Newlywed Blues
by Maggie_Conagher

Summary

After a whirlwind courtship, Mycroft and Greg get married and find they have some adjustments to make.

COMPLETED!

Notes

This story is not especially canon or in character. I wanted to explore the theme of emotional intimacy with two strong and familiar characters who have a first marriage after...
forty. In this alternate universe, Greg has never been married or dated women. Mycroft worked as an assassin for the ministry in undercover black ops before his desk job; he is still sometimes called into the field.

COMPLETED!
Drunk

Greg Lestrade had the newlywed blues. Their love had been wildfire, jumping from one milestone to the next, burning all their bridges before they could even look back. Mycroft was always running on ahead with the torch he had carried for years.

Whirlwind courtship. A marriage when they had barely had a proper date. An idyllic honeymoon, but time stolen, and now the piper was being paid with extra overtime for Mycroft.

Mycroft had been perfectly willing for him to keep it as a bolthole, but that seemed like an absence of faith and trust that would start their marriage off on the wrong foot.

Melding two middle aged lives together was a bigger act of diplomacy than either of them seemed capable of so they didn’t even engage it. They had amazing sex which Mycroft always initiated, topping most of the time and Greg didn’t say anything about wanting the lights on sometimes or other things he might want to try. Greg watched football in his newly decorated man cave of a study and yelled at the telly, and Mycroft didn’t point out that the house didn’t have a pristine hush anymore. There was also a shocking lack of coaster usage. The odd couple in every way.

Mycroft had the easy part; he was traveling for work more than ever. Home for two days, gone for five. Greg found that his job had always grown to fill the empty hours so that now, when somebody might be waiting for him at home, he could go home instead of waiting on lab results that wouldn’t be ready until the next day anyway. The paperwork could be done in his posh new study in half the time without distractions. Once in awhile he would be kept out all night at a crime scene but more often than not, Mycroft would be absent when Greg came back to the house to shower and change clothes.

It was the house at St. John’s Woods, but it wasn’t home yet. Greg was a lover but he didn’t feel much like a husband yet. He was thankful for the gold band on his finger because sometimes it all seemed like an elaborate prank. The house was eating little bits of him every day. Since he carried his files home most nights, he used the canvas book bag he’d had since the academy until Mycroft had replaced it with a chocolate brown leather one that was the softest thing he’d ever felt. The leather bag stayed in the trunk of the car while the canvas one went into work. If he’d come into the Yard with something that toff, he’d never have lived it down.

There were other replacements. His clothes were in the guest bedroom, his toiletries in the guest bath. Mycroft’s version of intimacy didn’t extend to mornings or personal grooming. They showered together after sex as needed but Greg got ready for work alone down the hall. His clothes, which he had never thought much about other than as a means to public decency, took up ten percent of the walk in closet. If he only wore a clean shirt for a few hours at dinner, he would hang it up on the hook on the back of the door for the next day, but somehow it was never there and would reappear in his closet later, freshly pressed and starched.

Along with the familiar items that now smelted far more expensive due to specially scented hangers and sachets, new items were appearing regularly and a few old favorites had disappeared. He had five new shirts with the label of a tony store that he had never even felt comfortable walking past. His standby gray suit had been replaced by one quite similar but with far better material and cut. He didn’t know if the secrecy was better or worse for his pride. On a good day, he knew it was a way that Mycroft could show love; on a bad day, he felt like a dress up doll and
In the bathroom, the towels were fresh every morning. He had grown up dirt poor and laundry money was hard earned. Did everybody else launder the towels every day? Morris the butler was like a hard working, helpful ghost. Greg never caught him at all the little favors that made him feel like he was living in a posh hotel instead of a home. Not only did his clothes smell different, but he himself smelled different as Sherlock had remarked before John tapped him on the shin with his small pointed loafer. “I found a new shampoo,” Greg said, feeling the flush creep up his neck to his ears.

Truth was, either Mycroft or Morris had found a new shampoo that tamed Greg’s feral hair so that it was silkier and shinier. Tamed, softened, civilized, neutered. So lonely he sometimes kept the telly on programs he couldn’t stand. Loneliness was the true issue. When he had lived alone in his glass and chrome flat pining for John, he had expected the pain of isolation and it had driven him on. But what he had with Mycroft now was halfway to what he wanted.

He was a grown man, in decent shape for his age, good at his job according to everyone but Sherlock, but he couldn’t ask his husband for what he wanted because what he wanted was affection. How did he initiate cuddling with a man like Mycroft? They had done so on their honeymoon when they hadn’t been shagging or sleeping, but as soon as they had come back to London and Mycroft’s routine, the door had closed. Greg didn’t want to give his body and soul, and then put on a full set of pajamas and sleep miles apart in a king size bed. He thought anybody might feel rejected to watch My button pajamas up to his adam’s apple and stay rigidly on his side of the bed, on the edge, so close to the edge that he had fallen off twice.

Greg was a bloody coward because he thought Mycroft might say no and then where would they be? As long as the topic was tabled, there was a chance at some later date, but if Greg said something twee after a rogering like “Would you hold me?” well, it was all out there wasn’t it? Couldn’t be taken back and as awkward as things were now, that was nothing to how it would be with the cat out of the bag. He would be sleeping down the hall in the guest room with his new clothes, Mycroft visiting him once a fortnight and fucking him through a hole in the sheet like some Victorian virgin.

Besides, did they really need to talk about it or was it implied? Mycroft initiated sex because Mycroft liked sex. Mycroft didn’t cuddle because Mycroft didn’t like to cuddle. Greg wasn’t talking about being braided together every second of the night, but it would be nice to say now and then, ‘to hell with the wet spot’ and go to sleep and wake up to skin on skin. Or to be half awake in the night and reach out to My’s steady breathing, feel his warmth, know he was there.

If Mycroft did like cuddling, it would be something that Greg could give him that nobody else could. My’s one sided gift giving hurt more than Greg’s pride. He felt like a selfish wanker; Mycroft’s house and clothes and food and blowjobs. Greg liked to give but what did you give the man who had everything? Mycroft had everything he needed and what he might like, Greg didn’t have the money or the right taste to pick out. Asking Sherlock for help would open him to ridicule. The little hurts were piling up. Greg’s checks to the household for groceries and utilities—which he could well afford now that he wasn’t paying rent—had remained uncashed.

When Greg tried to reciprocate in bed, My would always turn it around. My’s need for sexual power had been present early on; he liked to take Greg out of himself with frequent and thorough blowjobs while he himself merely watched, but on the honeymoon he had started allowing himself to be transported as well. Back to a calmer daily life, Mycroft was again the aggressor and Greg felt that his advances would get that little frown as if he’d spilled on the tablecloth. Week went into week with nothing resolved and broaching the subject went from awkward to absurd.

Greg’s resentment boiled over when Mycroft was in Japan for a week. Coming home every night
to a silent dinner at a giant table and a restless sleep in an empty bed reinforced the fact that something had gone horribly off track. Even the capture of a murderer so that a case was wrapped in time for weekend didn’t bring the joy it once might have. He tried to rise above. He took the crew out to celebrate, buying the first two rounds with the money Mycroft refused to take from him. While most of the group drifted off for dinner after the second round, Sally stayed with him for a third drink (his fourth), but she was having non alcoholic because she had promised to babysit for her sister later.

Much to his embarrassment, she gave him a ride home. He might have vented to her, but she assumed that missing his husband was the only reason for his drinking to excess. “You’re missing him awful.”

“Right. Come in for dinner.” He tried to make it sound like it would be fun.

“In that mausoleum? Not bloody likely.” Sally was no fool.

“Thanks ever so.” But she had already gone, the screech of tires a bit of overkill.

He went straight to Mycroft’s study and poured an enormous tumbler of the most expensive scotch there. He drank it down immediately with only one pause for a hiccup. Then he poured another, the liquid gold sloshing all over his hand and the precious satin finish of the antique sideboard.

Morris came in and sized up the situation at a glance, just as his employer would have. “Mr. Lestrade, dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes,” was his only comment but he looked daggers as he replaced the stopper on the decanter and wiped the sideboard with a clean cloth from his pocket. There were babies in the world who got less tender care than that veneer. With a last parting stare at the glass and a raised eyebrow, Morris swept out of the room.

Dinner was miserable. Greg’s stomach burned from all the liquor and while there was wine with dinner as always, Morris had a way of highlighting the water glass each time he served the next course. Greg sipped at the wine just enough not to choke on the food but he could feel himself getting drunker as the two monster scotches hit bottom. A whiskerless boy knew not to mix drinks and he was on his third type of the evening.

Some of the food wasn’t making it to his mouth, and it was with great satisfaction that he noticed it was one of the new shirts that had a sizable gravy stain.

The meal was nearly over. Dessert and then an endless evening of bad telly.

“Coffee, sir?” the stealthy and disapproving Morris asked.

“Not if I have to drink it alone in this concert hall.” Stroppy moved to seething moved to eyes starting to burn. Greg Lestrade was not a sloppy drunk. Until he got married. That’s what they would say at the Yard. Sally would tattle.

This is what Mycroft had reduced him to, a man drinking alone at home on a Friday night with a butler who resented the hell out of him. He was a lonely trophy wife and apparently one who could not shut up because as Morris took his plate, he said, “Have we met? I’m Mrs. Mycroft Iceman.”

He said it with a Jewish pronunciation on the final syllable (Ice-muhn) as in ‘Mr. and Mrs. Iceman cordially invite you to Avi’s bar mitzvah.’

“I’m purely ornamental.” He wasn’t drunk because he could say words like ‘ornamental.’

“Mr. Lestrade, you are not quite yourself. Is there anything I can do to help you?”
“I ruined my shirt but I’m sure it will magically appear in the wardrobe tomorrow. See to it, Mr. Tumnus.”

There was a pregnant pause which became a laborious pause which yielded a litter of kittens.

“I’m sorry, Morris. I’m drunk because I’m lonely and my marriage is in the skip.” His lip wobbled, god help him.

He cleared his throat several times but finally gave up and let his husky voice out. No secret he was to big girl’s blouse status on his magnificent drunk. “Could we just dispense with standards for one night? I swear to you it will never happen again.”

The previous pregnant pause went into heat again and gave birth to a litter of puppies.

“Come back to the kitchen. I’ll see to that stain and get you some coffee.”

The kitchen was warm and smelled like his mum. Morris wrapped Greg’s hands around a stoneware mug of black coffee. He liked milk in his coffee which Morris bloody well knew, but he felt it wasn’t the best time to put in special orders. He burned his tongue, of course, which seemed like more than could be borne.

Morris came back with, gasp, a wrinkled shirt. “If you would care to switch, sir?”

“Greg, please. If at all possible. Anything other than Mr. Lestrade.”

“Would Mr. Greg be a suitable compromise?”

“Sounds like a poof who sells shirts such as these in his little shop.” The retort would have been far more clever if he didn’t have gravy all over his chest.

Morris handed him a tea towel and took the soiled shirt with a shake of his head. He strode back to what Greg assumed was the laundry room. He probably wanked to the scent of Persil back there. As a detective Greg wanted to know. He had scrubbed off most of the gravy and gotten both of his arms in sleeves when Morris returned. “Are you a Passion Flower or Sunshiny Days man?”

More staring. “I prefer Ariel liquidtabs, sir. The Almond Milk and Honey ones are good for Mr. Holmes’ sensitive skin.”

“Sensitive skin, my arse, thick as hell.” His apology for that bit was muffled by his trying to see why his arms were tied.

“Wrong sleeves, Mr. Greg, sir.”

His chest had never been quite so bare. He was going up to his study to hide and perhaps cry into a pillow when the house phone rang. The crying jag was scared right out of him by sheer panic. He fumbled with the buttons but they kept slipping away. He held his shirt closed and turned his back to the phone. “I’m not here, Morris. If I talk to him now, I’ll say something hurtful.”

“Shall we see who it is first?”

“I know it’s him, Morris. Tell him that I missed him and I got drunk and I’m sleeping it off. That’s about ten minutes from the truth.”

The phone had been ringing for years. “Hello, Mr. Holmes. No, he finished dinner. He wasn’t
quite himself and has gone to bed, I believe. Nothing serious, a minor digestive upset. Perhaps a
voice mail, sir? Things are going well there? I can imagine, sir. I’m sure Mr. Lestrade will call you
as soon as he wakes in the morning, allowing for the time difference, of course. I’ll see to it. Hurry
home, sir. Goodbye."

Greg heard the beep of the mobile’s disconnect. Then Morris was close enough behind him that he
could feel his body heat.

“I won’t lie for you again.” The ending ‘sir’ was conspicuously absent. “You’d best come over here
to the sink. You are going to be sick.”

There was a pincer grip to Greg’s elbow and his feet were moving sinkward. “I haven’t puked up
my drink since I was a lad. A man knows his limits and –“

Greg was hard pressed to say what hurt most. His head, his stomach, his pride, or his elbow that
had been quite firmly pinched. He was at the sink long enough that his pride didn’t hurt anymore.
Morris handed him a damp tea towel, and the tears Greg wiped away were mostly self pity but a
little bit of missing My and wanting him to be the one handing out towels.

“Are you quite finished?”

Greg feared his nod was a lie. Moving his head in any direction was certainly ill advised. Morris
put him at the table again with a glass of ice water and an Altoid. He hadn’t known that an Altoid
was exactly what he needed until the peppermint covered the myriad flavors of his binge.

“Can you listen to reason?”

“No more ‘sir’?” So the stroppy thirteen year old still lived inside him.

“I call people ‘sir’ as a courtesy. You haven’t earned it tonight, have you?”

“No, sir.” Greg checked in the bottom of his glass for the irony. There wasn’t any.

“A new marriage is a fragile thing but you haven’t broken yours beyond repair just yet. I’m going
to help you, but I will deny that this talk took place until my dying day."

Having started off strong, Morris then faltered. Finally, he took out his wallet and showed Greg a
picture of a laughing bloke of about thirty. Even the standard backdrop of a cut rate photo booth
could not hide the mischief in his brown eyes or the dark hair standing straight up. “My husband,
may God rest his soul,” Morris said thickly.

“We worked for Mr. Holmes. He helped us be together. Things were tougher for us back then, but
we had laughter.”

Greg took a sip of water and tasted guilt alongside the peppermint.

“He came from a family like yours, my Rory. Hugs and kisses and jokes at dinner. I raised myself
while my dad drank his pay packet away. I know lonely. Mr. Holmes was lonely a long time,
Greg.”

“I know that.”

Morris gently returned the photo to his wallet. “No, I don’t think you do. He hasn’t had the
experiences that you’ve had. He never gave his heart away before. Sometimes I think he feels
unworthy because of all the things he’s done for his work. Sometimes maybe not having a dad
around at the right time. He’s wasted many tears on Mr. Sherlock, not that he’d ever let on. Trying
to be a dad when he needed one himself.”

“He doesn’t tell me what he’s feeling. I ask him and it just makes things worse.” Greg ran his hands through his hair, wincing at the premature hangover.

“You’ll have to push him a little, and some things you will have to teach him. He’s an innocent about feelings.”

“So as always, it falls on me.” Greg’s rebellion lasted all of ten seconds. He took another sip of water.

“You had some vows at your wedding. Do you recall anything about taking turns? It’s not fair but I think if you take even a little step forward, he’ll meet you more than half way. He’s quick. Give him some cues.”

“Things were fine on the honeymoon. He was able to talk about his feelings then.” Greg was truly at a loss.

“Any boat can sail in fine weather. You’re being tested now. You honeymooned with the best part of him and now you come home to his worst. You’ll have to fight for your husband, and your greatest opponent in that fight is Mycroft Holmes.”

“I want to make things right, Morris. I swear it, but I don’t know how.”

“I would imagine if you survive the head you’ll have in the morning, patching things up with Mr. Holmes will be easy.”

“How did Rory help you?” Greg was pleased to see a bit of surprise in Morris’ stern gaze. The long silence wasn’t loaded with anything but warmth. “He piled loving care on top of loving care until I couldn’t fight anymore.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” That bloody phrase they were trained to say that didn’t make a fucking bit of difference at an open grave.

Morris smiled. “I’m going to get you another glass and some paracetamol. You’ll be wanting morphine in the morning, you poor bastard.”

Greg laughed at this which neither his head nor his stomach appreciated. “Can I be Mr. Greg until My gets home?”

“I think a man has a right to choose what he’s called in his own house. Would have been simple enough to tell me.”

“Should be, but it’s not.” Greg took the paracetamol, swallowing them very carefully.

“The man is crazy for love of you, Greg Lestrade. No question about that. He’s showing you in all the ways he knows. Now you teach him to receive love.”

“And when he asks where I got my advice?”

“Blame it on Mrs. Hudson.”

“Fair enough.” Greg held out a hand and to his great satisfaction, Morris shook it.

The next morning, Morris woke Greg with a hangover cure that tasted as bad as Greg’s breath. Then he handed Greg’s mobile to him. “I made a promise.”
Greg dialed the number while praying it would not be answered. In less than a ring, Mycroft’s voice was on the line. “Greg, are you ill?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Morris was moving toward the door but his piercing stare reminded Greg of his lessons the previous night at the kitchen table.

“You haven’t been answering your mobile. I know that the time difference makes things difficult, but I haven’t spoken with you since my first night here. Can we at least email?”

Greg took a deep breath. “No, My. I need to hear your voice. Truth is that I miss you so much I got puking drunk last night.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m too old to revisit my teens.” Greg caught himself tracing shapes on the duvet like his teenage self had done while talking to a crush.

“I’m sorry that I haven’t been more available.” It was the words Greg needed to hear but in the same tone as one might use with a junior member of staff.

“You have to travel for work. I understand that.” They were talking all around it again. And Greg was trying. He had admitted to puking and that was vulnerable as hell.

“Mycroft?”

“Yes, love?”

Fuck all, he let the tears creep into his voice. “My head hurts and I’m doing a shit job of coming up with things to say. I’ve never had a husband in a foreign country before.”

“Me either. Did Morris give you his hangover cure?” A bit more personal, but not ideal.

“Yes, it smelled like dog piss.” Now hiding behind humor.

“Did you vomit?”

“No.”

“Job well done, Morris.” Now hiding behind sarcasm.

Greg sighed. He closed his eyes and put himself on a certain balcony overlooking the Aegean Sea. “I’m thinking about our honeymoon.”

“Are we going to have phone sex?” This was whispered.

“Do you want to?” Greg’s cock didn’t even quiver.

“Not presently. I’m in a meeting.”

“What the hell? You could have told me.” Beyond awkward, veering into obscene.

“We hadn’t talked.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Guilt piled on guilt.
“We are all apologies today.”

“I can’t talk to you when the fate of the world is in your hands.”

“You’ll have a long wait.”

“Show off.”

“Greg, are you okay? No sordid tryst with Morris on the credenza?”

“No, his credenza stayed in his pants where it belonged.”

“Gregory, a credenza is a type of sideboard, a long narrow—“

“The fucking veneer is fine.” Was this pouting?

“And you? Are you fine?”

“No, because I miss you and we’ve solved the case and I’ve got all weekend with nothing to do.”

Oh, it was definitely pouting.

“I miss you too.”

Then there was a string of Japanese words in Mycroft’s voice which did make Greg’s indisposed cock a bit more disposed.

“Do you miss me when I’m drunk and stroppy? Morris did not appreciate the stroppy.”

“Even when you reek of hangover cure and are whinging, I love you, Greg, so much.”

His eyes were stinging again. He would be lactating soon. “Still glad you married me?”

And now he was fishing.

“Best decision I ever made but taking this call may have been one of my worst. I’ll talk with you again in a few hours. Have breakfast in bed. Goodbye, love.”

Greg rung off and got paper and pencil from the nightstand drawer. He had two days to come up with ways to pile love on Mycroft Holmes. He did not write down ‘polish the credenza.’
Chapter Summary

After a colossal self pitying drunk, Greg Lestrade searches for ways to strengthen his marriage while he waits for Mycroft to come home.

If you would like atmosphere while reading, give yourself a rainy weekend like Greg’s with rainymood.com

Since Morris’ regimen of hang over cure and forced phone call had awakened Greg early on Saturday, he decided to give the whole marriage off track problem some dedicated research. A perusal of Mycroft’s library did not yield any books about relationships between two people although if two countries ever decided to tie the knot, they were over prepared. A trip to a book shop was in order.

He was out the door with one of My’s weekend umbrellas opened against the torrential rain when he realized that his car was still at the Yard. He walked for awhile but the houses looked disapproving so he stopped at a corner and called a cab. Thinking about the sizable sum unused in his account for food, rent and clothing, he rode all the way to Foyles and quickly got lost in the shelves.

Unfortunately, there weren’t many self help books for middle aged gay assassins and the men who love them. There were none at all for middle aged gay assassins in love for the first time and afraid to touch their husbands in the light of day. He began loading his arms with marriage manuals, then found the newlywed advice guides and took those instead. The section dedicated to relationships was near both the Gents and the Café so he found a back corner and settled in.

He quickly ruled out the books written at a primary school reading level with cartoons. Another was actually just a het sex manual, which he slammed shut after it fell open to candid photos of a clitoris and vagina. For all his faults, he knew his husband’s anatomy quite well. It was comforting that some marital challenges could be eliminated.

By the time his stomach reminded him that he had missed breakfast, he had a crick in his neck and some relief in his heart. What he and My were going through had a name, post nuptial depression. It was quite common. Having read extensively in the three books, he had come on the same advice repeatedly and had condensed it to, Communication and Continue the Courtship. He was very pleased with the three C’s and thought it was the sort of thing someone else would make money off of with presentations and tee shirts. Now he needed to apply what he had learned, but he was being hampered by not having any note taking materials. He had written on his hand with a biro he kept in his pocket, but it had run out of ink.

His stomach growled again, and he looked up, resurfacing to a different quality of light in the room than when he had begun. Walking dazedly to the till, he paid for his books so he didn’t have to worry about spills and then followed the food smells back to the café. Food triggered his obligation to check in at ‘home’ which was still just the place where he kept his dwindling wardrobe and the clothes that had been purchased for him. Still calling to say that he wouldn’t be in for lunch seemed a very domestic thing to do.
“Morris? I won’t be home for lunch.”

“Getting some pub food, sir?”

“No, I’m at Foyles getting some advice guides for newlyweds.” Even though he was doing something Morris would approve of, Greg still felt scolded.

“Foyles? Very good, sir. Will you be home for dinner?”

“I don’t know. I’ve found quite a lot of information to go through. I might just spend the day. Still raining?”

“Buckets. I see they close at half past nine. Why don’t I have some soup on by ten, sir?”

“I don’t want you to go to any trouble. That’s quite late.”

“It’s my job, Mr. Greg.”

“Oh right. I’ll see you by ten then.”

“Very well. And good luck with your research.”

“Thank you.” But Morris had already rung off. Why did Greg feel like he had just got his boss’ permission to proceed?

Feeling virtuous, he then called My but didn’t get through. He left an insipid message. “Hope things are going well. Can’t wait to see you. I’ve found a proper way to pass the time until you get home. Love you.” He imagined Mycroft grimacing with distaste and wiping his mobile with an antiseptic towelette.

He ate the shockingly overpriced demitasse of soup and thin film of mystery meat paste on a large roll, but he barely registered it as he continued to read about the dynamics of marriage. The books were comforting even though he knew that all was being oversimplified. Mycroft was so complicated and closed off, two more C’s to combat his solutions. Would he want the kind of marriage that Greg was building up in his mind?

Greg kept veering between two husbands. The first, the easiest to imagine, was the Mycroft he had now who would be distant and disdainful. He had moved on to the D’s. If he asked for what he wanted and they did things together, would it be a longsuffering tolerance? He pictured spending a rainy Saturday in a bookshop with My. My did like to read, great phonebook sized historical novels that Greg might keep in the loo and read over the course of five years. So the reading aspect would work, but he saw this version of My in his work suit, perhaps the tie loosened in honor of the weekend, reading glasses perched on his beak, sipping at the tea and shuddering since it wasn’t his private house blend which Morris handcrafted leaf by leaf. He might sigh with gentle martyrdom as Greg turned a page too loudly.

Greg looked up from his book to find that he had finished all of the food and drink with his stomach still decidedly empty. He went up and got the largest tea they had and a promising scone. Imaginary Mycroft Point Two was waiting for him at their table. The glasses were still perched on his nose but they were comically large and owlish. A third chair had been pulled up to the table for Mycroft to prop his long legs on, long legs covered in faded denim. He was wearing an oatmeal cabled jumper like John used to and Greg had often imagined burying his face in. Guiltily, Greg deleted the jumper and dressed My in a button down with a well washed Fair Isle slipover in muted colors, still soft and in need of his cheek resting against it, but far more My friendly. Not bad this dressing up lark, so maybe Greg would do some shopping and Ninja closet
organizing of his own.

Imaginary Mycroft smiled when Greg approached, a friendly smile, glasses removed to offer up wide and readable eyes. He took the tea Greg offered, sipped it, and murmured his appreciation. Then they both settled back in. When Greg came to the end of a chapter and turned the pages rapidly to review, Mycroft looked up, smiled again, and reached for Greg’s hand. His leg pressed against Greg’s under the table with the promise of a cuddle after they made their way home through rain drenched streets to an enormous hot supper of stew and fresh bread in Morris’ kitchen. Having read all day, they would have boundless energy for love making of the slow and sensual variety, candles giving the room a flattering light, perhaps a bath after in the enormous garden tub.

Greg came to with his empty hand reaching across the table. Mycroft would likely bathe with his pajamas on and consider candles a needless expense and fire hazard. No, that was hurtful and judgmental. He needed to stop the habit before it took hold. The man he married and frolicked with on honeymoon was still inside. Maybe if he thought of it as a fairy tale curse, a spell that could be broken, he could push through. The icy stone would have to be chipped away to free his prince, a DIY quest. He was already making battle preparations.

As he tore at the scone with big bites, he took inventory of what he knew for sure. My loved him. He had never doubted that, thank God. Morris had confirmed it. My wanted to give him gifts and do things for him. The fact that they were the wrong things didn’t change the intention. The sex was good; no, the sex was great. This would go a long way to mending the other problems.

Sex during the minibreak in France had been amazing, and the days before their wedding and the honeymoon had seemed to be a progression of growing closer and closer. Mycroft had allowed cuddles and they had slept spooned together. But…Greg began to remember with a detective’s eye rather than an adoring husband’s. Even many of those nights, Greg had been shagged senseless and fallen into an exhausted sleep until morning. My could have been anywhere during that time. Twice Greg had awakened to My sitting in a chair, watching him. Of course he had motioned My back into bed and the incident was forgotten. My seemed to require less sleep and was sometimes in the shower or reading the paper when Greg woke up. When they slept spooned, Mycroft was on the inside. Had he wanted to be there or had he just tolerated it instead of speaking up, the way Greg was tolerating so much now?

Their days were very busy; the activities choosing them. Greg sighed as he remembered that My would allow hand holding or quick kisses only if no one was around. Not so different then, from what was happening now, but without the Aegean sun to burn away doubt, the truth was gray and rainy. Greg’s hope was that Morris spoke the truth. Mycroft wanted affection and cuddles and all of the things that Greg wanted, but he didn’t know how.

Some books and a heart to heart with the butler seemed a feeble effort to combat a lifetime of withholding. The scone was long gone and the cup had been shredded into tiny pieces. Greg tossed it all in the bin and went to the ground floor in search of supplies. The gifts section was adjacent to the door for Manette Street and Greg kept glancing at the downpour, dusk already approaching. He was glad to be warm and dry and loved by someone, no matter how cautiously.

He gave himself over to the enjoyment of purchasing ‘school’ supplies. A packet of sticky notes, four color pen, and the perfect notebook with a picture of the Eiffel Tower on the front. This was the image he would keep in his heart, sunset and fireworks over the city of Paris. But most importantly, Mycroft Holmes striding across the room letting nothing deter him from claiming his man. My had waited for him, longed for him, and finally taken him. That spirit, the one he inherited from his adventurer father, would see them home.

Going back through the warren of shelves, he found his little corner and enjoyed opening his new
things. He had always enjoyed new school supplies. The journal gave a delicious crack when first
opened. The lined paper was thick and creamy; these were tools appropriate for his brown leather
tote bag. They were the right kind of tools for improving his marriage.

On the first page, he wrote their names and their anniversary. Then he wrote other special dates
while they were fresh in his mind, counting backwards on his fingers sometimes. Mycroft
dragging him out of the seedy pub and looking after him. He called that First Rescue.

Then First Sex followed after Second Rescue. Mycroft Holmes, master assassin, charging down
the stairs with gun at the ready. They had blazed their way out of that one, shoulder to shoulder.
When the crisis was all over, My had come to his room, mastered him but then washed him
gently.

First Declaration. Riddleston Hall and everything topsy turvy with the horrid cleanup in the
aftermath of a serial killer. My had been so brave then; Greg’s heart still clinging to the past but
open to trying something else. It had been overwhelming to think of how long My had been
watching and waiting. As Greg wrote this date in his notebook, he was struck with just how
lonely that must have been, how much it would have hurt to watch for months as Greg pursued
John. Some of that hurt likely remained where My kept all his hurts locked away. So much to be
addressed. He wondered if they would have gotten married if they had stopped to think about the
challenges.

Proposal in France. Again, My led the way. He was brave. But it was time now for Greg to be
brave and to lead sometimes. He was the older partner with more experience at relationships.
None of it especially pertinent though. He had dated but he had kept his heart off limits until John.
Nothing had prepared him for that conflagration which had finally died to nothing in the face of
My’s persistent caring.

The list of special days complete, Greg spent several hours taking notes in the front of his
notebook, blue for post nuptial depression, red for communication, green for dates and exercises,
and black for his own ideas. The constant clicking of the pen between colors drove away any
competition for ‘his’ table.

In the back of the notebook, he made brainstorming pages for possible gifts he wanted to give My,
dates they could go on, communication exercises he wanted to try, and things he would need to
look up online the next day. He also added a list of marriages that he believed in. Research
included field work such as observation and interviews. If he wanted real advice, he would need
to gather tips from real people as well as his books.

He was shocked when his watch read half past eight. They would be closing in an hour. He had
one more purchase to make upstairs in music, but he took the time to page back through his notes.
The gift ideas page remained blank other than the cd he would purchase. He sighed. Mycroft
needed the practice of receiving something tangible in order to learn about receiving love.

Greg made his to do list for Sunday. With a clear plan in mind for the following day, he was able
to firmly close all his books and return them to the carrier bag. Then he went upstairs and quickly
found a cd of ocean waves, plain with no musical accompaniment. He listened to a sample and
knew immediately that it was right. Their first time had been by the sea, and then in that strange
old house in St. Jean de Luz, they had stolen one night in the midst of danger. My had shared how
the sound of waves made him think of his father and therefore saddened him. My had reclaimed
the sound for himself that night when he had made love to Greg in the wrought iron bed. Now the
waves were a happy sound from the sea lapping below their balcony on their honeymoon, and
perhaps the ocean as background would help My to open himself again.

The rain had stopped when he left Foyle’s and got on the tube. Reaching the Yard, he walked
quickly to his car and felt better just getting inside even if he needed the heater full blast to stop shivering. It had been quite some time since he felt satisfied about a day’s work. There was so much new information that made him hopeful. He drove on streets light with traffic. People were home to stay or already to their local, and he had a hot bowl of soup waiting for him.

As the sodden trees were still shedding rain, Greg was glad of a garage to pull into. Morris was at the back door to take his wet coat and umbrella, but Greg hung onto his carrier bag like the spoils of war.

“I’ve got a big pot of vegetable soup and some sandwiches, Mr. Greg.”

“Can I eat in the kitchen?”

“Of course, come on through.”

No tiny cups for Morris. Greg’s soup was in a huge bowl and had great chunks of beef floating in the rich broth. The sandwiches were on thick, hearty bread, the filling spilling out in abundance. Morris set a bottle of lager down for him with a wee twist of his mouth.

Greg didn’t realize how hungry he was until Morris cleared his throat.

“Did you find what you needed at Foyle’s, sir?”

“I’m sorry. I went away there for awhile, didn’t I? This food is wonderful.”

“You worked hard.”

Greg had gotten praise from his father on occasion and been spoiled by his mother and sisters daily, but this quiet word from an honest man soothed his battered feelings greatly. “I really did.”

“It’s a fine thing when your man comes home, and you’ve been working hard for him and you know that you deserve all his kisses. Sure, he would give that love whether you worked for it or not, but it’s nice to feel you’ve earned it.”

“Would you like to see my books, Morris? Would you sit down with a cuppa and look through them?”

“I’d be honored, Greg.”

Greg ate and Morris read, and the kitchen was quiet but for bubbling pot and the scrape of a spoon. Greg had questions running through his head for Morris, but he was suddenly weary and the thoughts chased each other. He came to the bottom of his bowl with surprise, and Morris was up like a shot to refill it.

“There’s apple crumble for dessert.”

“Morris, this was supposed to be a light supper. I’ll never make it up the stairs.”

“You’ll do fine. You’re getting too thin on the low fat recipes that Mr. Holmes favors.”

“Thin enough to fit in my clothes properly again unless he’s buying me larger sizes.” Any concerns one way or the other disappeared as the tender meat melted on his tongue.

Morris finished paging through the books and put them back in the bag. “I’ll run these things up to your study. Shall I draw you a bath while I’m upstairs?”

Greg thought about saying that he could draw his own bath, but he realized that he had been out
all day and that maybe sometimes Morris got lonely or restless in the big house. If his job was to take care of My and him, then maybe Greg needed to practice receiving too. “I’ve been thinking all day about how nice a bath would be. Thank you.”

There was another twitch to Morris’ mouth. Those were smiles trying to break free. “Very good, sir. I’ll be drawing the bath in Mr. Holmes’ big tub.”

“That’s even better.”

Morris held up the bag. “These are very good books. I wish they had things like that when Rory and I were, were starting out.”

“I hope you’ll tell me more about those times as you can, Morris.”

Morris nodded and then hurried from the room. Greg thought perhaps it was too soon, but he got the feeling that it would always be too soon to talk about such a loss.

Greg finished his supper and let the quiet warmth of the kitchen wash over him. He was getting the nice meal and the bath after a day of reading, but god he wanted My beside him. He counted the hours. Sunday breakfast time in Tokyo. He dialed the number, but no response. “My, I’ve just had a very nice supper and I’m getting ready for a bath. It’s going to be a long day tomorrow and Monday waiting for you to come home. I love you, sweetheart.”

He rang off before he could change his mind. Endearments were another thing they were still dancing around. Sweetheart was one he hadn’t planned on and certainly to be used sparingly and in private, but he had felt the rightness of it deep in his groin. He had put all of his heart and the long day of trying into the message.

Morris was back. “If you’d like to go on up now, I can bring your crumble with tea in a bit. You can have it in bed.”

“That is an unforeseen luxury, Morris.” The weariness hit with full force when he stood up and he gripped the back of the chair. “It might be a rather short bath. Does the Coast Guard keep a look out for sleepy swimmers on Lake Mycroft?”

“Good one, sir,” Morris almost grinned.

The bath was scalding and there were his own loofah and good scrubbing soap along with his toweling robe. Morris had thought of everything. When Greg has scrubbed all of the previous day’s sin off himself and wrapped in the robe, he found a covered dish of crumble and a tea pot on a tray on the giant bed while under the covers was a flannel wrapped hot water bottle. The next round of rain pounded the roof as Greg savored the crumble and an herbal sleepy tea. He didn’t need any help from the tea. He barely remembered moving the tray off his lap and snuggling down into warm covers. There was a lovely dream waiting of the flannel cover being a Fair Isle slipover and Mycroft pulling Greg against his shoulder.

Sunday morning found Greg diving immediately into his list after quick tea and toast. He wanted to phone his mum before she went to church. Like most older folks, she was up very early to take her medications. As he dialed the number, he had that sinking feeling he always did that he had let too much time go by since the last call.

“How’s my best girl?”

“That’s alright, Mum. I’ve called to talk with you actually. My is out of town this week and I’ve been going through some books about marriage. I want a good one like you and dad.”

There was a pause long enough to scare him. “Mum? Is Dad alright? You aren’t getting a divorce or anything?”

“No, I just never thought you’d come ‘round.” Her voice was thick with tears.

His eyes began to sting; he had lost count how many times over the weekend. He reminded himself that it was normal to be emotional during post nuptial depression--if you are the fucking bride. “Don’t cry, Mummy. You’ll get me started.”

“Are things alright with you and Mycroft? We haven’t seen you or heard.”

“You’re allowed to ring me, Mum.”

“I don’t like to bother you.”

“It’s not a bother.” They were following the usual script and he didn’t have time. “I need your advice today. I want to be a good husband. What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out?”

“He’ll never trim his nose hair. You’ll have to do it.”

“That’s your best advice for me?” Greg was laughing as the tears receded. “That’s good. They didn’t really cover that in the books I read.”

“Has Mycroft beaten you or had you tortured?”

“No. No! He’s not like that.”

“He’s very imposing. Let me ask your father.” She didn’t bother to cover the phone and Greg got an earful of his question and his father’s familiar mumble.

“Your father says, always apologize. Pretend it’s your fault. Richard Lestrade, you did not do that in our fifty four years together. I will do you an injury with this roasting pan.”

There was another mumble. “Yes, that is good. Greggie, he says that you should send flowers at least once a year on an ordinary day. Would Mycroft like flowers, dear?”

“I don’t know. What’s your advice for me, Mum, besides the nose hair?”

“You will always feel like you are doing more. The partnership is not 50/50; it’s 80/20. But your husband will feel the same. I told your sisters and now I get to tell you,” her voice broke again. “Give it your everything plus a little more.”

“That’s good. I’m writing all of this in my notebook.”

“Are you happy, Greggie? Is he treating you right?”

“Yes, Mum. He has to travel and I miss him, but he’s given me all kinds of lovely things and he tries very hard.”

“Greg, give him some time. I don’t think he’s had much love in his life.”

“Yeah, that’s an excellent point.”
“I have to iron my dress for church now, but you ring again very soon. What, Rich? Your father says, get tulips.”

That Sunday, Greg’s study became like home. He did meaningful work there. He chose the three dates that he felt most confident about and looked up every detail online. His notebook had pages for every possible contingency and all of the contact information with backup numbers. On Monday he would ring My’s assistant and synchronize schedules and then make the reservations.

He would even humble himself and ask her advice, but he thought that dinner at a new restaurant making waves for its low calorie cuisine would be a pleasing start. After dinner, they would go to a light comedy, The Recruiting Officer. Greg thought that My would like the historic significance of it since it was written in 1706, and it was also a little romantic. Then he hoped they would go out for dessert, a truly naughty one after the healthy dinner. He would also hide a box of chocolates in his closet in case they decided to come home directly after the play. It wasn’t especially clever or creative, but it was his best try.

He read through pages and pages of questions and communication exercises, selecting three questions that he thought were the least threatening for their first attempt. My would be tired from his trip so they wouldn’t start out with it his first night back, but he didn’t want to lose momentum either. He made very firm instructions to himself in the red ink. There was always the coward’s way out of accepting the status quo if he wasn’t vigilant. Optimistically, he chose questions for their second time.

He was settling in on the leather sofa to finish reading all of the books, cover to cover, when Morris appeared in the doorway with a tray. “You’ve worked through lunch, sir. Thought you might like some finger foods while you keep on, but don’t let me interrupt.”

“Thank you, Morris.” Greg didn’t even look up from an especially revealing chapter about separating love, affection, and sex. Compartmentalizing was a C word that he wanted to avoid. When he had finished the chapter, he was a little horny and a little sad but mostly hungry and thirsty. There were party foods, cheese and little cocktail sandwiches and crisps and lovely fruit tarts and a pot of tea, but he had some lager in the mini fridge he had snuck in. He knew that Morris had cleaned every inch of the room almost daily so it wasn’t really a secret but if it was never mentioned, he could feel subversive. He sighed and put his feet up on the coffee table, his plate balanced on his lap. The next chapter was about initiating communication in a non-threatening manner. He dove back in, finally after weeks fully unwinding in his new home.

When he had finished both books, long afternoon shadows stretched across the study. He spent the next several hours at his desk, searching online at every posh shop he could think of. Getting the perfect gift for My seemed like the holy grail, something that would make Greg worthy of the changes he would ask his husband to make. My might never know how far Greg had pursued a loss of faith, but Morris knew and the evening couldn’t be taken back. A gift would redeem it somehow.

Clothing was out; My would accept it politely and never wear it. Greg’s heart was too raw for that. Wallets, key chains, money clips, cufflinks. Again a matter of taste and not personal enough. A ring, but would My wear a ring in addition to his wedding band? A ring seemed like something to give after they were better settled. Entertainment in the form of tickets or dvds or cds or books, again seemed less personal and some of those were on the date list too. Besides, he didn’t know. They hadn’t had dates where they talked about music; he would be guessing. Furniture, even more out of his league, and the house seemed well furnished. Greg wanted a dog but for all he knew, My was allergic. A pet was something to plan for together like a child.

Taking his dad’s advice as a last resort, there would be flowers. He would wait until Mycroft was home and back in the office stress, and then send a great bunch of tulips to the office and another
to the house for the study. There were plants in the house that Morris kept well tended but there were seldom fresh flowers. It was better than nothing. He found and bookmarked the best floral website and copied down the order information in his rapidly filling notebook so that he could quickly place the order later. Another check with the all powerful assistant would be required. If only Anthea would stay Anthea, but there was a heavenly host that surrounded Mycroft Holmes and Greg was intimidated by every one of them and their easy confidence.

It was half past eight so he went in search of Morris. There was kitchen magic again. A crisp green salad with dressing made to order as he watched. Just as he took the last bite of salad, an enormous shepherd’s pie slid from the oven, the fragrant steam smelling so like the one his gran used to make that he was back into boyhood. Then after the warm heavy main dish, dessert was a trifle all smooth and light and cool.

Morris poured him a second cup of coffee with plenty of milk. “You’ve worked all weekend without a break. Time to rest now, sir. Do something light and easy before bedtime. Rest your mind. Perhaps a movie?”

“I haven’t been able to master the telly in My’s, in our room,” he admitted, taking on a final humiliation.

“It’s no trouble for me to give a wee tutorial, Mr. Greg. What would you fancy watching? A light comedy?”

“God, yes. Python would be perfect. The Holy Grail, I think.”

“Mr. Holmes doesn’t have that one, sir.”

Greg sighed.

“But I do.”

Quicker than he would have thought possible, he was upstairs with the familiar credits looming large on the mighty flat screen. He changed into his silk sleep boxers and climbed under the covers, missing his flannel friend from the previous night. Considering a wank, he checked in with the downstairs staff but it was cock a doodle don’t. He dozed, rousing here and there to quote along with the knights, finally coming more awake when the action stopped. He managed the power button as he had been shown by a very patient Morris.

The room was far too quiet, no sounds of rain, nothing but his own breath. My’s pillow didn’t smell of him since Morris had done laundry while Greg was at the bookshop. One more night and My would be in the bed with him and the ache of his absence was so keen that Greg would take him in a suit of armor on the far side of the bed rather than be alone anymore. In spite of thinking he couldn’t, Greg was instantly in a deep sleep.

It seemed only minutes later that a wonderful dream began. Mycroft was behind him, pressing little kisses down his spine. One hand was in his hair, the other was sliding inside his boxers and…”Hey, stop that,” he said far louder than he meant to. “Mycroft? Is that you?”

“Yes, Greg. I’m sorry that I startled you. I’ll stop.” My’s voice was heavy with fatigue.

“I didn’t mean stop in a bad way, just making sure that it was you before things went any further.”

“Who else would it be? Is there something I should know?”

“When someone puts a hand in my pants unannounced in the dark, I like some confirmation.”
“Have you sufficiently identified me, Detective Inspector?”

“Just a minute.” Greg was horribly dizzy and stroppy from being awakened so suddenly. “You could have been a cat burglar or kidnapper.”

He switched on the light, and Mycroft let out a small hiss. Of pain? Greg pulled him close and tried to go backwards to when he had fallen asleep desperately lonely. He tingled in the places My had touched him as if his body had awakened before his brain. He tried to return the favor, running his hand down My’s back in a soothing manner, surprised and pleased to find that My was naked except for his own silk boxers, a dark blue the same shade as his eyes when impassioned.

He welcomed his husband home with kisses, but My barely opened his mouth. His jaw was rigid, his breathing strange, and he wouldn’t look at Greg, keeping his eyes closed or fastened on the duvet. “My, what’s wrong?”

“I was trying to get home to you. Your messages. Thought I’d never…”

My was rambling, and his skin was feverish and dry. Greg felt the penny drop. He put his hand up to shade My’s eyes. “Shit. You have a migraine, don’t you?”

“I was trying to get to you. You sounded so unhappy on the phone.”

Greg switched the light off and felt some of the tension leave My’s body. “You’ve masked pain so long, you don’t even know when you’re having it, do you?” he whispered.

Greg knew about migraines. He eased My’s head down onto the pillow and lightly stroked the back of his neck. “Are you allergic to anything, love?”

“Lilies and orchids.”

“Medications.”

“No.”

“I’m going to get some things to help you. I’ll be right back.” Greg kissed his husband’s clenched jaw.

Greg walked lightly out of the room and then ran down the stairs and to his study. He grabbed the waste can, knowing that Morris kept even the trash receptacles spotless. Into the can, Greg loaded an ice pack, a gel mask, a bottled water, and a Coke from the mini fridge and the tin of Altoids from his desk. He ran back up the stairs, slowed his steps past the bedroom and went to the guest room where he kept his pills on the dresser.

My was gone from the bed. The door to the loo was closed. Greg didn’t hesitate. His husband was in pain that he could make better.

My’s long arms and legs were wrapped around the toilet, and he whimpered. “I don’t want you to see this.”

Greg knelt beside him with a hand on his back, rubbing very lightly. “I can help you. I know what to do.”

My’s body was a coiled spring; his breathing was ragged and loud in the tiled room.

“I know you think you can’t, but if you can keep these tablets down for even fifteen minutes, they
will help."

He shook two pills into My’s hand and opened the water and put it in his other hand. My pressed the cold bottle to his forehead, panting with the pain. Greg rested the ice pack against My’s neck. Finally My gathered himself and took one of the pills, gagging for some time before he could swallow. Greg knew how strong the nausea could be when the pain drove through eyes like hot needles and the pressure pushed until the eyes seemed forced out of the socket. Mycroft was on the edge of being violently ill. Delicacy was required.

When My managed the other pill a few minutes later, Greg kissed his temple. “My poor boy,” he whispered.

He turned away and hunching his body over the can to muffle the pop, he opened the Coke. “Little sips if you can, love.”

My again put the drink to his forehead and his cheeks. He was then able to take a few sips. When My had finished the Coke, Greg gave him an Altoid and then filled the sink with hot water and wiped My’s face and hands and torso with a flannel. His jaw was no longer clenched, but he was holding himself carefully and the path of the cloth across his cheeks made him wince. Greg kissed his temple again. Then he tilted My’s face up and put on the eye mask. He ran his hand along the band at the back to make sure it wasn’t too tight.

“Yes, thank you,” was the quiet reply.

Greg wanted him to yell or snark because he seemed so helpless. It was one thing to want your partner more open; it was quite another to see him laid bare by pain. He spent a long time alternating the ice pack with his warm hands along My’s spine, working the knots loose one at a time. There was one spot so tight that My cried out when it finally gave way under Greg’s thumbs. “I’m sorry, love,” he said, pressing his lips there.

Finally, My’s fevered skin cooled and he shivered as the melting ice pack was pressed to his lower back. Greg leaned up and pulled a bath sheet from the towel rack and wrapped it around his exhausted husband. “Do you think you can make it to the bed?”

“Not just yet.”

Then Greg did what he’d been wanting to do all night. He sat with his back to the wall and pulled My against him. He gently stroked My’s jaw and rubbed his fingers through the dark ginger waves of My’s hair. My pulled off the gel mask and nuzzled his face against Greg’s chest. As My’s arms wrapped around him, Greg felt a bit of his own tension go. They were cuddling. It was for all the wrong reasons, My’s poor head clamped in a vise, but My’s breath against his skin and soft hair against his cheek were enough like his dream for hope to take a firm stand in his heart. My’s body grew heavier in his arms, but the caffeine in the pills and the Coke that had settled his stomach would make sleep difficult. There was no easy cure for migraines this severe.

Greg danced his fingertips up and down My’s arm, finally concentrating on his forearm, smiling at the downy hair that grew thickly over the freckles.

My sighed. “Oh, that’s good.”

Greg turned My’s arm to the soft underside and stroked his fingers up and down, the touch growing lighter until it was tickles. When he stopped, Mycroft whispered, “More. Please?”
Never guessing that the sweet touches his mum had given him to distract from the pain were going to be something to do for My, Greg felt the world slide back into its right place. He went on until he could feel that My was getting chilled from sitting on the cool tiles.

“Time for bed, love,” he said, and thankful for a sturdy towel rack, he pulled himself up, his stiffened limbs protesting. My’s legs were shaky so Greg stood and held him until he could get himself steady. My lay his head on Greg’s shoulder, and they stood swaying, almost like dancing. Greg’s eyes filled with tears at the feel of his husband’s arms around him, skin on skin. They moved slowly to the bed, My leaning on him in a most satisfying way.

My grunted as he sunk to the bed. Greg knew that movement could start the throbbing again. He knelt by the bed and stroked My’s forehead until the wrinkles smoothed out. “I’ll be right back. I need to put away the supplies in case we need them tomorrow.”

He went back to the loo and made sure that the pills and Altoids were pushed far back on the counter so they wouldn’t get knocked off and roll under a cupboard. Then he collected the gel mask and the ice pack and returned them to the mini fridge. They had given My relief; Greg was going to make sure that they were always ready.

My was curled small under the covers when Greg returned. Greg hoped that the pain and the caffeine would fade enough so that he could get some sleep. He would call in to the office first thing and see what could be done. He would call in sick for his husband.

Crawling under the duvet, he wasn’t sure what would happen. Then Greg felt empowered to say, “Come here,” and Mycroft was in his arms again. All that lonely time in the giant bed in monastic pajamas, Mycroft had been waiting for an invitation.

He carded through My’s hair over and over, the thicker waves in the back wrapping around his fingers. They were right in the middle of the bed, ample duvet shutting them in together.

My snuggled closer. “You called me ‘sweetheart.’ In your message. I had to get to you.”

“You did. You came home to me.”

Then My quieted for long enough that Greg thought he was asleep until he felt clumsy kisses against his chest.

So Greg sent his heart out into the darkness. “I can’t give you posh gifts, but I can take care of you. If you’ll let me.”

What do you give the man who has everything? He still wasn’t sure but he was holding his husband in their big comfy bed and that was enough for the present.
Chapter Summary

Mycroft wakes up to the aftershocks of his migraine and some serious doubts about the new insights Greg has regarding their marriage.

Word Count: 5332

Mycroft Holmes came out of a sound sleep to total panic. He never overslept because sometimes his life depended on that internal clock. The sharp pains from the migraine had dissipated to a dull throbbing. He searched for the clock in the gloom. Someone had pulled the heavy drapes tightly, and he wasn’t in his usual spot on the bed.

“Easy. You don’t have to report to work until afternoon.”

“I have meetings to prepare for and a debriefing in—“ he zeroed in on the clock and groaned. “In one hour.”

“Anthea came by an hour ago for your notes. She will handle the debriefing since she was there by your side. Your afternoon meeting has been pushed back. The ambassador was glad of a longer lunch hour. This junket has been nonstop for him.”

“Greg, I appreciate the effort, but it will only make headaches of a different sort.”

Greg was handing him two more tablets and a glass of water. “You are very important, love, but you are only indispensable to me.”

Mycroft forced down the tablets and buried his face in his hands. Someone in his life looking after him was good. It really was. Why did he feel frightened and ashamed?

Greg took off his shirt and trousers and climbed into bed. He eased Mycroft down onto the pillow and pulled him close. “We’ve got another couple of hours to lounge about; then Morris will bring up brunch on a tray. After that, I will draw you a hot bath.”

“You’ve thought of everything.” Mycroft stood in the doorway of the room and watched the bed where his body was being stroked and kissed by a beautiful man. He moved in and out of his body with the throb of his headache so that he saw the kisses to his eyelids rather than felt them. Greg was kissing a block of ice, a marble statue, and Mycroft’s heart was buried in a jar on the grounds of his ancestral home.

He let himself be guided through the morning because it seemed like a dream. Cuddling, caring, concern, all things that happened in movies. The migraine was muffling everything with its steady beat. He came back to himself in his car and closed the door on what had to be a fluke. Anthea began orienting him and Greg’s gentle caretaking faded away.

The afternoon was fraught with tension and even the car ride home was a strategy session with two agents so that when he came in and Morris and Greg were both there to greet him, he wasn’t
Greg kissed him lightly on the forehead. “Feeling better, sweet heart?”

The endearment that had caused him to rush his meetings to a nearly dangerous level, to forego food, drink and sleep, and to work in the dim light of a sleeping first class section until his eyes burned and twitched. Greg’s voice, hurt and disappointed, came back to him. A problem at home, something he had never needed to trouble himself about before. His husband was lost and lonely and needed him. He had felt elated and furious by turns.

Now he was home. Greg seemed happier, but Mycroft felt smothered. He needed time to decompress after the trip and to sort through his thoughts about going into a meeting groggy and unprepared. Anthea said it had gone quite well, but Mycroft had felt lost, and why? Because Greg was lonely. Mycroft had been lonely for all his life and nobody had risked his career for him.

He was brooding and churlish at dinner, and when Greg suggested an early bed time, Mycroft jumped at the chance. Greg reached for him and he let himself be posed like a doll. When Greg began to snore, Mycroft took his churning mind to the other side of the bed. Starved for affection, dreaming about it for years and now when it was offered without limits, he couldn’t take it in. There was a wall of glass between them and Greg’s voice was muffled, his image not quite true. It was maddening.

He played the afternoon meeting over and over in his mind. All of the things that he could have done better down to word choice. He reviewed every decision he had made since Greg’s troubling call on Saturday morning. When he had been awake for hours and gone over every detail at least three times, he allowed himself to go into one of his stories in progress. His character, a country doctor in Edwardian England, had just discovered that the vicar was quite ill. The challenge of the chapter was that the doctor, a widower had harbored a crush on the vicar for years. Did he portray that for an Edwardian audience or a modern one?

He had worked on some form of this story since he was thirteen. Early drafts were simplistic, but the characters and plot had grown as he did. Several chapters had been typed on an old manual typewriter long into the night his sixteenth summer. His father had been away and with the leniency of his mother, Mycroft had stayed up long into the night, working on his novel. When Lord Holmes had returned, he had found the draft and marked it up with a red biro, writing and twice underlining the word ‘implausible’ on the final page.

The draft had gone in a bottom drawer of the desk until Mycroft had ruthlessly cleaned his room after his father’s memorial. He had taken it back to uni with him and given it another try, but of course, he was busy and then pressed into service immediately following his final year. Still, whenever he was bored or stressed or even afraid, as he was far more than he admitted to himself, he could go into the world of Lawton(not so mysteriously based on Cawton, the little market town near Riddleston Hall). There he walked the streets, meeting the people that he had created. This world went fully his way; he was beloved there.

Completely spent from sickness and high emotion, he went into the small chapel with the stained glass window of Christ with the lambs. In his mind it was a drowsy summer afternoon and he had nowhere to be. The vicar moved about replacing candles, straightening hymnbooks, and quietly rehearsing the homily. Mrs. Twadley came in with a clean altar cloth and stopped to pray. She gave Mycroft a scone from her basket and patted his hand. A bee had come into the nave and was now buzzing about the stained glass when Mycroft bowed his head on his folded arms and allowed sleep to come.

_The nightmare was instantaneous, a familiar foe. He was at Riddleston Hall. Mummy and the baby were sleeping. Shadowy figures were in the house looming high above Mycroft. He was the
man of the house; he had to protect them both. How could he choose? He could carry the baby to Mummy and then they would run together. His hands were clumsy and Sherlock was wriggly, not wanting to be held. The hall kept getting longer and longer. Mummy was screaming. The dream changed from the usual because he did reach her in time. He and Mummy and the baby were safely locked in the wardrobe, hiding from the shadow men whose eyes glowed red under their hoods. He had never gotten all three of them safe before. Maybe it was all over. There was pounding and pounding on the flimsy door of the wardrobe. Mummy’s eyes were wide with fear, and Sherlock whimpered. Mycroft had a thin bladed knife which he stabbed over and over into the crack between the wardrobe doors. The pounding finally stopped. When he opened the wardrobe, it was bright daylight and Greg lay dead on the floor in a pool of blood. But Mycroft mustn’t cry because crying was for poofs and he couldn’t let Father see what he was.

Mycroft came awake silently with little movement. It had taken several months to master control of his reaction to nightmares since he had never been able to control their appearance. He was able to control the sounds he made so that his screams were silent, and he had repressed his tears until he never cried even sometimes when tears would be the appropriate response.

He was clutching the edge of the bed so that his fingers ached. Greg was snoring with enough gusto to reassure Mycroft that he was very much alive. This part of the nightmare dispelled, Mycroft slid from the bed and bolted down the stairs to his study. Putting on all the lights to fend off the shadow figures that lingered, he dialed a familiar number. “Alpha One. This week’s clearance code. ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud.’ Very good. I need you to verify security at Baker Street. Perimeter sweep as well as a visual inside.”

The response was what it nearly always was. Dr. Watson had gone on to bed and Mr. Holmes the Younger was in the kitchen with his experiments. Mycroft’s shaky legs lowered him to the desk chair. He called his mother’s security detail and waited while they made a sweep of the grounds. When he got a reassuring report from Riddleston Hall, he dialed his own team located in the basement of the townhouse. They confirmed all clear. He then did his own search of the upper floors even cracking the door to Morris’ room to hear a gentle whistling snore. Finally, he tiptoed back to his bed and slipped slowly under the duvet. Only then did he realize that he was shivering.

Greg roused and rolled over, mumbling, “Cold. C’mere.”

Then Greg threw his arm over and pulled Mycroft close. In contrast to his own chilled frame, Greg was scorching. Mycroft focused on his breathing and tried to stay present so that he could enjoy being held. At the same time, he didn’t want to get so comfortable that if the nightmare returned, Greg might notice. If Greg found out about the nightmares, he would know he was married to a coward and a failure, and Mycroft would be all alone again, but this time he would know what he was missing.

Tuesday was a better day. Mycroft had time for lunch and reflection at his club. When he got home, they would make love and all would be right again. During sex was the one time that Mycroft felt confident in his marriage. His tawdry past had taught him hundreds of ways to pleasure Greg, and the endorsement of so many former lovers blocked out the negative voices. As long as they came together in darkness and Mycroft topped, he could overcome the truth of Greg’s beauty. As long as he kept Greg utterly exhausted from shagging, he had some assurance that his nightmares would remain secret.

Tuesday dinner was an exercise in flirtation. Greg had sorted something out with Morris and now they ate together with Mycroft at the head of the table and Greg on his right rather than opposite ends of the banquet length monstrosity. Greg’s foot wandered over and stroked along Mycroft’s calf. They looked into each other’s eyes. Greg licked his lips and did the little thing with his tongue which nearly burst the stitches of Mycroft’s fly. Mycroft ran his finger along the underside
of Greg’s wrist.

All was done under the watchful eye of Morris so that when Mycroft asked what was for dessert, Morris responded, “Cherries flambé, sir.”

Mycroft looked at the dish of dark cherry compote once Morris was back in the kitchen. “I don’t understand.”

“I think Morris was making a little joke. I guess we’ve been looking at each other rather pointedly.”

“I do feel decidedly warm.”

“I think we could take this upstairs for later.”

“You may be too weak to eat them later.”

“I consider that a challenge and a promise.”

They walked slowly up the stairs, both too hard for comfort. Mycroft started on Greg’s buttons, looking forward to a fast, fierce and blessedly silent fuck, but Greg had something to say. He stilled Mycroft’s hands and led him over to the bed.

“I need you to promise me something, love.”

“Anything.” Mycroft concentrated on his breathing, fighting to remain present.

Greg held his hand and rubbed his thumb over the knuckles. He brushed his lips across Mycroft’s. “Don’t you dare initiate sex when you’re in pain, physical or otherwise. If I’ve said or done anything that made you think I have to have sex regardless, I am so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m glad that you want me.”

“But not when you’re hurt because that hurts me. This is our safe place, My. You don’t have to be brave here. You can lay it all down.”

Mycroft considered this a very pretty fantasy. No bedroom would ever be safe. Beds were the place for interrogations and cruel games and power. But his husband needed to feel like Mycroft was happy so he nodded. “All I was thinking about was getting home to you and reconnecting. It felt like I was gone much longer than a week.”

“For me too.”

Then Greg was done talking and the evening went according to plan. Nine days of separation had made Greg extra hungry. He came twice and attempted a third. Mycroft pounded his fears against his lover’s strong body. Greg was asleep before Mycroft had him cleaned up.

This time when Mycroft crawled under the duvet, he pulled Greg close. He could touch him without worrying if he was doing it right. Sex was the price to be paid for affection, and he had earned his pay. He stroked his fingers through Greg’s soft, thick hair until Greg moaned in his sleep. He practiced things to say, words that came into his mind but seemed awkward. If he could whisper them to a sleeping Greg, perhaps his subconscious would release them sometime in future to a wakeful husband.

“You are so beautiful. I can’t believe you belong to me. I need you.”
Saying the words put him on high alert so he lay awake in the dark, counting Greg’s breaths. When he finally felt drowsy, he eased away from Greg and moved to the edge of the bed. It was cold. Memories of old lovers were especially taunting tonight. He reminded himself that they had only entered his body, not his mind. His mind was his only safe place so he went to his little town and began work on the next chapter until sleep took him.

When the nightmare came, he knew that he couldn’t call security again so soon. He sat outside in the hall with his back to the closed door of their bedroom and kept watch until dawn.

Wednesday dinner was quieter; they both seemed lost in their own thoughts. Mycroft noted that Greg was nervous, likely planning something. The biting of his plump lower lip was even tastier than the custard tart Morris served as dessert.

Greg’s voice was a half note higher than usual when he said, “I want us to try something different.”

Mycroft tilted his head and raised an eyebrow. It was his best pose for getting to the heart of things.

“It may be awkward at first. It’s a little radical.”

Ah, there it was and fortunately, Mycroft was adept at that practice, not even a challenge either way. “While I’m not opposed to fisting, Gregory, I usually like to do it at the beginning of the weekend so the body has time to recover.”

“What?!” Greg’s voice was a loud squawk, and Morris, who had just come through the swinging door to collect plates, stepped quickly backward.

“It’s something we can work up to,” Mycroft said soothingly, patting Greg’s arm.

“No, I don’t, I mean I wouldn’t mind, but no, that’s not what I meant for tonight. I just wanted us to talk before bed. My god, I wouldn’t come out with that over a custard tart. I’ve got some tact.”

Greg’s eyes were huge, and he was profoundly red.

Morris made another attempt at entering the room, took one look at Greg’s face and again tiptoed backwards.

“We’ve frightened Morris,” Mycroft said and then it was all very funny.

They giggled. Then quieted. Then Morris made a third and successful try to clear the table and once he was safely back in his kitchen, they burst into another round of giggles.

Greg had laughed until he cried and he wiped his eyes with his napkin. “I did some research while you were gone about newlyweds and one of the things you are supposed to do is take regular times to communicate. I thought maybe tonight if you are feeling better….”

“Of course, whatever you’d like.” Mycroft was skilled at any number of team building exercises.

Greg’s voice was shy now, the giggles all gone. “It’s going to take some work, but I want a marriage like my mum and dad’s.”

“I want that too.”

“Seems like it’s extra important because of our jobs. I’ve waited so long to find you, My. I don’t want any regrets.”
Mycroft nodded which seemed to be all that was required.

“You probably have a little work to do so I’ll go up and get the room ready; I bought some candles and things like the book recommended. Then I’ll be in my study. You could text me when you’re ready, or be really radical and come and get me.”

“What should I wear?”

“Just put on something you feel comfortable in. Pajamas, jumper with a duck on it, whatever you like. I thought we would start very small. Three questions.”

Mycroft went to his study but he didn’t get any work done. As he was sitting at his desk, his heart began to pound and it took him awhile to place the anxiety. Bed time meant talk time. With as little exposure as he had had to his father, he still was able to read him as the hunted animal reads a predator. Beautiful and brilliant, Lord Anthony Delamere Holmes had given Mycroft his skills of interrogation, penetrating calm, deadly quiet, and lightning perception. He used them on his son relentlessly. “I’m not giving you a lecture, son. I just want to make sure that you are living up to your potential as a Holmes.”

Mycroft remembered trying to keep his eyes steady when they darted around the room. He began breathing techniques, practiced hiding his tells. He was eleven. Still, whenever that soft voice began, his heart rate increased. He felt trapped and eyed the French doors in his room longingly. Escape. His adult self knew that the Iceman had been born in that room. It was his father’s legacy.

He always sensed when one of the talks was going to take place. They would start with different innocent subjects, attempts to put him at ease. He wished that this part was real and that his father was interested. But as soon as he slipped into that fantasy, the true purpose of the conversation would reveal itself and no matter what the topic, Mycroft would fail the test.

He wasn’t beautiful; he wasn’t good at sport; he wasn’t straight. The things he was good at didn’t appeal to Lord Holmes at all. Films, writing funny or scary stories, acting in plays at school. Acting would have been fine. Lord Holmes had been a popular performer in school. But Mycroft loved the wigs and make up required for the character parts. He liked being someone else. There was more challenge in being plain and making the audience care.

All of these hurts had molded him into the success he now was, able to provide for Greg and to justifiably employ Morris. He could also watch over Sherlock as he had promised to do since his birth. What he couldn’t do was take in that his life had changed after twenty some years of isolation, and he had a husband more handsome and bright and loving than he had ever dreamed for himself.

Mycroft shook himself back into the present. Greg was waiting. The talk had to play out as it always did. Then once Greg was asleep, Mycroft would curl up on the edge of the bed and hold his aching stomach. He would go into one of his stories until he fell asleep or morning came.

Going upstairs to their room, he saw that Greg had lit candles in the four points of the room and now it smelled like cedar and the ocean. Enough of his migraine lingered that the two scents clashed and overwhelmed. He got out the heather blue plaid pajamas that Greg seemed to favor. They were soft flannel and shabby chic like a duvet at a beach house.

Clad in the appropriate uniform for the occasion, he stared in the mirror to center himself. His father’s voice played in the back of his mind, making little observations he called them. But it was nitpicking. Mycroft was keenly aware that he had cut himself shaving, that he was bloated from a salty lunch, that his pasty face still showed the ravages of travel and the migraine, that his hair was going, that an age spot was developing on his left cheek, that he was totally unsuited to be married
to a man as lovely as Greg Lestrade.

When his father’s voice stopped, his spitting image and echo, Sherlock began. While the flesh and blood Sherlock had grown a great deal in the past year under John’s tutelage, the one in Mycroft’s mind remained unchanged. Cruel in his observations, powerful because he had known Mycroft in his weakest years, the teens, Sherlock wouldn’t pick at Mycroft’s appearance. He would go straight to the heart.

*You’re losing him.*

*He needs someone open and real. You aren’t capable of it, Iceman.*

*I am not the only sociopath in this family.*

*You don’t even know when you’re acting, Mycroft. The patterns run too deep.*

“Well, my boy, you’ve led John a merry chase in your time,” Mycroft said out loud to his sniping little brother. Then he took a deep breath and texted Greg because his legs were shaking too much for him to manage the stairs. What cannot be cured, must be endured.

Greg came into the room and took Mycroft’s breath away as he did at least ten times a day, whether face to face or on CCTV. He was wearing track pants slung low and a white vest that made his arms look extra tan and bulky. He pulled Mycroft close, nuzzling his cheek against the pajamas. “Mmm, you’re soft, My. Thank you for doing this with me.”

Then he got the remote for the stereo and quite pleased with himself, worked the buttons until the sound of ocean waves filled the room. “Morris taught me how to use the remotes while you were in Japan,” he said, tongue behind his teeth in that kissable way.

He took Mycroft’s hand and led him to the bed. Greg lay down on his side and propped his head up on his hand, with elbow bent. He looked like an ad for underwear or condoms or some other spicy, good thing. Mycroft eased himself down and copied Greg’s pose but feeling painfully self conscious, he thought he probably looked like an ad for laxatives.

With his free hand, Greg played with Mycroft’s fingers. Mycroft wanted to enjoy just being with Greg; he would give anything for the shy ease that Greg had. He wanted to be fully present with his husband, but the bad memories were screaming louder than the ocean sounds and his body was on full alert.

“The book says that it will feel silly at first, but it gets easier,” Greg chuckled awkwardly, all of fifteen and socially clumsy and still heartbreakingly lovely as he looked up under his lashes at his husband. “I want to learn all I can about you, My. I need to know you.”

“You may regret it.”

Greg’s denial was muffled by the roaring in Mycroft’s ears and he had to have the first question repeated.

“I said, what’s your favorite color?”

“Green.”

“What shade?”

“Emerald. Jewel tones.”
“Right, not likely that neon lime would suit.”

There was a strange pause in which Mycroft knew he was supposed to do something, but he felt excessively dim when Greg said gently, “Now you go. Ask me the same or something else small that you’d like to know.”

“Your favorite? Color, I mean.” He sounded like a stroke victim being retrained.

“Blue. I always loved blue but now when it’s the color of your eyes, it takes my notice even more. And your eyes have been all the shades of blue at one time or another.”

“That’s very kind of you to say.” Good god, he sounded like someone in the office had complimented his penmanship. Why couldn’t he be lighthearted like other people? Why did everything have to be so damn serious?

Greg was going on, thank heaven for his kindness and occasional oblivion. “Favorite movie?”

“North by Northwest.”

“Why? I mean, I haven’t seen it so tell me.”

“It’s Hitchcock. You know how much I like his work even after all that mess with Ramsay. Cary Grant is the lead; an advertising man pulled into intrigue, acting as a spy. I wanted to be him, all cool and smooth and likable. Didn’t hurt that he was gorgeous.”

“You are cool and smooth and likable and gorgeous so you met your goal.”

He knew that he had been given a compliment but it sounded empty, like a line. Still, Greg’s face was open, his eyes glowing with pride. Mycroft didn’t know what to do about that. There were too many voices saying otherwise; the bed was crowded with people that saw him as a clumsy, ugly fifteen year old. Fortunately he could hide in the rhythm of this exercise.

“And your favorite movie?” He had done better this round, his response time was lower.

“Being There. Peter Sellers. Have you seen it?”

“No, I know who Peter Sellers is but the Pink Panther movies were just too close to home.”

“For me too. I didn’t care to keep hearing the word ‘inspector’ associated with bumbling. I’m sure Sherlock loves them if John has introduced them to him.”

“Sherlock can’t sit still through a whole movie unless it’s for a case. You are probably safe.”

“Being There is different. It’s clever and the ending leaves you with lots of questions. There’s symbols and social commentary but it’s also really funny. Maybe we could watch it together? Have a movie night? Yours and mine?”

“Of course.” Two hours of closeness was good but the expectations would be huge. He sighed.

“Almost done, love. Last question. Did you have a teddy when you were small?”

The question was a blow to the back of the head, unexpected and stunning. He blinked and coughed. He wondered if Greg could see that he was felled by the memory.

Hop, a fine upstanding rabbit. Chocolate brown eyes like the ones he was looking into now. Long, velvety ears for telling secrets to. Soft fur but sturdy like a real pet, one he could keep with him in the nursery, a friend to hold after the lights were out, someone in his corner after his father
had interrogated him. The new nanny had tossed Hop in the bin while he was asleep. Stuffed toys were not hygienic, and they also made children anti-social and clingy. His mother had been horrified and went with him to search the trash, but it had already been burned. He had cried himself to sleep every night for a week and even now, the loss loomed large in the locked rooms of his heart.

He willed his voice steady and said, “I didn’t have a teddy. I had a little rabbit called Hop. He was a true friend until my nanny threw him away.”

“What kind of monster does that to a child?”

“Nannies can be formidable. It’s not all Mary Poppins and even she had a dark side. Hop had been exposed to many bodily fluids in his wee life. I got sick all over him. She was likely right, but I grieved him just the same.” He was trying to be clever with that last bit but his voice wavered.

Greg kissed him, slow and sweet. “I’m sorry, love. It was meant to bring happy memories, not sad.”

“No, it was a long time ago. Tell me about your teddy.” Hide your hurt in plain sight with a distracting question.

“He was reddish brown with reddish brown eyes. He was wind up and played Brahms’s lullaby. When his fur started to wear off, my sisters put him in a doll’s coveralls for me. Mum still has him. I called him Bruce for reasons I’ve forgotten.”

“Bruce Edward Lestrade, a friend indeed. I’d quite like to meet him.”

“Mum thought I would give him to my kids, but I wouldn’t let a child near that mange. He’ll soon be fifty years old.”

All the air had left the room to be replaced by cedar and salt fumes. He was hot in the pajamas and everything was terribly sad and empty. Lost toys and children that would never be born and a marriage that was a sham because Mycroft Holmes was a cold, sick bastard that couldn’t feel.

“My, are you okay?”

The urge to cry was overwhelming but even though the tears didn’t come, he felt the shame as if they had. He wanted to confess every last ugly thing about himself until Greg gave up and left him instead of working so hard at a doomed marriage. Some of it did pour out in a small ugly lump of words. “I know that I’m failing you.”

“You didn’t fail me. I asked you three questions and you answered them all.”

“I know you want more. You’re unhappy. I’m trying but I …” Mycroft’s cheeks were incendiary. Greg’s face glowed in the heat.

“I want to know you better. That’s all. We are having our courtship after the fact but it’s no less special.”

“Courtship?” His smoldering face twitched. This was a joke, wasn’t it?

“Right. I haven’t asked you, have I? Will you have dinner with me on Saturday?”

“Of course, but we always have dinner together.” When would the confusion end? So many unknowns, so much required of him.
“Dinner and a show, My. A date. The things we missed out on when we were saving the world.”

“I haven’t done much dating.” Another mine field of potential mistakes, but this time in public.

“I know. So maybe it’s a good thing if we can slow down a bit. I didn’t mean to push you tonight.”

“You didn’t. It’s me. I don’t know how to do this.” Mycroft’s head was full of his own language and the one Greg was speaking, and they darted and crossed each other as they did when he wore his headset at the UN. Greg wanted to slow things down. Was that his exit strategy?

“This?”

“Being married. I feel like I’m in a play where everyone has the script but me.”

“I feel that way too.”

Mycroft let out a huge breath he didn’t know he had been holding, and he felt an ocean breeze cool him. Maybe what he was feeling was normal?

“We’ll find our way, love, I promise. But you’ve had enough for now. We can watch some telly or read or maybe you’d like to go straight to sleep?”

“No, I don’t think I could sleep yet.” My’s heart was still pounding. If he was able to cry, he would have.

Greg flashed the full out boyish grin that made Mycroft’s pain stop and his cock start. “Fancy a shag, Mr. Holmes?”

“It’s the one thing I’m good at.”

“Wrong!” Greg did a fair imitation of Sherlock.

Mycroft smiled as he was supposed to. Then Greg looked hard into his eyes. “My, will you let me drive tonight?”

“I think I’d like that very much.” It was just another test to pass, but in a subject he excelled in. He could erase his communication failure by being compliant. It was something else to get through, and he left his body to do so. Greg didn’t notice.
The tulips ranged in color from cream tipped with palest peach to a deep coral spotted with yellow. They were in a cream colored china vase with a royal blue ribbon. The card read, “Beautiful flowers for my beautiful husband. I can’t wait for our date. Love, Greg.”

Greg was on a case that had taken his days and nights, but he had somehow remembered to do something special. The card was in his handwriting; he had gone by the shop instead of ordering over the phone. Mycroft yet again felt overwhelmed by a display that must be a joke. People didn’t give him presents, didn’t think about him except in a work capacity, and certainly didn’t see him at all, let alone see beauty. It had to be a joke, but Greg wasn’t a cruel man. He was honorable and sincere and in their private moments gentle. Still the memories came that proved Greg wrong. The memories were always coming these days, stronger than ever before, impossible to stem the tide.

A family gathering. It was always somebody’s birthday. After greeting every one as he was forced to do, Mycroft found a quiet corner behind a tree in the garden and settled in with his book. The younger cousins were playing cricket or tennis and anyone over thirty was doting over a toddling Sherlock who called out pithy observations about everyone with a piping lisp.

Voices approached and Mycroft dreaded having to make idle chit chat but Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Opal were looking for a quiet corner for gossip and did not notice him.

Aunt Opal was a large, saggy bosomed woman and the bench creaked when she plopped down. Her voice was wheezy and laden with phlegm. “That Sherlock is growing into a little git. I think a child of nearly three is old enough to keep his remarks to himself.”

The bench didn’t even whisper as Charlotte’s angular frame settled. “The problem, dear, is that what he says is true. It’s hard to scold a child for the truth.”

“But he said I’m fat.”

“And that’s not true?”

A spluttering silence fell. And then, “He’s a beautiful child, thank all that is holy.”

“Yes, thank heaven and all the angels above. He’s the very image of his father.”

“They’ll just have to make sure Mycroft’s away at school when they have the family portraits done.”

A snort. A cackle. “It’s as if all of the worst traits of the Holmes and the Cholmondeleys have been visited on one unfortunate child.”
Charlotte had recovered from snickering at low humor enough to say, “One hopes for the sake of the line that Eugenia had a dalliance with one of the stable hands.”

“Don’t worry about the line, my dear. He’s a little queen in waiting. No more children that look like potatoes on matchsticks. Now, based on the size of her baby, how far gone do you think Suzanne was when she was married?”

Mycroft wasn’t sure of everything that they were saying about him, but he was pleasantly surprised at how wickedly funny the two old women were in private. It stung but it was more of an honest truth than the subtle picking that his father did. He stood and eased himself round the tree to enjoy the joke with his aunts.

After their initial guilty faces at being caught in unladylike behavior, their eyes changed. When Mycroft saw pity in their eyes, his fun was over. It wasn’t jokey; it was true. They knew he was ugly; they knew he had fantasies about boys, and they didn’t think any of it was going to improve. He went back to the main crowd of the gathering. Mummy was having some trouble with Sherlock, who needed a time out from the overstimulation of too many people, too many insulting things to say.

Mycroft carried him up to the nursery. On the stairway, Sherlock began one of his favorite taunts, honking Mycroft’s nose saying “Big” and then touching his own pert little perfect nose and saying “little.”

“Stop it, Sherlock! I’ve warned you.”

Sherlock got in one last honk, and Mycroft smacked his little face. Sherlock stared at him, a demonic and silent resentment in his eyes until time for hand off to the nanny when he cried out, “Mycoff hit me!” and he sobbed into his nanny’s buxom bosom.

Mycroft ended up hiding in his wardrobe even though it was stifling. His face couldn’t get any hotter than it was.

He was brought back from memories by Anthea waving in his face. “Sir, your husband is on line two.”

He must have looked confused because she said, “Detective Inspector Lestrade, your husband is on line two.”

“Thank you. Hold any other calls until we finish, please,” he said primly.

He waited until she left the room and the door was firmly shut. Keeping a close eye on the other lines, he pressed the button for line 2. “Greg, how kind of you to call.”

Damn, he was sounding formal again. No wonder Greg was unhappy. Here he had just given an amazing gift of flowers and Mycroft couldn’t break through the decorum.

“I only have a few minutes but I wanted you to know that I’m sorry this case is keeping me away. I miss you.”

“I miss you too. The bed is very cold when you aren’t in it.” Oh, that was choice, reminding Greg that he slept with the Iceman. “Thank you for my flowers.”

“You are very welcome. My dad gave me that bit of advice and suggested tulips. You aren’t allergic?”

“No, not at all.” Big strapping copper woos sickly, weak, highly allergic ponce with
hypoallergenic flowers. Sigh. “Lilies and orchids, but not tulips.”

“There’s a matching one at home so you can keep that one to enjoy at the office.”

“Greg, it’s too much.” He knew what Greg’s salary was, and he knew what flowers cost even though he only ever sent them to his mother.

“Nothing’s too much to show you how I feel, My. Did you notice that I picked the ones that were your colors? A real English beauty you are, all peaches and cream.”

There were muffled sounds of laughter and chatter, and Greg’s voice, rough and quiet. “Shut it. If you’d give more thought to your own marriage, you wouldn’t be spending half your nights on the sofa.”

There was a chorus of jeers for the unfortunate one who was having problems. Then Greg’s voice was firm again. “I love my husband. I’m proud of him. If you can’t cope, there’s the door.”

Mycroft didn’t know how to take in such unwavering public affection. He was still waiting for someone to tell him that he had been the unwitting participant in a mockumentary.

“Listen, love. I have to interview this suspect, and I’ve got surveillance tonight. I won’t be home.”

“You didn’t get any sleep last night.”

“I caught an hour on the floor here.”

“Maybe we should postpone the date and let you catch up on your sleep.”

“No! I will be fine, and this is important to me.”

“If you can’t, I’ll understand.”

“Have you changed your mind? Sounds like you are looking for the exit.”

“No, Greg, not at all. I’m just concerned. Same as you were when I had a headache.”

“You were quite ill, and I was very concerned. This is just work but I’ll be there in time to change and pick you up. I keep my promises, My.”

“Shall I schedule a car?”

“No, my date, I drive. But you can choose my clothes if you like. I don’t want you to be ashamed of me and the rags I normally wear.”

“It’s not like that.”

“We’ll see. The closet fairy has stopped leaving me surprises. God, I’m tired. That sounded like something else entirely.”

“Can you be more specific than dinner and a show?”

“The venue is Donmar Warehouse and I’ll let you do your usual sleuthing to get the rest. I love you and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Love you too,” Mycroft said but Greg had already rung off.

Friday evening was a shopping spree. Greg had said that Mycroft could choose his clothing and
so he did, working from the inside out. Gray silk boxers with small brown polka dots. Brown and tan argyle socks. New driving loafers, the leather softer than skin. When he got home, Mycroft inhaled the new leather smell deeply and repeatedly.

Gray khakis, gray Oxford, chocolate brown cashmere jumper, gray tweed sport coat with a small brown fleck, and a Burberry trench coat in dark brown wool. He chose his own clothes in shades of blue. Never having dressed for anyone before, he hoped it wasn’t wishful imagination that the deep royal blue of his jumper made his eyes seem bluer. Navy blazer and trousers. Pale blue shirt. He thought about Greg taking it off of him later if they were still on speaking terms after The Date.

Mycroft had been thinking about it since Wednesday without Greg to distract him from worry. The anxiety had built to ridiculous proportions. Saturday dawned rainy and gray. Morris had plenty to occupy himself with making Greg’s new clothes look less new. Mycroft realized he should have bought two or three of everything and let Greg choose, but it was too late to return to the shops for a proper trousseau.

Knowing now what play they were seeing, he read all of the reviews and skimmed over the play itself from one of his literature textbooks as well as some critical essays in a literary journal. He skipped lunch so he would be able to eat good sized portions wherever Greg took him. The day dragged on.

Finally, a scant half hour before they needed to leave, Mycroft was in the bath, getting ready by faith, but fearing the worst, when he heard Greg trotting up the stairs, Morris’ hushed tones punctuating Greg’s rough voice. Rougher than normal, he had been shouting at his team again in the rain or interrogating some criminal until he was hoarse. A bad day? Mycroft couldn’t read him as easily as he had his father.

Mycroft had timed it poorly and had fifteen minutes left over before Greg would come for him. To avoid looking in the mirror, he went to his study and attempted work. Failing that, he tried to read for pleasure, but finally, he was at his desk staring into space. He tried to work on his story. He had cycled through to his favorite bit where the doctor was caring for the vicar at his last; the impending death had loosened both their tongues and the bitter sweet declarations were heart wrenching. It was no good. The blood was rushing in his ears. Apparently, the story wouldn’t work in the daylight for dates. Greg superceded fiction.

He started doing survival math. Thirty minutes in the car. One hour for dinner. Two and a half hours for the play. One hour if they went for dessert after, something he was going to firmly quash. Then thirty minutes home depending on traffic. Worst case scenario, five and a half hours. Then it would be over and he and Greg would be tucked in bed which was a different type of mine field but not unknown.

*No matter how big of a fool I make of myself, no matter how badly I fail Greg, it will all be over in six hours.*

Then a more recent memory flooded in to keep him in his place. He had been hiding in a loo stall after a brutal meeting, his legs pulled up to his chest and cramping belly when two of his minor enemies came in.

“Did you see him? The Wise and Powerful Ponce. Twice as arrogant now that he’s married.”

“I don’t envy the poor bastard that married the Snow Queen.”

“Haven’t you seen him? Inspector Lestrade, he was in all the papers for stopping that terrorist ring. I would dip my wick in that any time.”
“Oh he was a tasty morsel. Why the hell with the Iceman?”

“He fancies iced lollies maybe?”

“Beauty and the Beast. It’s a crime against nature, that.”

“Rumor has it, back in the day, he slept his way to the top with blow jobs for one and all, but his skill was eclipsed by the size of his—“

Mycroft couldn’t take anymore and flushed, but then he had to wait for his stomach to settle. It was within his power to have them both transferred, but he couldn’t hate them for speaking the truth, and unlike the aunts, they were too resentful of him to pity him. In the truth basket along with ugly went arrogant, cold, undeserving, and slutty. A big cock didn’t make up for all those negatives.

“My? Are you ready, love?”

Greg was coming down the stairs, calling his name. He rose to meet his fate.

There were flickering moments when he felt like enough. Greg was coming toward him with that cheeky grin, his tongue busy behind his teeth. Mycroft could see the love pouring off of him.

“You look so good in that blue,” Greg said, wrapping his arms around Mycroft’s waist and squeezing.

Greg nuzzled his cheek against Mycroft’s jumper. “You look good, feel good, and smell good. I am so lucky.”

Mycroft would always, always be the lucky one. Greg was stunning in the clothes suited to his coloring. His eyes popped, highlighted by the brown jumper, and his silver hair shone. It was damp from his shower and smelled of mint. “Greg, are you sure you are up for this? You must be exhausted.”

“We got as far as we can for now pending lab results that won’t be ready until Monday. I’ll have tomorrow to sleep, but tonight I’m yours. Let’s go.”

He put his hand in the small of Mycroft’s back to urge him toward the door. Mycroft felt strange walking down to the garage and getting in the front seat of a regular car. He wasn’t fond of being a passenger in this situation. The ride couldn’t be used for paperwork or phone calls.

“Here we go,” Greg said with a wink.

He put his hand on Mycroft’s headrest as he turned to back out of the garage. Mycroft’s heart pounded at the closeness. Why couldn’t they stop the car, go back in the house, strip off the carefully chosen clothing, and just fuck? No expectations, no pitfalls, two bodies. But Greg needed this, and Mycroft was going to do whatever was asked of him. Five hours, fifty seven minutes before he could climb safely under the duvet.

Greg was a careful driver, and Mycroft willed himself to move from full alert to hypervigilance. He would only have to monitor fifty percent of the potential danger because Greg would be watching, but since Greg was exhausted, maybe it could be 70/30.

When they paused at a traffic light, Greg turned and said, “I’m so glad you’re with me tonight. Thank you for being willing to try something new.”

Mycroft again wondered what it would be like to speak his heart like that, to freely and easily say
the perfect thing and feel the truth of it. The guilt came in because he hadn’t been willing for this
date to happen at all. He was still dragging his feet and looking for ways to back out. He couldn’t
offer feelings so he offered facts. “I looked up some information about the play today. I read it in
school but had forgotten.”

“You won’t be bored if you’ve already read it?” Greg chewed at his bottom lip.

“No, of course not. Good plays are meant to be enjoyed over and over throughout one’s life.”

“Like family stories?”

“Perhaps your family’s stories, Gregory.”

“I suppose you’re right on that. Maybe a favorite meal?”

“Yes, a better metaphor. You see something new each time or you come to parts and they are
funny again. Like movies, I guess. Sometimes it’s nice to know what you’re getting.”

“What are we getting? All I know is that it’s very old, and I don’t want to be the one ignorant
bloke in the room with my mouth hanging open.”

So Mycroft gave a mini briefing, simplifying the theses and terms of the critical essays that he had
read. He warmed to the subject so that the time passed faster, and they were suddenly turning into
an alley and a tiny car park for six cars. Greg turned off the engine and sighed. He unfastened his
seat belt and fully turned to his husband. “I’m going to kiss you now because I’m guessing that
public displays of affection make you uncomfortable.”

Greg’s lips were soft on his, sweeter for their few days’ separation. The kiss stopped short of their
usual ferocity. “More of that at home,” Greg said. “I truly believe that we need planned activities
but rest assured, my favorite thing will always be the sex.”

“Me too,” Mycroft said, relieved that his best skill would be Greg’s favorite. Sex would have to
cover a multitude of sins.

“Now, no kisses but I would very much like to hold your hand sometimes. Would that be okay?”

Mycroft paused. People would know they were together. Did Greg want that? “I think that would
be acceptable.”

Greg laughed. “Not exactly a ringing endorsement. Let’s do this. I’ll take your hand and if you
don’t like it, squeeze very hard, and I’ll drop it for the rest of the night. But one hard squeeze,
mind you, because three squeezes means ‘I love you.’”

“There are codes?” Nausea ran through him, thudding in his throat.

“Only a few, My, and their use is optional, not really a first date kind of thing. We’ll work up to
it.”

My was embarrassed at how relieved he was. “I’ll leave that to you then.”

He waited for Greg’s signal to exit the car, but Greg was rubbing at a spot on the steering wheel
with complete absorption. “I am so nervous,” he said, ducking his head.

“Why? At the end of the night, we go home to the same house. In spite of any make believe, I’m a
sure thing.”
“Right then. Let’s explore the many proper foods available at Coeur Sain.”

It was easier for awhile. They had the business of coat check and being seated and choosing a wine and an entrée but eventually, the terrible and awkward seven minute silence occurred.

“The damned seven minute silence,” Mycroft muttered.

“What’s that?” Greg asked.

“All conversations have an ebb and flow and grind to a complete halt every seven minutes or so.”

Greg pondered this awhile, his head tilted adorably. Then he set his stop watch. “I want to know more about Morris. He told me that he and Rory used to work with you, and I wondered how he came to be your butler.”

Then he took a sip of his wine, sat back, and waited. Mycroft was a little put off by the cheek of it, but he was a good story teller and it would while away the time until their food arrived.

“I was recruited straight out of uni, and one of my first assignments was to go back as a student under cover at Oxford instead of Cambridge but to be far more ostentatious about wealth. I doubt they would allow this now, but they let me interview and choose my own staff.”

“Your salads, sirs,” the waiter said so suddenly that Mycroft startled.

He looked down to find a nine centimeter circle of sprouts with a tiny brown speckled egg inside. Greg was watching him intently for cues how to eat the thing, but Mycroft didn’t know himself. He motioned the waiter over and noted an eye roll. Not a good start to the meal at all.

“I’m an avid bird watcher, but I’m unfamiliar with this type of egg.”

“Cornish game hen, sir.”

“Edible?”

“Of course, a significant calorie count for this portion of the meal, high in protein.”

“Does one peel it?”

“Unless you would like me to do it.”

“If I wanted to forego the egg, would I be allowed dressing for this salad?”

“It is dressed, sir. Like the marsh that inspires it, the salad nest sits atop a skim of lemon infused water.”

“Thank you, ever so.”

Greg was biting his lower lip again which looked to be the most edible thing nearby. “My, I’m really sorry. I thought the heart healthy low calorie thing would be like Morris’ cooking.”

“It’s all right. I’m sure the entrée will be better. Now let’s peel our tiny eggs.”

Greg’s blunt fingers were ill suited to the task and the slippery egg landed on Mycroft’s plate. He picked up the egg and his story. “I had a car that I loved back then, a vintage Mercedes, black. I wore a lot of black and must have looked like an undertaker. I was having her tuned up. Rory was bold as brass and damn good at anything mechanical. But to be honest, he was beautiful and I wanted him around.”
“How did Morris feel about that?” Greg sounded gratifyingly jealous under his curiosity. He had swallowed his egg like a pill and was now struggling with the ‘nest.’

Mycroft held his knife and fork in demonstration and cut through the marsh grasses. If there was any sort of moisture on the plate, it had long since disappeared. “Rory made sure that he was solidly settled in the job as my driver and then began campaigning for his friend to come on as my butler. Morris was fifteen years older than I was, ten years older than Rory. He was an angry man, but a fine mimic as was Rory. We got Morris a trainer and in the evenings when I was supposed to be studying, we watched old movies, period pieces. He and Rory got quite good at playing any type of servant needed.”

There was a pause for chewing as well as extracting the tangle of dry seeds that had nestled between teeth. Mycroft put his knife and fork down to free his left bicuspid behind his napkin, when his plate was whisked away.

“Are you done, sir?” the waiter addressed Greg with disdain and flirtation.

“Very much so,” Greg said, not even looking up. “So when did you find out about them? Their secret?”

“Rory was very affectionate and eventually, I observed a stolen kiss. There was a tense moment where Morris thought that I might harm them, but if anything, I must have looked sad to be third wheel yet again.”

“It’s hard to imagine Morris being angry or scared. He’s almost serene now.” Greg’s tongue was in motion against the sprouts, and Mycroft had to look away as his body responded to that motion.

“Morris and I had much more in common than either of us had with Rory. In that way I got to be part of the in crowd sometimes.”

“He told me that his dad drank.” Greg’s eyes were sad. “Did your father have a problem with alcohol?”

“No, he was very sparing with alcohol, and during his expeditions, he didn’t drink at all unless to refuse it would be rude.”

“Then what was the common ground?”

Mycroft’s hands were instantly cold and numb. In attempting to distract Greg in one direction, he had stumbled into another trap from the past. He took a sip of the truly awful wine, and by then the waiter had brought the entrees which stunned them both.

“Fresh ground pepper, sir?” the waiter asked Greg.


Mycroft covered a laugh with a cough. “Pepper for both of us, please.”

Greg continued to stare at the tiny plate and the tiny food while Mycroft had to bite the inside of his cheek and not look directly at the waiter. He was thankful for the change in topic the miniscule food would provide.

When the waiter was safely out of earshot, Greg leaned forward. “When they bring the entrée, tell them my plate has some food stuck to it, and they might want to get their dishwasher serviced.”
Mycroft snorted, a sound he didn’t know he was capable of. “Let me get my glasses.”

He put on his reading glasses, knowing that they made him look like a fussy old woman. Greg wrinkled his nose at him. Then Mycroft intentionally imitated Aunt Charlotte picking at a plate of food like the canary she was. Barely touching the items with knife and fork, he formed his mouth in a disapproving pucker. “Three pork medallions the size of ten pence, fourteen grams of carrot shreds, five grams of whole wheat angel hair pasta including the chaff, a stunning one hundred grams of haricot vert or the more vulgar, French beans, three drops of sauce, and a raisin. Make it last, Greg.”

Greg was smiling his naughty boy smile, the full on grin that he usually saved for their wilder sex choices. Mycroft had seen that smile very seldom since the honeymoon. He wanted to see it every day. He cut the medallion into fourths and with the tine of his fork, lifted one fourth to his mouth. It was Greg’s turn to snort.

Greg speared all three medallions and most of the pasta on his fork, and it was still a polite portion for one bite. They were both grinning like fools now. Mycroft continued his doll bites, but Greg got most of the French beans on his fork with a second bite and cleaned his plate with the raisin which he popped into his mouth with a flourish. The waiter immediately swooped in and grabbed his plate as well as Mycroft’s. Admittedly the plate did look empty, but half of the food that had been served was still on it. Mycroft did not wish it back.

In mere seconds, they were presented with saucers that contained a demitasse cup of espresso and a dark square. “We’ll have the check please,” Greg said to the waiter.

“Don’t you want to savor your dessert course, sir?”

Greg winked at My, and in unison, they put the squares in their mouths and chased them with the coffee like shots. They both put the wee cups down hard on the saucers. “Done!” Greg said firmly.

He handed over his credit card without looking at the total.

“I wish you’d let me pay, Greg.”

Greg scowled. “I asked you on the date, I pay. You can get the next one. I hope you’ll bring me back here.”

Mycroft Holmes was having a case of the giggles. His nerves were coming out in high pitched wheezes and the harder he tried to be circumspect the funnier everything got. Somehow the bill was paid and they exited the restaurant. Greg didn’t even stop for them to get their coats on properly but propelled them both two doors down to an alleyway and leaned against the building.

“What the hell was that?”

“Overpriced poison and undertrained staff. Your typical three star.”

“How long were we in there?”

“I don’t know. Time stands still in hell.”

“They don’t let the grass grow under your feet.”

“No, they want it for the salads.” Then Mycroft let the giggles out fully until they were propped up against each other.

When the spasm passed, Greg checked his watch. “Twenty minutes at the most in that swank pit.
We’ve got time to try again. Come on,” and he reached for Mycroft’s hand.

God, it felt good to Mycroft whose panic had dissipated with the laughter. What was the signal? He had been so nervous when Greg explained it. A hard squeeze. He clamped down on Greg’s strong hand.

Greg instantly let go and hunched his shoulders. The look he gave Mycroft was sad but not judgmental.

Mycroft stopped walking. “Wait.”

His voice was small. He was caught no matter what. Greg turned, his body language closed. Mycroft felt the whole city straining towards his next words. People were walking around them as they stood in the middle of the sidewalk, something he hated when he was walking in the city.

“Greg, I forgot the signal. Which is it for ‘I love you’? Or what I meant to signal was I like it, I like you.”

Greg’s smile was dazzling. He closed the gap and took Mycroft’s hand and whispered in his ear as he demonstrated. “It was one hard squeeze for stop. You got that bit. But ‘I love you’ is three quick squeezes and then the other person answers with four, for ‘I love you too.’”

All the people and the noise and the fear went away just long enough for Mycroft Holmes to raise his husband’s hand up and to kiss the calloused fingers. It was Greg’s left hand and Mycroft loved the feel of the cool metal wedding band against his lips.

Greg whispered, “Well done, My.”

Then in his regular confident tones, he said as they strode onward, “I’m for pizza and we’re doing enough walking tonight that you had better be too. No growling tummies during the play. We are too close to the front.”

Greg towed him to a Pizza Express where they received a warm welcome in the garlic scented air. There were promising sounds that meant music later, the universal tuning up, but alas, no tables were available. Greg took this in stride and after asking a few questions, ordered confidently.

Sooner than Mycroft might have imagined, they were walking back toward the car in the cool damp air. Mycroft was carrying their pizza which warmed his hands and Greg had the bottles of lager and soda.

From the boot, Greg produced two bath towels, a bar of soap, and a bottle of water. “For bibs now, and washing up after,” he explained, tucking the towel in the neck of his jumper.

They stood at the car and the boot made an efficient makeshift counter, but all admiration of the ingenuity was forgotten at the first bite of the still steaming pizza. Simple, identifiable flavors of goat cheese and spinach and onion and garlic. “My god,” was all he could say through the buttery, crunchy mouthful.

“I know. A little taste of Greece, right? A reminder of our honeymoon.” Greg clinked his bottle against Mycroft’s with a ring. “It’s heaven on a crust and I’ll wager it doesn’t get much better than hot pizza, a cold bottle, and your best mate to share it with.”

Mycroft stopped short as he felt the cold drink run all the way down his throat to his stomach. “Is that what I am?”

Greg chewed thoughtfully as he reviewed what he had said, and Mycroft watched his expressive face as he realized what was being asked. “Hell, My, don’t you know by now? You’re my best
friend.”

“And you’re my only friend,” Mycroft said quietly.

“Guess you better treat me right then,” Greg answered, not letting things get maudlin. “Can I have a sip of your lager?”

“You can have it all if you like.”

“No, just a sip for the flavor. I don’t want to get relaxed. I need the caffeine in this Coke.”

Mycroft had never shared a bottle in his life, and he was feeling deliciously bohemian. He had finished his first slice and looked longingly at the box. Greg put a second slice in his hand, and Mycroft took it from his best mate. A comfortable silence fell as they tucked it away. They watched the people walking by and it was a good feeling to be part of a crowd. Mycroft stopped counting calories, and Greg didn’t ask any disturbing questions but talked about the Pizza Express and its history. “We’ll make reservations some time and come back for the jazz. Do you like jazz, love? Damn, I can’t believe I don’t know that.”

“I like all kinds of music, classical is generally my first choice, unless Sherlock is playing it, but jazz is quite interesting. I don’t know much about it.”

“I do, and I will enjoy teaching you something for a change. So it’s a date?”

Mycroft nodded. He was beginning to think they had a future. When the box was shockingly empty, Greg orchestrated the clean up and it was easy enough to pour water on each other’s hands and scrub up. The empty bottles went in the boot for recycling, and they found a bin for the box as they walked to the theater. Once that was disposed of, Greg took his hand again, and there wasn’t any awkwardness about it.

Mycroft was in his element now and showing Greg around was pure joy. Greg was full of questions about the play and the building, and they had time to explore as well as fully peruse the program and learn about the actors in more detail than Mycroft’s pre-research had provided.

As the curtain went up, Mycroft found his mind fragmented but not unpleasingly. He was in the world of the play with disbelief properly suspended but he was also in the world of the actors, noticing the cues and the projection of voice and because they were close enough, the makeup. He thought about which role he might be best suited for.

He was also in the world of being Greg’s husband and watching out for him since the signs of exhaustion were still there. He was proud of how open Greg was to new experiences and how willing to ask questions rather than bluffing. There was no shame in not knowing and Mycroft desperately needed to accept that truth. Greg was showing him how. Finally, Mycroft was in his memory to all of the times that he had come to plays alone and been jealous of the couples. Greg had received many admiring looks as they had walked around the lobby, but he would be going home with Mycroft and sleeping in Mycroft’s bed.

The bench style seating allowed them to sit close, thigh to thigh, with the excuse of leaving plenty of room for the other patrons. Under cover of darkness, he lay his hand palm up on his thigh. Greg’s fingers were twined with his instantly. Three quick squeezes and he answered with four; Greg’s gaze never wavered from the action in front of them, but his slow smile sent warmth all the way to Mycroft’s curled toes.

Greg’s childlike enthusiasm during intermission was adorable. “It’s jolly. I thought I might have trouble staying awake, but there’s something happening all the time even with the folks who aren’t
talking. It must be great fun to play act like that.”

“It is. I sometimes wish I had different work and could be in local productions. Nothing this grand but a neighborhood theater.”

“You can, My, when we retire to the country.”

“You’re talking about forever.” He was smiling dazedly until his cheeks hurt.

“This is real, love, and it is forever. Now let’s get me a coffee.”

They walked to concessions and Mycroft thought how Greg had covered over several awkward moments during the evening. He was considerate and careful and trustworthy. It was time to trust him more.

“My, what would you like?” Greg had his wallet out and was waiting for his husband to order first.

“Black coffee.” Someone else ordering and paying again; he could get used to it.

“Two black coffees then, but lots of milk and sugar in mine.” The barman smiled at that.

“It’s like having a Diet Coke with an ice cream sundae,” Greg said and suddenly Mycroft pictured Greg prone on their bed with scoops of ice cream on his belly and a cherry in his navel. He sniffed deeply of the tarry brew to clear his head. This desperate yearning for someone was new; newer still was the ability to fulfill his need without fuss. Greg was always game for sex, no matter how tired he might be. Still even getting his needs met almost every day was never enough for Mycroft. He was always hungry again, come nightfall. He wondered if that would fade with time.

“Mycroft?” Greg had been speaking for awhile.

“I’m sorry. I was thinking about sex.”

Greg laughed at his blush. “You must have been because you usually are very careful what you say. Don’t worry. It’s on my mind as well. I’m still not caught up from your Tokyo trip.”

“What were you saying before?”

“I wonder what will happen to that Brazen bloke. When he’s on stage, that’s all I can see. You can tell he enjoys being up there too.”

“He’s very good. We can take our coffees back to our seats if you like.”

“No, I think it would be rude, them up there doing their best and us slurping away like it’s just the telly.”

“I feel the same.”

They sipped at their coffee for awhile and watched the people again until the first warning sounded. They put their empty cups in the bin and went straight back to their seats. “My?”

“Hmm?”

“It is alright, isn’t it? I mean we had a rough start but then we got pizza and this play, you aren’t disappointed?”

Was Greg feeling insecure? Surely he’d been on lots of dates. But he hadn’t been on dates with
Mycroft before. The walls were up again and Greg couldn’t tell what he was feeling. “I’m having a very nice time.”

He berated himself. Tourist phrase book is what he sounded like, but Greg seemed pleased and risked putting his arm along the back of the bench. Mycroft settled against it, feeling protected and taken. Truth be told, he wanted to climb in Greg’s lap and sleep the night away.

The second part of the play moved rapidly with the rising action piling dilemma upon dilemma. He watched the stage some of the time, but Greg’s reaction more. He was so empathetic and his face so open that Mycroft wondered how he had done without him for so long. Finally, something that he had longed for was his and his alone. Not Sherlock’s leftovers or a user after his money or power or some tired friend of Mummy’s but someone he had won all by himself. He still thought that perhaps he should ration this love, that it couldn’t last, but tonight was a good night and with Greg’s arm around him, maybe he was safe. With so much happening at once, his father’s voice had stayed in the background, and when it did try to sneak in, he had the evidence of Greg’s love all around him. He hadn’t gone to his imaginary world even once.

Greg applauded furiously through all of the curtain calls and watched as the actors collected bouquets. “Should have brought some tulips for these folk. They did a good job.”

“No, Greg, that’s for their family, friends and lovers to do. Some other time when you aren’t exhausted, we’ll be stage door johnnies, but let’s go home now.”

“If you like, we could have dessert.”

“No, I want to get you home.”

“And have your way with me?” Greg’s errant tongue licked over his lips and Mycroft wanted it in his mouth right then for all to see, but he knew it wouldn’t end with kisses.

“Twice,” he said smugly.

They walked briskly, swinging their clasped hands. Greg would look over and smile at him, and it was a secret they had of the world they were headed toward under the duvet in the house at St. John’s Woods.

A shout and running feet behind them changed Greg’s posture instantly. He pulled Mycroft into an alley and pushed him behind, guarding him with his body. Mycroft was instantly alert and felt his own muscles so supple minutes ago, turn to coiled springs. But it was only a thin and obvious young man with bedroom eyes.

“Hello, I think you left this back at Donmar. You were at the play, right?” He held out a crumpled scarf but his eyes were undressing Greg, not even leaving briefs.

Mycroft waited for Greg to flirt. Mycroft braced himself for the car ride home with the knowledge of being second best. Mycroft prepared himself for hurt and took one step inside his little village of Lawton, but Greg was saying…

“Mate, that’s your own scarf, and you bloody well know it. I would suggest you not go running after people this time of night. It comes to no good.” Greg held out his warrant card into the light, but it didn’t seem to deter Poor Man’s Lothario.

“I wouldn’t say that, Detective Inspector Handsome.” The kid popped a hip.

“Go pick on someone your own age. I’m taking my husband home to bed, and you’ve delayed us.”
Greg reclaimed Mycroft’s hand and marched off at a brisk pace muttering to himself. “Of all the cheek. Sodding little prick. Like he didn’t see our rings. I’m sorry, My. You okay?”

Mycroft was more than okay, ten feet tall in fact, but he had to be sure. “He was exceedingly pretty, Greg.”

“Was he? I don’t notice anymore. I only see you and think about what I want to do to you.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Sooner or later, all this questioning is going to make me feel bad. Where’s the trust, My?”

Mycroft froze, but Greg had meant it lightly and another awkward moment passed without consequence. At the car, he watched Greg carefully. “Are you okay to drive?”

“Starting to look ragged, am I? Don’t you worry. I’ve got enough left to get you home and ride you hard before I rest.”

They got into the car in silence and both buckled up before another fit of giggles overtook them. “Done and done,” Greg said, pretending to spit in his hand.

“Somewhere between that and weak tea with a water bottle.”

“Perhaps a lukewarm bath.”

Then Greg was quiet, taking the tricky streets and traffic seriously. When they were past the worst of it and stopped at a traffic light, Greg shifted to park and leaned across his seat. “Kiss, please?”

Mycroft closed his eyes and put everything into the kiss, all the words that he knew would sound cold and stilted. For one night, he had been cherished, his needs put first with the choice of food and entertainment. He hadn’t taken care of anybody or fixed any problems for several hours. He had loved being protected in the alley and chosen first over a prettier kid with a better body. There was anticipation for love making as Greg slid his tongue inside, but it was eager, not desperate.

A horn behind them broke the kiss, and Greg looked sheepish as he forgot to put the car back in drive and the engine revved. “Not much of a role model.”

He was quiet again, and Mycroft could feel his weariness but they were quite close now and he trusted Greg to know his limits. It was still a relief to pull into the garage, safe at home. It was then that Mycroft remembered his clock at the beginning of the date, the six hours until it was over. The timekeeping had stopped as soon as Greg smiled at him. They had both survived.

The engine was settling but Greg hadn’t unbuckled his safety belt yet. “My? Could we do a little playacting of our own? I’d like to walk you to your door and kiss you goodnight like it really was our first date. I want you to have a memory of that.”

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Their first time had been rough sex without kisses, and their first date had come several weeks after a bout of crime fighting and long separation. Greg was giving him a better first time, and the familiar sting started behind his eyes. If he were capable of tears, this gift would have brought them.

Morris had left the light on over the service entrance to the kitchen. Mycroft turned to face Greg; his hands were shaking and his mouth was dry. He thought when he and Greg had said their vows that what they had was rushed but perhaps better for men their age, and he had let go of the dream of being slowly won over. Greg had known Mycroft’s feelings while he still loved someone else.
so Mycroft’s declaration had hung in the air quite some time. There was a tinge of infidelity to that even if Greg’s love for John was unrequited. But now Greg had his hand and was swinging it between them.

“Thank you for coming with me tonight.”

His voice was high and young but real, and Mycroft felt it throb inside his heart, and he was fully present but his voice wasn’t. It took all of his courage to look up at Greg, and there were those gorgeous teeth worrying a full lip that he hoped to kiss soon. He rubbed his thumb along Greg’s wrist and felt the pulse leaping there. Greg was nervous? Mycroft knew how to slow his pulse down and when he played Sergei on missions, he had gotten quite adept at hiding his body’s responses, but it was much harder to play the reverse and manufacture nervousness. This was real.

“Do you think you might want to go out again?”

Mycroft could only nod. How could Greg be unsure? There had only been one man for him ever, his wildest dream come true.

“Maybe you can choose something next time? I know you’ll want to revisit Coeur Sain.” Greg giggled and Mycroft could hear the nerves. He was stalling the kiss just as happened in his favorite movies.

“Tonight was about me. We’ll do something from your world next time.” What an idiotic thing to say. If Greg hadn’t been holding his hand, he would have punched himself unconscious.

“I know it’s our first date, but I was wondering if I could kiss you?”

Mycroft wanted to say pretty things first, even thank you, but the words were stuck like needles in his throat. “Please,” was all that cut through.

Then Greg stepped closer, tentatively lifting his hand to Mycroft’s face. His lips brushed and clung against Mycroft’s cheek and then his lips, and it was so sweet that it hurt. Greg pulled him closer and hugged gently. Mycroft hugged back, his arms under Greg’s coat and jacket, the cashmere jumper soft against his hands.

But the moment was ruined because even after being married for a few months, Mycroft still didn’t know properly how tight he should grasp during a hug and where his head should go and how to know when it was over. He just didn’t have the experience. Then Greg pulled away and didn’t seem fazed by Mycroft’s cluelessness. Perhaps he would assume it was more role playing.

“I had Morris put out one last present after we’d gone. A box of chocolates. We didn’t have proper dessert. Good night, Mycroft.” With a last quick kiss on the cheek, he was gone around the corner of the house.

Mycroft leaned against the door for awhile. With his eyes closed, he worked hard at denial and editing until he had the soft kiss back without the clumsy hug. Greg had been shy and romantic and nervous. Even with the cold wind that always eddied at this spot blowing down his neck, he felt warm and a little weak. His lips burned where Greg had kissed him.

The house was quiet as he floated upstairs. A light shown from the guest room. Mycroft wondered if their play was finished. He took off his coat and blazer and sat on the bed. The chocolates were on his pillow.

Greg had gotten the best ones. Paul A. Young’s, he could tell by the dark purple ribbon that screamed luxurious chocolate and also sex. They were all for him, not like Christmas at Mummy’s where Sherlock bolted down most of the chocolate and left the caramels. He quickly opened them
and chose one, enjoying the mystery. It was a raspberry milk chocolate truffle, as smooth and
delicate as the Coeur Sain wafer had been bitter. He grunted with pleasure as it melted on his
tongue. He and Greg would eat the whole box themselves and Sherlock couldn’t have any. If
Sherlock wanted expensive sweets, his husband could buy them. Mycroft’s husband had bought
these and the tulips and a high ticket date on a copper’s salary. This was wooing.

After several minutes and no reappearance of Greg, shy or sassy, Mycroft decided it was time for
a curtain call and reconnaissance. He walked down the hall to the guest room. Greg was sitting on
the bed fast asleep, his shirt unbuttoned, one shoe in his hand. As Mycroft moved toward him, he
listed to one side. Waves of love washed over Mycroft as he removed Greg’s other shoe and socks
and trousers. Greg was pliable as a small child who had fallen asleep at play, and Mycroft easily
got him fully onto the bed.

After removing his own clothes, he fetched a spare blanket from the closet and lay down facing
Greg. Pulling the blanket over them was like shutting the world out. He cupped a hand around
Greg’s cheek and said the words that had been so difficult after their goodnight kiss. “You made
me feel special and protected tonight. I never thought I would have that, didn’t even know I
wanted it, but you romanced me. I hope you will do it again.”

Greg’s reaction was noncommittal and therefore not scary. Mycroft could even imagine that the
sigh, which came after, was a happy one, and when the snoring started, he tucked himself as close
as he could and finally pulled Greg’s arm over himself. Greg obligingly wriggled in his sleep until
Mycroft was securely held against his husband’s body and the adrenaline finally drained away. He
had barely arrived in Lawton when sleep took him.

He had fallen asleep standing guard over Sherlock’s room. Sherlock had been ill and the black
caped marauders somehow knew this. They needed a baby for their High Feast and Sherlock was
a plump morsel. One of the red eyed villains showed Mycroft the rotisserie where they would
roast the child. He braced himself against the door, pulling them back with his arms, their breath
searing him, as he heard the creak of the door. It would not hold, but he was all that stood
between Sherlock and certain death. His arms and back ached with the force of them, three
demons against a weakling boy. He was shouting but it was barely a whisper.

Mycroft came out of the nightmare in fight or flight, shoving his body against the headboard until
it creaked, disoriented by the strange location. Greg was holding him and stroking his hair. “Easy
now, love. It was just a nightmare.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Mycroft wriggled out of Greg’s comfort and stood, running his hands through his
hair to erase the touch.

“My, you don’t have to be embarrassed. I have them too. The surprising thing is that we don’t
have more.”

“I’m sorry I woke you. Stay put. I’ll be in the other room.” He nearly ran to the master suite and
closed the door with shaking hands.

Then Greg barreled through the door. “Stay put. As if I would! You’re still trembling.”

“And that’s my look out, isn’t it?” Mycroft was deeply ashamed and it was coming out as anger.
“I’m fine. Thank you for your concern, but leave it.”

“No, I don’t think I will leave it. I’m your husband for fuck’s sake and when you are in distress, it
is my concern.” Greg’s voice had risen in volume with each word.

“Gregory, not now. You’re exhausted and might say something you’ll regret.”
“I bloody well might and about damn time I did. Better to spew out something I regret than to choose each word with so much fucking care that I never speak from the heart.” Greg’s face was red and he was panting.

“Tact and diplomacy are part of my job.”

“Well you aren’t working now, are you? This is home, Mycroft. Take off the fucking suit. This is your safe place.”

“There is no safe place.”

“Would it be safer if I left? Maybe you can send me to my room like a naughty child or a dog that’s pissed on the carpet.”

“That wouldn’t help.” My back toward the door as subtly as he could, but Greg noticed it.

“Are you ever going to trust me, My?”

Greg sank down on the bed as if his strings had been cut. It took Mycroft eons to walk across the room and kneel in front of him to say, “I’m sorry.”

Greg’s voice was deflated and Mycroft had to strain to hear him. “I have nightmares too. I want to kiss you and I take off your mask and there’s another one underneath and another. When I finally get to the end, the face is blank, no eyes, no lips.”

“I don’t mean to use the mask with you. I’ve been doing it so long that I don’t realize it’s happening.”

“You’re so far away.”

“I’m trying to get to you.” Mycroft stroked across Greg’s taut jaw and a tear broke free and ran across his finger.

“We had such a good time tonight, I thought.”

“We did, I swear it.”

“When you pushed me away just now, it hurt. I thought I was done with being rejected.”

“You’ll be the one rejecting me when you really see me.”

Greg didn’t take this the way Mycroft planned. It was completely reasonable that Greg would want someone prettier; it wasn’t any reflection on his character, but his voice was thick with pain, “So you think I’m a fair-weather husband then. I’d be a bloody loss if I only loved your good qualities.”

“Not sure there are any.”

“So you need some stroking. Alright, I’ll play. You’re brilliant and successful and beautiful and fiercely loyal and sensual and self sacrificing and funny.”

The praise couldn’t penetrate his consciousness. His father and Sherlock were whipped into a frenzy, laughing and shouting in his head. They were all of those things. He was not. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Which of those is a lie?”
“Beautiful. Really? You insult me. Any room I enter, I’ll be the least attractive person there.”

“What room?”

“221B Baker Street. All the pretty people of every shape and kind. And then me.” Mycroft wanted to be corrected more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life.

“In that same room, I’d be the least intelligent. We’ll all get old. My. Paunches and crow’s feet and gray hair, but the mind remains sharp and what I have is so much lesser than.”

“Stop it.” Greg was so clever and none of it had come from an expensive education. It was native intelligence hard won. “It hurts me when you criticize yourself like that.”

“Yes, it does.”

“You’ll always have offers, Greg. Like that boy tonight. I won’t. Never have.”

“That’s my fault? I did everything but draw a gun on him.”

“He was beautiful.”

“And so are you, but you can’t hear that from me. There’s nothing I can say, is there?”

There was a long silence that swelled and grew. Mycroft’s ears roared with it and his heart pounded trying to compete.

Greg finally spoke into it, his voice thick with unshed tears. “I’m fighting for us, My, but I can’t do it alone. Nobody expects you to change overnight, but if you can’t open the door just a crack, I’m going to lose hope.”

“Tell me what to do, please.”

“I need to know what you’re feeling. I’m not bloody Sherlock able to read your mood off the dust on your shoes. If you can’t talk to me, maybe you could email me. I don’t know. I’m out of ideas.”

Greg sighed, almost a sob. Then he squared his shoulders and looked around as if noticing his surroundings for the first time. “Nothing is going to be solved tonight. Maybe things will be clearer in the morning. Where do you want me to sleep?”

“Here. With me.” Mycroft pulled down the duvet and helped Greg get in bed.

When Mycroft climbed in the other side, Greg reached his hand across the space, and Mycroft ached at how easily Greg could show his needs. It was Mycroft’s turn to pull a throbbing head to his chest and stroke fingers through thick hair. It was his turn to massage tense muscles and murmur soothing words. “I’m sorry, love. I’ll try harder.”

“You shouldn’t have to try at all.”

Greg drew a deep breath and after awhile Mycroft’s chest was damp with tears. He reached to get Greg a tissue, but he was fast asleep. Mycroft was devastated at the pain he had caused this sweet man. He had Greg so lost and confused that he hadn’t even been sure of a welcome in his own bed.

Mycroft had left God behind when his father died, but the people in his story still believed. He went to the chapel in his little imaginary village, and looking up at a sorrowful, brown eyed Christ,
he prayed for the courage to give his whole heart to Greg.
**Passing Fancy**

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of a pivotal quarrel, Mycroft fears the worst as Greg pulls away.

Word Count c. 8696

*This fic would not exist without Ghislaine. She not only provided the inspiration through her own amazing complex universe, but she also provides daily support and encouragement to me about my writing. She has never been competitive or jealous, always delighting in my successes as if they were her own. She’s fighting a severe respiratory illness this week with very limited progress. While she will be too weak to reply for awhile, please consider sending her some love by checking out her fics. Her earlier work has lots of steamy Sherlock/John if you are a not a big Mystrade shipper.*

*Get well soon, Ghislaine. We need you; we need your words.*

After their first date and the colossal row that followed, Mycroft Holmes lay awake all night while his husband slept soundly in his arms. He practiced staying present by counting Greg’s breaths. Whenever he would be tempted to dissociate, he would say something that he loved about Greg.

“*You are brave. You are kind. You are honest. You are patient.*” When he had stayed present for an hour, he rewarded himself with total escape.

He worked on the vicar’s death scene in his little fictional village; the doctor stayed brave until he closed his lover confessor’s sightless eyes; then he knelt by the bed and sobbed. Mycroft’s characters could cry, but he still couldn’t. The Iceman would cry hail, the icy droplets shooting from his tear ducts and scratching anyone in the way. Still he tried until his eyes ached but there was no moisture, not even when he thought about how hurt Greg had been.

Maybe it would have been better to let Greg comfort him from the nightmare. After all, he liked the touching, and he could have gone away in his mind if it got uncomfortable. Now they’d had a fight and a crucial one at that. Greg was losing hope after a communication exercise and a date had had a few glitches. He wasn’t ready for the long haul in that case because Mycroft had enough issues to last a life time. Greg’s biggest issue was being too damn adorable.

When he had the scene of this story exactly right and he’d reviewed and rejected other possible choices so that their fight might have ended differently, Mycroft fantasized. Not about sex but about being an open, friendly person. Babies in their prams would reach out their hands for him. Dogs of dubious breeding would follow him down the street. John would invite him out for a pint and shake his hand vigorously when they met at the pub. Each morning, Morris would pour his tea into a bright yellow mug that said Best Boss Ever. Greg would greet him at the door each night wearing nothing but a top hat and bow tie.

He would go to romantic comedies with Greg and weep openly when Hugh Grant got the girl. He would tear up when he walked by an elderly couple feeding geese in the park. He would pick up his mobile at random during the work day and call Mummy just to say, “I love you. Thank you for giving birth to me.”
He would pop round to Baker Street with a bag of take away and give Sherlock a hug and say, “I’m proud of you, brother.”

He would thank Mrs. Hudson for taking such good care of his little brother and John, and he would give her flowers or a potted plant. He would eat one of the huge breakfasts like she cooked for them. He would get her a long haired cat for company and help choose a name for it like Mr. Scrugglesworth. He would tell her naughty little jokes and she would say, “Mycroft, you are terrible,” and hit him on the arm, but not hard.

He would fix Anthea up with some dashing agent, retired early from the field for some mysterious but not disfiguring injury. He would pay for the wedding and walk her down the aisle since her own father was a drunken sod. He would be godfather to her first chubby little baby and bounce the child on his knee when she brought it by the Ministry for a visit. He would buy it a pony called Fortescue.

His Scroogey reverie was cut short when his Tiny Tim responded to the fantasy as if it had been the vilest, most delicious of practices. He hoped it wasn’t the pony that had sent him over the edge. Some things were best left in the Americas. Work puzzles brought welcome release from his worries, save one. It was the hour for cocks to announce the dawn, he thought, trying to discreetly rub himself against Greg’s muscular thigh which was flung over his scrawny ones. His problems multiplied. The early bird woke the other. Now his thigh was bombarded both sides and Greg had begun to mumble and nuzzle so that Mycroft’s chest was accosted by puffs of air and stubble. His silky coat of chest hair was not nearly enough to protect him from the ‘elements.’

Because Greg was moaning and his breathing had changed, Mycroft couldn’t be sure if he was awake or not, and if he wasn’t, would he awaken angry or sad because of their argument? He didn’t want Greg to think that he was expecting sex, not just because the problem of their row was unresolved but also because they’d had a wonderful, romantic evening and sex on the morning after the first date might be a bit tarty. Besides Greg was exhausted. And a point that was unpleasant but pointier by the minute was the late feta of the pizza consumed on the boot which was making itself known in myriad ways. Or perhaps it was the Cornish game hen egg.

Greg’s hand lay lightly on Mycroft’s chest. Mycroft entwined his fingers with Greg’s and gave three quick squeezes. I love you.

“You’d better!”

Mycroft yipped and tooted a boiled egg and feta surprise that had them both scrambling for refuge.

“Bloody hell, My. I wanted a hand job, and you gave me the holy hand grenade,” Greg said, pressing his pillow to his face and trotting from the room.

Mycroft locked himself in the loo. He lay on the furry rug beside the toilet, a towel pressed to his face to muffle the sound of his hyperventilating. It was the third panic attack of his life, the first being alone in his room after his father’s funeral, the second being Sherlock’s accidental overdose that got him into rehab, and now his body’s betrayal. Greg would never ever see him romantically again. He had his buttocks tightly clenched around the rest of it, but the damage was done.

What seemed like hours was a matter of minutes since his biofeedback skills were legendary. He quieted his breathing and counted, arms weak from lack of oxygen, heart weak from lack of hope.

Footsteps signaled Greg’s return to the scene of the crime. Mycroft shoved his fist in his mouth to keep from crying out. “What are we going to do about breakfast, My?”
“Nothing for me, thank you.” Why was Greg’s speaking voice so even? He could barely choke out a reply and shoved his fist back in to silence a whimper.

“Are you ill, love?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Are you still upset about last night?”

“No, I mean not right now.”

“Then come on out because I’m hungry and I don’t want us eating in shifts.”

“Give me a minute.”

He wanted to set fire to the bathmat rather than ever leave the room. Greg could have crispy bacon and husband and as a handsome widower, he would not be alone for long. The will was already fixed that everything would go to him with the money to keep Morris on retainer for life. They would help each other; maybe even find love with each other.

Greg was knocking again. “Did you have an accident? Do you need fresh pants?”

“God, no. No, but thanks for asking.”

“Are you embarrassed about farting?”

“I am not.” The little prick was laughing at him. One did not laugh at a Holmes. He sat up, his new best friend, the towel clutched in his fist.

“Good. I’m going to give Morris our order and then you are going to come out of there.”

Dialing noises on the house phone and a bloody chuckle. “Morris, it’s Greg. I’m perishing. Do you think I could have a full English this morning? It’s oatmeal and dry toast for My. He has a digestive issue.” Full on laughter now.

He jerked the door open without thinking. “I don’t like being laughed at.”

“I’m sorry, love. Come here.”

“I will not.” Even if Greg’s laughter was preferable to another row, he wanted to be appeased because it still hurt.

“Even the Queen farts, My. Cannons to the left of them, cannons to the right of them.”

Greg was sidling, actually charming his way closer.

“No, charm isn’t going to work this time.”

“When did my charm ever work against your iron will, Mycroft Holmes?” Boyish grin coupled with a head tilt.

Mycroft wrapped his arms around his bare chest and stared at the opposite wall. Apathy was the ultimate weapon.

“Prince Charles farts, all that veg, lots of cabbage. Camilla always looks like she’s just smelt one although she who smelt it probably dealt it.” Great pealing giggles echoed off the vaulted ceiling.
Mycroft’s mouth twitched in spite of his set jaw.

“The time has come to talk of cabbages and kings.”

A clearing of the throat did not relieve his need to join the laughter. He sucked his lips inside between his clenched teeth.

“There’s no fart like an old fart.”

Greg was right in front of him now, looking up at him with a child’s wickedness. Mycroft laughed. Then Greg hugged him and the laughing stopped. If Greg was going to be more affectionate outside the duvet, Mycroft had a problem.

“Come on, love, it’s all over now.”

Greg was rubbing his back and it felt so good, but he didn’t know where to put his hands and he was keenly aware of his lack of clothing.

“Is something else wrong?” Greg stepped back and put his hand to Mycroft’s face so that he had to look. “You don’t like hugs.”

“No, it’s not that. I’m just bad at them. I don’t know where to put my hands or how long to hold on or how tight to grip. Hugs are the source of all panic, Greg.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m sorry.” The laughter was gone and Greg was all compassion.

“No, I’m sorry. You are young and beautiful and stuck with an old ugly farting mess for a husband who can’t even give you simple affection.”

“You have got to stop beating yourself up. Life does that enough and so does Sherlock. How often did your dad hug you?”

There was a painful pause as might happen when one has been called on in class but did not do the previous night’s lessons. “I’m not sure he ever did. There are two pictures of him carrying me before I could walk but that must have been expediency.”

“Then how did he show affection?”

“Well, we shook hands, of course, if I was going away to school for the term.”

“Oh, of course. But if you were sad about something or he was going away on one of his expeditions?”

“He would squeeze my shoulder.” Mycroft waved his hand as if that conveyed it.

“Show me.”

Greg was being the copper, gathering evidence, when Mycroft needed his husband. Still, if he could make Greg understand why he was so inept at hugs, it might give him some leeway. He hadn’t thought about it in a long time, and he had never done it to anybody after he tried it with Sherlock shortly before his father’s funeral. Shoving the memories back in their cupboard, he reached up and squeezed at the base of Greg’s neck, his thumb and forefinger digging into the muscle.

“Fuck, that hurts,” Greg said, tilting his head down onto Mycroft’s hand to try and stop the motion. “That was for comfort?”
“I might be doing it wrong.”

“Did it feel good at the time?”

“No, it pinched.”

“It bloody well must have.”

Mycroft rubbed the spot. The morning was going from bad to worse. Shame fired his cheeks as he realized that Greg was learning more and more about things best left buried.

But Greg’s tone was business like. “Get your kit on while I give you a few basic pointers on hugging.”

Mycroft grabbed at blue in the closet since his clothes from the previous night were still in the guest room. He put on trousers first and everything immediately felt more sane. Greg waited until Mycroft was buttoning his shirt, which felt quite breezy without a vest, and then began the lesson. “First off, you can hug or touch me anyway you want and I’ll like it, except for that Vulcan nerve pinch of your dad’s. What kind of sick fuck touches his kid that way? Well, no time before breakfast for that chat. Let’s see, you said where do the hands go? That’s the hardest part because it depends on who you are hugging. For a mate, keep them high like the shoulders, and for all ladies, high at the waist, because you have gorgeous big hands and you don’t want to brush their tits with those long fingers.”

Greg was in teacher, team leader mode but Mycroft couldn’t stop a nervous giggle.

“Well, look who is laughing now when I’m trying to impart knowledge.”

“I’m sorry, sir, please go on. Where should I put my hands when I’m hugging you? Because that’s really all I’m interested in.”

“I’m afraid you need to know it all because when my mum and sisters get hold of you on visits, it will be like a wrestling match, and Dad will likely hug you goodbye eventually although he’ll act like it’s a trial.”

“All right. High if it’s a guy, middle for a lady. You’re a guy so high for you?”

“No, love. Go low. Grab my arse and hang on.”

Mycroft just nodded. He was already feeling like the mystery of the ages was clearing up.

“So you know where to grip, now how tight? There are two schools of thought on that. One is as tight as you can, but because of your third question, I like to hug at about eighty percent. Tight so I don’t seem wimpy or noncommittal, but not all the way so I’ve got somewhere to go.”

“Somewhere to go?” It seemed scary again.

“You are hugging and you get done. With mates, it’s three firm slaps to the shoulder; cup your hand so it makes some noise.” Greg demonstrated the tap tap tap on his thigh.

Mycroft copied the action and Greg smiled a different one then Mycroft had seen before. It was nice as if he had pleased and surprised Greg.

“Now the eighty percent comes in with the ladies. They will always go on longer than you would like so when you are done or can’t bear it any longer, squeeze all the way and make a little growly noise or a grunt. Then step back. You may have to repeat the process if you get a double grabber,
but the second round would be the same procedure. My girls are pretty good about letting go and Mrs. Hudson isn’t clingy unless someone’s been injured and then it’s understandable. You can always say, ‘Cuppa?’ with her and wiggle free.”

“It’s a code like the hand holding.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. We’ve got time for two practices before breakfast. Start with the challenge. I’m Mrs. Hudson and you’ve dropped by Baker Street with some medicine for Sherlock.”

Greg’s posture changed and his voice was high and tight. “Oh, Mr. Holmes, he’s in so much pain. Thank heavens you’ve come.”

Mycroft’s heart raced and his legs shook but he made a fair attempt. His arms went round ‘her’ and he knew where to put his hands, but his head smacked against ‘hers.’ Greg was making fake sniffles and shaking a bit. Mycroft went off script and patted ‘her’ saying “There, there, Mrs. Hudson.”

Then he was done and squeezed and umphed and ‘Mrs. Hudson’ let go. Mycroft stepped back nervously. “How did I do?”

“Good try. Partly my fault, I forgot about your head. Go to the right since most people will. Right handed, head tilts to the right. Left handed people are used to mistakes. You’ve got to watch those great mitts of yours though. Women will be smaller around than I am and you would have caught the real Mrs. Hudson’s nipples on that one especially if we account for the ravages of time.”

Mycroft was at sea again.

“Women sag with age, My. Let it be our little secret. Okay, now I’m a mate, an old friend in town for the week, we meet at the pub.”

“Greg, you old wanker,” he said, remembering to go to the right and keep his hands high on Greg’s shoulders. Greg’s arms were strong around him, and then there were three loud claps on his upper back and he let go.

“Excellent work, My. You remembered the signal even though I changed it up on you, and the nasty greeting was absolutely correct and all your own. You are a quick study. Now let’s have some breakfast that isn’t marsh grasses and shite.”

Breakfast was a happy family time. Morning sunlight shown into the dining room, a sight which they missed during the week. Morris liked making big breakfasts and seldom got to, but Greg had missed several meals while he was pursuing leads and he gobbled down the ample choices with abandon. Mycroft dutifully ate his oatmeal, but Greg fed him off his own plate. “Here, love, have some of this bacon. Morris knows exactly how crisp it needs to be.”

It was one of those things a young boy dreamed about, breakfast served in the great hall by the faithful staff and fed to him by his beautiful husband.

“You’re going to have a little bit of everything except the beans, My.” But Greg winked and the teasing was okay. It was a little secret they had together. Greg put a spoonful of egg in his husband’s mouth as Morris came to check plates and pour more tea.

“Oh, Morris. I’d forgotten how gifted you are at breakfast. Remember how often we had scrambled eggs for our tea when we were at Oxford. You had to buy eggs almost every day at that little shop.”

“Yes, sir. They wondered what I was doing with them. I had to tell them that I baked wedding
cakes and meringues as a side line.”

“That and milk. I never knew a man to consume as much milk as Rory did. Huge mugs of it, drank it like tea.”

Morris missed a beat, imperceptible to most, but Mycroft was a Holmes. The older man had paled as well, his scar flushing red against his white skin.

“I’m sorry, Morris. Greg was asking about how I met you while we were eating dinner last night, and it brought back memories. The black Mercedes, the little house, those night missions where we came back half frozen and you made tea for us and warm milk for Rory. If you don’t like to talk about him, I assure you it won’t happen again.”

“No, please, sir. I like to talk about him. Been a long time since you remembered him to me.”

“I’ve had many field partners since then, seen many agents come and go, but he was and always will be the best I ever served with, and it was even more remarkable because he hadn’t been groomed for it as I was.”

“People trusted him was the way of it. He charmed the ladies and gents both, children and dogs too. He loved life and it was contagious.”

“His biggest challenge was putting that smile away when I needed him to play my enforcer.”

“He would bite the inside of his cheek until it was bloody.”

“Sometimes, I’d tell him to go ahead and it made him seem a mad man, more terrifying than if he’d frowned. They wondered what he was thinking about, but I knew, it was always you, Morris.”

Morris’ hand trembled where it curved around the teapot. Greg broke the awkward silence. “Here, My, try these hash browns. You can’t get these anymore, made fresh. They still taste of the garden but also bacon. It’s best I keep a breakfast like this to weekends or I’d be needing a whole new wardrobe and not because my clothes are cheap.”

Morris nodded his thanks to Greg and poured Mycroft’s third cup with a steady hand. “You need a good breakfast since you don’t seem to eat lunch. I could make it healthier with egg whites and turkey sausage.”


This was more of an exchange than he’d had with Morris since they moved to the townhouse shortly after Rory’s death. Greg was the kind of man that people told their life stories to; unless of course, they were criminals. But when he was not in his copper mind set, people gave him their hearts just as they had Rory. Mycroft firmly pushed down the memories of that last day; the day his mistake had gotten his best agent killed and Morris nearly dead himself. No amount of time would assuage that guilt.

“More oatmeal, sir? Or I could make you an egg since they tasted good to you this morning.”

Mycroft blushed. “I would do well to avoid eggs right now, Morris, but perhaps a little protein. Bacon or sausage, but adjust my other meals accordingly.”

“I have a half portion of each if Mr. Greg won’t mind.”

“Mr. Greg does not mind. He may not be a member of the clean plate club without some help. Not
so at the Coeur Sain, eh, My?”

Morris came back with the meat and two small glasses of freshly squeezed juice as well as a plate of scones fresh from the oven. Then Greg told the story of the tiny food and the snippy waiter with voices and hand motions and demonstrations. Soon all three men were giggling and Rory’s memory was safely at bay for a little while longer.

Mycroft’s stomach was fuller than he usually allowed it to get, but his heart was full too. Greg always knew the right thing to say. He could make other people feel comfortable; people were their best selves around him. The mystery of his attraction to Mycroft remained, but best not to pick at that thread.

Greg shoved his plate away and rubbed his stomach. “Morris, if you ever get tired of taking care of us, you can have your own restaurant. We would eat there every night so it wouldn’t be that much different, but you wouldn’t have to do my laundry.”

“Mr. Holmes knows that I will take care of him for as long as I’m able.”

“And I will take care of you.”

“And I will take care of the credenza.” Greg stood, his hand kneading the back of his neck. The playfulness of the story teller was gone. “I’m sorry, love, but I really need to review my case notes and see if we missed anything. If you can give me a solid hour at it, then I’ll put it away and we’ll spend the afternoon together. Anything you’d like.”

“Don’t worry, Greg. I’ve certainly brought my share of work home. I understand.”

“Walk me to my study door?” Greg held out his hand.

Mycroft wondered why these little affections that he had so often scorned were so powerful that they nearly brought him to his knees. Greg’s hand wrapped around his, as potent as their bodies joined. They climbed the stairs. When they got to Greg’s study, he held out his arms and Mycroft had no anxiety about this hug. He went to the right, he put his arms around Greg low on his back and he hung on. They swayed a long while. Finally, Mycroft was the one to squeeze with the little grunt as Greg had instructed. “The sooner you get started, the sooner you’ll be finished.”

Greg looked a little lost and infinitely weary. Mycroft kissed him on the forehead, and then they exchanged a soft kiss like their ‘first’ kiss the previous night. Mycroft crossed the hall to his study on weak knees. He closed the door and stood against it, convinced that Greg had been saying goodbye.

With his boundless compassion, he had taught Mycroft to hug and given him one last happy meal together, but as soon as he had done his work, he would come across to Mycroft’s study to end their marriage, handing his ring back and walking away. He would have every right to do so.

Mycroft dragged shaking legs to the desk and called up the security feed on his computer monitor. Greg had his papers spread out on the coffee table in front of the sofa. His body language read frustration and defeat. This paperwork was a ruse for his thinking time about how to extricate himself from Mycroft and a marriage that had been doomed from the start. At first Mycroft tried to imagine that he loved Greg enough to let him go and that Greg deserved to be happy with someone else who was less damaged.

But finally, he buried his face in his hands and imagined the life he would have without Greg. Now that he had experienced what it was like to be loved and to have companionship, loneliness was a torment he wouldn’t survive. He and Morris would wander around, grieving the loss,
because Greg had charmed Morris too. The rooms would seem dark and cold even with lamps lit and fires going. Their clipped voices would never fill the giant silence. The bedroom would be only for nightmares again.

Mycroft knew he could never bear to use Greg’s study again so it would remain a shrine, empty because he would send the furniture with Greg, who would make love to his new husband on the supple leather sofa. Were there any souvenirs he could put in the empty room? A few honeymoon pictures. The clothes Mycroft had bought that Greg would surely reject as spoils of war. A ticket stub from the play. The dessicated petals of the tulips with a card that was now a lie. A half used bottle of lube. He would buy a display case. He could go there to talk to Greg as if it were a gravestone.

His eyes burned as if with tears but of course, they were dry, like all his hopes. Wallowing wouldn’t make the time pass any faster. He could keep faith until the end by doing more lessons, not as rewarding as the hug lesson, but showing his willingness. The books Anthea had purchased for him were in his bottom drawer. He took the biggest one from the bottom of the stack. *Marriage at Midlife: Counseling Strategies and Analytical Tools.* It was as cheerless and uninviting as he was, but the others seemed so chirpy after a few pages that he grew angry. He didn’t want cartoons and neon colors and twee slogans. This knowledge of marital dynamics was life or death because underneath the picture of him and Morris as ghosts floating through the town house was the truth that he wouldn’t be able to live without Greg so there wouldn’t be years of loneliness, just one echoing shot and oblivion. Convenient that he would have a whole arsenal to choose from for his final assassination.

He allowed himself one last look at the monitor before starting his desperate course of study. Greg was lying on the sofa with a sheaf of papers in his hand. Reading glasses firmly perched on his cute nose, he was still squinting. Mycroft watched as Greg’s head dipped and jerked until finally the papers slid to the floor and he slept. Enormous discipline prevented Mycroft from going to Greg and sliding onto the sofa beside him, slipping into that warmth for perhaps the final time. He touched his finger to the screen to stroke Greg’s hair which was on end from frustration.

Then Mycroft opened the book and began to read. Morris interrupted him a few hours later, and he was surprised at how the time had passed but the amount of pages covered with his marginal comments indicated a long study session.

“I wondered about lunch, sir. Mr. Greg is still resting, and you are quite engrossed.”

“We had that enormous breakfast. Perhaps a heavy tea in the early evening? But if Greg can sleep, he needs to and I could stand to miss most meals.”

Morris never argued with him about his weight anymore so there was a brisk nod and his one point of human contact was gone. Mycroft paged back through the material he had covered. There were definitely skills that could be learned and useful techniques but all that he had read assumed a certain level of emotional currency that he didn’t possess. It cut to the bone that he needed a far simpler manual on how to express basic needs and emotions. He doubted such a book had been written and he could write the before part of that scenario but he had little hope of finding solutions. Greg had married an emotional dwarf, and there was nothing for it but to release him to find a more equal match. That was true love, wasn’t it? To care so much about one’s partner that one wanted him to be happy regardless of the cost.

After checking that Greg was still asleep, resting on his side with reading glasses askew, Mycroft went back into the text, determined to finish the book before Greg awoke. Somehow this was a task in the quest. If he finished in time, maybe Greg wouldn’t leave him.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”
The familiar rasp sent Mycroft’s book flying. “You needed to rest.”

The book cover was slippery with Mycroft’s nervous sweat. He couldn’t seem to get hold of it. His hands were shaking.

Greg knelt and picked up the book and Mycroft felt new levels of embarrassment, the theme for the day. No, not embarrassment, shame. Crippling shame.

“This is a good one,” Greg said, smoothing the cover. “I read this when you were in Tokyo.”

“I got more questions than answers.” Mycroft was stunned with relief at one less humiliation.

“Same for me, but if they are writing books like this, then there are other couples struggling. It was a comfort.”

Mycroft was out of words. Anything he said would give away how the afternoon had turned into a celebration of terror. Greg seemed so calm for someone who might be dissolving a marriage even if he had admitted that they were struggling. He was rumpled and sweet and still groggy. He laid his head in Mycroft’s lap so Mycroft got his wish to smooth the wild hair. “I will always love you no matter what happens.”

“Even this?” Greg asked, his fart amplified by the polished wooden floor.

Greg shook with giggles and Mycroft felt vindicated for his morning laxity. “I see that all hope of propriety is gone.”

Greg knelt up so that he could clasp Mycroft round the middle and nuzzle his head against Mycroft’s chest. “You seem sad. Did something happen while I was sleeping?”

“Just going over my faults, my most grievous faults.”

“My farts, my most grievous farts.” Greg giggled again. “I’m hungry, love. Let’s chase maudlin away with Morris’ magical menu.”

Greg kissed him on the cheek and hurried from the room. “I’ll wash up while you prompt our chef.”

Mycroft picked up the house phone, which seemed heavy as lead in his hands. Greg was happy and joking because he had made a decision and would soon be free. “Morris, we’ll have tea at your convenience. No, there’s no need. We’ll come down to the dining room.”

The last supper. Each thing they did now would be for the last time. Mycroft dragged himself to the dining room, hoping he could swallow around the lump in his throat.

Greg was quiet, tucking into the sumptuous tea that Morris had provided. They hadn’t done much with tea and Mycroft thought now, when it was too late, that they should have had high tea in the library sometimes on the weekends or in his study when he was working from home.

“You’ve gone away again, love,” Greg said gently, reaching for Mycroft’s hand.

“Sorry. I was thinking about what I had read.”

“No more thinking please. I know I slept all day but I was hoping we could go to bed early.”

Greg’s meaning was unmistakable. They would go to the bedroom, the place where all inquisitions took place. Mycroft Holmes’ faults would be laid out before him on the duvet, and
once the lecture was over, he would be left alone for all time as someone who could never, ever measure up.

He pushed food around on his plate and waited for Greg to clean his plate so the punishment could begin. There was more light conversation but he didn’t register it. His answers must have been adequate as no one looked alarmed. Morris came and went with more tea and some sort of pastry that felt like lost teeth in Mycroft’s mouth.

Relieved to be getting on yet dreading, he finally climbed the stairs behind Greg and was alone in their room although to his shame, Greg was still down the hall to change clothes. Most married couples shared a room and he hadn’t the courage to initiate that yet. They had crossed a line today with another bodily function but Mycroft wasn’t ready for all his secrets to be revealed. If Greg left, he would be glad that he had some of his dignity left.

Mycroft put on pajamas. He needed defense and his heart felt wide open to marauders. A clothing discrepancy would give him some edge although Greg was the kind of man who could be naked and still retain his dignity. A perfect body certainly helped with that confidence. Mycroft had to slow his breathing down again. Apparently marriage itself was a panic attack. All of the knowledge he had gained that afternoon slowly trickled from his ears, and he was left with memories of bedrooms and speeches and a low voice thick with disappointment.

“What a day, yeah?” Greg said coming into the room, pale gray boxer briefs making his whole body glow with tan.

Then he caught sight of Mycroft’s uniform, and Mycroft saw the disappointment and heard it too as Greg said, “Oh no, we might be standing still, but we are not going backwards. Mycroft, take those bloody things off. I don’t want to see them again unless you’re ill.”

“If we are going to have another argument, I prefer to leave them on.”

“No, but you said you wanted to come to bed early so I thought…”

“No everything ends in tragedy, My,” and Greg sighed like he had the night before and Mycroft wanted a cyanide capsule then and there to end things before another second of pain could penetrate.

Greg came over and held Mycroft for a long time which would have been lovely except then Mycroft couldn’t read him. Was this goodbye? Finally, he summoned the courage to give Greg the three taps and the squeeze so that he could face him. He put on the pose he had practiced should he ever be in front of a firing squad and asked, “Aren’t we going to finish our discussion from last night?”

“The only thing that I’d like to finish is what we started under the covers this morning.”

Then Greg was unbuttoning and sliding his hands inside the back of Mycroft’s pajamas to cup his arse, and it was too much too soon when Mycroft had been prepared for loss. But Greg was going slowly enough that the sensuality finally caught up with bodies instantly at the ready. Greg stripped him completely and led him to the bed. Then he was spooned from behind which again made it impossible to read Greg. He would have to make guesses based on touch.

Greg’s hand wandered down his body to grip his eager cock. His movements were torturously slow until all worries were forgotten as he gave himself up to Greg’s attention. Greg’s hand skimmed up and down, each pass lighter and slower. He was crying out and Greg mumbled
words that didn’t matter when the tone was so tender. When he was nearly screaming with want, Greg stopped altogether. “Greg, please, I’m nearly there,” he was begging and it seemed right to do so.

Greg was silent.

Mycroft put his hand over Greg’s. “Please, need to now.”

A snore ruffled the hair at the nape of his neck. Greg had fallen asleep during sex. Good god, that stung. Sex was the one thing that they had been doing well. Mycroft’s failures at emotion and affection had finally brought consequences in his strongest area. His cock let him know with a rapid descent. He got up and put his pyjamas on and lay on the very edge of the no longer conjugal bed. When the light from the window turned from black to gray, he tiptoed to the loo and got himself ready for work. He was out of the house without even a word to Morris who would prepare tea and toast that like his employer would remain untouched. He drove himself to work and was engrossed in his papers by the time Anthea arrived two hours later.

The next few weeks passed in an awkward haze. Greg had stopped trying for something more. He was considerate, compassionate and closed. Things were the same on the surface; they even continued to have sex in the dark under the duvet, but there was a distance growing. Clearly, Greg was waiting for Mycroft to make the next move, but he was waiting with expectations far too high for his husband’s abilities.

One night the old nightmare came back with a new twist. Mummy and Sherlock in danger; Greg in the hallway, always dancing just out of reach. Greg could help; the two of them together could stop the black robed figures. Then the hallway ended in a flight of stairs miles long, and Greg tumbled backwards. Mycroft reached as far as he dared, but he couldn’t catch Greg’s outstretched fingertips. He came awake with his arm stretched into the darkness to the point of pain. He turned over to see if Greg was still in their bed.

Greg’s eyes were open but dark and unreadable in the moonlight. Mycroft tried to still his ragged breathing; he was on the edge of a panic attack. The space between them was an endless abyss. He wasn’t even sure this moment was real. Greg was waiting on him. His arm burned and tingled as his shallow breaths weren’t filing his lungs. It took all of his strength to reach across the chasm. Greg twined their fingers and squeezed three times which released Mycroft’s paralysis. He rolled over and Greg pulled him close, whispering, “It’s all right, love. I’ve got you.”

In the morning, Mycroft still wasn’t sure if it had happened. He woke up, clinging to the edge of the bed and Greg was in the shower. If it was a dream, it was a good one and Mycroft lay there, imprinting the feel of it into his mental scrapbook. If Greg gave up, if he went away, Mycroft would have his memories. He could even write them down until Greg became another character of Lawton, an almost real person that Mycroft went to for comfort.

Days stretched on, each one adding more pain. The emptiness was cumulative. The mystery was impossible. One Saturday morning when Greg was out on a case, Mycroft sat at breakfast and reviewed the night of their date and that row which was epic because of what had come after.

“I’m fighting for us, My, but I can’t do it alone. Nobody expects you to change overnight, but if you can’t open the door just a crack, I’m going to lose hope.”

“Tell me what to do, please.”

“I need to know what you’re feeling. I’m not bloody Sherlock able to read your mood off the dust on your shoes. If you can’t talk to me, maybe you could email me. I don’t know. I’m out of ideas.”
Email was out of the question. Cold, cheap, distasteful, too easily hacked. What did one say to a distant husband? Email wasn’t who Mycroft had ever been. Anthea managed nearly all of his computer correspondence and all he had to do was click approval. She had studied piles of memos and letters until she could imitate his voice. She should be the one emailing Greg.

He must have sighed because Morris looked at him with startling sympathy. Greg had thawed the Ice King’s minion and there was no going back to blissful oblivion.

“I can’t help but notice that you are in some distress, sir.”

Morris used to talk with him, not at him; Morris used to smile and laugh and pat his shoulder. They were careful friends for awhile; the butlering a lot of playacting for fun and occasionally with all seriousness, for work. Then Rory died, Morris almost died, and what Mycroft brought home from hospital was a robot that looked like his friend Morris. When Greg left, the tentative smiles would disappear again. An automaton would call him ‘sir’ and then crumble to dust.

“I am and while it’s good of you to notice, I don’t think there’s anything to be done.”

Morris kept some of the decorum in place, filling his cup, removing a dirty bread plate.

“Something that I’ve always admired about you is your letter writing, sir. Expensive paper and ink, beautiful handwriting, and a turn of phrase that’s poetic but practical. I’ve kept everything you’ve ever written to me including shopping lists. A few times I’ve thought about framing them.”

Mycroft flinched when a scone crumbled in his hand. “If I could copy something out of a book, you might have the solution there, Morris.”

Morris handed him another scone. “Nothing wrong with quoting the greats to get you started, sir. The condolence letter you gave me after Rory—,” Morris suddenly found the lid of the teapot intensely interesting. A prolonged swallow and he soldiered on. “When Rory died, you started with a quote from Auden. ‘Stop all the clocks.’ It captured my feelings exactly, but your words were what I needed.”

“It was the least I could do after I—,” Mycroft stared at the teapot but his own gulp wasn’t enough for him to find his voice.

“We’ve already ploughed that field, sir. It’s past time to be going on, and you are with Mr. Greg. We try to fix everything, you and I, the whole of the past as well as the present and we can’t see the future. Might be time for less thinking and more doing.”

“Be very specific, Morris. You had a successful marriage. I do not.”

“Too soon to tell. You get out your pretty paper, and you find him on your screen wherever he is today. Look at that beauty; then hold your pen tight and see what comes out.”

Mycroft went to his study as to the guillotine. He did a web search for classic love poetry, yet he wanted one that hadn’t been quoted into the ground. The first poem he found was Matthew Arnold’s “Longing” and it fit but there were thee’s and thou’s and inverted sentence structure so it felt right for him but wrong for Greg. The next poem on the odd list was by an author he didn’t recognize but the words were right for them both, for this water treading miasma they were both in.

Mycroft liked a good sonnet because it was predictable. Free verse always seemed like a typesetter’s error. He wrote the quote as a sentence across the top of the page, the antique fountain pen flowing over the heavy paper under his practiced hand.
“Marriage is the edge of the receding glacier where painfully and with wonder at having survived even this far we are learning to make fire.” –Margaret Atwood, poet

He moved the pen quickly away from the paper as his hand started to shake. Then he remembered more of Morris’ advice and called up Greg’s security page. He typed in three codes and the feed loaded. Greg was having a heated discussion with ‘the weasel’ as Mycroft had named Anderson, CSI which stood for crime scene investigator or cock sucking idiot, depending on if you had met him or not. As Anderson stomped off, his pointed face more pinched than usual, Greg rolled his eyes and looked up in thought. Mycroft froze that image as picture within picture and left the feed on so that Greg would be with him as he wrote.

Then he made an iron clad commitment to the image of Greg that he would write without thinking and not lift his pen until he had told all of his feelings on this particular day. He had a stack of pages and imagined that he would be writing an encyclopedia of scattered thoughts and off putting revelations. At least he would be losing Greg by action instead of cowering like the poof that he was.

Beside the header with his name and the family crest, he wrote in the date. Documents needed to be dated in case of divorce or on the positive side, study for future generations. If Greg responded well, there would be more letters.

Dear Greg,

I love you and I am so grateful every single day that you love me too and that against all common sense, you married me. If the rest of this pitiful missive doesn’t track, know that. You are loved.

You deserve so much better than I can give you. I live in constant fear that you will realize this and leave. I would not wish you back if you could be happy with someone who was as open and affectionate as you are. You trust without consideration in spite of a job that shows the worst of human nature. You enjoy life; you don’t worry. You can be in the moment.

Then there is the sorry mess that is your husband. I do not trust anyone. I know that you are everything that is good, but still, I question everything. I search my databases for hidden meanings; I parse every sentence and when you don’t speak, I interpret the silence as bad news on its way.

Other than our honeymoon and the moments in the dark when you give yourself to me, I cannot think of any time in my life when I have enjoyed life. I think of everything that can go wrong and when I have made that list, even if it is items in the hundreds, I review it incessantly. Should there be a harmless environment with little happening, I will review past or future scenarios to worry about.

I am never in the moment but always either worrying (as above) or taking myself away in my head to an imaginary village where I feel safer because all of the people there are my creation. That world moves slowly at my will. I fade to there so often that it is nearly impossible to stop. Only in life threatening situations such as we were constantly in during our beginnings, do I stay present. Maybe if you started holding a gun on me, I could be fully present as you deserve from a spouse.

You are full of hugs and kisses. As you know, I had to be taught hugging and am still terrible at it, apparently needing additional lessons on something that a toddler does without any effort. I am starved for affection, but do not give it and often cannot return it.

You give love freely. I am a miser, hoarding your love, because I know that there is an end to it. There will come a day when I wear you down. A day when despite your best intentions, you will
have nothing left to give me because I have taken so much more than I ever could give.

While I would end if you left me, I see that as the best possible course. I would rather that you go now while there is some love left than to stay and let me see that love be replaced by disappointment in your eyes.

I suppose we must discuss the matter. Since I am not experienced, perhaps I have got it wrong. Why do you love me, Greg? How can you? Can you forgive me when I fail so miserably at loving you?

Something happened to you when we had that lovely date and then quarreled after. You have taken a step back and rightly so, but how I have missed you. I have foregone food or drink at work so that I might get a migraine and come home to your tender care. No one ever held me like that before not even when I was a child. No one wants to hold an ugly baby. Will you ever hold me again? This is the question uppermost in my mind now.

You asked me to share my feelings. Is this enough to be going on with? Have I humiliated myself enough? Perhaps I can be a source of humor for you if I cannot give you enough love.

In summary, I have failed. I’m scared the damage is permanent. I should let you go but I can’t. Even if we are doomed, could you hold me one last time before you go?

Love,

My

He blotted the pages with the special blotting paper inside his rosewood stationary box and wiped off the nib of the pen. His neck was sore from hunching over and his fingers ached from gripping the pen. He checked the feed and startled when he saw that Greg was pulling into the garage.

Mycroft had hoped for a few hours to read the letter over and make corrections or even find another way to reach out to Greg that was less devastating. This letter told all. There would be no going back once Greg had read it.

He watched Greg go into the kitchen then typed in new codes so that he watched as Greg came closer and closer, calling a greeting to Morris as he passed by kitchen and laundry. He was coming up the stairs; he was passing Mycroft’s door; he was in his own study, looking sad and gaunt. Mycroft had been focusing on his own pain so much that he hadn’t seen Greg’s. Greg was a man with a life sentence heavy on his back.

Mycroft traced his finger on the screen so that he was stroking Greg’s cheek. “Mycroft Holmes, you are a fucking coward.”

He dialed Morris on the house phone, his fingers numb so that he had to watch them punch in the number. “Morris, could you come to my study, please?

The calm voice and a minute later, the sedate presence of his butler friend kept Mycroft from jumping through the tall, narrow window of his study.

“Morris, I’ve taken your advice and written Greg a letter. Would you take it to him please? I’m not sure I can walk just now. My legs are shaking abominably.” More painful to note was that his voice was shaking as well and high as a school boy’s from the nerves.

Morris bent down to fetch a silver tray from the bottom shelf of the credenza and placed the letter on it. “You shared your heart, sir. He’ll see that.”

Once Morris was gone, Mycroft buried his head in his hands and awaited his fate.
Mycroft quotes from Margaret Atwood’s “Habitation”
Greg brushed a tear from the thick, creamy paper. He had fought the emotion at first but then realized it would be hypocritical to ask My to open his heart if Greg had his own guarded. While he would never be fully reconciled to all of the security cameras, he hoped this was one time that his husband was watching. He thought about how difficult it must have been to write something so soul baring and with My’s gift for reading faces and body language, he would know immediately that his letter was well received.

Not trusting his own voice, he texted

Come here please. –G

While he waited, he rubbed his thumb back and forth across the paper. He would need to write a letter himself. Epic love required letters.

Then My was standing in the doorway, and Greg held out his hand. When My walked over and took it, Greg pulled him down to sit on the sofa, wrapping his arms around the slender shoulders. Neither of them could speak for a time.

Greg ran his hands over and over through My’s soft, ginger hair eventually working his fingers against the thick knots in his neck muscles. Still struggling against the power of the letter, he could only whisper, “You’re trembling, love.”

“Is this the last time?” My’s trembling increased.

“No, baby. Not even close.”

My sighed and melted against Greg’s chest. For a long time there was nothing but Greg’s hand working up and down his husband’s back the way he had the night of the migraine. It felt good to have clear guidelines about what My needed. He found the loosening of the taut muscles very satisfying.

My went without a vest on weekends, and Greg enjoyed chest hair peeking from the open neck of the shirt and the occasional nipple sighting through the thin, expensive fabric. He pulled the shirt free of My’s trousers and rubbed his bare back. My’s skin was cool; his body had reacted strongly to the high emotion. Greg warmed the smooth expanse with his hands, glad that no matter the season, he was like a human blast furnace.

Greg rested his cheek against the top of My’s head, the baby fine hair perfect for nuzzling. He cleared his throat twice before he could say, “That was a very good letter.”

“You would have had it sooner if I weren’t such a coward.”
“Stop. All this harsh criticism of yourself has to stop.” Greg made several attempts before the words were audible. “Do you know how much courage it took to write a letter like that, My? You gave all of yourself to me.”

“Is it what you wanted?”

“So much more.”

My buried his face in Greg’s chest again and the next words were muffled. “I thought it was over. You didn’t want me anymore.”

“I will always want you, but everything I did just seemed to make you feel more pressured. I didn’t want to force things so I pulled back.”

“What else could you do with someone so inept?”

Greg kissed the top of My’s head several times, luxuriating in the openness after weeks of guarding his words and behavior. “I am not perfect, love. Putting distance between us was the worst possible idea. I see that now. I hurt you when you were already in terrible pain. I am truly sorry.”

“I’m sorry that I’m so full of problems.”

“Shh. No more of that. Can I kiss you now?”

“I would like that.”

My was looking down, the tips of his ears reddening as Greg watched. The crucible that had forged an assassin from such a shy and gentle man was palpable in the room. Greg wanted to go back to the beginning and make sure that the little boy inside was loved and cherished, but he could only start from this day and who My was now. There was much damage to repair.

Greg put his hand under My’s chin and tilted his face up. He kissed those full lips as lightly as baby’s breath. My sighed and rested his forehead against Greg’s. “Better, sweetheart?”

“Yes, but don’t pull away anymore. Even if I do seem pressured, I want you to push me. I can learn, Greg.”

“I know that. You are the most brilliant man in all of England as evidenced by your minor position in the government.”

A shy smile bloomed on My’s face. It was one Greg hadn’t seen before, My’s pale skin flushing. He would learn to read more of those signs, the way the dark blue eyes sparkled to brightness. My’s whole face came to light. He looked years younger with the weight of their conflict gone.

“You are smiling with your whole heart. You are so beautiful. Do you know that?”

“When I’m with you, I feel it, but it wears off. I can’t retain it.”

“I’ll keep saying it until you know all the time. I want it to be your core value.”

Greg kissed him softly again. It was a Saturday, and he planned to focus the whole day on making My feel safe and beautiful. “Care to snog?”

My’s smile was incandescent. He nodded and closed his eyes.

Greg spent several minutes on soft, slow kisses, his mind drifting into peace after the long
Greg spent several minutes on soft, slow kisses, his mind drifting into peace after the long struggle. Temporarily sated, they put their foreheads together. “I love you.”

“I love you more,” My said.

“Good contest to have.” He pulled My close, understanding now how hungry his husband was for touch and how hard it was to ask. My’s arms wrapped around him in a hug that he doubted they would finish with a signal. A plan began to form in Greg’s mind for helping My to see how beautiful he really was. It was risky and wanton. He rubbed My’s back again, getting him ready.

“Are we going to snog all day?” My asked, his voice nearly unrecognizable without the tension and command.

“No, I don’t want that.” It was a bit cruel but he wanted a little tension so that he could relieve it.

“I’ll go then,” and My moved to leave which gave Greg the chance to pull him more firmly to his side.

“I don’t want to snog all day because I have other things I want to do to you.”

There was a contented sigh. “What other things?”

“I am going to unwrap you like the gift that you are, very slowly. I’m going to touch you everywhere.”

My flushed even more and Greg could see his arousal, growing quickly. “But there are cameras in here.”

“Exactly. I think it’s time other people saw the beauty that I see all the time.”

“I have to maintain authority with my team.”

“Fuck authority. You hire and fire them. Trust yourself. Besides, they can look but never ever touch.”

Greg was rubbing his thumb across My’s wrist to feel his pulse jump.

My licked his dry lips. “No one touches me but you.”

“That’s right. I call you ‘My’ because you are mine.” Then Greg waited, hoping that My would fill the silence, but he kept his fingers moving, unbuttoning My’s cuff and slipping a finger underneath to stroke along My’s arm.

My’s breathing was ragged and there were long pauses. “Sometimes when I’m in a meeting, I think about you walking in and stopping the agenda. You handcuff me and strip off all my clothes. You show them my cock, and I’m so hard that I’m dripping. You finger fuck me right there, bent over the table. They all gather around and watch your fingers inside me until I come all over myself.”

Greg’s vision blurred for a time as he thought he might come just from the sound of My’s voice, shy and halting. “I can make that happen, but let’s start with this. You are going to see on the tape how gorgeous you are when I’m touching you. Everybody will see your pretty cock. Then we’ll watch the tape, and you can see how beautiful you are when you give yourself to me.”

“I want to give you all of me.” My kissed him in that careful way. He was learning that a gentle kiss could be just as erotic as a bruising one.
“I want you to feel safe, baby. Do you remember your safe word?”

My grimaced. “Deduction.”

“You can stop me whenever you like. We’ve got all the time in the world to show off your body.”

“Help me let go, Greg?”

“I will. I’ve been wanting to.”

Greg was determined to undo My completely after the many times he had been weak and helpless under My’s touch. He started with feather light kisses to cheeks and lips so that My would understand that this was about love and pride, not power. “Look at me, sweetheart.”

My’s eyelids were heavy and his eyes opened slowly to show Greg his pupils blown wide.

“Your eyes get so dark when you’re passionate. I’m weak over how beautiful they are. And these spiky lashes—“ Greg traced a finger over them. “All that passion, the sparkle, the deep of them, it’s just for me.”

My was parting his lips for a kiss, but Greg tilted his head over the back of the couch and put his lips to My’s long, pale throat. His tongue circled My’s Adam’s apple and felt the convulsive swallows. He licked down to My’s collar, unbuttoned the top two buttons and traced his fingers where the dark ginger hair started. He kissed the hollow there. The hair was soft and springy under his tongue. He knew his slow progress was tormenting My but it was also keeping him present. My wasn’t going to dissociate during this encounter.

While still kissing My’s neck, Greg slowly unbuttoned My’s shirt, tracing the opening after every button, reveling in the feel of that abundant hair under his fingers. Greg was going to draw this out until somebody screamed but as the languid heat stole over him, he knew he might crack before My did. My’s shirt buttons were all undone, and Greg ran one finger in the narrow opening all the way from throat to waist and back up again. My moaned through clenched teeth. Greg grinned with satisfaction.

My was puffing his chest up, expecting Greg to remove the shirt, so Greg knelt and untied My’s shoes. He removed both shoes but left the socks. My’s socks were cashmere and were decadent to wear or touch. Greg firmly massaged both feet, working his thumbs deep into the heels. My was clutching the arm of the chair, his fingers white. Greg worked his way under trouser cuffs to My’s ankles and then grazed his fingers across the skin at the top of the socks. My was panting now, head still thrown back where Greg had placed it to kiss his throat.

Greg smiled again. My was still fully covered, nothing very untoward had happened yet, but the idea of unseen eyes on him had ratcheted up reactions all out of proportion for a simple foot massage. My’s arse wiggled back and forth on the leather cushion. His voice was high with strain. “Greg?”

“What, love?” Greg almost laughed at how ordinary his voice sounded in the face of his sympathetic erection.

“Take off….my socks….please.” He was gasping for air. “Toes.”

Greg removed the socks and massaged each long, narrow toe. Thoughts of Mycroft’s long years of sensory deprivation flitted through his mind, and he firmly pushed them aside. He was going to fill all of those unmet needs one by one. My didn’t have to be sad or empty anymore.

When My’s desperation had eased, Greg finished the massage with a kiss to the sole of each foot,
raising My’s legs to do so. My winced as the movement put pressure on seams stretched to bursting.

Greg moved back to the sofa and started the next round with soft kisses to My’s forehead. “I love your freckles,” he whispered.

He trailed a finger down the open front of My’s shirt again, almost cursing the slow steady course he had set for himself. He worshipped My’s chest. But Greg was unwavering once he set his mind to something. He wouldn’t take off My’s shirt until the man begged him to.

He focused on My’s ears next. My was breathing so loudly that he didn’t hear Greg’s deep calming breaths, necessary to rise above the pain of his own mammoth erection pressing on seams and zip. Greg alternated flicks of his tongue all around and inside My’s ear with slow sucks on his earlobe. Greg whispered, the puffs of air right against My’s ear, “This is what I’ll do to your nipples later.”

Mycroft Holmes snapped. Greg was pushed back on the sofa so that My could lean up and shrug out of his finely tailored shirt. He whimpered, “Please, Greg, please!”

Greg tutted mock disapproval, biting his lip to keep from laughing. “Patience, love. We’ll get there.”

He returned to My’s side where he could whisper in his ear, which had proven effective. As he licked and sucked on My’s ear, he trailed fingers along My’s forearm. “They are looking at your chest now, My, and seeing all of that gorgeous hair. They want to touch it, but I won’t let them. I’m the only one that gets to know how soft and thick it is. I’m the only one to know that your nipples are pink and erect, hiding under all that fur. How sensitive they are, how they love my teeth scraping across.”

Greg was getting dizzy from his own voice. He couldn’t imagine how My was able to hold back as much as he had. “They are biting their lips, love, because they can’t bite your sweet little nipples. They’ll wank later to the thought of sucking them.”

Then Greg couldn’t bear it anymore and fell on one while his fingers teased the other. My was gasping with relief, arching his back to press the little peak hard against Greg’s mouth. “Needed your mouth,” he moaned.

Greg spent a long time flicking his tongue across the taut little buds while his fingers combed through the ginger hair. He had pulled My back from the edge again but not as far. He needed to pick up the pace; there was no question of My being fully present. He eased down My’s zip with infinite care, sliding his other hand under the waistband to protect the massive erection. My keened when he felt Greg’s hand on him.

But Greg had one last endurance test for them. He wanted My completely naked, but he wanted it to last as long as possible. He knelt in front of My and patted one pale foot. “Lift your hips, love,” he instructed and pulled the trousers free.

He looked his fill of the long muscled legs, sinewy, freckled and furred. He wanted to kiss every inch, but he feared hidden consequences of priapism. Rearranging his own beleaguered cock, he thought of dead rats and bits of food in Anderson’s beard, and then proceeded to final stages of his first class seduction. His voice came out an octave lower than usual. A foghorn would have felt threatened.

“Look how long and lean you are, My. Coiled wire. They’ve wondered what was under all the buttons and zips and fine fabric. You’re like a statue. Not an ounce of fat. I can see every sinew of
muscle. Do you think they get hard, watching me run my hands along your straining muscles?”

He lifted My’s leg to his shoulder and worked both hands down his thigh, pressing hard at the tension there, stopping at the hem of his boxers. My was arching up again, only the back of his head seemed to be touching the sofa. “No, sit back down. That’s the way. Look at me, sweetheart.”

My dragged his eyes open; they were no longer blue, the dark pupils having taken over. He was hyperventilating. His face and chest were flushed. He was completely at his husband’s mercy. “Greg?”

“Tell me what you need, love.”

“Can’t.” He was squirming again and his hand strayed to his crotch.

“No. That’s mine to touch.” Greg moved his hand to the sofa. “Say the words and we’ll finish.”

“Suck me?”

“Not this time. I want them to see it.” Greg put My’s leg back down and kept his own hands away. He thought that just a breath might send My over.

“What do I want them to see, My?”

“Cock?”

“That’s right. And how do I describe your cock?”

“Pretty.” My whimpered.

“Your pretty, pretty cock, love. They are going to see it. They’ve always wanted to. They’ll watch me touch it and be so jealous.”

Greg eased the boxers down, My’s cock springing out with an almost audible sproing. “So long and thick too, strong like your legs. I am so proud of your body, all flushed and sweaty. Waiting for my touch.”

My cried out when Greg grabbed hold. It only took a few strokes before My shouted his release and Greg let it spray where it would. He had just come in his pants. Hand over hand, he hauled himself onto the sofa, arms and legs like lead. He pulled My full length on top of him and stroked down his back, his other hand joining to rub slow circles on My’s overheated ass. “Tell me about yourself, love.”

“Pretty cock, beautiful,” My mumbled into Greg’s shoulder.

In total agreement, they fell asleep, Greg’s hand still cupping My’s ass.

Greg woke before Mycroft did and savored the feel of a completely surrendered husband on top of him. He stroked My’s hair and then down his neck, amused that all tension was gone. A simple hand job had taken My over although the real release was getting his feelings on paper. Those truths were out now, and they wouldn’t ever go back to that lesser intimacy again. Greg saw now how marriage was so much more, and he was glad he had waited to go to these depths with My.

My stirred, his body tensing at the unfamiliar surroundings, but then he remembered and his body flowed back over Greg’s. “What happens now?”
“After I put on dry pants, you mean?”

“Uh huh.” My was reduced to sounds as he stretched, rubbing his body lazily against his husband’s.

“Then I go down and have Morris start our lunch, something simple we can eat up here because I don’t want you putting even a scrap of clothes on your sweet body. After dessert, which you will eat today, we will watch the tape that I very awkwardly will acquire from the boys in the basement.”

“They’ve all seen me naked.”

“They’ve seen you naked before, yes?”

“Maybe. I don’t want to know.”

Greg danced his fingers lightly all the way down My’s spine, ending in a caress of the cleft and the pretty pink hole he would be exploring later. My didn’t know yet how much was going to be recorded for posterity. “Can you nap while I retrieve the food and the tape?”

My yawned. “It would appear that I can. Why am I so tired?”

“You fought a terrible battle with yourself and won. I am so proud of you.”

“You say that a lot.”

“Had anybody said it to you before?”

“No.”

“Then I have quite a debt to repay.”

“Not all yours,” My said, settling quietly on his side as Greg eased away from the sofa.

“You’re needs are mine to fill, love, as much as I can.” Greg got the quilt he kept in his bottom desk drawer and spread it over My, who would chill quickly without his personal heater. He knelt and kissed My’s forehead, loving that his husband was naked in his study. It was a precedent that he planned to repeat in every room of the house in front of every fucking camera in the house of mirrors. A gentle snore came from under the quilt, and he knew My was exhausted enough to sleep comfortably while he made preparations.

A quick wash up at the loo sink and a change of clothes he hoped would be on only briefly and he was trotting down the stairs, feeling younger and lighter. Morris was at the counter with what looked like lunch already well underway. “Morris, we’ll be taking a light lunch up in my study. I’ll be back shortly to help you.”

Morris nodded, but there was no customary eye contact or his usual ‘Yes, Mr. Greg.’

Greg had temporary qualms about what Morris might have seen; the gentle widower’s observation had been far from his mind when he stripped My. He would need to tread lightly; perhaps the less said the better. He went down the stairs by the kitchen door and into a truly bizarre encounter. While Greg was used to some discipline at the Yard, he had not had much experience with higher level military. It was like talking to dolls; these men seemed switched off. This was My’s world and no wonder his pain had been forced underground to fester and cut him inside.

Rather than embarrassment at his request, he felt intense dislike for the chill and the lack of
humanity. After clipped greetings, he decided to shut himself down and keep things quick. Warmth and My were waiting. “I need the video feed for the past two hours in my study, please. With audio, as high res as you can get it.”

“Yes, Detective Inspector.”

He sat down on a wooden straight chair near the door and watched the screens bearing images of every room of his house save the master suite as one man monitored current feeds and the other worked at a console. Greg saw bits of video with My arched on the couch, and he knew that his plan would work at least in the short term. This artificial world that My lived in created an endless supply of voyeurs, dissociation, isolation, and pain. Only love could break through.

Three men sat in a ready room beyond the consoles. They spelled each other in twenty minute increments so eyes were always fresh. Shifts were staggered and varied daily so that no routine was detectable. Agents were rotated in and out every six weeks. All of these precautions and My still had nightmares.

The senior officer handed Greg a dvd in a case with the date typed on a label. In for a penny, in for a pound, “I’ll be needing the same for the rest of the day, please. In two hour increments.”

“Yes, sir,” said the mannequin and Greg was reminded of his own nightmare about the masks. How did My’s sweet nature ever survive under such heavy cover? A chill ran down his back at how close he had come to losing My and the pure heart that lurked beneath. He hurried up the stairs back to warmth and light.

Morris had prepared several promising trays. It was party food like Greg had seen the likes of only once when he had received an award after an especially complex case. This was pre-Sherlock when Greg still had some hope of making a difference in the city.

Posh party food. At quick glance, he counted four kinds of sandwiches including his favorite, egg mayonnaise. There was crudite which My insisted on at every meal, filling himself with the low calorie, high fiber foods first, but Greg saw a creamy dip as well. Cheese and crackers, but some of both that Greg did not recognize. He did know there was a wheel of baked Brie. There was also a three tiered tray of cakes and tarts, and his stomach growled with yearning. Another tray held a tea service but also a bottle of lager and packets of crisps, Morris having acknowledged Greg’s less refined tastes in an elegant way.

“Morris, you outdo yourself constantly. Someday, you will prepare a meal such as this and be taken straight up to heaven for a higher purpose.”

“Thank you, Mr. Greg,” Morris voice was thick like it got when he talked about Rory, but when he talked of his adored husband, he always met Greg’s eyes with his shiny ones. He wouldn’t look at Greg.

“Morris, are you okay?”

“I’ve done a terrible thing, Greg. You’ll not forgive me.” Then Morris turned and his face was pinched and white.

Greg was fairly certain of what the terrible thing was and all thoughts of food and My were put away for a time. “You saw something that you feel you shouldn’t have?”

Morris nodded, and Greg tucked the dvd in the small of his back under his belt.

“I’m sorry that you had to be embarrassed, mate. This was totally my fault, my carelessness. Don’t think anymore about it.”
“But I can’t stop thinking about it. You were so tender with him. I’ve never seen him happy that way. He glowed with it. I don’t have many pictures and no movies but surveillance of Rory, but we must have looked that way. When he held me, I—“

Then terrible muffled sobs were fighting through clenched teeth. Greg didn’t want to embarrass this kind and proper man further with unwelcome affection so he put a hand on Morris’ shoulder, gentle not like the nightmare grip of Lord Holmes. When the hand was not rebuffed, he slid his arm around Morris’ shoulder and as the grief kept spilling out, Greg did what he wanted to and pulled Morris into a hug. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

When the sobs slowed, Greg patted and rubbed Morris’ arm and handed him a paper towel for a handkerchief. “You need a good blow, mate, in more ways than one.”

They both laughed, and Morris trumpeted into the rough paper.

“What do you think Rory would say about you locking yourself away in this crypt and sleeping with the ghost of his memory?”

“He would be furious.”

“Then time to leave the nest maybe?”

“Who would want a fright like me?”

“Far more men then you realize.”

“I’m too old to start over.”

“Think about what you just saw. It’s never too late.”

Morris wiped a shaking hand across his eyes and faced Greg. “I’ll give it some thought. Might need a bit of advice.”

“We’ll talk about this more later. Lots more. But I need to get back to my man. Best leave the video feed off for the rest of the day. I’ll find a way to signal you when we christen the other rooms.”

“Cheeky,” Morris said shyly.

“So I’ve been told. Your matinee viewing should probably go on the list of things we don’t tell My.”

“Absolutely. You go on up, Greg. I’ll put everything in Mr. Holmes’ study and when it’s ready, I’ll knock on your door. That way you are on your own schedule and can wear or not wear what you like to the table.”

His eyes twinkled faintly and that little twitch of a smile flickered. Greg held out a hand, still pleased when he did something that met Morris’ approval. “We’ll be fine for the rest of the day, Morris. Why don’t you wash your face and then go out for a pint?”

“Is that an order?”

“If you are taking an order from the lady of the house, than yes, it is.”

“You aren’t Mrs. Iceman anymore, are you, Greg?”
“The glacier is melting.” Then they exchanged a fully lighted smile, and after swiping an egg mayonnaise sandwich off the tray, Greg hurried upstairs to wake his sleeping beauty.

My lay on his side, the quilt tucked under his arms so that Greg could take in his bare shoulders in the late afternoon light. Peach freckles dotted his creamy skin, the sun turning the hair on his forearms to gold. Greg knelt beside the couch, an unfortunate pop of one knee waking My who braced himself but then relaxed with a sigh. Greg ran his hand over My’s shoulder, so cool and smooth against his warm, rough palm.

Just a shoulder, bare and gleaming, and he was hard as rock. My’s eyes were closed again, his breathing deeper and slower than Greg had ever heard it. “Sweetheart? I need to bite your arm now.”

Holding out his forearm, the underside on top, My mumbled, “Don’t draw blood.”

Greg grazed his teeth and sucked hard all up and down My’s arm, biting gently when he got to My’s bicep, a little harder at the shoulder when My groaned with pleasure.

My sat up. “Lunch taking too long, love?” And then he laughed full out, a rare and blessed sound.

“I am always hungry for you,” and Greg bit again but left space for this tongue to flit back and forth between his teeth.

Throwing his head back, My loosened his grip on the quilt and arched his back. The quilt slipped to his waist, revealing his beloved chest hair which was turned to fire by the sun. Greg trailed his fingers down, remembering their honeymoon and how the Grecian sun had baked their bodies and how they wore as little clothing as possible on their rooftop terrace. A knock on the door stopped his intention of checking to see if all My’s hair would be tinted with the sun’s help. Since he knew this already, the rationale was thin at best. “That will be Morris with an amazing high tea set up in your study. He is going out for the evening, and we will have this mansion to ourselves.”

My reached for his pants. “Oh no, Mr. Holmes, you are filling your plate just as you came into this world.”

“And you, the overly clothed Detective Inspector Lestrade, what will you be removing?”

Greg did an impromptu striptease until he was down to his boxers. Being nearly naked outside the bedroom felt decadent. With a defiant flare, Mycroft put his pants back on, but then walked over and gave Greg a hug with an ass grab. A kiss followed that nearly stopped the tea completely but Greg’s stomach growled again at a pivotal moment so they tiptoed down the hall, giggling like school boys.

They piled their plates up and then went back to Greg’s study where the furniture was not antique. Greg was glad to see My eat without calorie counting. The diet was something they would have to address eventually. One chubby phase right before a growth spurt was not a lifelong weight problem. He suspected Sherlock was to blame. It was all fine for John to love someone dangerously thin; he was a doctor. Greg wanted My to be comfortable with food. If they put on a few pounds, they could back off for a little while or add an extra workout. Morris used healthy cooking techniques so there was no reason for the stringent deprivation that made meals a test of wills.

Today was not about chipping away at bad habits though. Greg wanted to see just how good he could make My feel. Today they were making love instead of their customary intense passion that offered release but not much else. With time, perhaps My would get used to slow and gentle couplings as part of their repertoire. There was nothing wrong with fast and furious on weeknights.
when they had to be up early the next day, but weekends needed to be leisurely. My needed down
time and comfort and an absence of deadlines. It was Greg’s job to provide that and he was proud
to do so.

My was sitting cross legged on the sofa, his plate balanced on one knee, cup and saucer on the
other. His hair was rumpled and the lines were gone from his face. He tore into a roast beef
sandwich with gusto. Greg watched the white teeth bite into the bread and the working of My’s
long throat as he swallowed, and it took discipline not to put their plates aside and have his
husband for lunch instead. He would never grow tired of the way My tasted or the way he
responded, far more precious now that Greg was getting an idea of how bad things had been for
him in the past.

Looking at Greg over the rim of his teacup, My smiled. “What is it?”

“I love you more than when we got married. Every new thing I learn about you makes me love
you more.”

My put his cup in the saucer and stared at it. “I don’t understand how you love me at all. I swear
to you that I’m not fishing for compliments. I’m genuinely confused.”

“You are strong and brave; you stand up to the stubborn force of me.”

“But Greg, you know the truth now. I’m none of that. It’s all a façade, the masks that plague your
nightmares.”

“You are brave. God, that letter. To look at yourself unflinchingly and to tell me things that you
thought would drive me away. That’s your true self, your best self acting there.”

“You keep saying that. But it’s the opposite of what I’ve been told all my life.”

“As wounded as you’ve been with no one in your corner, you still took the risk of loving me.
Remember, you told me first, knowing that I wasn’t sure. You proposed, unsure of my answer.
That’s guts, love.”

“What else?”

On another man, the question would have been vanity and self absorption, but Greg knew that this
was a starving man asking for a bit of bread. “You are brilliant. But I never feel lesser than as I do
with Sherlock. You make me feel like the things I do are important too, even though you are
saving the country, the world even, and I’m just saving a few people here and there.”

“It doesn’t feel like brilliance when I’m at work.”

“We both know it is, My. But another example would be how you understood the play and
explained it to me so I could enjoy it more. You are a quick study. Much as I hate some of your
alter egos, it was a pleasure to watch you at work and how you adapted to all kinds of
circumstances. They don’t let idiots in at Cambridge.”

Greg bit into a sandwich with some sort of meat paste. Both the meat and bread were made from
scratch. Morris had too much time on his hands. Greg chewed thoughtfully for awhile as My
pulled a sandwich apart and licked at the filling. The appearance of that pink tongue between kiss
swollen lips did not help with focus. “You’re funny,” he said abruptly,

My started and Greg caught his tea cup just in time. “You’re funny, love. We laugh at the same
things. I’m never bored. You play the clown sometimes just for me.”
My carefully put his empty plate on the coffee table beside his cup. His eyes were blue lasers when he looked at Greg. “If we work hard, if I can make myself better, will you be happy?”

“I’m happy now, My. We both have some work to do, but that’s what marriage is, saying that you want more than a tumble. You’ve had enough of trying to measure up. You have my approval now.”

Then My was nearly in his lap, arms around his neck, trembling again. Greg hugged back, surprised at how deep the fear went. He stroked My’s hair for awhile, loving that he was allowed to, but he knew that words didn’t last the way his actions did. His husband needed tactile memories. “Let’s have some dessert okay? Stay put. I’ll get enough for us both.”

Going across the hall, he got one of everything from the three tiered tray. He took up the teapot as well and returned to the sofa, feeling very much at home in partial nudity. My was holding the quilt in his lap and staring closely at the pattern. “Where did this come from, Greg?”

“It’s mine. My mum made it.”

“Why haven’t I seen it before?”

“I keep it in a drawer because I know it doesn’t go with your decor.”

“Your mum made this?”

“Yeah, out of my old clothes from when I was growing up.”

“This needs to be on display. The craftsmanship is amazing. It would sell at auction for a starting bid of 150 pounds.”

“Don’t tell Mum. She’ll get puffed up.”

“She should. She’s an artist. These stitches are tiny and uniform. Will you tell me about it? This is your history.”

My spread the quilt over both their laps, but Greg was more focused on food. “If you eat whatever I feed you with no comment about calories, I’ll tell you what the patches are. Close your eyes for your treat.”

Greg popped a lemon meringue mini tart in My’s mouth. Then he took My’s finger and traced a white cotton square. “This is from a onesie that I wore as a wee babe. A very fat baby since this square is the size it is. Kiss, please.”

My leaned in and Greg laved his tongue across My’s lips and then inside his mouth, the citrus sting tingling on his tongue. Morris was a regular chef and a pastry chef. So much talent going unnoticed. “This is my footie jersey from when I was eleven. The number is about all that survived. I wore it night and day.”

He fed My a little pink cake and there was a groan of pleasure that made him want to tip the tiny treats on the floor and mount My like a bull in a barnyard. He forced himself back to the task at hand. “You can talk, love, just not about calories.”

My grinned and licked his lips. He put his hand on the back of Greg’s neck and pulled him in for a kiss that went on forever until there was nothing but strawberries and My’s tongue and the cool of the leather sofa against his molten back. When they finally resurfaced, gray dots danced before his eyes and he lay his head on My’s shoulder. “You are starting to see how beautiful you are to me. I wanted you before I loved you.”
My’s cool fingers ran through his hair which was probably looking like a fright wig. “I’ve loved you so long that I don’t even remember when it started.”

“Here I was with the whole world available to me and never knew it. I’ve answered a lot of questions today. Your turn. What did you see in me?”

He fed My a mouthful of chocolate mousse just to watch him swirl the fluff around in his mouth while he tried to talk.

“Kiss, please?”

Greg licked every bit of the chocolate from inside his husband’s mouth while My’s whimpers vibrated through both their cocks.

“I watched you on CCTV like Eastenders. Every day, every free moment, I saw you looking after Sherlock.”

“The flat was bugged, of course.”

My’s smile fled. “Greg, I was different then and I had to be sure Sherlock was safe. He wouldn’t let me anymore and ---”

“Shhh, considering how we ended up, it’s all fine. What did you see?”

“You were gentle and patient. One night, he couldn’t stop vomiting and you held him until he finally was asleep in your arms, and I closed my eyes and pretended that it was me. When his face was turned into your shoulder, it might have been me.”

“Why didn’t you say something then? We met often enough to monitor his progress.”

“Nothing in me at that time deserved such care.”

“Wrong!” Greg’s Sherlock impression echoed in the study. “Sorry, that was very loud.”

“What’s this one?” My asked, pointing to a light blue patch.

“That is my first communion suit, cutting edge style of the time, polyester.”

“I had a peach one, first suit I bought on my own. Mummy was beside herself. I looked like a moldy carrot.”

They had discipline names for each other, not in a BDSM way, but when it was time to make a point. Mycroft and Gregory, the grownups who were seldom home. “Mycroft, you are unsuccessfully changing the subject.”

My grabbed a shortbread cookie and stuffed it in Greg’s mouth with a head tilt that would render any pet store puppy jealous and defeated.

Greg chewed a long time and washed the last bit down with the lukewarm dregs at the bottom of his lager bottle. “You will not derail me with cuteness. You deserved all the tender care that you wanted, My; you always did.”

He took My’s hands and kissed the long fingers one by one. “It’s time to watch the movie we made, time for you to watch yourself being pampered. I’ll move the coffee table; you put the sofa cushions on the floor.”
Greg moved the coffee table and retrieved the dvd from his desk where it lay on top of his pile of clothes, but he was stymied by the variety of remotes. Even though it was his telly, it was a gift from My and had all the features. When he took his time, he could do it but he was nearly blind with wanting and weary from all that they had shared in one big lump. Long fingers eased the dvd from his hand. Greg lowered himself to a cushion and rested his back against the plushly padded arm of the sofa. “Right here, love,” he said when My turned with remote in hand.

My sunk down gingerly but sat ramrod straight in front of Greg like a child after a scolding. Greg pulled him back as their ‘film’ started. He settled My between his legs, My’s head resting on his propped up knee. “Fast forward a little.”

My held the button and Greg was organizing papers at his desk with super speed. “If only I could work like that in real life. We’d have more time together.”

My pressed play as Morris entered the room with the letter. “What did you think when he brought it to you?”

“That I’d never got a love letter before.”

“If the situation was reversed, I would assume that they were divorce documents.”

“What? And give up all this?” But Greg wrapped his arms around My’s middle and lay his cheek against My’s.

They watched Greg’s tears and his shaky texting; then My entered the room, his anguished face contorted, his steps slow. Greg felt him tense and hugged tighter. Then on camera, My was being held too. Greg was surprised at how powerful it was to watch himself comfort My. There was so much love. He could see My’s body soften at the gentle touches; the pain left My’s face.

Greg mirrored his filmed self and rubbed My’s back, kissing the nape of his neck this time. There was purring. It was like the best kind of do over. “Look what your letter did, love. I feel very good.”

“I did something right.”

“You do lots of things right. Can you forgive me for pulling away? I will never do it again.”

Mycroft leaned back against Greg’s other side and tipped his head up. “I’ll forgive you for the price of a kiss.”

They were kissing in real time and on screen. It was heady stuff. Greg was painfully hard, but he knew what he wanted for My. He would overteach the lesson so that My could go on from this day with total confidence, and the lesson would be repeated until all the terrible past was wiped away.

“You have to talk to me too, Greg. Tell me when I’m wrong. Challenge me. If I know you are firm with me, I’ll feel safe.”

“Okay, but I am not pinching your shoulder for love or money.”

“I think we can retire that bit from the Holmes’ heritage.”

“Shh, the good bit’s starting.”

“It’s all good.”
My was sharing his fantasy on camera and groans were in stereo.

“We’ll have to set up that scenario sometime, but you’ll need to get me off twice beforehand or I would never be able to finish.”

Greg copied his counterpart’s moves, touching and kissing My but glancing at the screen often. They were beautiful, his face as enraptured as My’s. He felt empowered by servitude. He was worshipping My’s body, and the tears stung behind his eyelids. This was what love looked like. Marriage was the sacred act of pleasuring his husband. He ran his fingers over his wedding band. Loving this man was the one job he would have forever.

He took My’s foot between his hands and lifted it to his lips, sucking the long toes. My actually shouted at the suction. Greg was thankful that Morris was safely away since it wasn’t fair to be so happy in front of someone who couldn’t be, but someday soon, he would help Morris find love again.

He kissed and suckled My’s ears which were bright red; he sucked with desperation on My’s tight little nipples which were still swollen from their film debut. My lay across Greg’s arm, his head thrown fully back, throat straining. He panted like a Lamaze instructor, calling Greg’s name over and over. Greg had to taste him; there was no choice.

On camera, Mycroft was begging Greg to touch his pretty cock, responding to the sexual catechism as Greg asked the questions. On the sofa cushions, Greg rolled My over and slurped kisses all the way down My’s spine as he writhed and whimpered. He removed My’s pants, sliding his hands down the back of freckled thighs. Greg’s tongue dredged the cleft and then reached My’s pretty pink hole. He teased with flickers and grinned to himself as My’s ass raised up to meet his mouth. He probed as far as his tongue could reach when it was pointed and then widened his tongue to press firmly all the way around the opening.

He had forgotten that the whole day was spontaneous until he looked around for lube. Fortunately, Morris had provided little carafes of vinegar and oil for something on the menu, and Greg drizzled the oil liberally on his fingers. He added a finger to the welcome advances of his tongue.

“Please, Greg, get in me!”

My was wiggling his ass and Greg steadied it. He had wanted this to be slow and sensual, but his body had limits, and there was no way he was coming in his pants, hands free, twice in a day. “Just a minute, love. You’re not quite ready.”

Greg was kneeling and slid his pants down just far enough to free his cock. He was so hard that the fabric almost burned as it slid across. He eased another finger into My, thankful for once that they were big as sausages.

“I swear to you; I’m ready.” My was bumping back, nearly spraining Greg’s fingers.

Greg had to slow him down. “Tell me what you want, My.”

The pushing stopped and Greg continued to work as My struggled with the question.

“Want your cock.”

“Where, baby? You have to ask for what you want.”

“Inside me.”
“Inside where?”

“I can’t think, but I know you want me to say pretty.”

Greg leaned all the way over My’s back and whispered in his ear, “I’m going to put my cock in your pretty pink hole. They watched me slide my tongue all over that pretty place, and now my cock will be inside there.”

Then Greg aligned himself and pushed in slowly. He lay over My’s back again, putting his hands underneath to support My’s chest. He could feel My’s nipples hard against his palms. When My tried to quicken the pace, Greg slowed things down. He wanted My to come without being touched, and he wanted My to be present and to remember. Agony was going slow in the best place he had ever put his cock; My was always tight and could milk Greg with inner contractions.

They were in a battle of wills, but Greg kept My on all fours so that he couldn’t touch himself. Greg’s hands kept My in place. A sheen of sweat covered them both.

Finally, My was begging. “Please, love, I can’t bear it.”

“You’re beautiful. Say it, Mycroft. Come on.”

A tiny clenched voice. “I’m beautiful.”

“Not loud enough.” Greg slowed down, praying for divine help to do so. “Yell it. Let them hear you next door.”

“I’m beautiful.” Greg sped up the tiniest bit.

My was grunting with every thrust now. He yelled so the china rang. “I’m beautiful.”

Greg finally let himself go, and with one last declaration, My came, his arms and legs collapsing as Greg followed him over. They lay side by side, aware of each other but completely spent. Finally, Greg slid his hand across the cushion so he wouldn’t have to lift it. He squeezed My’s hand three times and My gave him four squeezes back. When his vision cleared a few minutes later, he reached for the quilt to pull it over My.

My was indignant. “You are not getting semen on a family heirloom.”

“In this house, that means fucking on the lawn like dogs.”

When they stopped laughing, they went upstairs to shower. Taking Greg’s hand, My pulled him into the master bath. They were still wobbly so it was more like slow dancing with a bar of soap between them. Heads on each other’s shoulders, they swayed back and forth under the simmering water. My’s soap smelled like Earl Grey with cinnamon. Greg felt that he might glow like something holy afterward.

It was early evening, but Greg was staggering from weariness. “Nap?”

“Just a little one.”

“Right, an hour at the most.”

They woke at four a.m., ravenous with hunger and thirst. In nothing but their dressing gowns, they tiptoed back to My’s study and got all of the food that was safe to eat after sitting out so long. Cheese and crackers, cheese and watercress sandwiches, all of the vegetables and the rest of the dessert, with lager and diet Coke from Greg’s mini fridge.
Greg picked up the remote, his eyes questioning if they wanted to view anything while eating.

“I can’t, Greg. It would start me up again, and I’m spent.”

Greg nodded, relief written all over his face. “We’ll have the new one to look forward to.”

“Like Christmas morning.”

“Christmas with all the rimmings.” Greg laughed until he rolled off the cushion.

My chuckled but soon was tracing the letters on his diet Coke can and didn’t respond when Greg said his name. Greg ran his hand up and down My’s calf until he tuned back in.

“All those years watching from the shadows, I never imagined anything this wonderful. I’m the one being looked after now.”

“We look after each other. It will keep on getting better, sweetheart. I promise.”

My’s face was without mask in that moment, and Greg saw hope. He watched My eat a custard tart without rationing it. They were in dressing gowns outside the bedroom. He had showered with My in a leisurely fashion the night before. He had an amazing letter that he couldn’t wait to commit to memory. There was hope.

“So if not our home movies, how about my favorite movie?”

“I’d like to see something that you enjoy, Greg.”

“I’m glad because you’ll have to work the remote. I need a refresher course from Morris. If it’s not footie, I haven’t watched it since the honeymoon.”

The gentle music and the slow, quiet dialogue of *Being There* were perfect for early morning viewing. Greg used My’s rapt attention on the film to feed him far more than he would normally eat. Thanks to Morris, there was plenty for both of them, and hunger elevated it to the list of top ten most remembered meals. Their adventure at Coeur Sain had caused Greg to have two categories of remembered meals.

My started giggling at the antics of Peter Sellers. Greg laughed because My was laughing, but the soft sofa and full stomach soon won out. His head jerked back when he came awake, but his eyes quickly closed again. He was fully aware of the sounds around him but could not keep his eyes open to watch My anymore. Soon his head was being pulled down onto a pillow, and long cool fingers began running through his unruly hair and down to rub the muscles in his neck which would normally be tight enough to bounce coins off of but were now as pliable as warm modeling clay.

He went into the state he used at work where he would appear asleep, his breathing deep and slow, but his ears fully functional. Many times, he had learned important secrets about his team, their extracurricular shenanigans, and the pet names that they had for him. One of his favorite victories as a boss was walking into a team meeting and quoting an Anderson snark verbatim. He remembered the little newt blanching, backtracking in that grating nasal tone of his, and bringing his wife’s pastries in for a week. The fact that bloody Anderson cheated on a woman who baked for him and all his colleagues used up the last of Greg’s tiny bit of patience with the man.

He wanted to hear more of Mycroft laughing as his hands worked under the collar of Greg’s dressing gown and over his upper back and shoulders. Greg had been so focused on My’s pain that he had forgot how badly he needed touch for the sake of it and not just foreplay. He grinned as My copied many of the things that Greg had done for him. It worked well since, in the
beginning, Greg always touched his partners the way that he liked to be touched.

The affection went on and on while Greg lay drowsy and content. Soon the film stopped, and My was speaking softly. Greg strained to hear and keep his breathing even.

“Thank you for being so patient with me, baby. You are my whole world, Greg. I need you, sweetheart. You are my baby. You are mine. You belong to me, sweetheart.”

My was practicing endearments. It would be interesting to see what he decided on, but for now, Greg let himself drift completely to sleep with the lullaby of My’s pretty, pretty words of love.
Mycroft challenges himself by meeting Greg and his team for a celebratory drink at the pub. Greg, overcome with pride and drink, invites Sherlock and John over for dinner and a movie at the Mystrade’s. Unparalleled awkwardness results.

Word Count c. 9888

Lots of extra credit to snarry fool, my challenge and my crush. Gender confusion with avatars, notwithstanding, she is so crushworthy. Her heroic read of monster chapters and laser commentary spurred me through my most difficult chapter to date. It's not pretty but it is finished. We can move on from here and not speak of it again. Snarry, I owe you some heavy duty topping in this fic.

Mycroft Holmes couldn’t believe that he had missed a call from his husband, but the meeting had been tense with the most delicate of manipulations. Now the week was complete, and he had a chance to hear Greg’s voice on the way home.

“We got him, love. A little from Sherlock, a lot from me, but it doesn’t matter because the evidence is all there and we are done in time for the weekend. We’re at the pub. Even his Royal Coatness is having a drink, and John is making him behave. I know you won’t come by, but wanted to invite you all the same. I’ll be home very late. Eat a proper dinner. I love you.”

For the Herculean task of teaching Mycroft Holmes how to love, Greg deserved a surprise although more Mycroft seemed like a poor gift to offer. Still, it would be interesting to see how Greg responded, and his team might give some little tidbits of how Greg talked about him when he wasn’t around. “Driver, I need to change my destination.”

Putting away his paperwork, he looked at his attire and mentally reviewed what Greg wore at the end of the work day. He took off his suit coat, waistcoat, and tie. After some consideration, he took off his shirt, rolled it into a ball and sat on it. The windows were tinted and he still had on a vest.

Then he let his mind wander to his new favorite escape, a review of all of the delicious things that Greg had said and done since their impromptu film making several weeks ago. First of all, having discovered that his husband communicated better in writing, Greg initiated a regular lunch time text. It was a flicker of love, taking only a minute, but Mycroft had benefitted immensely, being reminded of Greg’s love when he needed it most.

He also found that his anxiety was reduced by expressing his love in these tiny messages. The risk and drama were far lower and each one grew easier to send. There was the added carrot of knowing that Sherlock knew he hated texting so it felt subversive to do so particularly about love instead of work. He had memorized his favorites and used them as mantras when the doubt rolled over him as it still did many times a day. Some were Greg’s and some were his own, but all of them were lovely.
Right this minute, you are making the country better. I am proud of you. G
I love the way your hands show that you’ve worked hard all your life. M
You have beautiful eyes. I am so lucky that I get to stare into them. G
Thank you for being so patient with me. M
I want those three mile long legs wrapped around me tonight. G
Could we make a movie tonight? M

Mycroft had commissioned cameras for the bedroom the day after their ‘session’ in Greg’s study. Years of watching people for his work had created the voyeurism, and he was thankful that Greg enjoyed it rather than rejecting it as something aberrant. The exhibitionism had faded some and he was thankful since this involved other people and the potential for blackmail. Far more salient, however, was the fact that Morris had been deeply hurt by an accidental glimpse of their lovemaking. He was far too reticent to say anything, but Mycroft noticed the pain in his eyes sometimes when he served dinner. Fortunately, Greg and Morris had a growing friendship so Greg could do the fence mending, but Mycroft felt sick inside for having hurt a man from whom he had taken so much already.

Now they could film anything they liked in privacy. To his mortification, Mycroft found in reviewing some of the tapes that he was not as competent sexually as he had imagined. Yes, he always brought Greg to release, but the way Greg loved him, with ample affectionate foreplay, taking time for touch in non-traditional erotic zones, stopping and starting to build anticipation, these were techniques that Mycroft had seldom if ever used because he hadn’t cared about his partners beyond a superficial friendship at best. While Greg reassured him that quick and dirty sex was an important part of their arsenal, Mycroft knew what his favorite was now and it wasn’t riding Greg like a jockey at a race track.

He enjoyed Greg’s body, tasting it and watching Greg’s reaction to new sensations. While Greg did not enjoy his toes messed with the way Mycroft did, the back of Greg’s knees were a failsafe area. They both loved their ears licked and sucked, which was especially nice if coupled with compliments. Nipples were high on the list, and they were quite versatile. Licking, sucking, flicking, grazing, scraping, pinching, biting, rubbing. One Sunday afternoon, Mycroft had made Greg come from nipple play alone, and that was his favorite movie of Greg so far.

Perhaps best of all, there was more hugging. Most of the time, Mycroft didn’t even have to think about it. Greg would hold out his arms, and he could walk into that tight circle and know exactly where his head and hands needed to be. They hugged for its own sake; it did not always have to lead to sex. A few times in the past weeks, Mycroft had gotten cheeky enough to initiate, and Greg had walked into the hug with just as much enthusiasm. If it was the weekend or after dinner, Greg would hold on until Mycroft ended the hug; he got to take as much as he needed. Greg didn’t push him away or call him a poof or look at his watch. They were making something good together. A relationship could be built; it could continue to be negotiated periodically, but where they were right now was perfect for Mycroft. Now he was going to surprise Greg.

As they got closer to the pub, a low hum of anxiety was mounting. No, Mycroft corrected himself, anticipation. He was excited to see Greg. It had been a busy week; their time together had been limited. But Greg had finished the case, and they would have the whole weekend together. There were things to look forward to. If Greg’s friends hated him, and he would know if they did, he could make his apologies and see Greg later at home. He would give it fifteen minutes; then he could leave. He would get credit for the effort regardless of the duration of his stay. He startled when he realized that he had almost ruined it right at the beginning. “Driver, I need to
stop a block away from the pub, an alleyway if possible.”

Driver. Mycroft sighed. While he tried to learn names, he got a new driver every month for safety’s sake, and they blended together inside the uniform. Greg, on the other hand, would know the man’s favorite color, birthplace, and how he liked his eggs. Morris was thriving under Greg’s friendship as if he had just been waiting for someone to take an interest. He was thankful that Morris and Greg were helping each other make a comfortable home, but Mycroft felt inept and left out. No, Mycroft corrected himself, he had other strengths, and as Greg had told him repeatedly, if no one had offered him friendship or affection, how was he to know how to go about it. He wasn’t left out. Greg always included him, and Morris didn’t stare at him with that pinched look anymore.

The car glided to a stop. Mycroft cracked the window to see that he was in an alley as requested. Retrieving his shirt from under his ample bottom, he put it on, shuddering at the deep wrinkles. He rolled the sleeves up. Greg was waiting! He got a moist towelette and scrubbed most of the concealer off his freckles and ruffled some of the styling gel from his hair. The goal was looking like a pencil pushing mid management bureaucrat. The most important performance of his life was about to begin.

Greg’s face lit up when he caught sight of his husband. Then Greg was coming toward him and hugged him hard, the man to man kind with loud slaps on the back. It felt great. Greg took his hand to steer him toward the overflowing table of happy people, finishing up their second round. His timing had been perfect.

“I’ll not introduce you all at once,” Greg said. “But this is my husband Mycroft Holmes.”

“Hello, everybody. Congratulations. I’d like to buy a round.”

A chorus of approving voices. “I love you, Lestrade’s husband,” somebody said under cover of the crowd.

Sherlock was staring with raised eyebrow, of course, but John winked at Mycroft and raised his glass. Mycroft would trust John to manage the worst of Sherlock’s snarks. He knew from past social events that John’s wee foot could deliver a powerful blow to just the right spot on Sherlock’s shin; not to mention the other disciplinary action that might take place later behind closed doors. If he had known just how deep Sherlock’s need to submit was, he would have pressed it far sooner, as soon as Sherlock came of age in fact.

But Mycroft let Greg’s glowing smile block out the past. Under the table, Greg gave Mycroft’s knee three quick squeezes, and Mycroft put his arm along the back of Greg’s chair and squeezed his shoulder four times but not like the patented death grip of Lord Holmes. Not thinking of him tonight, no not at all. When the server came to the table with the next round, Mycroft whispered in her ear to bring three large trays of assorted pub grub. He knew that he was buying friends, but he certainly had the money to spend and these were some of the best that the Yard had to offer.

He listened attentively as they recounted the search and capture of a burgeoning serial killer and never let on that he had found the man on CCTV and planted clues and created obstacles to the murderer’s escape. It was a hobby, not his life’s work. Greg’s team still had to go out and get the bastard. Mycroft caught the few names that he wasn’t sure of and added their nicknames to his mental dossier for each of them. They were impressed with his memory; he was impressed with his own acting skills. He had been watching Greg for over five years now and so knew the people that influenced his life for better or worse.

Worse included Anderson who at that moment was sauntering up to push himself into Mycroft’s good graces. Uriah Heep, come to ply his trade of false humility. If there were ever a thing that the
Holmes' brothers agreed on, it was their mutual hatred of Anderson. The weasel held out his hand. “I’m sure Greg’s mentioned me. I’m his second in command.”

“I’m sorry, but no. If you’ll excuse me, nature calls.” Mycroft stood abruptly.

“Everything okay, love?” Greg asked under cover of the group’s response as two servers brought huge trays of pasties, chips, and other finger foods that warmed and lit the room in sharp contrast to the gray, rainy outside.

“The Gents?”

Greg got up to point it out under a melee of flashing signs, dartboards, and ancient animal heads, leaning close to be heard over the growing crowd sounds. “Thank you for being here. I am going to make it worth every dull and awkward moment when I get you into bed tonight.”

Mycroft inched and sidestepped his way to the back, through the creaking door marked Gents, and barricaded himself in one of the stalls. He had not been around so many people who knew him or expected something of him in a long time, at least not on a personal level. Pulling his heels up to rest on the seat, he wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his face in them.

Things happened too fast before he could know how to feel about them. He needed to register things in his mental scrapbook. One picture he would carry with him always was Greg’s face shining with pride when he saw his husband. Mycroft had felt more married in that moment than on his wedding day. Greg had hugged him, claiming him publicly in front of his closest friends. They wouldn’t have been able to tell, but Mycroft knew that Greg had been powerfully moved by introducing him. His voice had that little extra roughness in it, a break and a swallow.

Mycroft reviewed his behavior and found that he had only made a few mistakes. He had slipped and mentioned having an assistant, and he had mentioned going to uni although he had not specified which one. But he had also done some things right like listening carefully, looking people in the eye, and keeping the haughty sneer off his face. It was hard to blend with people that he didn’t like, but he would do far worse to make Greg proud of him.

“They all know you’re a nancy boy,” Lord Holmes whispered in his ear.

“A moldy potato found under the drain board stuck with bits of slut’s wool and pasta,” said Aunt Charlotte.

Then a squeak of the door and a piercing voice inside the room saying much the same. “He’s an ugly bloke to be tied to Lestrade. Greg could have had anybody at the Yard including half the straight men if he’d crooked his finger, but he picks old Microphone.”

“That’s MYCROF HOMES,” shouted another voice.

“What now?”

“Walter, watch my mouth,” shouted the accommodating friend of Walter. “MYCROF HOMES.”

In his bolt hole, Mycroft gagged at his name being shouted thus at Walter Shetterly, idiot savant of the evidence room.

“I thought it was a nickname. Microphone, like he was a TV presenter.”

“You just said he was ugly.”
“Well, most presenters are ugly really. Huge heads, skinny bodies. Like a toffee apple. Or maybe he’s on the radio. He speaks posh enough, but he was wearing makeup.”

“Whatsoever else you’ve got to say, you’d better say it in here. Lestrade is smitten.”

“That’s just it. Why? He’s either rich or good in bed.”

Mycroft burst from the stall. “I am rich and a damn good shag but he married me for my enormous cock.”

There was a long pause as Mycroft edged toward the door, wondering if Greg would ever forgive him, when a hand clamped on his shoulder.

Walter gave a shout of laughter. “Microphone, you old sod, you’re welcome in my evidence room any time. Have your silver fox bring you down next time you’re at the Yard.”

Handshakes for Walter and Walter’s friend who turned out to be Richard Tillotson, longsuffering assistant and computer guru to Officer Shetterly. Walter even gave Mycroft the backslap that sounded worse than it felt. He was thankful Greg had warned him about such things.

They meandered toward the table with Shetterly shouting and Richard, making apologetic gestures to Mycroft. As they seated themselves, Shetterly clapped Lestrade’s back with echoing percussion. “Your man’s alright there, Lestrade.”

“Thanks, Walt. Coming from you that means a lot.”

Mycroft could hear the respect in Lestrade’s voice and looked at Walter in a new light.

“Teach me to talk in the Gents without checking the stalls, shouting out trash with this plastic ear of mine.” He pointed at a hearing aid. “He got me good, he surely did. I was saying as how I didn’t know what you sees in him—”

Walter’s wheezing laugh was contagious and Mycroft found himself grinning.

“I says, it’s got to be he’s rich or good in bed, and he says—” Walter paused until he had Mycroft’s eye contact and the attention of the entire table as well as a fair bit of the whole pub.

Walt winked at Mycroft. “Rich or good in bed, I says and he comes hopping out of that stall and says—”

“You married me for my huge cock.”

Greg’s lager went all over the remaining pub grub, Anderson’s just delivered salad, and Sally Donovan’s ample cleavage.

Walter was telling it again, acting it out, including Mycroft’s surprise appearance. “He comes out of that stall like a cross between a giant carrot and a randy rabbit, and I felt my heart give out and thought I’d be home with Betty and playing a harp before I hit the floor.”

Greg was mopping up as best he could although he left Sally to her own devices. Anderson was leering at her where the liquid made her modest blouse cling.

“Put your eyes back in your head where they belong, Anderson,” Mycroft said, feeling quite pleased with himself.

“Oh no, sir. I wasn’t ogling. I just thought that stain might not come out. Hazard of the job you
know, analyzing stains. I’m sure your work requires some unusual skills as well.”

“It certainly does, but having your six foot nose up my ass is not one of them.”

Walter was apoplectic with laughter. When he had choked until his dentures shifted and wiped his eyes with a green polka dotted handkerchief larger than the oil cloth covering the table, he said, “Microphone, you come visit me every time you drop by the Yard. He’s a diamond, Greg.”

“I think so, more every day.”

For a minute, the whole pub disappeared and Mycroft was back on his honeymoon, standing naked before his husband in the Grecian sun. The ‘awww’ of the group brought him back.

“Pictures, please.” Many of the team had been away on holiday when Greg and Mycroft had a surprise Christmas wedding at Riddleston Hall so this was their first chance to see the couple in a social setting. When Mycroft came by the yard, he tended to have his driver pull around to the back and Greg would come down to the car. That would no longer be possible.

After mobile phones had snapped photos, the crowd’s fancy turned to another command performance. “Kiss, kiss, kiss,” they chanted.

Greg brushed his lips across Mycroft’s closed ones, and the cheering was raucous. The green polka dot hankie made another appearance. “I miss Betty,” Walter wailed, far into his cups.

“Inappropriate display,” muttered a jilted Anderson.

“Your whole life is an inappropriate display, you bloody prick,” Richard said, much to his immediate superior’s approval with a wave of the green polka dots.

“Hey now, you cannot talk to your superior that way.”

“Can and will, you cheating bastard.”

“That’s enough, kids,” Greg soothed. “Richard, get Walter on home. Here’s money for cab fare and a somewhat proper dinner of takeaway. Anderson, while I’ve got the till open, here’s money for a replacement salad although what you’re doing eating salad at a pub crawl is beyond me.”

“Get it for take away and you and your six foot nose go home to your wife. She might finally enjoy herself.”

“Walter, you won’t get the last word with him; you know that.”

Walter turned toward the couple then, and there were tears in his eyes, not of laughter or drink. “You boys treasure this time. You’ve got a late start, but Betty and I were married at eighteen and it still weren’t enough time. Microphone, you owe me a visit next week.”

Mycroft pumped the gnarled hand vigorously and felt he had earned something he’d waited a lifetime for. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Greg, well done, lad.”

He hugged Greg and to Mycroft’s delight, ended the hug with the traditional three loud pats on the back. Then he was shouting for Richard at great peril to the glassware.

Greg was looking after his team since, because of Mycroft’s generosity, some were more well oiled than usual. Mycroft enjoyed seeing Greg up close in this role instead of on film. The cold
and rain were a shock after the warmth of the pub; Sherlock’s mocking smirk was a shock after the warmth of Greg’s smile and Walter’s handshake. While Sherlock gave Mycroft the stink eye, Greg bundled some of his people into cabs and the rest went in small groups to the tube, but all were dispersed with care.

Mycroft got another reminder of how much he loved his husband when he realized that he hadn’t brought his umbrella from the limo. He was not as fond of Greg when he turned to John and Sherlock and said, “Come along home with us. We’ll get Morris to whip something up while we watch a movie. Okay, My?”

What could one say? Greg was generous and friendly; Mycroft knew he was drowning in loneliness in the empty townhouse, Mycroft’s company not nearly enough. Sherlock was spoiling to find fault with all of the ways that his older brother had behaved out of character, acted, put on a show, but perhaps it was better to get it out of the way under cover of food and drink with Greg and John present to referee.

“Morris may be out since I called to tell him I was meeting you, but we can always order something.” He wondered if Greg could hear the strain in his voice. “You call him, Greg. You’re much in favor.”

The cold easily penetrated his damp rain coat and went straight through his thin shirt. His nipples popped up, and he crossed his arms to hide them and warm himself. His hands were like ice in his armpits. Afraid of his own brother and his adolescent slings and arrows. He had changed the boy’s diapers and fed him bottles of white goo and cuddled him when he had nightmares. There was no need for this cowardice. Sherlock could say nothing tonight that he hadn’t already said a hundred times in Mycroft’s head.

John was a good fellow and would do his best to keep the peace. He had never returned Greg’s love so there was no chance of an affair. Greg said his love for John ended before they got married and Mycroft had to start trusting somewhere. If Greg’s unrequited love did resurrect itself, it had nowhere to go, and Mycroft would do what he could to earn back first place. Images of Greg holding an injured unconscious John, kissing his hair, cradling him, flashed in a montage behind Mycroft’s eyes as they often did, but now he had his own cinema verite to combat his jealousy. Greg looked at him with loving eyes in their special movies.

The car pulled up, ending the ugly spiral of bad thoughts. Stepping from the awning, Mycroft got a deluge of frigid rain down the back of his neck. He would have walked home rather than get in the car with them. He wanted to be like Sherlock, narcissistic and oblivious, and cry out that he had changed his mind, that he wanted to go home alone with his husband and they must take a cab back to Baker Street.

Greg settled in beside him and squeezed his hand. “Morris is home, not wanting to go out in the rain. He’ll start straight away and have some appetizers for us shortly after we get there.”

“He will be glad of more people to cook for, I’d imagine.”

Silence fell. Greg was beside him so he felt in one sense comforted, but he couldn’t see his husband’s eyes and for all he knew, they were raking over John’s wanton form. Mycroft clenched his fist until the nails dug in. John was wearing a shapeless jumper and a puffy coat with baggy jeans, hardly the shirtless torso and painted on leather trousers of a man whore.

“I hope Walter gets home alright. He’s not had that kind of excitement in awhile. Did him good.”

“That old windbag will be dead in six months. He’s having mini strokes.”

Mycroft actually felt the pilot light of Greg’s anger ignite.
“That old windbag saved your porcelain ass more times than you know. Do you have any idea how much of your coke was misplaced with a larger confiscation? And how it broke his heart to do so?”

“That was the man?” Mycroft couldn’t believe he’d forgot such a crucial detail.

“He said that you saved more people when you were high than the Yard saved while sober, and don’t think that was an easy admission either.”

“I didn’t know.”

“For a genius, there’s a bloody ocean of things you don’t know and yet you shoot that pretty mouth of yours off constantly. What if I came round Baker Street and said that Mrs. Hudson was a batty old tart?”

There was a crashing full stop of sound and breath. Then all four of them were giggling, and Greg having not had the chance to hear much, if any, giggling from John and Sherlock, laughed because they were and could not stop. By the time they composed themselves, the discomfort of Greg’s anger had dissipated.

Greg and John began to talk about what movie they might watch, mentioning several titles that were unknown to Mycroft and to Sherlock from the eye rolling and gusty sighs. What would it be like to be fully unscathed by someone’s anger? The man across from Sherlock, as close to a friend as he had, was hurt and angry and yelling at him minutes before and it was gone from Sherlock, washed away in the blink of an eye. Mycroft’s stomach hurt and his heart was pounding. His cheeks burned with shame. He felt scolded even though he had done nothing. Perhaps Greg could read inside his head and how in the bathroom stall prior to jumping out, Mycroft had hated Walter.

While Greg and John were talking about Monty Python (that movie would follow him everywhere, Morris’ favorite), Sherlock was observing his brother. Mycroft gripped the door handle. He wanted out of the car at any cost, away from prying eyes and social situations and expectations. Imagining himself rolling away from the car and any behind it, up on his feet and down some dark alley way, bruised and scratched, cold, tired, and hungry, but free. Greg would come after him; John would examine him and bind up his cuts; Sherlock would mock him. There was no escape.

Staring out the rain streaked window, he went into his head instead, walking through his little village and into a cottage he had built recently. Greg was there at the door, his face lighting up at the sight of his husband. He took Mycroft’s coat, heavy with rain, and hung it by the door. Pulling Mycroft into the bedroom, he got him out of his wet things and into a thick, warm dressing gown and slipper socks. Then he held him for a long time saying, “I missed you today.”

The kitchen table was laden with food, great steaming bowls of stew and fresh baked bread and a towering layer cake for afters. Mycroft had a glass of wine and a cup of Earl Grey to warm his hand. After supper while Greg did the dishes, he put Mycroft in the living room with a fresh cuppa, a book, and a crackling fire.

Instead of reading, Mycroft closed his eyes and remembered the pub and how he had sat around the table with a group of people and felt welcome and wanted. At first it was because he was Greg’s husband but then thanks to Walter, it became acceptance for his own sake, because he was funny and a good sport. Those things were true of him; they really were. He hadn’t been acting. Maybe Sherlock would observe that; he could observe nice things if he chose to. John’s love had made it possible. Mycroft was imagining Sherlock winking and raising a glass to him the way that John had done when a hand on his shoulder made him jump.
“Sorry to startle you, love, but we’re home.”

Mycroft turned to see that Sherlock and John had already exited the car. So much for Sherlock not laughing at him. He crawled from the car, his arms and legs aching with dread. Sherlock was coming into his home which thanks to Greg, had started to feel safe. He wanted to grab Greg’s hand and run them both up to the bedroom and lock them inside. The security team could come up from the basement and see Sherlock out.

They crossed the space between house and garage, the little eddy by the kitchen door adding to the chill of doom running up and down his back. But Morris was busy in the kitchen and the aroma of garlic, onion, and beef reminded Mycroft of the time Greg had taken him to Pizza Express. He would eat for comfort tonight. His waist had stayed at its optimal size for months now thanks to micro workouts before and after work and a consistent, daily sex life. Greg was always pushing for him to treat himself, and if there was ever a night that he needed a treat, it was this one.

“I arranged the library for viewing, sir,” Morris said.

“Well done, Morris. Thank you,” Mycroft said, his churning insides getting some relief that Greg’s study would remain untouched by Sherlock’s venom. If there was any safe place in the world outside Mycroft’s own head, it was the room where Greg had proven to him that he was beautiful. While the others stayed in the kitchen, Mycroft went to check on the setting, to brace himself for the evening to come.

In the library, Morris had a fire going and the small dim lamps switched on where they would not interfere with the screen. There was a time when Mycroft had entertained visiting diplomats and even had a few summit meetings at the townhouse. A viewing screen was required for business and pleasure. He had nearly forgot its presence since it was built into the molding. Morris had lowered it and connected Mycroft’s laptop to the projector, which was kept in a cupboard, unopened for use in many years. But Morris, bless him, knew every closet, cupboard, and cranny in the entire house, cleaning and polishing what never became dirty or dull. The laptop was on slideshow and random pictures of nature scenes flashed across the screen. A wide variety of dvds had been brought from upstairs and were on the cart with the projector.

While the library furniture was as antique as in the rest of the house, it was sturdy, purchased when the Diogenes Club redecorated. The long leather sofa would seat all of them, but Morris had pulled two chairs to flank the sofa, leaving options for what might be a tense group. The drink cart was in good order. Soft drinks as well as an ice bucket had been added. Mycroft wondered how Morris had done so much with such little warning. Then he decided that Morris was enjoying a new challenge to a tedious job. They would have to entertain more. He went back to the kitchen feeling lighter.

Morris had appetizers similar to pub grub waiting for them in the kitchen. Since Mycroft and Greg had let the team go first, they were quite hungry. Lunch was an occasional treat in their work day and seldom happened on Friday. Sherlock who had done his usual starvation diet during the case had eaten lustily at the pub but was still ready for more. As they filled their plates, Greg chatted easily with Morris. “Okay, Morris, reveal some of the magic. It did take us awhile to get across town, but these are tiny masterpieces. You didn’t just make these.”

“No, they are frozen. I’ve always made some ahead in case Mr. Holmes would entertain. When they get close to past it, I have them for lunch.”

“We shall just have to entertain more so that your art can be appreciated.”

Even Sherlock was silent and content for a time as they sat down at the kitchen table and ate their
fill of stuffed mushroom caps and pasties and baby quiches and wee sausages and cheese filled scones along with the omnipresent crudite and cheese with crackers.

“I'll have the main course in an hour’s time if homemade pizza will be okay for you, sirs.”

“Oh god, I can’t eat another bite,” John said. But Sherlock glared at him and they all laughed. “Sherlock will eat my share then.”

“There’s triple layer chocolate fudge cake for afters, and I’ve just got in some new coffee beans which I shall grind moments before you need your cuppa.”

“It’s a night for staying in and keeping warm,” Greg said, lifting his bottle of lager. “To a full belly.”

They echoed his toast although Sherlock just sprayed crumbs.

“Let’s take our crumbs into the library, lads. We’ve got enough time to see most of Holy Grail while we wait. Morris, once you’ve got your cooking done, come on in and watch with us or quote with us as we do.” Greg was an excellent host, enthusiastic and easy in the role.

Mycroft loaded the dvd and adjusted the picture. It was a full movie experience with the big screen. He and Greg exchanged a glance and yielded the sofa to Sherlock and John which put them eight feet apart in equally comfortable overstuffed leather chairs, but Mycroft desperately wanted to be beside Greg with an arm around his shoulders and a hand patting his leg now and then. He watched with envy as John and Sherlock did just that. John had been extra busy at the surgery, and Sherlock had worked alone for much of the week. They were reconnecting, just as he and Greg did after a case.

At first, Sherlock was still eating, tucking solidly into his third plateful. Greg and John quoted verbatim with the knights, even humming the music and putting in the sound effects of coconut horses’ hooves and clanging bells and monks’ chants. Morris’ love for the film had made it a staple of their viewing in the old days. Mycroft was surprised at how much he had retained in some long closed room of his mind. He quoted automatically, not fully present, but Greg grinned and winked, finding another reason to be proud of his best friend.

“This is belonging,” Mycroft thought as the three of them did funny voices and sang along about brave Sir Robin and made idle threats and answered riddles three. Sherlock pouted beside John, the odd man out. Mycroft was almost ashamed at how good it felt to fit when Sherlock didn’t.

Then Morris came in and leaned against the wall and it was a crowd of people who liked each other, enjoying a shared favorite. Morris looked almost happy. Mycroft knew that Greg had been working very hard, encouraging Morris to go out more, helping him choose activities each week that would get him back into the stream of life. There were calls sometimes on the house phone for him, and he wasn’t so pale. Greg had healed him, the same way he was healing Mycroft. The townhouse was no longer gloomy and dinners were happy occasions. They were almost like a family.

They paused the film when the timer in Morris’ pocket went off. He offered to serve in the library or in the dining room, but by agreement they trouped back into the cozy kitchen and the glorious smell of fresh baked pizza. Morris had done two large ones but halved each as to toppings so they all could have four different kinds. There was a Greek with feta and olives and roasted garlic cloves; a traditional pepperoni and sausage; a margherita with fresh tomato and pecorino; then a sweet pizza with ham and pineapple. While these were devoured, Morris put in a plain five cheese pizza on a thin crust and a white pizza of chicken and Alfredo sauce with mozzarella.
Greg made Morris sit down with them and celebrate his own talents. Mycroft watched Morris sit straighter as they sang the praises of his craftsmanship. “There may be some to send home with the young ones,” he said.

“Oh, I like that,” John said. “Free food so I don’t have to cook or shop tomorrow and being called young.”

There was a seven minute silence as all chewed, savoring the flavors. The appetizers had cut the desperation and they took their time. The drinks were icy cold and plentiful. Mycroft thought how Greg had created this happy time for all of them, and Mycroft’s work had provided the bounty. He wondered if Greg remembered that lovely but awkward first date and standing at the boot of the car, eating Pizza Express.

Greg lifted his bottle again, the more he drank, the more he seemed to toast things. “To first dates and plans gone awry. Is that a word, ‘awry’?”

“It is. To first dates, bad restaurants, and rescue by Pizza Express.” Mycroft clinked his Diet Coke can against Greg’s lager bottle as their eyes met, Greg’s glittering.

Sherlock raised his bottle. “To mysteries, Chinese food, and blue dressing gowns.”

John blushed and smiled. “To bad cabbies, blind bankers, and consulting detectives.”

John and Sherlock kissed, right there at the kitchen table in front of everybody. Mycroft looked quickly at Morris, knowing how awful it was to see love when you couldn’t have it. “To Morris and his amazing food and drink that has us all in our cups.”

“To Morris,” they all said heartily, each clicking a can or bottle against his.

When a surprising amount of the pizza was gone and the rest packaged for lunches or the ‘young ones’ take away, they invited Morris to come with them for the rest of Grail as well as Being There.

“Thank you kindly, lads, but I’ve got a chat scheduled with a new American friend on the internet.”

“Morris, anything we should know?” Greg’s eyes sparkled.

“Not yet but some good safe practice. I’ll have just enough time to bring in the cake and coffee, which I will put in a warmer so you can have it at your leisure. Enjoy your film.”

They took their full bellies back into the library and slumped on couch and chair. When Grail was over, they were ready for a cake break. Mycroft made sure his guests had huge slabs of Morris’ signature triple fudge layer cake with white chocolate shavings before he served Greg’s piece. He got coffee for everyone, Sherlock’s black but sweet, John’s lightened with milk to the color of his hair, Greg’s replete with milk and sugar, more of a coffee stew. Then with a shaking hand, he cut himself a slice of the cake, the same size as everyone else’s. The dark fluffy layers reminded him of freshly turned earth and the rare happy moments of his childhood spent in Cook’s kitchen. She served up love in heaping ladles and food had been his first love until Greg.

He stirred milk into his coffee, it was the thick whole milk that Morris kept just for adding to cuppas but still less of a transgression than cream. Breakfast and lunch had not happened and dinner the previous night had been a quick sandwich since Greg was working his case. Besides hadn’t Mycroft promised himself comfort? His home had been invaded without warning and he had taken it with good grace. He settled into the leather embrace of his chair and watched with shivers of delight as his fork slid through the fluff of the cake and the smooth gloss of the thick
pudding of frosting. It was coming toward his mouth, saliva pooling behind his teeth. He closed his eyes, felt the stir of an erection. Morris was that good at baking.

“Do you really want to do that, ‘My’?” Sherlock said with a dig at Greg’s pet name. He stared pointedly at Mycroft’s plate and then at his stomach, a little bloated from the salt of the pizza. It did not matter that Sherlock’s lower lip was smeared with chocolate or that his own piece had been devoured in a bulimic frenzy.

Mycroft put the plate down as if it were hot and sat back in his chair. He couldn’t look at any of them so he didn’t know until Greg spoke just how angry he was.

“I’ll thank you to shut it. You do not come in a man’s house, drink his liquor and eat his food, and then disrespect him like that. He tolerates it, but I won’t. Just because you have an eating disorder, doesn’t mean that he has to. I love his body. Keep your poison observations in your Mind Palace.”

Sherlock smirked and Greg’s fist came up like a slot machine arm. “Greg, it’s alright,” Mycroft said.

“It bloody well isn’t.” He turned back to Sherlock. “Can you behave nicely or do I need to ring for our driver?”

“He will behave if he wants his treat later tonight,” said John who couldn’t be bothered to pretend that he was talking of anything other than sex.

“Ring for the driver. He can run over me to relieve this boredom.”

“Sherlock, we have talked about this.”

Sherlock looked anxiously at John, and then over at Greg. “I’m sorry, Greg?” he said, the unfamiliar words odd for him to say and odd for the others to hear.

“Apologize to your brother and since I’m in a celebratory mood, it can stop with your being such a prat tonight, but you owe him a hell of a lot of apologies and I’ll get them all out of you one of these days.”

“Mycroft, I’m sorry. If you want dessert, you should have it.”

“Thank you, Sherlock, but I’ve lost my appetite.” Mycroft’s cheeks burned. It wasn’t Sherlock sitting there saying the right words without the feelings behind them. It was Lord Anthony Holmes, haughty and sickened by his spotty, bloated, ginger haired son. He sunk back into his chair, glad that the wings partially hid his face. His eyes stung and he wished for the hundredth time since marrying Greg that he could cry. He wouldn’t even care if Sherlock made fun of his tears; he was cut to pieces inside and he wanted someone to see that and help him.

“Greg, you said we might watch Being There,” John, ever the peace maker.

Greg glared at Sherlock one more time, and then opened the dvd case, but he fumbled with technology during the best of times. He looked over at Mycroft, clueless as to what to do with the shiny disc. Mycroft stood up and reached his hand out. Greg came over but before he gave over the dvd, he pulled his husband close. If Mycroft were capable of crying, he would have sobbed at the small comfort Greg offered, right in front of Sherlock, who disdained them both, and John, whom Greg had loved. Vindication was heady stuff.

Mycroft loaded the video and clicked all of the right places and soon the serene music of the opening scene was flooding the library in surround sound. He remembered watching the film while Greg slept and all of the words that he had said then but was still unable to say when Greg
was awake. Greg deserved to hear them. Mycroft went away for awhile to the little make believe cottage in his little make believe village where he was confident and secure in Greg’s love and he could do all kinds of wonderful things for his copper husband.

He came back to the library to find they were in the middle of the film and Greg was watching him. They exchanged a smile that warmed him to his toes. Maybe this was the purpose of social events; to share the secret of your love with a smile or a wink and to give each other promises of what was to come after the guests went home. Then he noticed Sherlock nodding and tilting toward John who had positioned a needlepoint cushion on his lap and was easing Sherlock’s head toward it. Poor Sherlock, still going without sleep during a case and then acting like a toddler when sleep deprivation caught up with him, and when the case was over, fighting sleep as a deadly enemy. He had done it all their lives.

Mycroft got up and retrieved a blanket from the bottom of the credenza. Greg’s christening of each room of the house had resulted in emergency stashes of blankets, towels, wet wipes, and lube everywhere. John smiled gratefully as Mycroft tucked the blanket all around Sherlock. John’s eyes were shining with love as he stroked his husband’s wild curls. Sherlock’s cynicism and arrogance faded when he slept, and Mycroft saw the boy that had loved him. He put out a finger and touched a curl. Other than a handshake when convention forced it, he doubted if he had touched his brother since he had left for Cambridge while Sherlock was still at home with a tutor. “He always acted out when he was exhausted; we learned to forgive so much.”

“He really is sorry,” John said. “He’s learning but it takes a long time.”

“Your love is a powerful motivation.”

“Thank you, Mycroft.”

Mycroft went and backed up the movie to the beginning of the scene he had interrupted, but he watched a far different movie in his head. Baby Sherlock, the most beautiful and brilliant child in all the land. Nine year old Sherlock, face contorted in wordless screams, as Mycroft gave him the news about their father. Eighteen year old Sherlock rigid and blue, foaming at the mouth from an overdose and Mycroft, racing against time to get him help while Rory and Morris were out in the field and also needed him. Impossible choices. Rory had died and Morris had barely survived, his spirit broken, his face scarred. The friendship twisted into a vengeful subservience, a role that Mycroft had never asked him to carry on in private. He felt like his chair would crash into the basement with the weight of his regrets. If he had left Sherlock on his own, he could have saved Rory and Morris. Sherlock wasn’t conscious anyway and would have resented Mycroft’s presence if he had known, but Mycroft saw the curly haired toddler who reached for him and he had to stay.

For the second time that night, Greg brought him back. “The movie’s over, My. You’ve gone quite far away.”

John was pulling the blanket from Sherlock and shaking his shoulder. “Come on, sweetheart. Time to go home.”

“Stop it, John,” Sherlock whined and pulled the blanket back over himself.

Nostalgia was a wonder drug because Mycroft said, “You can stay in the spare room if you like.”

“No, he’ll sleep twelve hours at least, and I have things I need to do tomorrow, and we both need our privacy for celebrating the end of the case and a free weekend.”

“I’ll walk you out then,” Greg said, getting an arm under Sherlock and lifting.
At a strange touch, Sherlock was awake and ready for a fight or a puzzle. John stroked a hand down his cheek to soothe him. “Time to go home, little boy. You’ve had a busy day.”

Although Sherlock rolled his eyes, a tiny smug smile twitched at his pretty mouth.

As John and Sherlock were busy putting on coats, Greg leaned into Mycroft and whispered, “When I come back, I expect you to be naked.”

Mycroft worked quickly, building up the library fire, pulling the sofa as near as safety permitted, piling dishes onto the credenza. Then there was nothing left but to strip which he did briskly, trying not to think about it. Without Greg’s loving gaze on him, he felt keenly aware of his flaws, but he had a stroke of inspiration. Typing a series of codes into his laptop, he called up the security feed for the room and then fed the signal through the projector. Soon his own pasty, freckled body was eight foot high on the screen. He quickly shut down the feed but took the remote with him to the sofa where he tried to strike a provocative pose but ended up feeling like a tony poster for skin cancer checks. ‘Are any of these freckles irregular? What is the difference between a freckle and a mole? What should I have my partner look for on my back? Etc.’

That idea flowed into the concept of posters for emotional issues as if they were medical issues. The tube infiltrated by posters with the Seven Warning Signs of a Failing Marriage or Spotting Bad Husbands Early or Finding Irregular Blokes: Early Detection Saves Lives. Greg’s entrance startled him for the third time that night. This daydreaming lark, perhaps ill advised.

“I’m very put out with Sherlock,” Greg announced.

“I noticed.”

Seemingly unaware of Mycroft’s blatant and requested nudity, Greg took off his socks and shoes like an old man getting ready to soak his feet. “I don’t even think he’s that big of a wanker after all he’s been through but it’s a habit. He picks at people instead of his cuticles. How someone so aware of others could not be self aware is beyond me.”

Greg was rolling his socks into balls and shoving them in the toes of his shoes, perhaps a bit of wading? Mycroft made simple and noncommittal noises because the last thing in the world he wanted in his conjugal bed or sofa was a discussion of his brother’s bad points, strike also his good points, known only to John.

Greg unbuttoned his shirt with angry jerks of his hand and threw it on the sofa. He removed his belt with such force that Mycroft’s arse clenched shut and not in an erotic way but in a trip to the woodshed sort of way. “Fuck,” Greg said, which had been the idea.

He stutter stepped over to the desk to empty his pockets of keys, cellphone, wallet, warrant card and other sundries. Then finally when Mycroft’s cock had become disinterested to the point of hiding behind his balls, Greg plopped down beside him on and said, “Hey, beautiful. Thank you for your wonderful surprise appearance. Walter was quite taken with you and he is not easy to impress.”

“I liked him.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I usually don’t like loud or bossy men.”

“Then I will ask you very nicely and quietly to come here to me so that I can kiss you properly.”

They were snogging, but it was so much more when Mycroft was naked and the door standing
He rubbed himself against Greg who was… decidedly… NOT aroused. Terror gripped Mycroft’s throat as he tried not to freeze or in any way let his body language show that he knew. Oh god, oh god, oh god. Panic, a familiar friend, rushed up and down his spine and into his lungs, taking all the air. Greg didn’t want him anymore? Greg wanted him but was crippled by finally seeing the ugliness that other people saw? Greg was ill and hadn’t told him?

Mycroft moved his focus and fingers to Greg’s nipples which were a safe bet, but he felt like he was hitting the shift keys on his computer keyboard when it locked up. Nothing was happening. More soft kisses, then Greg’s earlobes. The front of his pants stayed neatly in line. Rolling Greg over to hide the problem, he nipped at the back of Greg’s knees and up his thighs which were surprisingly small for his torso. Mycroft had attempted teasing one night, calling Greg the Birdman of Alcatraz and Colonel Sanders because he had chicken legs. Greg was not amused.

Mycroft had never read about impotence since his hypochondriacal nature meant that any illness, ailment, condition, or rash that he read about immediately manifested itself in his body. But there were pamphlets and diagrams displayed in the Ministry’s surgery, and a physical was required for all employees, no exceptions. One tended to need something to read when bent double and coughing. A very comforting list of possible causes on a poster obligingly hung twenty centimeters from the floor included work stress, exhaustion, alcohol, and age. It was easy to forget that Greg was five years older; he looked and acted far younger than Mycroft.

The end of a long week, friction within his team, two all nighters, three drinks, a certain big birthday looming. It added up. As a last resort, Mycroft pressed the remote button and gently turned Greg’s head toward the screen where Mycroft’s nipples were the size of dinner plates and his chest hairs loomed as large as climbing ropes. It was all Gulliver in Brobdingnag.

“Holy bloody hell and then some. Damn, My. That’s something to behold.”

“Too scary?”

“No, let’s watch some of our other tapes in here. We’ll make sure Morris has a chat scheduled, and there should be cake.”

“Of course.”

Greg was hard now. Mycroft could feel it through the silk, knocking on his thigh, but when he reached for his favorite toy, “No, it’s about you tonight,” Greg said, shoving his hand away and rolling onto his belly.

Afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing that might deflate his seventh wonder, he closed his eyes to his gigantic bits and bobs and let Greg have full sway. There was licking, great swaths of himself thoroughly attended to, most areas familiar with Greg’s tongue. But Greg was altogether strange this evening and Mycroft’s armpits were diligently laved.

Mycroft endured this for some time, squirming at the thought of his flop sweat during his trial by pub and his workout at lunchtime with a perfunctory reapplication of antiperspirant. He reached his limit. “Deduction!” Mycroft cried out his safe word.

Greg stopped instantly. “What is it, baby? Did I hurt you?”

“No, but I might harm you. I haven’t had a shower since early this morning and I’m positively mangy. Not your sweet mouth, not there.”

Greg cocked his head and smiled the naughty smile with his tongue behind his teeth. “I am the mummy cat and you are my little kitten and I am going to lick you clean all over.”
“Greg, it’s late and you’re tired. Tonight might be a good night for quick and dirty, especially the dirty. I exercised instead of lunch today.”

“And you smell musky and it’s good. Don’t you want to see my little pink tongue on that screen? It’s the size of your head. My pretty, pretty tongue?”

Mycroft groaned and arched so that his nipples were prominent and Greg continued the tongue bath, but only Greg snuck glances at it on screen.

He licked under Mycroft’s pecs. “Look at me, sweetheart.”

Mycroft dragged his eyes open, feeling shy and ridiculous.

“Now look up at the screen while I trace your ribs which are prominent.”

Mycroft glanced furtively at the screen and saw that Greg was right. He was seeing a torso that he knew was his, but without the head, he could see the line of ribs and some definition below that. Not as firm as in his youth, but firmer than it had been before Greg.

Greg rested his hand on Mycroft’s belly. “No one will know just how strong and trim you are. If Sherlock could see you like this, he would have to take back every fucking bit of his lies.”

So this was about Sherlock. Curiouser and curiouser. Also not conducive to where Greg wanted him to go. “He’s gone now. This is our time, Greg. Leave him at Baker Street.”

Mycroft felt the shift when Greg relaxed and became fully present in the library. This must be how it was for Greg when he escaped into his mind. It wasn’t pleasant to be on the other side of it, but he was disciplining himself to do it less and when they were alone, he could stay and damn, it was good. Whatever Greg was trying to accomplish with the licking, it was Mycroft’s duty as a husband to try.

Then Greg moved southward, tracing the trail of hair pointing toward pretty, pretty cock and pretty, pretty balls. But he stalled at the navel. Mycroft was an innie, but Greg seemed to be searching for his husband’s appendix through that small dip. Chills went up and down Mycroft’s spine and he couldn’t decide if it was arousal or disgust. His cock stayed hard, but he had experienced similar reactions at a cobra breeding farm and a royal command performance of Barry Manilow.

The tongue did not stop. They were kitty cat licks, some long and grooming, some short flicks. His cock came fully out of hiding like some of the cobras had and inched toward his belly, getting in queue to be licked next.

“You’re going to come from tongue only, no stroking, no sucking. Just my licks of love.”

It was bad porn and a weird task. Where was all the spit coming from to accomplish this quest? Mycroft wanted his bed and this odd tension and stranger Greg to be gone. “I can’t. It’s too slow.”

“We’ve done harder and faster. Leave off what you think you know,” Greg said sternly and a little too toppy.

Mycroft focused on this rare display of dominance and did his best to let go. Greg’s tongue was soft and slow, but persistent. After what seemed like hours of writhing and tingling, Mycroft felt the orgasm in the very bottom of his belly, resting on his backbone. It gurgled like an Artesian well up into his navel. He actually felt the come bubbling in his balls and flowing lazily into his cock. He made noises that he could not stop, an opera record played at the slowest speed, cellos, bassoons, and tubas. The climax lasted longer than any he had experienced before. Much to his
saliva coated surprise, Mycroft was satisfied.

Waves continued to roll over him as he tried to lift his hand to pleasure Greg. But Greg pushed him away. “Let’s just get to bed while we still can because I could sleep right here until morning and then not be able to walk for the aches and pains.”

He pulled Mycroft up and hugged him until enough of the afterglow had passed that he could feel his jelly legs. Greg had an arm firmly around his waist. Mycroft let himself be pulled upstairs and placed on the bed for a quick clean up. Then he was tucked into a bed that he thought he might never see again on this longest of days. The sheets felt amazing against his naked body and he had to concede that Greg had been right about sleeping naked. As the flush of the orgasm subsided, Mycroft felt Greg slide under the covers and pull him close. Greg’s body was warmer than any blanket. With a hot chest against his back, a strong arm around his waist, and stubble rubbing against his shoulder, Mycroft Holmes was happy and safe.
Chapter Summary

Greg confronts the possibility of losing Mycroft.

Word count c. 8805

Fanart: rusty_armour created the lovely picture of My's wedding band on a chain with Greg's St. Michael's medal

Critical Essay: Thessa Jensen reflected on Newlywed Blues with her usual wit and deep insight into all kinds of things that I had no idea I was doing. She gives me too much credit. Tessa's Thoughts

For Megan, who asked, "What can I do?" and left amazing scary hyperbolic comments that tempted me to self sabotage and end the fic prematurely. I will learn to accept praise one of these days. Not today, lol
Mycroft Holmes was dead. Greg said this sentence, trying to sink the truth of it into himself. After the film on BBC News, the long narrow shoes and the pale curved hand peeking out from a shiny black body tarp, he had known in his mind, but for his heart, he kept telling himself, *my husband is dead. I am a widower. My is not coming back.*

Anthea had phoned, her voice the fake bright that Greg had used many times with families of victims. “We need more information. Don’t lose hope. He’s under an alias; four different agencies were in on the raid. They haven’t identified the bodies yet. It’s too soon to give up.”

The lies hurt worse than the truth, every time. False hope was cruel. As the years had gone by, he started saying things like, “It doesn’t look good. Prepare yourself for the worst.”

There was more hysteria and shock initially but so much better that now and then, a family had a happy surprise instead of so many families bearing the bad news twice. And for those whose worst fear had come true, they had time to sit with it, a trial run before the crushing blow.

For three days, he had waited, training himself to think of My as dead. Not able to face an empty house, he had stayed at the Yard. It was unfortunately a quiet week with everyone catching up on paperwork. They had brought food and drink to his desk, spoken in hushed tones and averted
their eyes. His loss was terrifying to them.

Only Anderson had been his usual weasely self. Walter had come up aces with a bone creaking handshake and shouted advice that had the rest of the team cringing in a satisfying way. “That long tall wanker is a survivor, Greg. He might come through yet. But if he doesn’t, you’ll get through it, same as I did when I lost Betty. People will say all the wrong things, and you’ll hate them and you’ll eat terrible food that they bring. The day after the funeral, you’ll be alone and you’ll get drunk and cry and call a mate and go on.”

Greg treated this advice as a to do list. He couldn’t call Morris or his mum or John. He almost called Sherlock, who would be celebrating, just to have someone to yell at until the lump was blown out of his throat so he could swallow the abysmal tea Sally had made. He was sure the tin had bears in pajamas on it. This was a time for caffeine.

Suddenly unable to breathe, he announced that he was going out for proper coffee and no one offered to accompany him. Relief all around. He wanted to go some place without memories and walked a long time until he smelled coffee; mid morning a place empty except for a few students. He sat in a back booth, facing a blank wall, the kitchen and loo to his right. On autopilot, ordering a plain coffee with extra cream on the side and an orange scone that he wouldn’t end up eating.

He stared at the wall, his mind as blank, until the coffee and scone appeared in front of him. Then as the bitter coffee wiggled loose the boulder in his throat, he reviewed his last day with My. He wanted to get the memories straight to tell people at the wake, possibly the eulogy. He needed to implant them before other people’s impressions invaded and the business of dying took over—caskets and suits and plots and gravestones. His mobile was switched on; death could find him here but until then, he was going to remember My.

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He had known when he saw the news; known days before that My would have to go. It was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that he didn’t discuss with anyone. Morris raised an eyebrow when he only managed a few bites of dinner each night; My commented on how Greg wasn’t sleeping well, the thrashing and moaning obvious even in their giant bed.

The pocket of insurgents was on the border between two no-win countries, and as news stories got more specific, two things became clear. There were agents in trouble, and Sergei was coming back into their lives. Greg didn’t even need the brief email from My explaining his reasons. Sergei was firmly planted in that part of the world, his history as a drug dealer made him popular and semi famous in the worst circles, and they were My’s agents, ones he had chosen and trained personally. While Greg understood and agreed, he was still sending his husband into certain danger, and he was sick with fear, which he kept buckled down tight, praying that My’s busy mind would skip the observations for once.

Greg and Morris made that last night as comfortable as they could for him. Fog had given them the gift of this time together, but My had so many calls to make and papers to attend to that it was the idea of My in the house rather than actually being with him.

When My got home well after nine, Morris took his damp raincoat and umbrella and carried his briefcase up to the study. Greg pulled My close, breathing in his scent, trying to lock it all in, make this hug count for all time if it had to.

“Gregory, don’t cling. It will all be over in a few days, a simple misunderstanding that Sergei will clear right up.”

“I hate that bastard more than ever.”
“I know you do, but until someone else can infiltrate as deeply, I can’t retire him. Getting into inner circles takes time.”

“You don’t have to explain, My. If it were me, I’d go to get my people out.” Greg looked hard into those deep blue eyes. “I am so proud of you.”

“Doing my job, nothing to be proud of,” My said, but he smiled and brushed his hand through Greg’s hair.

“Morris and I planned it out. We’ll bring up finger food you can eat while you are working, and I’ll be watching you on camera. You can signal for anything that you need. Morris has your bag packed already. Anthea briefed us on your schedule.”

“We’re lucky that I got to come home for a few hours.”

“Can you change into something more comfortable?”

“Best to keep my battle gear on, love, for the calls that I have to make.”

“Right then. I’ll be up in a little while with a tray.”

Greg wanted to cry and scream and throw things. He wanted to beg My to stay for the sake of their marriage. Instead he watched the screen through long, lonely hours, reading his husband’s body language like a favorite story. My forced down the food that Greg had brought him. Who knew when he might eat again?

Morris made Greg sip at some soup. “No sense in your getting a migraine, Greg.”

Finally, My was stacking papers together and putting them in his briefcase. His last call was to the airport. Greg was beside him in the study when he hung up the phone. “It won’t be safe until dawn or even after.”

“Then you can get some sleep.”

“I doubt I could, Greg.”

“Come upstairs anyway. Get more comfortable. You’ve got all that time on the plane to prepare.”

“Very well.”

Greg was walking up the stairs with Mycroft Holmes, not his husband My. Mycroft was decisive and cold and closed, but Greg was thankful that Sergei had not shown up yet. At some point during his workday, Mycroft had had his hair darkened, but he hadn’t taken on the brutal, calculating power of his alter ego yet.

“If I’m doing my numbers right, we’ve got a half hour for you to wind down, three hours for you to sleep, which is optimal. One sleep cycle is enough time to be more rested but not to get groggy. Then thirty minutes for you to shower, dress and have breakfast. Yes, you will eat some bloody breakfast.”

“I can’t unwind. Every minute of delay is more torture for Stuart and god knows what they are doing to Elaine.”

“You can best help them by being healthy and well rested. You were a good boy and ate all your vegetables so now you get your dessert.” Greg slid off My’s jacket.
“I don’t think I can perform, Greg. I can’t focus.” My loosened his tie.

“Shhh. No sex, just a massage. A platonic one to help you sleep. That’s all.”

Greg knelt and took off My’s shoes and socks, caressing the long narrow feet. He soon had My down to his pants and helped him to lie on his stomach on the bed. There was oil in an electric warmer and towels and flannels.

Greg went to work immediately, knowing that time was short. Fortunately, he had a clear map of where My carried his tension and could quickly release the taut muscles. He knew that complete relaxation was impossible at such a time, but this was a better way to spend the last hours than bolt upright at a desk. He kept away from his husband’s erogenous zones as promised, and My’s responses were subdued compared to his usual enthusiasm. Greg didn’t dwell on how this might be the last time that he touched his husband intimately.

My’s breathing had slowed and deepened; his pulse was steady under Greg’s hands. Greg eased his leg over and crawled off the bed. He replaced the cap on the bottle, switched off the electric warmer, and wiped his hands. The single lamp in the room was on its lowest setting; he would leave it on. He was going to the sitting area by the window to keep watch when My turned on his side. “Greg?”

“Yes, love?”

“Hold me.”

Mycroft Holmes had left the room. Greg got back on the bed and took his husband in his arms.

“Tighter.”

A wave of terror passed over Greg as he squeezed My to the point of discomfort, but he gripped Greg back until sleep took him. Greg did not sleep but whispered ancient prayers into the darkness.

When the few sweet hours had passed, My shifted and stretched. “You were right, Greg. I needed that.”

His smile barely penetrated the cold dread in Greg’s stomach. “I’m glad,” he said, his throat dry and tight.

“I’ll have that shower now, but there’s one thing you must do for me. You won’t like it.”

“Whatever you need, sweetheart.” Was it the last time he would use that endearment? What new torment would he endure to give My an easy sendoff?

“You’ll have to keep my ring for me.” My was already twisting it off his long finger.

“But Sergei was married in Greece.” Greg held the ring in his palm but it was not warm from My’s finger; it was cold and so light as to be nothing in his hand.

“This cell may or may not be in contact with Greece. If they haven’t heard, that’s fine and if they do know about you, your alias that is, I can say that I divorced you because marriage didn’t agree with me. They will understand that Sergei could not be tied down for long.”

Greg stared at the ring and then slipped it on his pinky. It didn’t look right. “I’ll get a chain and wear it around my neck until I put it back on your finger.”
He lifted My’s hand to his and put a kiss where the ring had been.

“Only a few days, love. Then you’ll put it back.”

My walked into the loo and Greg heard the shower start. He went to the guest room and found a St. Michael’s medal of protection his mum had given him. It was on a long thin chain; he kept the medal on the chain and added My’s wedding band. St. Michael was for coppers and emergency workers but maybe he would lend a hand with My’s safety. Greg kissed them both and let them fall against his chest where his heart tried to break free of his ribs.

Back in the master bedroom, Greg sat on the bed and listened to the blood rush in his ears until My came out of the shower with a towel riding low on his hips. Greg wanted to touch him one more time, to run his hands down that furry chest and along his smooth back to cup his sweet, curvy ass. He wanted a deep, penetrating kiss and promises whispered with eyes closed.

But My gave a quick hug with the dismissive pat coming far too soon. “Love, I think I might eat one of Morris’ big breakfasts if you eat with me. Will you go down and see to it?”

Greg had been so naïve, smiling puppy naïve, and trotted down the stairs to Morris’ warm kitchen with pictures in his head of feeding My off his plate and then a lovely goodbye kiss that tasted of Earl Grey and plum jam. He was still delighting in the fact that My was willing to eat something when they heard the front door click.

Greg ran, but with a soft squeal the long black car was around the corner and he didn’t even get a last sight of it nor My of him if he had been looking back. Morris pulled him into the house. “He’s always been that way about goodbyes, Greg. I should have known. I’m sorry.”

It hurt deeply that the last touch had been one where My pushed him away. This wasn’t Tokyo. There were no texts, emails, or phone calls. Field work this deep meant that his own people didn’t even have direct contact with him. If he sent any messages back, Anthea wouldn’t say. After the appointed two day’s travel time and another two of infiltration, there were three days of not knowing; the BBC news falling silent except to say that the situation remained unchanged.

The Americans had gone storming in, of course, because there were children being held hostage. Civilian lives were lost anyway in the confusion. There in color on the screen in their bedroom, the corpses lined up and one of them in the boots that Sergei always wore with a pale hand curved on the blood soaked ground.

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The waitress tapped his shoulder and he jumped hard, knocking his mug into the little plate. There were crumbs everywhere; the scone was uneaten but not untouched.

“Didn’t mean to startle you, sir. You’ve been so far away. Drunk a full pot of our finest though. Would you maybe like some lunch?”

Greg looked at his watch. He’d lost over an hour to memories that cut and burned. He took out his wallet and handed her all of the folding money he had. “Here’s for the pot and booth rental. Thank you.”

“No, thank you.”

He could tip like that now; he was rich. He was a rich widower and he’d go back to a bedsit for the rest of his life to have My in his arms one more time. His legs shook as he walked to the Yard, and he thought he might be sick, the extra caffeine making every sound a dagger in his head.
Somehow he got through the rest of his day, clearing all the paperwork from his in box and tidying his desk like he hadn’t done in years, throwing out old receipts and dried up biros and a hundred little coffee stirrers and sugar packets made into cakes by the damp. He wouldn’t have to work here anymore if he didn’t want to.

What he would have to do is live in the townhouse because it was Morris’ home. Morris who had just begun to live again, who had a local and was getting famous for his skill at darts and the quiz, and chatted twice a week with blokes from the United States. If he said that he needed to sell the mansion, Morris would understand but it had been his home for over a third of his life, and taking care of Mycroft had been his focus and pride. Greg would need to be the object of Morris’ care for awhile as their butler friend adjusted to another crushing loss. But maybe Greg could move into the guest room and close off his study.

As he drove home, he put to rest many of the dreams he’d had for them as a couple. The holidays both summer and winter, retiring somewhere to a small country home, big enough for Morris to have his own rooms but small enough to be cozy. They would go on long walks and garden and fish and have pets, two dogs, one large and one small, a cat, and perhaps a few chickens. Just enough for breakfast eggs.

Watching My continue to heal and relax was something that Greg wanted most even if they never retired and if work kept them busy until the end. There were ways he wanted to measure the changes like less nightmares, more confidence, a more active social life. He thought about the dates that he wanted them to go on. They hadn’t been able to coordinate another one since the first, but there didn’t have to be formal activities. He wanted more time for them to sleep in or read the paper together in bed, more time for a long hot bath in the deep tub, or for reading and watching movies near the library fire.

All of that was gone from one day to the next. Much as he could be cheerful for Morris, he knew that he would never marry again. He had waited a long lonely while for My and their time together was the high point of his life. He didn’t have what it took to start over. He was weary and sick at heart and that wasn’t going to get better, not even with time. The screams inside his head might get quieter but they would never stop.

He pulled into the garage and took out the carrier bag of junk he had pulled from his office, awards and a scrapbook of clippings, a shirt that didn’t fit anymore that had hung on the back of his door for a decade. Gift mugs, one for every Christmas and birthday from his team, jokey sayings on decals that peeled off in the dishwasher. The carrier bag was ancient too, from his bottom desk drawer, and so it ripped and the mugs shattered on the concrete garage floor.

Then his mobile buzzed in his pocket, and he didn’t even check the number. He knew it was Anthea, but he was so sure of the news that it took him three tries to understand that she was saying something different. “He’s alive, Greg, held by the Americans. He couldn’t reveal his cover until they separated the prisoners. I don’t have more information because it came second hand, but he is alive and should be in friendly air space by tomorrow morning.”

Morris found him on the floor, his hands bloody from small cuts where he kept putting pieces of the broken mugs into the torn carrier bag. There was a gap in time and then he was in the kitchen with an unbroken mug in his clean hand which had a few plasters stuck on. They drank lots of herbal tea but let it steep to the dark of builder’s tea. Morris got him to quote *Holy Grail* to see how far he could get then took him to his private quarters. Greg knew how bizarre his life had become when he found himself in Morris’ sitting room, talking to strangers in a chat called “We’re Here. We’re Queer. We’re Old. We’re Bold.”

Not wanting to be the extra man he soon left Morris to it and wandered from room to room, touching things to ground himself. In the en suite, he smelled My’s soap and touched the ginger
fluff that was in his hairbrush. Then he sat on the bed and ran through the telly channels. The news gave no mention of an agent surviving and coming home, but this was black ops. After the broadcast finished and he had put out his clothes for the next day, there was nothing left to do. He patrolled, checking all of the doors and windows even though Mycroft paid people to do such things. He walked the perimeter and then did a grid search, finding nothing in the dormant grass which was more tidy than most people’s carpets.

In the kitchen, Morris was making toast and more tea. “Sit down, Greg. You are going to eat something now.”

“That tea smells like funeral flowers.”

“Would you prefer Earl Grey? Or some decaf coffee?”

“God, no. Decaf is an abomination and I might have drunk enough coffee this morning to be done with it for good.”

“Orange pekoe? Chai?”

Morris would only be patient with him so long. He wasn’t Mrs. Iceman or Mr. Greg anymore and tonight pampering would have been nice. “I’ll have chai if I can have my toast with salty butter.”

He watched Morris move about the kitchen like an orchestra conductor. Economy of motion. Beauty in presentation. Not just a stack of toast but flavored butters and jams in little dishes. Not a chai tea bag but the actual spices and steamed milk with the tea base.

“Morris, why didn’t he ring me himself?”

“They wouldn’t let him have a mobile. He’d be a prisoner.”

“But once he revealed his identity? What if he’s hurt too badly to talk? I could lose him yet.”

“He’ll have the best of treatment because they’ve made a terrible mistake. I’d like to have been a fly on the wall when he revealed his clearance level. I doubt those Yanks had ever counted that high. No offense to my lovely chat mates, of course.”

“I might lose him yet, get nothing but the shell of him back.”

“You stop that talk this instant. We take this as it comes. You want to borrow trouble get out of my kitchen. He’s coming home to us, Greg; you get that straight in your head.”

Morris’ ears were red and his hand shook, but Greg got an amazing frothy cup of chai and all the toast he could choke down. Then Morris convinced him to get My’s laptop and come back down to the sitting room where he was inducted as an honorary future member of the Gay Geezers. They played cards online and looked at the new Abercrombie and Fitch ads and shared war stories, some from an actual war and some from what it was like to be gay when the closet came to you. They were glad of a new audience and grateful to Greg for getting Morris involved in chat. Apparently, as a Brit younger than sixty, he was quite a catch and several flirty invitations were typed in throughout the evening.

As they began to sign off around midnight on the East Coast, the West Coast boys came on and when they were worn down, it was time for a shower and a good breakfast which Greg forced himself to eat under Morris’ stern gaze. “I’m going to the Yard. No cases pending so maybe I’ll give Walter a hand today. My mobile will buzz wherever I am. Will you be alright here?”

“I’ll cook and bake all of his favorites and seeing as how he was on prison food, he just might eat a few treats.”
“If we keep Sherlock away.”

Greg met with his team but there was nothing new. He had done all of his busy work the previous day so he did end up working with Walter and Richard as they continued the painstaking process of cataloguing and cross referencing cold cases. Lots of mindless double checks and digging on dusty shelves and looking at his mobile every five minutes. Finally at noon, he rang Anthea.

“Where is he? Do you have any more information?”

“He crossed into friendly airspace at half past five this morning.”

“Why the hell wasn’t I called?”

“That’s the only information I was cleared to release.”

“I don’t care how small or trivial it may seem to you, I need to know, Anthea. Bloody hell, I thought he was dead.”

“I told you that we needed more information. I’m sorry that you worried needlessly.”

“Yes, that is my biggest concern. That my worry was in vain. When does he get into London? I want to meet his plane. Are we clear on that?”

Anthea made apologetic noises that he didn’t believe for a minute.

“What terminal, A? I will blast my siren as I drive up and down London streets until I find him.”

“Greg, while he has cleared you for a great deal, you don’t have clearance for this. You’ll have to wait for him to be driven home.”

“Will he come home or will he be in some secret military hospital? How injured is he, Miss NotMyRealName?”

“His injuries are not life threatening so perhaps you could adjust your tone.”

“Why doesn’t he tell me that himself?”

“No mobiles allowed on military planes and he is having some difficulty speaking clearly.”

“But he was able to talk to you.”

“Greg, it’s still an operation, a mission until he walks in the town house. Let us do our jobs so that what he went through means something.”

“It means something to me.”

“Greg, I really must go now.”

“Anthea, I want to meet him at the door when he comes home. You call me the instant he touches down.”

Walter, whose hearing improved greatly when eavesdropping, went on a tirade about a man’s right to know where his husband was and as soon as Microphone was back, he’d best see to that proper or get a piece of Walt Shetterly’s mind even if there was none to spare. Greg had no rebuttal. They looked up routes on the computer and tried to calculate airspeed but it was a military jet and the airport was in question. Would he be taken to hospital first? Greg got used to his heart thudding in his throat, but he still jumped like a shot when his phone buzzed.
Morris didn’t even say hello. “Greg, the limo just pulled in the garage. He’s home.”

“That little bitch. She was to call me.”

“Best have someone to drive you. No point in both of you being hurt.”

“Richard will give me a ride.” The man was already reaching for his coat and keys as Greg stayed on the line with Morris. “Tell me. If he didn’t go straight to A and E, that’s a good sign, right?”

“They’ve got out a wheel chair.”

Greg was running down the corridor, thinking that he might vomit. “So he’s conscious, able to sit up by himself.”

“There he is! Bloody hell.”

“Morris? Help me.” Richard had the passenger door open and was tossing trash and umbrellas and scarves in the back. His motions seemed unnaturally slow. “I’ll sit on a pot of curry, Rich. Just get on with it. Morris, what is it?”

“His face is very bruised and swollen on one side, arm in a sling, can’t bear weight on his left ankle.”

“The bastards.”

“I need to help them. Be careful in the traffic.”

“He can call me if he wants to. Please?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

It was a nightmare run where he panted and cursed and leaned forward to try and make the car go faster and all the while, there was the pain and confusion of why he hadn’t been notified. When they finally pulled in at the townhouse, he couldn’t get the door open and his legs were leaden as he ran into the house. Morris didn’t even try to talk with him. “In your study.”

The stairs stretched endlessly and his legs shook. On the top stair, his knee gave out and he pulled himself up by the newel post. He was in the doorway of his study where Anthea seemed to be quizzing My, acting as if nothing was wrong. Greg staggered the few steps to the sofa and sank to his knees in front of a man that did not look like his husband at all. One side of his face was black with bruises, eye swollen shut, lip split. While one arm was in a sling, the hand cartoonish with sausage fingers, three fingers on the other hand were splinted, sticking out at odd angles from each other. His left foot was propped up on the coffee table, the ankle elephantine in sickly purples and yellows.

Greg drew what was meant to be a calming breath but it came out like a whimper. He willed himself to the mindset he used at crime scenes, distancing himself from the gore. My’s good eye held his, communicating apology and pain. He drew back when Greg stood and bent over him. “It’s alright, baby. I’m trying to find a place to kiss you that won’t hurt.”

My’s left ear and cheek were scratched but relatively normal in size and color. Greg braced one hand on the back of the sofa while he leaned over to cup My’s cheek and brush his lips there and then across his eyelid, the spikey lashes tickling. “Thank God, you’re safe,” his voice breaking and he didn’t care.

He would be strong for My, but it wouldn’t be with nonchalance. Mycroft Holmes needed to
know how much he was valued as a person, not just an agent. As Greg walked around the coffee
table and then sat down on it to be facing My, he saw Anthea still there, calmly texting. Rage
nearly choked him. “I need you out of my house now. Get John Watson here if you have to use a
helicopter.”

“He’s already been treated.”

“I don’t care. Get John here without Sherlock, and leave my house while you do it.”

My’s eyebrow jutted high, but then he winced as his bad eye mirrored the motion.

“She didn’t call me or I would have met your plane. I wanted to be with you the minute you
landed.”

Greg glared at Anthea until she retreated. He was gratified to hear her say, “May I speak to Dr.
Watson please?” Even more gratified by the fading sound of her heels clicking on the wooden
steps.

My was making sounds, clearly words but unintelligible because of his injured lip.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I can’t understand. We can talk later.”

Mycroft tapped Greg’s left hand with his splinted fingers.

“Ring?”

Mycroft nodded, wincing again as every motion seemed to cause him pain.

“Your fingers are still too swollen, but you can wear it around your neck like I’ve been doing.”
Greg took the chain out from under his shirt and very slowly eased it over My’s head until the ring
and the medal lay against the hideous military shirt he was wearing. My pressed the chain to his
chest and sat back. He stuck out his tongue so Greg could see the row of black stitches all the way
across the widest part.

“We’ll get you some iced lollies to suck on and take that swelling down. You’ll get to eat
whatever you want for a few days.”

Tears welled in Greg’s eyes and one slipped down to drip off his chin, but My’s head lolled
against the back of the sofa so he didn’t see. Greg sat and counted breaths until Morris came with
a tall glass on a tray. “It’s a protein shake. He refused his pain pills until you got here, but he’ll
have to have them. They are too strong for an empty stomach.”

In spite of the swelling and the pain, My’s jaw clenched and his chin lifted in a stubborn refusal to
take in a highly caloric beverage.

“Listen, love. You have to eat to get well. I promise that you are going to lose weight on a liquid
diet, and I doubt you’ve eaten much while you’ve been gone.”

Greg held the straw to My’s lips and he drank obediently, but Greg could see that shaping his lips
around the straw was painful and difficult. There was a spoon on the tray. Morris really did think
of everything. “No worries. I’ll feed you. Open like the good boy that you are.”
My took the spoonfuls that Greg trickled into his mouth. His eyes were closed and his throat
worked hard at swallowing. It was not surprising that he only managed a third before he leaned
back, exhausted.

“Good effort. Now your reward.”
Greg got water from his mini fridge and a heavy bottomed glass that he kept for whiskey and scotch. He put the pill on My’s tongue and then held the glass as his husband labored over the simple task of sipping water and swallowing. He waited five minutes before administering the second pill. He got up to move the tray to the desk for Morris to retrieve later. John would be arriving soon and the exam would go better now that My had some pain relief moving into his system.

My’s good eye went wide as he stood up. “No, stay.”

“Oh, you better believe I’m staying. It will be a long time before I can let you out of my sight again.”

My slowly moved his hand down and tried to point at the sofa.

“I’m afraid I’ll hurt you.”

The splinted fingers gestured more strongly. Greg squeezed into the small space between the arm of the sofa and My’s good side. “There. You lean against me best you can and my arm will be along the headrest.”

My sighed deeply as he eased himself against Greg. He slid the splints under Greg’s hand and lifted it to his lips. It was the most heartbreaking kiss that Greg had ever received. It healed a lot of his hurt that no one had notified him of the landing. When My’s tongue was better, he would explain and Greg was hoping that heads would roll. Changes did need to be made in the protocol for field agents’ families, but Greg also hoped that My would never go out again. It was a fool’s paradise, but one that could be true for at least six weeks. These were long term injuries.

They just sat. My’s body grew heavier against his husband’s as the pills did their work. When John came, Greg looked at him as at an angel. “I thought he was dead,” Greg said, his voice breaking yet again.

John was all business and that helped. “Let’s start with your ankle, Mycroft. It looks the worst. I’ll be as careful as I can.”

John sat on the coffee table and lifted My’s ankle into his lap. “I’m sure you’ve been through this with the army doctor. I have to check for range of motion.”

The soft grunt of pain from My was a sharp gasp in Greg’s throat. “Be careful, John.”

John paused, lightly rubbing My’s toes as the injured man, panted for breath. “Greg, this will be easier on him if you aren’t hovering. I’ll give you all the results when I’m finished.”

“Go. It’s okay,” My whispered.

Greg sat on the stairs for awhile and listened, but John’s easy voice punctuated by moans and cries was unbearable. He went in search of Morris.

Morris looked up expectantly from his cutting board. “What can I do?”

“Nothing just now. John’s with him and sent me away.”

“Better for both of you.”

Greg walked over and filled the kettle at the sink and switched it on. His hands were shaking but then he’d had so much caffeine. He went to the cupboard for a mug, noticing that he had the bright yellow one of the breakfast set. It hurt his eyes. Then he watched as it slipped from his hand
and shattered on the tile floor.

Morris was beside him with a hand on his shoulder. “I have always hated that bloody mug. Too cheerful.”

“That’s all I seem to get done, breaking mugs.” He meant to laugh so when it came out as a rickety sob, he didn’t know what to do. His body was jerking and he couldn’t breathe.

“Let it all out, lad,” Morris said, pulling Greg close.

For a long time, all Greg could do was sob, clutching Morris’ shirt in a shaking fist. Then he began to appreciate the iron grip around his waist and the back of his head. It had been so long since he had been held with confidence. Other than his mum, he doubted anyone had held him so tight. He felt empty and couldn’t let go. “I’m sorry.”

“Better out than in, I say. You’ve had more than a week of torment, Greg. That shock and grief has to come out.”

With a final firm pat, Morris handed him a paper towel and Greg thought of that time weeks ago when he had been comforting Morris. “There’s nothing I can do. He’s in all this pain, and I can’t stop it.”

“Being with him. Talking to him. Even feeding him. He’s never had that personal care before other than me, and I’m well paid for it. Loving him, it’s a lot and it’s enough.”

Greg felt another wave of grief shoot through him. This one was quieter but he still ended up with wet cheeks and mild discomfort.

Morris was unruffled. “You sit. I’ve got a sandwich for you. You’ll have to watch yourself. Sleep when he does and keep up with your meals; otherwise I’ll have two patients.”

The bread was cardboard in his mouth, foreign and invasive, but flavorless. He chewed and swallowed out of politeness and duty, his mind upstairs where the pain was. Morris moved about with his usual grace, preparing liquids and soft foods for My’s convalescence as if it were routine. Perhaps it had been before Greg’s arrival; back in the old days when Rory was alive. Some part of Greg was thankful to be arriving at the second act when things weren’t as hectic. Then he smiled remembering their courtship via espionage.

They had time to make more memories. Every dream Greg had given up in the past week was within his grasp again. He was relieved to finish the last bite of his sandwich which took a great deal of chewing and copious sips of tea. Then he buried his face in his hands and focused on breathing in and out.

Another hand on his shoulder, another steady man speaking wisdom. “He’ll be fine, Greg, sooner than you think. English roses bruise easily; both the Holmes boys have that fair skin. Makes it look worse than it is.”

“I should go to him.” Greg felt weepy at the thought of My alone and in pain.

“Sit still. I gave him something a little stronger than that army issue shite. Helped him to stretch out on the sofa. He’ll be out for hours and we’ll only talk a few minutes.”

“What’s the inventory?”

“The ankle is cracked, possibly a chip in there as well. Easily misdiagnosed as a sprain especially in someone that has such a high pain threshold. Deep bruising everywhere. Ribs cracked as well.
But they’ve been wrapped. The sling you’ve seen, both the shoulder and wrist on that side have been badly wrenched. Prisoner in handcuffs trips. Translation, is tripped. They drag him up by the arm.”

“I’m so glad we’ve got you, John. I know a bit about prisoner accidents, but I’ve not seen anything like this.”

“Soldiers get quite wound up after a raid, especially where women and children are killed. He was cuffed and couldn’t protect himself when he fell. Failing to get up is considered resisting which allows them to take a firmer hand. But nothing that breaks bones which can be shown on X-rays as evidence.”

“What do we do about his ankle?”

“Come by the surgery tomorrow. I’ll get a full series; check the ribs and the shoulder just to be sure. I also want to make sure the swelling goes down from the bump on his head. He’s got a few stitches back there. Could be concussion so watch for a change in his pupil size and any altered behavior like confusion or vomiting is also indicative. Ordinarily slurred speech is also a symptom but with the stitches in his tongue…”

“God, he’s so broken. I can’t even touch him without making it worse.”

“The touch is what he needs most. He’ll be hurting either way.”

Greg’s mind was overwhelmed with all the things that might go wrong. He’d had most of those injuries at some point in his career, but one or two at a time. This collection of wounds was all encompassing. He wanted John to stay. It was the odd feeling of John being the grown up and if he left, there wouldn’t be any safety.

John sat down at the table and took Greg’s hand. “I know you’re feeling overwhelmed right now.”

“You’ve got to stop learning from Sherlock. This deducing stuff is an invasion of privacy.”

John smiled although it didn’t reach his eyes. “I don’t need to observe to imagine how I’d feel if my husband were that badly beaten. But he will get better every day, I promise. Tonight will be the worst, but you can manage it. Ring me with questions, and get into the surgery tomorrow as early as possible.”

Greg walked John to the long black car, wanting to fall to his knees and beg him to stay. He wouldn’t even ask John to keep watch; he could sleep in the guest room while Greg watched over My, but there would be someone in the house who knew how to relieve pain. John read his mind again.

“I’d stay if I could, Greg, but I haven’t slept in three days and I’ve got a full day of appointments scheduled for tomorrow. Sherlock has a racking cough, likely bronchitis again and I’ve got to pick up his medicine at the chemist’s. I will come if it gets bad, but Mycroft’s not in danger. Terrible pain but not life threatening.”

Big girl’s blouse that he was, Greg reached out for a hug and John obliged. Then he looked into Greg’s eyes and said firmly, “You will both get through this.”

Greg trudged into the house on weak legs. He couldn’t bear to watch the car disappear at the turn. It was hope driving away.

Morris was wiping down the worktops, his final bedtime ritual. “I’ll have the house phone
switched on by the bed. You call me when he needs his next dose, and I’ll bring food up. We can also shift him with help from the boys downstairs.”

“He wanted to stay put.”

“Maybe later then. You’ll sort it out.”

He wanted to ask Morris to come up to the study and sit with him, but he had been enough of a coward earlier. He didn’t want to use up all his tickets when things might get so much worse later. The stairs took forever, and he again had to use the banister to pull himself up.

John had turned off all the lights except the desk lamp. The room was dim and quiet, and helped Greg to calm himself. Mycroft lay on the sofa, his good side pressed to the back so that his leg could be elevated without danger of slipping off. His breathing was slow and steady and where his features weren’t swollen, Greg could see that he was more relaxed.

Sinking to the floor, Greg sat with his head resting on the seat cushion. He slowed his breathing to match My’s. Not wanting to disturb pain free rest, he was reluctant to touch his husband but finally his need overcame his concerns and he hooked his finger in the waistband of My’s army issue trousers so his fingertip brushed bare skin. Connected this way, if he dozed, he would be awakened by the slightest movement.

In a half sleep where he heard everything, Greg was instantly aware when the nightmare started. Whispey pleadings and twitches that tugged at Greg’s finger. He didn’t want to wait to be sure it was a nightmare; My didn’t need any kind of pain that he could be spared. But how to wake him?

There was just that small bit of his face and ear that had survived without bruising. Greg knelt and moved closer, keeping himself braced on one arm so that leaning over didn’t touch My’s shoulder or wrist or ribs or battered face. “Wake up, love. You’re having a nightmare.”

He repeated the words, increasing the volume, as he cupped My’s face and stroked his fingers across the freckled cheek. He’d been in the sun over there at some point, and when he was better, he would be furious that more freckles had appeared. The pills were making it difficult for him to wake up. Greg raised his voice. “Mycroft, come on now. Wake up. You don’t want to hurt yourself thrashing about.”

My snapped to wakefulness, his whole body jerking. His eyes were wild and his ragged breaths tore at Greg’s throat. It was a panic attack triggered by events in My’s nightmare.

“Look at me, baby. Breathe with me, okay?” Greg willed his breathing to slow down. He counted aloud and continued to stroke My’s cheek with his shaking fingers.

As soon as My’s breath came back enough for speech, he begged, “Hold me. Hold me, Greg.”

“I’ll hurt you, love.”

My repeated his plea, and finally Greg saw that there was no other way. A different pain needed to be soothed. He sat on the edge of the couch and slid his hands under My to pull him up. My helped as best he could, wrapping his good arm around Greg’s back.

“More, more.”

There was something childlike in the few garbled words that My could squeeze out from his swollen lips and tongue. A brilliant diplomat and public speaker reduced to basics. Mycroft Holmes distilled to his most primal need which was to be held by his husband.
“I’ve got you, baby. You’re home and it’s all over.”

There was a low keening that buzzed down Greg’s shoulder into his gut. Without tears for a release, My was singing his pain. Greg wanted to rub his back or stroke his hair but any motion would create further pain so he just held tight and repeated the words as a mantra, for himself and for My. “It’s all over now, baby. All over.”

Finally, My lay quiet in Greg’s arms, soaked in sweat and panting with the pain that sudden movement had stirred. With the adrenaline of nightmare and panic attack fading, his endurance had gone too. Greg eased him back against his arm so that he could gage My’s condition better. His eyes were closed and his lips trembled. Greg wiped the drops of sweat away.

My strained up at him and Greg understood that he wanted a kiss. He kissed the freckled cheek but My turned his head, wanting a proper kiss. Greg gingerly brushed his lips across My’s cracked ones. It hurt them both. My whimpered. A nightmare had done what the pain couldn’t—made him cry out.

“Thought I ne’er see you again.”

“I know. Me too.”

Greg could feel the fever soaking through My’s stiff, heavy military clothes. He was sure in that remote area that they had given him the best they had, but it was time to make him more comfortable in his own soft clothes. “I’m going to call for Morris. We’ll get you moved upstairs and get these bloody soldier clothes off and give you a nice sponge bath. Then we’ll have a midnight snack, and there’s room for both of us to sleep on the big bed. All right, My?”

“Okay.”

Morris worked quickly and the extra men on surveillance crew moved My to the master bedroom with a minimum of jostling. Then Morris brought up his best kitchen scissors that could cut through bone and they made quick work of the thick uniform. When My was down to his army issue pants, Greg dabbed at his battered body with a cold cloth, and there were sounds of relief instead of pain. Greg kept back the sounds of shock and fear that were in his own mouth. Bruises everywhere in all colors, the freckles obscured by black and purple and some bruises older that were fading to green.

Bruises everywhere and a thought pounded through Greg, leaving him with bile rising into his throat. “My, did they touch you?”

He couldn’t be more specific, but My hooked his good thumb in the waistband of his pants and pulled down so Greg could see that everything there was intact and without bruises. “Still pretty,” My said.

Greg had to catch his breath. “I don’t think I’m ready for jokes yet.”

Morris came in just then with cream of chicken soup and Diet Coke. My was able to eat more than he had earlier and even a few bites of custard for dessert. He took the next round of pills without protest and was satisfyingly muzzy in minutes. Whatever it was that John had left, Greg wanted some too.

He had promised that he would get in the big bed with My, but he found himself afraid. He stalled by calling Morris back to get the tray. But there butler friend was no fool. “You get in that bed. He’s the same man you married. A little different color for awhile, but the very same.”

Greg shucked down to his pants and eased himself into the bed as if it were an unheated
swimming pool. With his head on the pillow, he could only see My’s profile so that he looked almost normal. He tried to block out the constant neon images of the corpse with the long pale hand and the bruises and the gasps of pain and the shattering ceramics and his own ragged sobs against Morris’ shoulder. This is what they didn’t show in the action movies. When good had triumphed over evil, good went home and had weeks of suffering, trying to repair body and soul.

Greg had always plunged into any job that needed doing with confidence that he might not be the smartest or strongest but he bloody well tried the hardest. But here was a task that he felt completely ill suited for, untrained and inadequate, yet everybody else seemed to think that he could nurse My. He wanted advice and support and encouragement and reassurance, but he found that those were things he gave, not things he ever received.

How long had he been running on empty? He wanted comfort in his grief and fear, but the person who had committed to give him those things was injured and would be for some time. If he was honest with himself though, My wasn’t up to the task when he was whole and well. If Greg needed something from My, he had to ask for it and then teach the man how to do it. Greg was weary and sore in the big bed and he didn’t want to be the teacher. He wanted strong arms around him and somebody else to drive for awhile. He wanted someone else’s strength so desperately that it ached.

My stirred and rolled toward Greg, putting his bad arm across Greg’s chest and hooking his good leg between Greg’s. Greg risked a very light petting of the baby fine hair as My nuzzled into his chest. “Mmm. Greg. Safe.”

“That’s right, baby. You’re safe now.”

Greg was glad that he could be My’s safe place. He really was. He had made vows promising to be that for always. My had made promises too and Greg would accept that whatever he got was My’s absolute best. Greg would make do. He had faced the world without My for a few days and whatever My could give was preferable to being alone. Having made this decision with full determination, he was furious with himself when the tears of weakness coursed down his cheeks. He had been in training before. He would get stronger. My had risked his life; Greg had to be at least that brave.
Chapter Summary

As My recovers from his injuries, Greg experiences many conflicting emotions.

Word count c. 9967

Fanart: rusty armour has created this lovely picture of My's wedding band on a chain with Greg's St. Michael's medal "Safekeeping"

Somehow Greg made it through that first night. My woke with another nightmare shortly before
time for the next dose of pain medicine. Morris seemed to sense it from his little nest by the kitchen and was there without a summons, bearing another protein shake, some broth, and a strawberry jelly. They lifted My to a seated position against the headboard. He groggily took whatever Greg loaded on the spoon and when he had enough to coat his stomach, said the word ‘pill’ and took those eagerly.

Greg had a few hours of quiet to visit all his fears before dawn brightened the room, and they struggled to find something My could wear with the least amount of bending and pulling injured limbs. Breakfast was soft egg and oatmeal with coffee, juice, and more pills. Morris taught Greg how to position a bedpan, a lesson he did not want. He retched quietly when he emptied it.

The security team carried My to the wheelchair on ground level and then transferred him from wheelchair to limo. Everything moved at a snail’s pace until Greg wanted to scream.

In the car, My settled against his shoulder. “Love,” he said and then slept.

Greg was only partially relieved to turn My over at John’s surgery. Other people, medical people were in charge, but My was very clingy. Greg thought about mere days before when My had pushed away hugs, saying, “Don’t cling, Greg.”

He imagined a scenario where he pushed away My’s broken body and said, “Don’t cling, My. You’ll be better in a few days.”

He felt nauseous but disinfectant always hit him that way. He had to step out for the X rays and leaned against the wall which was cool against his back. Then they were in a room, My in a wheelchair rather than on a gurney or the exam table. After some time, John came in, lips pressed together. Greg knew that look as righteous anger.

“That wrist is dislocated rather than sprained. His ankle’s cracked in two places as well as a chip hanging off. The bastards. Cover their asses first. Motherfucking pricks.” This he addressed to the Xrays and then turned to My with a tired smile.

Greg had the treat of hearing My’s stifled scream as John put the bones right. He applied his vows in what was most definitely ‘for worse’ as he and the driver had to get My into the car where he panted in strangled breaths, his face gray with shock. John had been gentle and pushed the limits on how much pain medicine one thin person should have, but My’s body still shook and twitched with pain, the overload of too many injuries. My’s eyes remained closed and Greg had no idea if he was sleeping or unconscious.

Anthea was in the driveway when they returned to the townhouse. Greg wanted to wipe the smirk off her by grinding her face into the gravel until she cried out and finally, finally showed some human emotion other than smug. When she introduced him to the private male nurse she had hired, he wanted to kiss her. Lars was 6’4 and resembled a small shed. He lifted My into his arms and carried him into the house as if it were commonplace.

Lars was not a free pass however. My grew restless and panicky if he didn’t have Greg in his sightline. He would only eat if Greg fed him, and he only slept if he could feel Greg near him. Lars, the great Dane, sat his mountainous self in one of the chairs near the window and watched with an unblinking stare. Greg did not enjoy this aspect of voyeurism nearly as much as the unseen audience behind a security camera. He interpreted Lars’ silence as judgment. It was no reflection on Lars’ manhood to wipe another man’s ass. He did everything quickly and easily even the bedpan so instead of fear, Greg now had guilt and failure to contend with. A glacial glare pinned him whenever My had a nightmare. A raised eyebrow judged him whenever he dozed. He was living out his clumsiest self in front of a superhero.
The night nurse was another blow to Greg’s ego. Jack wasn’t massive but he was stocky like a little bulldog and clever as hell about changing soiled sheets with My in the bed, keeping up a soft chatter about his hugely pregnant wife and their two little dogs and their plans for the baby so that My was distracted from potential humiliation. Jack had a ready smile and might have become a friend to Greg if his wife Sophie hadn’t gone into labor a month early.

They had only enjoyed Jack’s soothing presence for two nights when he was taken from them by a little baby in a hurry. Greg wondered if he would be taken straight to hell for wishing a baby ill. Anthea did her best but there was no nurse to be found of any size or deportment at a moment’s notice even if they waived security requirements. Lars was already working twelve hour shifts which pushed the bounds of his contract and risked his own health. (as if the rocks, sea and sky had health risks) The agency apologized profoundly and promised that a new nurse to their exact specifications would be right on time the next evening if they could just muddle through for one night.

Just one night. Twelve hours more like, dark, lonely, pain filled hours. Greg’s hand shook as he put down his mobile. “Well, then, alone at last,” he said to My, trying to make a joke of it but My’s raised eyebrow told him that the panic was obvious and mutual.

Life had separated into four hour increments. Some nasty liquid, pills, fitful sleep for My, staring at the ceiling for Greg. The nasty liquid for their first shift alone was more cream of chicken soup. My never ate creamed soup so he was enjoying it and ate a full serving. Since he had already started to look gaunt as the swelling subsided, Greg was glad. There was more custard too, another forbidden treat. It had that eggy sulfur scent to it that made Greg think of a certain fart that had turned the tide for them.

Morris came for the tray and Greg wanted to chain him to the bed. He hoped My’s powers of observations were dulled by the pills because it didn’t take a detective to know that Greg was scared out of his mind and clueless about everything, having forgotten what little he’d been taught by Jack and granite Lars.

But My gingerly settled himself in the crook of Greg’s arm and nuzzled a bit, sighing contentedly. He was on the mend. There were still too many nightmares which mainly seemed to center on losing his balls. Even Lars had finally found the best way to comfort My after one of these terrors was to grip his balls firmly. My needed to know they were still there and on one awkward occasion, needed to reassure himself that Greg’s were still there. A narrative horror awaited them when My could speak easily again.

Greg willed himself to breathe the slow, steady breaths of the heavily medicated. Sanity returned in little memories. He had been this afraid before and had risen above. He recalled Sherlock in the worst of withdrawals, vomiting steadily for hours, his roiling stomach not even tolerating sips of water. The kid had cried but was so dehydrated that no tears would come. Greg had held him and talked him through the long night and wiped the bile from his shoulder when Sherlock had been too weak to lean over the toilet. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Greg had been watched on security camera by one Mycroft Holmes who dreamed of having such care.

And hadn’t he helped his husband with that killer migraine after his Tokyo trip? That was pain and pills and risk of vomit, but it hadn’t been scary. He was proud that he knew what to do, and My had thrived on the comfort. Expertise wasn’t the key anyway; it was love. My needed his love.

Greg sunk into peaceful sleep for the first time in ten days. He was out just long enough to wake in a complete muddle having dreamed that he was back in his flat with Sherlock cuddled against him, empty of drugs and finally at peace. There had been a sound, someone crying out. Greg jumped up and ran…into the wall. He was not in his flat.
He felt for a lamp in the darkness and knocked one off the nightstand. The shade was crushed when he picked it up but the switch worked. The light blinded him and he stood in the whirling room trying to remember. He was in the townhouse and married to Sherlock’s brother who had been injured and needed help for everything. A blind feel of the bedclothes revealed an empty bed. Where could My have got to on his own?

Greg ran toward the loo, catching his toe on the foot post of the bed. He was still spewing curses when he was overpowered by the reek of cream of chicken once removed. He stopped short. My was clutching the basin with his good arm, trying to keep his weight off his ankle. There was a puddle at his feet.

For a few seconds, he was paralyzed. He didn’t want to see his husband this way. It would change them forever. Then he didn’t have to think at all. “Baby, I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you wake me?”

He got his arm under My’s knees and carried him the few steps to the toilet, pulling down the soiled pants and tossing them in the waste basket. There were gurglings and waves of stench. My’s face was firmly downcast, his body trembling. Greg wanted to vomit and cry and perhaps sterilize himself.

My wrapped his arms around himself in misery, and they both waited it out. Finally there had been a long pause and Greg asked, “Done?”

My repeated the word in a choked voice.

“Let’s get you into the bath then. I’ll do all the work. We’ll have you tidy in two shakes.”

I’m bleeding Mary Poppins, Greg thought, but he soldiered on, carrying My over and positioning him on the granite seat of the shower. He was sad that My wouldn’t look at him but perhaps it was best that they both dissociate for this task. Maybe My was in his little mind village. He hoped it brought comfort.

The detachable shower head was a godsend. Gentle at first, he finally opted for speed and moved My’s legs around as needed, a little like diapering a baby, a little like preparing a chicken for roasting although Greg would not be eating chicken again for years. He cast his mind back to babysitting his nieces and nephews and eased My down so that his chest was resting on his knees and sure enough, the mess had gone up his back. More hosing of pale bruised skin, livid under the harsh lights bouncing off tile and polished granite.

He rested one hand on My’s back and rinsed off the bench and the shower floor. Then he squirited half a bottle of shower gel, which cost two pounds per ounce, all over My. He used the softer bath sponge but was sure it still smarted; nonetheless, in the same situation, he would want a little sting that said ‘well scrubbed.’ He had to get at all the wrinkly bits too which was not as fun as it might have been. The grand irony of a shower with My, which was rare, and it was convalescent instead of sexy.

“Well you be okay for a minute, love? I need to check the bed.”

My nodded, arms still tight around himself, head down. He must have felt as if the humiliation would never end. The sheets were clean and dry so one less task. Greg folded a top sheet into a thick pad and positioned it on the bed. Back in the shower, he patted My down with a towel and then wrapped it around his waist in lieu of pants. One more carry from shower to bed with My stiff as a board but not in a good way.
It was time for My’s pills and Greg called down to tell Morris not to bring any snack up. They would risk upset stomach over another tidal wave of chicken surprise. My took them from Greg with eyes tightly shut. He took the water himself, using his splinted fingers in a unit opposite his thumb. If a little dribbled, it was a drop in the ocean at that point.

Once My was tucked under the duvet, Greg was back to the chipper talk. “I just need to tidy up in the bath. Won’t be a minute, sweetheart.”

Greg grabbed flannels, towels, shower sponge, and finally his own pants and with little regret his watch, the leather band not worth considering, and bundled them all into the wastebasket which he put outside their bedroom as far from their door as possible. He would take it out and burn it as soon as there was someone else to sit with My.

He took a three minute shower, getting the water hot to the point of scalding. Sloughing off the top two layers of skin from burns could only be of the good. The bottle of shower gel was empty and the loofah was in pieces from his extreme exfoliation. He bundled his flannel and towel and added them to the growing collection in the hall and knotted one of the remaining clean towels around his middle.

My had been on his own for less than ten minutes, but he had curled in on himself as best he could with his injuries. His arm was over his eyes and he looked like a bundle of sticks from an aggressive pruning. Greg’s heart lurched. How very miserable for a perfectionist to be exposed in such a way. The embarrassment would have to be addressed immediately or scars would remain.

Greg lay down and prayed for another miracle, wondering if he’d used up all of his tickets. Since My was doing his ancient clutch-the-edge-of-the-bed ritual, Greg was behind him. He could see where My’s jutting shoulder blades had been slammed against something, creating contact bruises at the high points, but he also saw My’s thick curls, luxuriant against his long neck. He had missed his bi-monthly grooming appointment while in captivity and skipping a haircut and shave made two less procedures for him to undergo while he was recuperating.

He stroked fingers along My’s equally soft beard, knowing it was a chance of a lifetime to enjoy facial hair on his husband with longish hair. Funny how it was thinning on top, but thick and lush in the back where nobody saw. Without product, it was silky and wrapped around his fingers. He lifted it to kiss the back of My’s neck where the tension hummed against his lips.

He slid one arm up to rest his hand over My’s heart, the beat pounding into his palm, hard and erratic. My trapped Greg’s wrist between his splinted fingers and thumb with a surprisingly strong grip. This was a good sign if Greg could find the right spin. He could talk them past the embarrassment, but humor wouldn’t work this time. A fart offended dignity and was all about pride. Shitting yourself wounded masculinity and self esteem down to the core, and My had only started to solidify his confidence that Greg found him attractive.

Greg unstuck his lips from his teeth, swallowed hard, and began a story. “Do you remember when you found me in that waterfront dive at Port Douglas?”

A shaky exhalation from My, but an acknowledgement, then a sigh as Greg begin petting at the soft hair that covered My’s heart. A kiss to the shoulder, and then he continued. “I’ve had love and approval all my life. Only son with two older sisters. Huge extended family. But in that
moment, I was completely alone. You saw me piss drunk, in need of a shower, and chin deep in self pity.

He felt My change from suffering to listening, his body shifting down one gear, from complete panic to potential survival. Greg risked rubbing his thumb over My’s nipple and was relieved when another sigh broke forth. My wasn’t the only one being comforted by soft words and slow touch.

“I was in crisis, love. Lost. If you hadn’t come along when you did, I might have died there. Don’t have the stomach for suicide, but I would have picked fights until somebody beat or stabbed me to death. You saved me.”

My wiggled a bit and Greg started leisurely circles, catching taut belly and nipples with each pass, his fingers tangling in the chain My refused to take off. The wedding band and the medal were cool against Greg’s palm and made a nice contrast to skin and hair. The world had narrowed to their two warm bodies and Greg’s voice, painting pictures in the darkness. “I had all that love thrown back in my face. If John didn’t want me, nobody ever would. God, I felt so ugly.”

My nodded, and Greg leaned up to rub his nose in the gold and copper of his husband’s beard. His lips tingled against the baby fine hair. “You wanted me. You took care of me even when I was rude. You gave me your posh room and made sure I was fed. Nobody had looked after me like that since my mum.”

Greg started as the cool metal of finger splints ran up and down his arm and then lifted his hand to kiss it. He stopped for awhile to enjoy the touch, tracing little circles on My’s bicep with his tongue. “Do you remember coming to me in the dark? I answered the door naked, wanted to show you what you were getting. It had been so long since somebody wanted me. Then after you took me—hard—you washed me and tucked me in.”

He moved his hand to My’s balls and took his time with them. My had been tortured by nightmares of losing them so Greg wanted to pay special attention and let My feel pleasure there. He weighed them, stroked their fuzziness, rolled them between his fingers, as My’s body finally gave way to his medicine but also to the comfort.

“My’s satisfied shout surprised them both and scared away the demons of shame and secrets. Greg used the towel for clean up and tossed it aside. My was out in mid roll toward Greg so that he had to finish pulling him in. With My’s soft beard brushing his shoulder, Greg ran a hand up and down the smooth skin of his back and tried to remember the last time he had been hard. When had he started having trouble? What was happening?

God, diarrhea was nothing to being a limp noodle. My was only a few days from phasing out his pain meds. He would know that Greg wasn’t up for it anymore. The first time had been that night in the library after John and Sherlock had come over. My hadn’t mentioned it because Greg had distracted him with licking, but surely he had noticed. They had been off sexually for weeks and Greg blamed it on the growing unrest on the border and knowing that My might have to take
Sergei in there. He had felt and looked exhausted and My accepted his excuse of being tired and had finally stopped initiating.

Greg dozed into a nightmare of Morris setting a plate of full English breakfast in front of him. Prominent on the plate was Greg’s cock, pan fried. “Sorry about that, Greg, but I hadn’t been to the shops. You weren’t using it anyway.”

Greg startled hard enough that My moaned in protest and rolled back over to his side, grunting as various bruises made contact with each other and the mattress. Greg slid his hand down and made contact with the soft little thing. His pride and joy, nothing but a soggy sack of tissue. Mycroft Holmes had lived on, but Greg’s cock was dead as a doornail.

He huddled on the edge of the bed until Lars came in, surprisingly quiet for his bulk. Greg went to the guest room and showered again, wincing as the hot water hit the places where he had scrubbed himself raw. He threw on some clothes, finding the baggiest trousers he owned, not wanting the world to see that he was half a man.

By the smell of coffee and bacon, Greg knew that Morris was awake and busy in the kitchen so he slipped out the front and walked around to the garage where he dumped all of the debris from the previous night into the bin. Then he got his secret stash of cigarettes and lighter from the car. He smoked them all on the edge of the property, putting the butts back in the empty crumpled pack. Then he vomited into the hedge, but his stomach was empty too.

The sun was coming up with watercolor streaks so pretty that they hurt to look at. He stayed in the yard, the dew soaking his shoes, until the sun was fully risen and the cold had seeped into his marrow. He rubbed his hands across his face and discovered that he hadn’t shaved and tears had caught in the stubble.

My was more at ease that day and Greg could have taken some time for himself but he couldn’t think of anything that needed doing. He sat and watched My sleep and one of his naps was free of nightmares. He watched Lars care for his husband with skill and tenderness, working the wrist and ankle with small motions. He watched Morris prepare semi soft foods like scrambled eggs and mashed potatoes. They were retiring the cream of chicken soup.

Finally in the afternoon, My clearly said, “Tea please,” and Greg went down to fetch it.

He remembered filling the kettle and getting a mug from the cupboard and then it was a mystery until his shoulder rammed hard into the wall as the noise of another mug meeting its maker filled the kitchen. Morris was there moving him firmly someplace. Greg couldn’t seem to keep his eyes open even while walking. There was a lowering and a lifting until his head was pillowed softly. “Can’t leave My.”

“Just until I clean up the breakage and fix him a new cuppa, yeah?”

Greg woke to darkness in a strange place. His chin was wet from drool and his eyes were damp. He had obviously slept a long time but was still bone weary and deeply sad. Feeling his way along the wall, he found a switch and then waited for the night blindness to subside, wondering why his shoulder ached. He didn’t recognize the room, but the next room was Morris’ sitting room, forever burned in his mind from the long hours of waiting.

The kitchen was clean and dark. He went upstairs feeling like a scolded and abandoned child. The scene was peaceful. My was actually reading a book while Morris knitted in the sitting area, Kenny the new night nurse was rolling a bundle of yarn into a ball.

My’s face lit up and Greg went to kiss him. My’s lip had healed enough for a light kiss on the lips
and it was closer to something normal.

“He’s doing quite well. Turned a corner today, I think.”

“I don’t know what day it is,” Greg said, knowing it was the wrong response but the only one he had.

“About an hour into Sunday. You slept the clock ‘round, Greg.” Morris worked stitches off his needles with precise clicks, the needles flashing in the low light of the room.

“I could do it again.”

“You should, Mr. Lestrade. When you go that long without sleep at your age, it takes a terrible toll.”

Excellent nurse but tactless was Kenny Burke. “Not quite in my dotage, Ken, but I appreciate the concern.”

Morris took the yarn from Kenny and stuffed it firmly in a black canvas bag along with his work in progress, then stood up. “I was just getting ready to come for you. Mr. Holmes is having his bedtime snack, and you’ll be coming down to the kitchen with me for a proper supper.”

“Yes, sir.”

Greg let himself be led down to the kitchen and it was good. Morris put some water on to boil in a saucepan for pasta and then made tea. It was herbal stuff but strong and did not smell of flowers. Greg held the steaming cup under his face and then scrubbed his hands over the warmed skin. Morris handed him a paper towel.

My was getting a mug of the tea and something creamy with cinnamon that Morris had microwaved. “Morris, is there enough for me to have some of that?”

“Do you like rice pudding?”

“I’d like to find out.”

“Sure enough.”

So Greg got a huge dish of the smooth cinnamon goodness laced with raisins while Morris took up the tray. Then there was pasta with olive oil, spinach, tomatoes, and a mild cheese. Greg drank down two lagers and a diet Coke as well as sips of ice water.

“I’ve let you get dehydrated, poor boy.” Morris patted his shoulder as he put a dish of fruit salad beside Greg’s pasta plate. “We’ve got to take care of you too.”

“Do we?” Greg asked, the bitterness creeping in.

Morris didn’t engage it. “Every day is going to see improvement now. He’ll be able to entertain himself with books and movies. If you rest well today, you can go back to work. Maybe a half day tomorrow?”

“He won’t like that.”

“Himself will get over it. He’s got plenty of company with us and he’ll sleep half the time you’re gone. You’ve got to do for yourself, lad.”

Morris put two pills beside Greg’s plate, and he took them without even asking what they were.
Morris put two pills beside Greg’s plate, and he took them without even asking what they were. His plates and bottles were empty and he again experienced Morris taking him somewhere. There was a bed. My was in it. He climbed in, clothes on, as someone put out the light.

He woke to late afternoon sun across the bed. He woke alone and it hurt. My didn’t have to wake alone. Greg’s family would have to come to him this time; he didn’t like searching for them in the big house. That was a waking nightmare.

A huge shadow blocked the light by the window. Lars was gliding silently toward the closet. Greg had a fleeting though that he had strangled My with his bare hands and would now finish the job. He thought longingly of the weapons closet at the end of the hall.

“Ah, Mr. Greg, you are awake.” Lars came over and put a cool palm to his forehead. “You had a slight fever earlier so I took Mr. Mycroft downstairs.”

Greg sat up with a groan, his whole body sore from being so long in the same position. “Who’s watching him now?”

“Morris is with him. We managed to reach the garden. The fresh air is good but a little chilly so I came for a sweater. Join us, won’t you?”

I’m living in a French film, Greg thought. He stalled, taking yet another shower to wake himself and soften his scruff. Then he shaved with gratuitous care. Finally he put on one of the outfits that My had bought for him that he generally shoved to the back in favor of what he knew. Thus armoured, he went in search of his husband.

My was on a garden bench with his leg propped up. Lars was working his ankle. The sun shone down on their ginger and gold heads. “Greg!” My reached out a hand for him. “Pretty,” he said, running his palm along the sleeve of the heather gray cashmere.

Lars lifted My’s legs so that Greg could sit down and then lowered them onto Greg’s lap. Greg rubbed My’s calf a long while before he could look him in the eye. The awkward pause was softened by a whisper of breeze and bird song. A rare Sunday when there was actually sun. Greg finally looked at My and could see vast improvement.

His color was better on the unbruised parts and his mouth wasn’t so drawn. His posture was close to normal, and his eyes were smiling even though his mouth had some distance to go. “You look much better, My. I’m so glad.”

“Good day.”

“Yeah, sorry I missed it.”

My’s eyes lost the smile. “I’m a burden.”

“No!” Greg’s denial was loud in the peace of the garden. “I needed some sleep but it’s all fine now.”

It wasn’t. He still felt alone and scared and sad but he didn’t know why. He did know that he needed someone to hold him and that might put things to rights but My was still too ill. Lars was probably up for it, but Greg feared spanking from that quarter or some sort of role playing where he ended up in a nappie pressed to Lars’ leaking breast.

My took his hand and Greg noticed one of the splints was gone. “I’m going to Mummy’s.”

“No, you can’t, love. I’ll do better; I swear it.”
“Mr. Mycroft feels that there’s more staff there. Even Morris is growing weary doing all of the extra cooking and laundry. I’ll go with him to Riddleston Hall and we’ll spend most of our time in the library, but as he’s managed outside this afternoon, we can make use of the larger grounds with his wheelchair. And as he so amusingly pointed out, he will get credit for a long visit to his mother while he has a legitimate reason for heavy pain medication.”

“He told you all of that.”

“It took a while, but yes. In Danish.”

“He can barely get out two words in English and he gave a bloody speech in Danish?”

“Speaking Danish is a lot like having to talk with a hot potato in your mouth. His tongue manages it better than English.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” He leaned over to cup My’s cheek. “You don’t have to do this, baby. I’m sorry that my naps scared you but I’m better now. I won’t have you run out of your home.”

“You could come on the weekend.”

“Depending on my case load, yes.”

“Morris needs rest too.”

“Yes, I imagine he does, but he’s a lot tougher than the big girl’s blouse you married.”

My managed to look stern with one eye, while wearing a pale blue cardie over pajamas. “You are brave. I am proud of you.”

“That’s my line, remember?”

Lars put a sock and slipper back on My’s bad ankle which was a whole rainbow of bruises now. “I’ll go in to help, Morris. We’re having high tea here in the garden, Mr. Greg.”

Greg sat there stunned. As much as he had been feeling trapped and inadequate, this was not the solution that he had been looking for. He would be alone now, unable to reassure himself that My was alive by slow breathing on the other side of the bed. His mother in law would get her mitts in and have some choice things to say about his inept caregiving. He felt ashamed and abandoned and a trip to Riddleston Hall would complete his emotional castration. There was a basket of gardening supplies by the bench, might as well take out the shears and lop it all off and have done with it. He could pee into a bag and not be bothered.

My swung his legs over the bench and scooted closer. Greg knew it was mixed messages but he couldn’t help himself pulling My close and for once during the bloody recovery, throwing away caution and kissing wherever he could reach. Finally, My grabbed at his face and they were kissing properly, but the feel of stitches against his tongue stopped Greg short. “We’ll have to wait a little while longer for the passion, sweetheart.”

The rest of the evening flowed around Greg while he watched from a distance. A delicious meal with finger foods that My managed himself, the crumbs and mess not an issue outside. Then Lars and Kenny used the thirty minutes where their shifts overlapped to give My a good scrubbing after his outdoor adventure. My was tucked in early with a book but he was soon fast asleep, and it was Kenny that took the book and his reading glasses and put them on the nightstand.

Greg thought that sleep wouldn’t come after the two long naps he’d had but he was lulled by My’s slow, easy breathing. No nightmares woke either of them. The morning involved
preparations for the journey. Greg saw that he was in the way and went to his room of exile and got dressed. Morris gave him breakfast, and then it was go on in to work or look like an idiot.

He went upstairs to tell his husband goodbye. It felt so final, the first time they had been apart since My had come back from the dead. He was preoccupied with instructing Lars as to what books and movies to pack. Greg knelt beside the bed and lay his head against My’s belly, but the chatter in another language went on over the top of him, a world he couldn’t enter. My did stroke his hair once but it wasn’t enough. He should have just skipped the goodbye like My did. So he hopped up and kissed My on the forehead. “I’ll see you on Friday, love,” and he was out the door, hoping to be called back.

He got to his car without interruption. The rest of the week was a haze. On autopilot at work, the cases that came in were easily solved. Crimes of passion with an easily caught killer, just a matter of gathering evidence properly. Sherlock wasn’t even called and just as well since his bronchitis had gone into pneumonia. If John hadn’t been busy with a caregiving nightmare of his own, he might have been a friend to Greg that week. Greg couldn’t imagine the apocalypse of Sherlock as a patient.

Nights were spent in the kitchen for as long as possible after dinner, but eventually Morris would mention that he had a chat date or a quiz at the pub and invite Greg along. This was awkward for both of them. Greg would go upstairs and have a drink or three and fall asleep in front of the telly in his study. He would shift to his bed after the first nightmare and back to the study with the second, pulling his quilt around him since the leather felt icy on his bare skin.

Lars had called with an update each evening, putting My on briefly to say, “I love you and I miss you.”

Greg would say the same back, feeling nothing. He had a dreadful suspicion that Lars eavesdropped and that Lady Holmes might as well. On Thursday night, he said, “This time tomorrow I’ll be with you.”

“Greg?”

“Yes, love?”

“I need you.”

Greg didn’t know exactly what was meant and waited.

“I never said that to anybody else. But I need you.”

“I’m so glad. I need you too, My.”

“Can’t wait. Hurry here.”

“I will. Good night.”

Greg’s cheeks grew hot. What if he had told the truth? I need you too, but you can’t be there for me. I’m lonely again in my own house. I’m empty. Get well so you can be there for me. Then he’d be a cruel and selfish bastard. My didn’t have it to give either so how would the well get filled?

He stumbled through the weekend in the country. He took paracetamol for the ache in his chest but finally realized that the emptiness had become a physical pain. My’s nightmares were every few hours; he was stubbornly weaning himself from the pain medication at a price. There wasn’t a night nurse. Greg was on duty both nights, fetching the snacks and the pills and the cool cloths.
During the day, Greg weathered the heavy storm of Lady Holmes’ disapproval as if he was responsible for My’s injuries. She was kind and well intentioned and hopelessly spoiled. My had been hers alone for forty five years. Greg couldn’t seem to pass muster, and he began to see that she contradicted him for sport. He became increasingly silent, pushing all of his hurt into the void.

While she clung to her eldest son, she also gave every evidence that Sherlock was her reason for living. When Greg asked if she had any pictures of My as a little boy, she took him to the library where there was a whole series of leather bound photo albums. There were two for My and countless ones for Sherlock.

“My had a little stuffed rabbit when he was five. The nanny threw it out. I was hoping to find a picture of him with it. A surprise.”

“A little rabbit. I don’t recall. Sherlock had a gorilla called Winston--for Churchill, you see; it was as big as he was when we got it for him. My tiny boy says, ‘He has sad eyes because he is thinking about important things just like a world leader.’”

“That’s very cute.”

“More than cute. Sensitive, wise, compassionate, and brilliant.”

“Funny how My is a world leader now, secretly of course, but still someone who cares very much about keeping the world safe.”

“Pardon?” Lady Holmes was lost in an album labeled ‘Sherlock Age 3 Month One.’

“I’ll look through these, ma’am. Thank you.”

Greg moved quickly although he knew he could have taken them and no one ever noticed them missing. His husband had been as cute as any other baby, a wealth of ginger curls and the sweetest little smile. An only child until age nine and yet apparently not beloved. It was around age five that Greg noticed the furrowed brow and the skin growing paler. My had become a little old man. His sad eyes looked out of picture after picture, the weight of the world on his shoulders. How someone could see that in a stuffed gorilla but not in their own child was a question he wanted to shout.

Then he turned a page and there was baby Mycroft age five with Hop. It was a good photo for its time, sharp with clear color, the details of the rabbit standing out. If all went well, he would be able to find a match online and My would have a replica of his little friend back as a special birthday surprise. He found stationery in the desk and carefully made a padded carrier for the one-of-a-kind picture.

He returned to the ground floor room where My was staying temporarily and in spite of the watchful gaze of Lars, woke his husband to hold him. He said ‘I love you’ over and over and was pleased to see My bask in the attention.

Sunday afternoon and his departure came quickly for My and far too slowly for Greg. “You can come home with me, love. I’ll even let Lars ride in the back with us.”

But My was adamant. “Too much on you. It would hurt your work. And I’m storing up points with Mummy.”

Greg felt sick because all of the points in the world wouldn’t get My to the place that he wanted to be with his mother. Sherlock was there, and there exclusively. He held it together for the goodbye since My was very reserved about public displays of affection in front of his mother. A quick hug
and a chaste kiss, and Greg was back in the limo that had become a necessity not a luxury. Without My beside him, it was a drudgery, but he knew he was too weary to drive himself.

Still the silence of the car was so oppressive that he called his mother. He meant to update her on My’s progress and sign off as it was quite late for them, but when he heard her voice, his breath caught in his throat and all he could say was, “Mum.”

“Baby Greggie! Oh, Rich, it’s Greg.”

Why couldn’t My have had a good mum? He could hear her excitement just because he called. “I’m being chauffeured back to London after a weekend at Riddleston Hall. The high life, eh?”

He knew the breezy tone wasn’t fooling anybody.

“Is Mycroft healing? It’s late. You never call me this late. Point of fact, you never—“

“How are you mending?”

Greg couldn’t get words out one way or the other. His throat burned with the tears caught there. “I’m alright.”

“Don’t you lie to me, mister. I’ve had a husband injured in the line of duty.”

“I’m not so good, Mummy.” He set his jaw but the tears came anyway, just a few that made it hard to see.

“When I’ve been there before, we were always sneaking off to his rooms to—talk—“

His mother snorted.

“You are my mum.”

“And you’re a Lestrade. I know what you were sneaking off to do and twice if you did it once.”

At least the creeping blush edged the tears back. “All of her love is for Sherlock, Mum. It’s awful. She depends on My, uses him sometimes. He’s always working to earn her love, and she’s put it all into Sherlock, who is the image of the sainted bastard Lord Holmes.”

“That must have been hard to watch.”

“It hurts. He’ll never get what he wants from her and to see him trying so hard. He should have had you for a mum.”

“And he does. You bring him ‘round here like you should have long ago, and we’ll see he gets proper love and attention.”

“Weekend after next?”

“I’ll get a roast and have the girls over. You know your old room is just as you left it and maybe Mycroft would like to see that. I’ll get new sheets, Greggie. You’ll sleep over?”
“I’d have to ask My.”

“Most husbands don’t, but I’m glad that I’ve trained you better.”

“I try very hard to be a good husband.” Out came the tears again, fuck all, and he was so sick of being a baby. Literally sick, a great wave of nausea passed over him, motion sickness like he hadn’t had since he was a kid. He got in the mini fridge for a Coke.

“Greg, are you car sick?”

“Yes, Mum, but I’m drinking a Coke.”

“You haven’t answered my question yet. Other than feeling pukey, how are you, love?”

“I’m empty.” He’d finally said it out loud. “I need someone to look after me and My can’t. I think I’ve been empty a long time.”

“Then you have to tell him. Give him a chance to do what he can.”

“You said I would always feel like I’m giving more and so would he, but I think I really have done and I’ve come to the end of myself. He would be devastated, Mum. I can’t tell him.”

“Don’t you think he’d be hurt more to find out you were feeling so bad all on your own? He might surprise you, but you’ll never know if you keep it bottled up. You and your father.”

She sighed heavily. Then he could hear her getting in the fridge and the snap of a pop top. “I’ll have a Coke with you, Greggie. Like we used to. Cheers, love.”

“Cheers, Mum.”

He could hear her noisy swallow, the one that drove him and his dad crazy, and the little click of her jaw that popped in and out whenever she ate or drank.

“Your father is asleep in his chair.”

“Then all’s right with the world.”

“You have to talk to Mycroft, the sooner the better. Don’t let the debt add up until he can’t pay it. You ring off and phone him now, yeah? Face to face is better, but if you are calling me, you must be at the end.”

“Mum, it’s not like that.”

“It is what it is. You call him and get it all sorted before you come to us next weekend. I want lots of smiles and snogging on my watch. Lady Holmes can have the fights and cold silences.”

“You are a schemer.”

“That’s the kind of person I am.”

“I love you, Mummy.”

“I love you too, baby. Ring him now.”

Greg meant to, but he’d worked himself into a migraine and the light from the phone and the sound of the dial tone stabbed into his head. He got a water bottle from the mini fridge and put it
behind his neck as he lay down on the seat. That was the last he knew until the driver tapped his shoulder.

He started Monday feeling washed out from the headache he had struggled with all of Sunday night. When he came home Monday evening, it was all he could do to choke down enough dinner to take his pills and he was fast asleep still in his work clothes at eight. He slept through My’s call and emailed a chirpy explanation when he woke groggy and sticky at two a.m.

The feelings he was having didn’t go well as an email. He put the fact that he had forced My to write his feelings out of his mind. Why not try on hypocrisy? Might be better than the shite of self pity. He snuck down to the kitchen and made a sandwich and fetched crisps and some biscuits from the pantry. It felt like a weekend when parents were away. Channel surfing, he found a gay romance that looked promising. Maybe there would be full frontal nudity, a rare coup even in the modern age.

His mind flitted as he watched the two blokes struggling through their feelings. It was too close to home and he continued to channel surf, watching only bits of anything, news, cooking, shopping with a demo of a food processor, a documentary on sailing, and two American sitcoms which he could follow by watching a minute of each as he passed by.

The food that had looked so good in the kitchen was palling now. Two bites and he was done. He drank his full pint though. What if he called My now? Woke him up, woke the whole bloody Hall up and said, “I can’t go on. Help me, baby, I’m so tired.”

What then? And what if he said, “I haven’t had a hard on since you left me.”

Would he still be a man to My? Would My want to fuck him if it was a one way street? And wasn’t there whole bloody marriage a one way street anyway?

He left the telly on in the study for the noise and went upstairs to My’s bathroom, not their bathroom, God no. Just My’s. He went through the medicine cabinet, something he should have done long ago and found some sleeping pills. He stared at the nearly full bottle for a long time before taking a more conservative four.

Morris was shaking him hard. “Greg, it’s half past eight. Are you going to work today?”

“Sleep. Pills.”

Morris was like a monkey, clambering on him, prying his fingers open. “How many? How many did you take?”

Greg could have done without the slap. “Four. Fuck you, I took four.”

Morris dialed from the house phone. “Thank you, I’ll hold. Yes, hello. Inspector Lestrade is quite ill today and won’t be coming in. He should have never been in yesterday either. He doesn’t know how to take care of himself. Thank you. I certainly will.”

Greg settled back under the covers. It was like staying home sick from school.

An icy flannel settled on his forehead. “Bloody hell, what are you on about?”

Morris was an avenging angel in gray tweed. “Something is happening to you. Something bad. It’s been a long time getting to this point. See a doctor, see a therapist, talk to your husband, but get it fixed. I will not lose you.”

He had the shocking sight of Morris’ eyes welling up before he closed his tight. “I’m fine.”
“The hell you are, Greg Lestrade. You’re drowning. Talk to me if you can’t work up the stones to consult the professionals, but bloody hell, you’re in trouble.”

“I know, mate.”

“Today is a free one. You have a think about it. I’ll bring your meals up on a tray, but then you get on with it or I’ll be talking to some people and you won’t much like my way.”

He did as Morris told him to. First he called John, but John was frazzled and Sherlock kept asking things and needing things until John finally had to ring off with Greg’s confession still his secret. He researched marriage online again and got his notebook and textbooks from that long ago weekend and with his laptop he worked hard for several hours, his head still hurting. But all he could find was the advice to talk and to re-negotiate the relationship.

He called My, god help him, he did and he tried. But My was in self inflicted misery from refusing the pain pills. He’d been up all night with nightmares. Lars refused to do any physical therapy exercises until My took his medicine. They were at an impasse and Greg ended up as monkey in the middle.

Finally the day was over. Tomorrow he would see about getting into the Yard’s therapist. He had kept his promise to Morris. When the man came up with a mug of tea, he looked pleased. “I know you’ve been working hard today, Greg. Don’t you feel better?”

“Much better, Morris. Thanks for the tough love. Could we have something decadent for dinner tonight? Something My would covet but never approve of?”

Morris patted his leg. “I know just the thing. I’m going to run you a hot bath in the big tub and then get started.”

Now Greg carried the lie to Morris on top of all the other feelings. He did follow through and ring the therapist but there weren’t any appointments available until the following week. He did feel marginally better by playacting for Morris’ sake. His acting skills had not had such a work out since his early undercover days in vice when his pretty face and openly secret sexuality made him a favorite for some arrests he couldn’t bear to remember.

Morris took such joy in feeding him huge meals with calorie count thrown to the wind. He ate without enjoyment, the food looking and smelling great, but tasting odd now that he was used to low fat, low sodium, low carb. There was no comfort in the comfort food. Alka Seltzer was his beverage of choice at bed time and in the morning before going down to breakfast. He had Bisodol tablets in the car, in his desk, in his pocket. Now he was tired and logy from heavy meals.

He slept all the way to Riddleston Hall for the weekend. He was on a carousel that never stopped because the following weekend, he had promised to his mum. The whole world was on that carousel with him, and a web of secrets kept him there.

The bright spot was My’s improvement. His pride in his recovery was adorable. Half of the stitches in his tongue had been removed so that he talked slowly with a slight lisp but could speak comfortably. The finger splints were gone, and he could walk short distances with a cane as long as his ankle was in a brace. Lars had made a compromise about pain medication. My had agreed to take a full dose an hour before his therapy exercises and paracetamol at bedtime.

Lady Holmes was distracted with the planning of a fundraiser and they only saw her at dinner. Friday night when Greg cleared his head from sleeping in the car like a child, he was able to push aside all of the heavy thoughts and enjoy his time with My. There was light snogging at bed time, My hungry for it having little to do with his days but think of a sexual reunion. Greg was safe a
little longer though since My’s ankle and shoulder still made most two person sex acts painful and difficult. With boundaries set safe at kissing and perhaps My getting off, Greg let himself take pleasure in My’s beard, nuzzling and kissing along the furry jawline.

“I feel like I’m cheating on you,” he said, returning to My’s mouth and lips that were no longer cracked or swollen. With his eyes closed, they could go back to before. “Mycroft Holmes, cave man.”

It was strange to want My in his mind and heart without an answering throb in his cock, but he did want him and the gentle snogging turned to stripping and a brilliant blow job. My seemed to be drifting away as Greg cleaned him up, but when he settled back under the duvet, My’s fingers plucked at the waistband of his pants. “Let me try, Greg, please. Whatever I can do is better than nothing.”

Greg pulled away too quickly and My winced as his hand flopped to the bed. “Not yet. See, you’ll get hurt.”

His tone was out of proportion for the situation. My didn’t know that Greg was completely limp. Greg knew he was in a fool’s paradise thinking it was a secret. The hurt in his husband’s eyes told Greg that when the secret did break, My would take it as personal rejection. My reached down and brushed across the front of Greg’s pants. The question in his eyes burned.

“I’m still stuck where I thought every phone call was to tell me you were gone for good. Just a little while longer, My, when the bruises have faded, okay?”

Then My had pulled him close and stroked his hair, which was exactly what he needed, but was part of the lie now. He was almost relieved when a few hours later, My’s nightmare gave them something else to deal with. He was finally ready and able to talk.

They left the lights off and lay on their sides facing each other. Greg kept contact through touch, stroking his fingers across My’s sweat soaked face first. The bruises didn’t seem to bother him much anymore. He was so used to accommodating pain and moving forward.

“It was no problem to get into the camp. I had enough cocaine on me to overdose the lot of them.”

Greg had choice words that he kept to himself. He wondered if he would need stitches in his tongue when the full account was given.

“I saw Stuart first. I thought he had on red trousers which was odd. But they had, they cut—“

My gagged and Greg reached back for the wastebasket just in case.

“He was engaged last month and this was his final mission there. I was moving him closer home, more white collar assignments. He wanted to finish breaking up this cell though, get some closure. I understood that.”

Greg brushed the hair off My’s forehead and felt the fever, a body in shock from pictures that could never be erased.

“I saved the other one, but his chances of having children are limited. It should have been me, love. We won’t have children. What would it matter?”

“Elaine may not be able to conceive either. I didn’t even recognize her. They took turns. The specialist says that she’ll have several surgeries before any function returns. I put her there.”

“No, she chose to go just like you did.”
My wasn’t having it. “I put her there and instead of doing my job to get her out, I lost it. I thought of how much you love my balls and how I would miss them if they were gone, or if you had been the one lying there naked after they’d used you until you blacked out, and I don’t remember what came next.”

Greg rolled My onto him, easing the bad ankle over with his own leg. My panted against him. Tears would clean out the festering wound. He could feel My trying to let go. The press of their bodies was searing from My’s fever. Still they lay like that until My gave a great sigh and was still.

“I woke up barefoot and sore in a cell with people screaming at me in three languages. I was afraid my tongue would come off completely if I spoke.”

Greg kissed the soft ginger hair. “I feel a little bit less like going over and killing Yanks until I run out of bullets.”

“Anything they did was from ignorance at how injured I was. It was field medicine with triage. They treated me once my team was stabilized. That was before they even knew I was undercover.”

Greg heard the commanding tone come back. My was closing the door on the memories, but the nightmares would be with them for quite awhile. At least now he had a clear picture of how to comfort his man.

As to his own petty problems, he had not been violated or mutilated. He was safe, warm, and well fed with all of his body in working order save one little bit and there was no way in hell that he was asking for help now.
A visit to Greg's parents does not end well. Mycroft spends a lot of time in his mind village.

G, it will always be for you. You keep my vision safe.

I POST ON LIVE JOURNAL SO IF AO3 IS NOT WORKING, YOU ARE WELCOME THERE. SAME USER NAME BUT ALL LOWER CASE. THANKS SO MUCH FOR AMAZING COMMENTS SO FAR. WILL RESPOND AS QUICKLY AS AO3 ALLOWS.

Warnings: EXTREME CLIFFHANGER. CHAPTER ELEVEN POSTED WITHIN FORTY EIGHT HOURS. IF YOU HATE CLIFFIES, HOLD OUT.

Fanart: Rusty armour has created the lovely picture of My's wedding band on a chain with Greg's St. Michael's medal 'Safekeeping'
The new vicar for Lawton was apprehensive throughout the long train ride. The grimy cold did not help. He would reach his destination at less than his best. Hunger gnawed as well, but his recent student days had taught him to ignore the desires of the flesh. Food was a pleasure and not for the likes of someone prone to portly. He wondered what his new parishioners would be like.

Late afternoon dark found him footsore from a three mile walk as there had been some miscommunication about his transport to the village. He could have waited until morning but he wanted to be somewhere under cover before full darkness. He stood at the end of the main street, watching people hurry in for their tea. The vicarage was at the opposite end, sturdy but not beautiful. Still the lamps had been lit and he trudged with his valise handle cutting into his hand until he stood before the dark green door and winced as his knuckles rapped the damp wood.

She was an angel, the Madonna in a lace cap. Mrs. Lester, the village doctor’s mother but most assuredly working for the joy of it not the need. “My son the doctor and proud as goes before a fall says, ‘Be sure and tell the young vicar that I support my mother and her persistence in working is her own notion.’ I took care of the last three vicars to put Graham through his schooling and I won’t have him putting on airs about it now.”
Young Michael Hume was stripped of his outer garments and seated beside the kitchen fire.

“We’ll get to the formal dining room tomorrow, but tonight you need a mother’s care, sir. And as a mother, I shall be wearing young Sherman Lock out with a whip for neglecting his duty. His mother wouldn’t have anyone else to go for the vicar and I told her he would have his nose buried in a book and forget. But he’s perfect in her eyes and the rest of us hold our tongues and clean up the mess. She needs to fix her eyes on God and off of a son that isn’t all he might be. Now then, builder’s tea to warm your heart and belly. The kettle’s always a-boiling in my kitchen.”

All had been measured in advance so the water was added to the sturdy pot which was promptly swaddled in a knitted cozy. “Kind sir, if you’d like to hold the pot while it steeps, it will heat you up proper while I see to your clothing. I’ll hang your coat before the study fire. We’re not careless with our funds, but you only get to see a place for the first time once and these rooms are a sight prettier when they’re warm.”

Michael was nodding but comprehending her words long after she had moved on from the room and the topic. Able to hear her chatter as warning like a bell on a cat, he hugged the pot too him, the warming wool of the cozy prompting happy nursery memories of mittens drying on the fender. The heat of the steeping tea easily penetrated his threadbare waistcoat and ancient shirt.

She waddled back in. “Now sir, if you’ve warmed a bit, I shall fix your cuppa and then take your other coat.”

He enjoyed watching her chemist’s precision in preparing his cup, a squint and biting of the lip that perhaps her son employed in his surgery when making pills and potions.

“I’m giving you sugar and you shan’t complain. I’ve got to get enough on your bones for you not to blow away when that door opens. There’s biscuits too, fresh made this morning and only to comfort your stomach that a more sturdy meal is nigh. None of this plate on the lap business in here. You set this mug on the fender and I’m putting this extra chair here for your little table.”

She eased his coat off his shoulders and gave him a little pat. Then she bustled away. His mother had died when he was five and he had only distant memories of a gentle but wispy person who had never played with him. In his imagination, he always had a jolly mother like Mrs. Lester. Plump and accepting, she would not have minded her dress if her boy wanted to play ball or go for a nature walk especially if her poor boy’s father had died.

The tea was a surprisingly good blend, the likes of which he had only drank when invited to his professor’s home at the seminary. The biscuits were like none he had ever had. Three kinds, a short bread cinnamon with almonds, a little flat cake that was crisp on the outside and fluffy inside, and lastly a dear little frosted one in the shape of a fish with a little eye draw on. The butter cream frosting brought out the hint of orange zest in the batter. Three of each when he had only allowed himself one biscuit per day in his student lodgings. He tried to savor them but his stomach cramped with hunger, and he ate them all with abandon he would need to do penance for later.

Mrs. Lester entered the room, finally quiet. She took his plate and put the same amount of biscuits on again and held out her hand for his mug which she filled with more of the strengthening tea. Then she pulled a chair close, facing his. She retrieved a bit of knitting from her apron pocket. “I hope you won’t be offended, Mr. Hume, but we are a small village of simple people, and we love our vicar like he belongs to each and every family here. When Reverend Wilson died, we carried that loss like one of our sons had passed.”

Michael found that he had eaten two cookies while listening. He held his mug of tea to stay his hand, but one of the fish jumped into his outstretched fingers and thus to his mouth. Fortunately,
“Before John, we’d had older vicars near retirement. John was young and beautiful and happy. He made our village sing with new life. He was my second son.”

She dabbed at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief and Michael saw real tears instead of the crocodile sort he was used to from ladies.

“I made him these slippers just before he got ill so he never had need of them, but if you could see your way to wear them, I’d be pleased. Not hand me downs but a welcome gift from him and from me. You can wear them in the evenings and I can dry and clean your boots before I go. Warm, dry feet will keep you well and with us a long time.”

She knelt to remove his boots, the mud staining her fingers. When he protested, she said that it was her honor and then tears ran down his cheeks at the servant’s heart, the washing of feet. She tutted at his thin and poorly mended socks and then the soft wool enveloped his feet with warmth. The biscuits had taken the edge from his hunger and he was finally warm after what seemed like months of chill. With the anxiety of the meeting over, she ceased the frantic chatter and turned her attention to his supper. In the warmth and silence, he dozed, imagining the flavor of the shepherd’s pie she had promised.

As the young vicar nodded beside the fire, a blast of cold air against his cheek spoiled his reverie. Someone was calling for my, my what?

“Mycroft Holmes!”

Mycroft peeled his cheek off the window and pulled himself back to the cold and modern world of Greg’s panda car.

“We’re almost there, love.”

Mycroft blinked at the view which had not changed then reached for the cup of takeaway tea Greg had bought him at their last stop. It was cold and bitter and he rinsed his mouth and spit back in the cup.

“Better now?” Greg asked with a smirk.

“Yes, thank you.” Why did he feel sheepish? He had been ill. It was the guilt at feigning sleep in order to go to his village. Greg had been so closed in the past week that he hadn’t seen any reason to stay open himself. It was far too late for superficial chatter. Greg, who had promised to never pull away again, was shut tight, and Mycroft found himself alone.

Alone and unprepared to face Greg’s parents. It would be like the pub crawl where he barely passed muster, just a little too pompous or fancy or clueless about football, which was called footie, he reminded himself. Morris had given him five afternoons of frantic coaching on how regular people interacted. This along with his return to half days of work at home had him legitimately tired but not so tired that he couldn’t have kept Greg company in the car. And now he had let a few more minutes go by in review.

Greg reached for his hand and squeezed three times. Mycroft slowly returned the four grips for ‘I love you too.’ It was their first true connection since Mycroft had told Greg about his botched mission, and he could only assume that Greg was disgusted and disappointed in him. The perfect start to a taut thriller of a weekend with the in laws.

“Have a nice time in your village then?” Greg asked, but he didn’t seem angry.
“Yes, there was good food there, but I think I slept a little too.”

“You did. You’ve been pushing too hard. We’ll have to see that you get some rest. Mum can wear you out with her joy at having company. You let me know if it gets to be too much. We’ll go to a motel.”

“I can take it.”

“It’s a visit not an amputation, My.” For a minute, Greg grinned cheekily and it sparkled in his brown eyes but when Mycroft reached for another sip of foul tea, the grin faded and Greg looked far older than his years, despairing and broken.

Now that he was fully awake, Mycroft realized that he should have had the courage to tackle the issue while they were stuck in the car, but it was too late.

“Here we are at the palatial home and resplendent grounds of Lestrade Manor. Note the plastic gnome indicating that the Queen Mum is in residence.”

There was an edge to Greg’s humor that made Mycroft shiver in his oldest coat. Morris had packed for him, even loaning him some things. Now he wondered if Greg would perceive this as an insult. If only his head were clearer, but it was still taking a fair amount of energy to block out the pain in his ankle and wrist. The crutch had rubbed a huge raw welt under his good arm and he felt more like a collection of ailments than a person.

Even though the panda car’s heat was nearly non-existent, the cold wind still shocked him as he stepped from the car. The unseasonable cold snap mirrored the state of his marriage and he dreaded having that on display for Greg’s parents or the opposite, a painful bit of playacting that fooled no one. He was so weary in spirit that he wanted to grab the keys and run away. Instead he retrieved his flowers from the back and limped forward on his crutch to where the light from the kitchen door left a woman in shadow.

“Welcome home, boys,” she said, and Mycroft was engulfed in a pillowy hug. He carefully placed his hands the way that Greg had taught him and his fingers rested on a plush velvety fabric. Greg’s mum smelled of cookies and milk, and there was no jutting bone or plastic to keep him out.

Greg’s dad didn’t hug but held out his hand for a stout handshake and then caught himself.

“Sorry, force of habit. Greg said the bastards dislocated your wrist and jammed the other hand.”

He reached up and tilted Mycroft’s head to the light. “God, they worked you over, but they’re all dead.” He laughed, seeming pleased at the carnage. “Nothing like a raid with justifiable homicide. I envy you, mate.”

He patted Mycroft’s shoulder and pulled out a chair for him, leaning his crutch within easy reach. “Get this boy some tea, Ginny.”

“You have the match on, Dad?” Greg’s voice was high and deferential, startling Mycroft.

“In every room, Greggie. Come on.”

Greg’s mother sighed and winked at Mycroft. “No sense fighting it as you likely know by now. Gives us time to chat and have a treat that is too good for the likes of them. Here, love,” she said, moving another chair around for him to prop his ankle on.

“Thank you. The car was a bit cramped.”

“I told Greggie. Greg, I mean, that he should let you bring the big black car so you could stretch
out. That’s who you are, Mycroft, and why should we be hiding the fact that our son married well?”

“He’s proud and that’s a good quality.” He couldn’t believe he was chatting away with Greg’s mother.

She was preparing two mugs with liberal doses of what looked to be whole milk and sugar, not artificial sweetener but pure cane sugar. Mycroft’s mouth watered. Then she took a step stool and got in the cupboard above the refrigerator and reached around a collection of paper sacks and dusty vases to pull out a box and a tin and one of the vases. She tiptoed over, her round face lit with mirth. “My secret stash. Cocaine was never treasured more. And a vase for your lovely posies. Rich taught Greggie to buy flowers. Did you enjoy your tulips, love?”

“Yes, I did very much. It was so thoughtful.” And so long ago. He hadn’t seen that side of Greg in a long time. But here was part of the key to the mystery of his husband. Mycroft was sitting in the kitchen that Greggie Lestrade grew up in and talking to Greg’s mum.

She had Greg’s steel grey hair, thick and unruly, cut in a shoulder length bob. Her blue velour track suit highlighted the sparkle in her mischievous blue eyes. She was a little bit round but not bad for her age, and she smiled at Mycroft as if he were another treasure. Greg had received unconditional love from this woman all his life, and that love was there for Greg’s husband too. That love wrapped all of Mycroft’s fears into a warm blanket until they disappeared.

She took the lids off the box and tin with a flourish. “Liqueur chocolates and homemade jammy dodgers with plum jam. The dodgers were fresh made this morning while Rich was out with his mates. I told him the smell was my new bath gel. Take one, love, you’ve earned it.”

Mycroft chewed slowly, smiling to himself that he had just as fine a treat as the new vicar in his mind village. Homemade with love just for him. He could get chocolates any time but cookies made by a mum were priceless.

She sat the two mugs down, taking the blue one for herself and giving him the green. “Greg said green was your favorite color.”

“It is.” How many times could he be delighted in one hour? More than he ever imagined.

“This is copper’s tea, that’s builder’s tea only stronger. I learned to make it for Rich long years ago when he worked on foot. One night he dared me to drink a cup, said he’d buy me a new dress if I could take it down. Don’t ever dare me, Mycroft.”

“I won’t, Mrs. That is, Ginny, I mean, I still don’t know what to call you.”

“Call me Mum or Mummy if you like, as Greg does.”

Mycroft felt a chill pass through him. “I couldn’t call you Mummy. It means something else to me.”

“Try Ginny for now, love. See how it feels.”

He felt like he could take chances with her. “How would you feel about Mere?”

“French for mother or for the horse?”

He choked on the pine tar he was drinking and turned it into a laugh.

“Don’t get me wrong. Rich’s people are French so it’s a lovely thought until we have neighbors
over for tea. The grandbabies used to call me Mimi.”

“I don’t think I could. I knew a Mimi, you see and well, the less said the better.”

“Whore, was she?”

Mycroft choked again but not on the tea.

“You have another biscuit while you think on it, and I’ll make you a cuppa that doesn’t turn your ears red with every sip.”

Mycroft knew in his heart that he wanted to call her Mother. Not Mum or Mummy and not Mother in a formal way, but in a treasured way. She puttered about at the work top, and he thought back to his village scenario. At the moment, real life was even more pleasant.

“There now, love. See if this cup is any better.” She set another green mug down in front of him and putting her arm around him, kissed his forehead. “Don’t you worry. When you aren’t thinking about it, a name will come out and that’s good enough for me. Don’t force it.”

“Sit down a minute with me, please?” He wanted to be close to her, to soak in all the affection he could.

She sat down and with the cutest little wink picked a chocolate from the box. Her enjoyment of the candy was nearly obscene, and Mycroft couldn’t wait to send her a box of his favorite brand. He would keep her supplied so that it never had to be hidden away and meted out.

“Amaretto,” she moaned. “Oh that is nice.”

“Greg left chocolates on my pillow after one of our date nights,” he confided, not admitting that it was their only date night.

“I hope I trained my boy right.”

She took a hardy sip from her blue mug then clinked it against his. “To a long and happy marriage.”

“Cheers,” he said, feeling his face set in that frozen fake smile he hadn’t had to use much since marrying Greg.

She was nervous. Could she tell? “You’ve been forthright with me, love, about getting a name sorted. I confess to having the same problem. Mycroft is quite a mouthful.”

“It is. Father had very strong opinions about names. Do you have something else in mind?” He would give anything to have a nickname other than Iceman.

“What do your mates call you, love?”

“Nothing I care to repeat. One of Greg’s older colleagues calls me Microphone.”

“Oh, I know about copper nicknames, and I don’t care to know how you got that one. How would you feel about Myc?”

Mycroft remembered three young men setting up a house near Oxford. Rory and Morris had called him Myc and before Greg, it was the only happy time that he could remember. “I think Myc would be perfect.”

She twined her fingers with his, squeezing very lightly. She had remembered his injuries. “It’s
She twined her fingers with his, squeezing very lightly. She had remembered his injuries. “It’s good to have that settled.”

Greg and his father came trooping into the kitchen, and Greg came over to Mycroft and put a hand on his shoulder. An analysis of the match was in progress, most of it over Mycroft’s head literally and figuratively. Greg reached down and got the mug of copper’s tea and took a hardy sip. “Bloody hell, Mum, did you make him drink this? If it’s going to strip wallpaper, why not have coffee? Let me make sure your tongue is still there, love. You just got stitches out; it would be a shame to lose it to copper’s tea.”

Mycroft obligingly stuck out his tongue, and Ginny winced at the scar. She reached out for his hand again. “All my boys come home safe. You hear me?”

“Yes, Ginny.” It felt wrong, but he didn’t want to try out ‘Mother’ in front of everybody.

Greg’s father made a face at the casual use of his wife’s name.

But Ginny Lestrade knew her husband and how to manage him. “We’re trying out names, Rich. We can call Mycroft ‘Myc’; that’s M-y-c.”

“Thank heaven for that,” Rich said. “I was planning to call you lad and bloke and mate all weekend. Myc it is. I’ve known some fine upstanding assholes called Mike and you’ll do.”

He snaked out a finger for the green mug of pain and drank it down in one draught. “And you can call me ‘sir.’”

“Yes, sir. That was my plan.”

“Rich, don’t be a dick.” This was some sort of family joke so Mycroft smiled politely while inside he exhaled. Test one, passing grade.

“Greggie, take him up to your room. I’ve got the girls’ room ready for you, but he might like to see where you spent your boyhood. I got Bruce out like you asked.”

Mycroft had to duck a bit on the stairs and it took awhile with his crutch, Greg behind to catch him if he fell, but he achieved the second floor. He was glad to plop down on the narrow swaybacked bed, the cowboy bedspread making his sixth sense for antiques tingle.

Greg sat down beside him and reached for something on the pillow. “This is Bruce, my old friend.”

The little reddish brown bear was flocked nearly smooth from rubbing and Greg’s big hands stroked the bare patches as well as the remaining fur. Footy pajamas just as worn covered the bear’s body with yellow chicks, but Greg unfastened them to reveal a mechanism which he wound. A tinny music box version of Brahm’s Lullaby filled the room.

They were physically close but miles apart in their thoughts. The separation stung, especially after Greg’s promise to never pull away again. Mycroft had the familiar butterflies he got when making conversation with new people. “So, what did a young Greg Lestrade think about under his cowboy coverlet?”

“I dreamed of having someone like you to love and that I might be loved back.”

He wouldn’t look at Mycroft, but his strong brown fingers kept rubbing the little bear.

“Greg, I just want you to know how much I—“
His mobile pealed out Anthea’s ring tone, the Spice Girls’ “Wannabe.”

He pressed talk, fury making his hand shake. “Off limits this weekend, I said. This had better be about a certain Special Person, or you can leave your resignation on my desk.”

Mycroft felt Greg going back into his shell, felt the wall of ice slam down between them.

“Sir, he’s agreed to talk.”

He was still with Greg in his head, but Greg had not agreed to talk. Quite the opposite in fact. “I beg your pardon?”

“The call, sir. It finally came. Just a few minutes ago.”

Mycroft listened with growing dread. His whole career had been based on the hope of that call; his whole marriage seemed to hinge on his not taking it. As he was quickly briefed on travel plans, he watched Greg’s posture change. When he gripped the bear too hard, Mycroft gently eased it from his fingers and put it back on the pillow.

He rang off and turned toward what was going to be an ugly row no matter what. “You heard?”

A curt nod and a clenching of the jaw so hard that Greg’s teeth creaked.

“I’ve been waiting on this call for almost my whole life. It can spare many lives and prevent so much blood shed. I have the connection with him. I’m the only one that can go.”

“The last time you said that you were presumed dead for days.”

“This is diplomacy; there’s no danger.”

Without another word, Greg left the room. Mycroft had to manage the stairs alone, and by the time he got to the kitchen, Greg had told all of it. As he sank heavily into a chair, the sweat breaking out on his upper lip, Mycroft noted the smell of shepherd’s pie that he would never get to taste, but his hunger had turned to nausea.

“Can you tell us about it, Mycie?” Ginny took his hand again. It seemed like she needed to touch him to keep him there, yet he saw nothing but sympathy and concern. He thought of Mummy’s tantrums and accusations whenever he was called away from a weekend with her. Greg had no idea how lucky he was.

“I have been trying to talk to this man for almost my entire career, many years before I met Greg. He has always refused to negotiate, but today he is ready to talk. I promised him that when he was ready, I would drop everything and go to him. I must keep my promise.”

Rich was a man of action and that got Mycroft through the awkwardness. “What do you need, Myc?”

“A ride to the nearest airport.”

“Greggie will get you there in his panda. I’ll call the locals, let them know he’s coming through.”

“Mother, I’m sorry. I wanted this time with you.” ’Mother’ wasn’t the right name either but he didn’t have time to fix it. “I’m very disappointed.”

“Then you come back, Mycie, as soon as you can.” She gave him great smacking kisses on each cheek and then hugged him hard. “Go on with you now. Save the world.”
Greg was putting on his coat and out the door. It was Rich that helped Mycroft with his coat and steadied him when he tripped on an uneven bit of sidewalk. “This isn’t another undercover mission, is it?”

“No, sir. Just a much smaller version of the peace talks.”

“Good to hear. You come back to my son. You’re his whole world, or so his mother says.”

“I will, sir. I’ll always come back to him.”

There was a pointed throat clearing from the driver’s side so Rich tucked Mycroft in and shut the door carefully. Then he pounded three times on the roof of the car like they did on ambulance doors in detective programs.

The first few minutes of the ride were taken up with logistics. Greg had to travel the posted speed and obey all traffic lights and signs until his dad got clearance for him. They were on their mobiles together to set up a link with the locals. He would then use his radio and be relayed from station to station until they reached the airport. He was calm, professional and livid.

Once he got radio confirmation, Greg turned on his siren and doubled his speed. He gripped the steering wheel until Mycroft could see the white of his knuckles in the strobing light.

He had to shout over the siren and the racket of an engine strained to its limits. “I will make it up to you, Greg. I swear it.”

“It’s my mum that you need to make it up to. She bought new sheets and a new duvet. Things like that don’t come cheap in my world.”

“All I can say is that I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I should have known better than to think that I could marry someone so far above my station and be respected.”

“Where is this coming from?”

“You don’t introduce me to people, love. You’ve met all of my friends and coworkers, but other than Anthea, I don’t have a clue about your world. You’re ashamed of me.”

“There’s not a bit of truth to that.”

“We have a good time in bed, and I think you love me as much as you’re capable of but all behind closed doors. So I’m not your whore; I’m your mistress. You took me off the streets and you keep me, but you’re ashamed of your weakness.”

“Greg, it’s not like that at all. It’s not you, it’s—“

“Shut it. I know you’ve got an explanation for your behavior that ends with your insecurity, but I can’t bear it tonight. We’ll get through this as we have all of it; every bloody step. I’ll wear the clothes that you buy for me and maybe take some night classes and work with a speech teacher on my accent, and someday I’ll make you proud.”

“I am proud of you, Greg, as you are. You don’t have to change for me.”

“It’s a bit late for that, innit?” He was exaggerating his accent.

Mycroft stopped talking as his racing mind tried to review the past few hours then the past few
days, but he still had no idea what he had done or why Greg had been triggered. Class difference didn’t fit with anything that had happened. Greg had shut down long before that. Why was it that Mycroft could read a foreign dignitary with ease, guess their every mood in high stakes diplomatic poker, but he couldn’t read his own husband. It was maddening.

Greg needed his attention for the road. It was a legitimate reason to table the argument, but Mycroft wanted to sort it out. He didn’t want to leave with things unsettled. It was not as safe a journey as he had told them. Still, he felt like any of the ten things that he came up with were excuses or would be perceived as insults. His words and actions were being twisted to suit Greg’s anger.

Panda cars with different coloring joined them to get them through the next town. Radio chatter increased, many voices calling out instructions. The car swayed and shimmied and Mycroft had to brace himself with both hands, his wrist aching. He saw the lights of the airport; he would have to leave with his marriage still in the balance.

They were met by airport security and escorted straight to the tarmac where the plane was just in view for its first approach. Greg was around to the passenger side before Mycroft could get the door open with his stiff and clumsy fingers. He was jerked from the car, his bad ankle throbbing at the rough treatment as he tried to unfold his legs too quickly.

They were standing face to face. Greg’s jaw was still tight, a muscle twitching there. Mycroft reached to massage the tension away, but Greg pulled back. His eyes flashed in the strange half light of the runway. The noise of the engines was a physical assault.

He could see that Greg was breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling under his coat. He pulled Mycroft close and for a joyous second there was hope. Then Greg was placing words in his ear that cut like shards of glass. “I’ll give you a courtesy you never give me. I love you. Goodbye.”

The right words but said in anger so that they were a curse. Then Greg grabbed his jaw hard enough that the healing bruises sang with pain. Greg’s lips mashed against Mycroft’s, but he was so taken aback that he couldn’t return the kiss. It stung and he feared that his lip might crack again. The ground crew was still running the stairs out to the plane when Greg drove off, leaving ‘his whole world’ standing alone on the tarmac.

Mycroft kept his composure until he was seated on the plane; then he shook so badly that it was over an hour before Anthea could brief him. He could still feel Greg’s lips, hard and cold on his. But, the girl made tea for him and coaxed him to eat half of a sandwich. There was diet Coke to settle his stomach and a ripe pear. He ate to have something to do and to quiet her nerves which he could hear over the façade of her serenity.

“We’ve got another hour, sir. Why don’t you take one of your power naps?”

His power naps were actually trips to Lawton but that wasn’t something he could tell her or anyone except Greg. Greg knew about the village and had accepted it without seeking additional information but perhaps that was just a lack of caring. He wondered how many things he had misread during this first year.

This wasn’t the time to fixate; he was over prepared for the content of the meeting, his approach, his arguments, his gifts which had been purchased and updated regularly since his first year in this minor position. But his emotional state had to be calm, and he was out of his mind with grief. There was no phone service on this flight; they were too close to unauthorized airspace. He couldn’t even text ‘I love you’ which he had failed to say back to Greg’s bitten off goodbye.
So he chose to dissociate; it was the best course for now, and choosing was different from avoiding. But when this watershed meeting was over, when he was home safe, if Greg came back, if Greg would talk to him, he would stay out of the village for awhile. He had been going there way too often since returning from Sergei’s botched mission. He had spent hours at Mummy’s feigning sleep and plotting the lives of his villagers. Now that he was loved or had been loved, the villagers were leading much fuller lives.

The new vicar had just been to visit David Tinsley, an old man who did odd jobs for meals. The old man was waiting for the doctor who was at a breach birth, the midwife calling him late in the proceedings because she couldn’t get the baby turned.

*Mr. Tinsley had a severe abscess from a deep axe cut. The man seemed glad of company and Michael had managed to keep his lunch down thus far in the stench of the hut which was not just from the infected foot. He tidied as much as he could to keep Mr. Tinsely distracted and to better the situation should he have to return.*

Michael dreaded the appearance of the doctor who had taken an instant dislike to him. While Mrs. Lester assured him that the doctor’s cold and harsh manner was due to the loss of his friend Brother John, Michael still viewed the clipped tones and glares as personal rejection. He was terribly lonely, being accustomed to the classes and close supervision of the seminary.

A long while later, Michael stumbled from the tiny house, his long foot catching the threshold. The sun was bright and there was a stiff breeze, but all he could smell was infection and the fum of an unventilated hovel. He walked several steps breathing hard, his handkerchief pressed to his mouth, but Mrs. Lester’s good breakfast was soon on the ground and a bit of it splashed on his shoes.

His first call with the village doctor and he’d puked like an infant. He would be mortified later, but now all he could do was take in small breaths that didn’t start the heaves going. The smell was all over him. He moved blindly away from the spot until a hand was on his shoulder. “Come over to the pump. At least the water’s clean.”

He was steadied and eased down to sit on the edge of the trough by the good doctor, who was stripping off his stained shirt. “A breech birth and an abscess, and the shirt Mother made me is not even fit for the rag bag.”

Michael’s bleary eyes were suddenly presented with an expanse of tan back, muscles cording as the doctor worked the pump. The water glittered like diamonds in the sun and Mr. Lester scooped handfuls over his chest and face before going to his bag. Out of its depths, he took a clean cotton towel. “My last, we’ll have to share.”

He dipped it into the cold water and handed it to Michael who rubbed at his clammy face. It had to be the nausea and the bright sun that he was so dizzy. It had nothing to do with the doctor’s bare chest, the damp hair glistening in the sun, the brown nipples erect from the cold water. Why would he be lightheaded from watching another man scrub himself with carbolic soap?

Michael did not think he could walk yet so he held the towel and watched as Mr. Lester worked the lather down each arm, the wet dark hair holding the suds until he pumped a stream over them, the muscles rippling again. He scrubbed at the back of his neck, and for a breath stopping moment, Michael feared or hoped that he would be pressed into service to scrub the man’s back.

Someone had spoken, and he looked up slack jawed into the sun, the healer’s face in shadow. Words were repeated and he still couldn’t understand. The doctor removed the towel from Michael’s hand and put the bar of soap there. Then he scooped water from the trough and moved the soap back and forth in Michael’s hands. His sturdy fingers were dark against Michael’s long
pale ones. They worked in and out, cleaning the webbing, checking the nails, then all the way up to his wrists.

Michael knew that his breathing was heavy and ragged. He prayed that would be attributed to his nausea. Mr. Lester pulled on his wrist and he stood somehow and was led to the pump where one bare arm brushed against him. Soon the icy water was flowing down his hands. He wanted to climb in and have that water all over him, making him clean, but it would not reach his mind, the dirtiest place of all.

“You’re very flushed, vicar.” A hand reached up and touched his face, feeling his cheeks and forehead.

They looked at each other; Michael’s blush creeping to his neck, a tic jittering at the corner of his mouth. It was happening again. If he didn’t look at the good doctor’s eyes, he would have to look at his chest where drops of water ran slowly down, begging to be stopped by a long pale finger. One droplet clung to the tip of a hardened brown nipple, and Michael bit at the inside of his cheek. He stared at the ground to break the spell, but when he looked up again, their gazes were still locked. For just a moment, the doctor’s eyes softened and Michael hoped for a kind word, the start of a friendship.

“We’re beginning our descent, Mr. Holmes,” Anthea said, helping him to sit up and take a hot towel. She held it for him, dabbing at his face and neck, and he was glad.

He had ample time for a shower and a change of clothes as his host would send the escort at least an hour late. Promptness was a sign of neediness, but Mycroft as the guest and younger of the two, had arrived on time, a show of neediness but also respect. As he put on his uniform of impeccable tailoring and practiced with the cane that Anthea had purchased for him, the Iceman walked into his mind and pushed everything else aside.

He had rehearsed this meeting in his mind on a monthly basis for so many years that it was more of a performance than a peace talk. Every possible response had been countermanded; every flicker of the eyelash or downturn of the thin lips had been studied on video. Every member of the household was known by name with their strengths and weaknesses memorized; even the family pets were monitored.

The Iceman was in rare form, spurred on to laser like precision by pain and loss. He fully imagined that he would leave this meeting and go back to an empty house and with Greg gone from his life, the suicide of Mycroft Holmes would be inevitable. This conversation would the apex and the completion of his career; his last attempt at saving a world that had been so cruel to him.

He compartmentalized, hyperfocused, and played the game. No one would ever see what he could do. In spite of always feeling a little bit second best, his father confirming it, he had known that he had this gift for pleasing people, making them feel important and also secure. Hadn’t he learned as a lisping toddler how to placate the two narcissists who had birthed him as well as countless staff who were prepared to dislike him? The stakes were higher but the hyperbolic praise, the reassurances, and the worshipful listening, were all as automatic to him as cleaning his teeth or applying concealer to his freckles.

In the end, less than half of his arguments were needed. This was a man who had kept his word and not called until he was ready. While there were concessions on both sides, much of it was token protest, merely a dance. Gray streaked through hair that had once been black, and with it had come a weariness for conflict. He was tired of a young man’s posturing. He wanted peace in his life time. This meeting would be the first in a series and the public would know nothing about any of it. Off the record, clandestine, the meeting of two weary friends.
As the Iceman’s work was finished, Mycroft felt him leave, taking Sergei with him. He was suddenly exhausted and weak with hunger, the possibility of a migraine flitting across overstimulated neurons. As they shook hands, a further concession to British custom, Mycroft was powerfully moved that the man squeezed gently. “You have been recently wounded, my friend. I cannot tell you how much I regret that and so close to the border of my country. Can you stay the night here for food and rest?”

“I would be honored,” Mycroft said, his only choice to stay. He couldn’t think about Greg all alone with his parents on a Friday. He must not dwell on a marriage that was dying each second that he stayed away.

“Come. I will take you to a room where you may enjoy a lovely view of water and sky. Rest your mind while I see to the celebration meal personally. We have waited a long time for this day, Mycroft.”

“Yes, a very long time,” Mycroft said, rising from his chair and leaning on his cane far more than he wanted to.

It seemed strange to be led by the man and not one of his ubiquitous staff, but Mycroft was losing the razor sharp perceptions of the Iceman and he was merely a sore and sleepy mortal in desperate need of his husband’s arms. The house was monitored so that he still could not ring or text Greg although he fingered his mobile incessantly in his pocket.

When he thought he could not walk any further, although his guide had slowed his pace to match Mycroft’s labored steps, he was led to a room with floor to ceiling windows and lowered to a sumptuous couch with leather that was softer than human skin. The view was so striking as to look manufactured. Sand, sea, and sky, sharply defined, the windows tinted so that the glare was beautiful without harming his pale eyes. It was surreal and reeking of wealth and power, but all he wanted was stubby fingers twined with his and a broad shoulder to pillow his head on.

He had closed his eyes. When had he closed his eyes? It was an unconscionable offense in this culture. His foot was being lifted onto a soft cushion. “Thank you, Anthea.”

He could not open his eyes.

“I have sent for your assistant, Mycroft. You are more ill than I realized. You will rest as long as you need to. I am sorry that I put you through such a meeting when you were ill.”

“It was my honor and privilege, sir.” He heard his voice break and was thankful for once that the tears stayed buried. If he was ever able to cry again, it should be for and with Greg.

“I fear that you are heart sick as well as in physical pain. We will speak of this after you rest.”

Then he was alone except for security cameras, and once rest was allowed, he could not settle. Without the Iceman’s steel resolve, he could not turn off the replay of Greg’s anger. Mycroft could get out of his own head enough to know that Greg wasn’t angry but deeply hurt and frightened yet all of the rigorous review did not yield answers.

He felt the panic attack at war with the fledgling migraine and his horror at all of it happening in the most delicate of situations. If he couldn’t get a hold of himself, he might undo all of the good of the meeting and all of the respect that he had earned from years of careful cultivation. He was to rest, per his host’s instructions, and there was nothing for it but to do the one thing that brought him peace. It was mental masturbation and he was doing it in the very den of his country’s former enemy.
The azure, turquoise and gold faded away to the golden afternoon sun of a tiny garden in Lawton, where two men, a vicar and a doctor, faced each other beside a wheezing pump. The vicar needed a friend, and the doctor needed things that he could not bear to think about. He had softened momentarily, but he could not let another vicar into his confidence in any way. Michael was witnessing the change, eyes that had softened grew steely once more. But the eyes stopped sparkling; the guard slammed back into place. “It’s too much for you seeing real life up close, smelling it. Best leave the visiting of the sick to me and get on writing your sermons and straightening the hymnbooks, parson.”

“He’s an old man who has outlived his family. He needed someone to wait with him until you could get here.”

“Are you saying I dallied?”

“Of course not. I’m saying that it is my task to give comfort where I can, and he needed some company while you did other very important and necessary things.”

The doctor scrubbed himself with the towel, his skin reddening from the harsh soap and an even harsher application of rough fabric. “I’ll not have you going into situations you can’t handle. You can get hurt or catch something, and you’re white as a ghost and rail thin now.”

“I’m quite sound, doctor.”

“This village won’t survive the loss of another young vicar. Stay in your study where you’ll live a good long life.”

Michael could see that the hands wringing out the towel were shaking, but he was turning over a new leaf here, not letting himself be trampled. “A long life of ease doesn’t attract me.”

“What does attract you, vicar?”

“Doing the will of the One who sent me.”

With a snort of derision, the doctor gathered up his bag and ruined shirt. “Get in the buggy, vicar,” he commanded and Michael obeyed, his stomach roiling again but not from the sick room.

When the doctor stopped at his home to fetch a clean shirt, Michael fled without another word. He spent the afternoon at the altar of their little church, begging God to take away the memories of that smooth tanned skin and the broad shoulders, but every time he stood, images of being pulled against that bare chest assaulted him so that he fell to his knees and started his prayers all over.

The doctor was bathing Michael’s face with cool water. No, he was angry, terribly angry with Michael who could not puzzle out what he had done wrong. Who was gently pulling him upward and holding a glass to his lips?

“Sir, it’s time to wake up. Our host has a wonderful meal for us, and you’ll feel better once you’ve eaten. Take your migraine pills as a preemptive strike. And damn if that wasn’t a bad choice of words. Sorry to all who heard that.”

Anthea had all sorts of things in her voluminous bag to revive him. A spritz of lavender water at his temples and wrists, a peppermint to cover the bitter taste of the tablets, an icy migraine plaster for the back of his neck, and eye drops. She also touched up his light makeup under the guise of dabbing at his brow with the flannel. Mary Poppins in a push up bra and kitten heels.
The meal turned out to be quiet and simple; his host being sincerely troubled at his guest’s condition which had become far more obvious in the direct sunlight from the large windows. Mycroft could feel that his face was drawn and gray the way it had been when he first began weaning himself from the pain medication several days in advance of doctor’s orders. He knew that under his beard, the bruises were still dark and plentiful and that his injured eye was still extremely bloodshot and dropped when he was tired.

Mycroft was able to eat just enough to be polite and was thankful for the excuse of illness and pain. The loss of appetite was from one reason alone, the thought of life without Greg. It was such a huge loss that he could only peer at it around corners like a shy child. When the meal was over, the silent waiter poured the thick syrupy coffee. Mycroft was lost in the thought of copper’s tea and how many exfoliating beverages his still healing tongue could bear.

His host pulled a chair around so that he was directly facing Mycroft, who had been placed on a bench for reclining at table so that he could prop up his ankle which looked like an elephant’s foot umbrella stand painted by school children.

His host put a hand on his arm and spoke barely above a whisper. “Is Gregory well?”

Mycroft started and then fell back. Close surveillance cut both ways. “He is well.”

“Your heart is in your eyes, Mycroft. I have only seen such sad eyes in the mirror when my lady was diagnosed with cancer.”

“No, it’s nothing like that. He was badly frightened by my recent adventure. I was missing for several days, presumed dead.”

“I’m sorry. I did not realize. You were undercover to that extreme then?”

Mycroft nodded. This was on the very edge of cultural propriety as well as violating a great deal of ministry protocol. “Yes, I was undercover, but I was also injured and unconscious and therefore could not identify myself.”

“That must have been terrifying.”

Mycroft felt the migraine medication lifting his body from the padded bench. This could not be real. “He was badly treated by staff. Not everyone in the ministry agrees with my choices.”

“But you have had time to allay his fears? And correct the idiocy of your subordinates?”

Mycroft smiled at the phrasing in spite of himself. “There are new policies in place although I hope that we never have to use them.”

“You are still sad. A quarrel perhaps? Brought on by pain and exhaustion. You are needing to speak with him; you have been fondling your mobile.”

Mycroft could not explain without seeming ungrateful for the meeting and after the kindness and understanding he had received about his physical condition, he had personal reasons for not wanting to tell. But his host was persistent, his eyes alight with the joy of a puzzle that would not involve countries, armies and principalities.

“He is angry that you came here. I disrupted your plans. It is the same with my wife and my daughters.” The man threw his hands up in triumph. “This is easily resolved. You must go home at once; you can rest on the plane and repair this rift before it grows.”

“I could not forsake your lovely household and your bountiful hospitality for such a petty personal
“No, I insist. We must not even waste time with the customary dance of politeness. You are needed at home and that is where you will go immediately. It is done.”

After that, it was out of Mycroft’s hands. Protocol seemed to be thrown to the wind. Their host rode to the airport with Mycroft and Anthea and the one security agent that he had brought. Upon hearing that Mycroft had left his inlaws for the meeting, his dark eyes flashed. “I would walk into a room naked with my greatest adversary before I would leave my wife’s mother to conduct business. I must send an apology to Gregory’s mother.”

His assistant and Anthea synced up their mobiles.

“What are her tastes and interests?”

Mycroft could smile now. “Chocolate, flowers, and tea.”

“She shall be showered with the best my country can offer of all of those as well as a letter that I shall write myself. And Gregory shall have my sincerest apologies in a letter as well. Do you think this will resolve your other diplomatic dilemma, Mycroft?”

“They are noble and forgiving people. All will be well.”

“When your eyes are no longer sad and your wounds have healed inside and out, you will come to me another time and bring Gregory along. He is a man of adventure; he will enjoy my country. But we will make sure that the time is best for all concerned.”

Mycroft was back on the plane with only a vague sense of having parted from his host. When the door closed and the wheels lifted from the tarmac, he staggered to the tiny loo and vomited everything he had eaten or drank since he had stepped from the panda car long hours before. Then he let Anthea take him down to shirtsleeves and bare feet and he slept through the flight, waking long enough to be transferred to limo and then sleeping until he was at the town house.

Anthea had managed to get a text to Greg, and he was there as Mycroft emerged bleary and stiff. The anger had faded from his face but he looked guarded. Mycroft stood braced in shoes without socks and a crumpled and vomit stained no-longer-expensive shirt. Greg hugged him and it wasn’t a mockery of affection like the goodbye kiss had been. There was hope.

Then Greg asked, “Did you accomplish what you wanted to?”

His voice was flat, devoid of love.

But Mycroft had to play it out. Greg had a right to withhold after being abandoned at his parents’ home. “Thanks to your understanding and all of your help, the meeting was a success. A precedent in global politics that will never see light of day.”

“Congratulations. Morris has the kettle on.”

Greg turned and went in the house without looking back and Mycroft noticed that he was walking as if he too needed a cane, his steps dragging on the sidewalk. The migraine had subsided, leaving Mycroft ravenous and the comfort of home after the tension and formality of his work made him wish he was the sort of person to strip off and eat in his underwear.

Greg was silent throughout the meal. Mycroft said his name and the eyes that met his were empty and defeated. He stifled a gasp; the cold traveled down his spine until he thought his breath might be white with frost.
While not especially late for a Saturday evening, Mycroft felt that he could sleep for days. He hoped that they could go upstairs and hold each other in the big bed until the whole world melted away and they found each other again. Greg nodded his agreement to early bed time and helped him up the long staircase. He got the icepack from his study as Mycroft slowly tackled the last flight. When he had helped Mycroft undress, wash his face, and clean his teeth, he settled him on the bed, carefully putting the ice on the gargantuan ankle.

Then he looked speculatively at his husband before dropping the bomb. “Don’t turn this into something you anguish over, but I’m sleeping in the guest room tonight.”

Mycroft’s supper started swimming toward the surface. “Why?”

“Because I have to recharge my batteries and I can’t do that when you’re around.”

“You’re pulling away. You promised that you wouldn’t.” He was whining; he couldn’t stop.

“One fucking night, My, where it’s about me. Can you just give me that?”

“Of course, but I’d like to understand what I’ve done so I don’t repeat it.”

“You haven’t done anything and that’s the bloody point.”

“Then tell me. Tell me what to do for you.”

“I can’t be the teacher tonight. Hear me. I’m past empty.”

“Then don’t teach me anything. Just tell me what I did. You hated that I was Sergei again. I know that much.”

“Sergei is far down on the list. You didn’t tell me goodbye, Mycroft. You snuck out, and then I’m watching telly and they haul out a dead body wearing your shoes and I never got to say goodbye. You weren’t even wearing your ring.”

“I didn’t want a long sad goodbye; it makes it that much harder.”

“Harder for you. Is that why you never see me in the mornings before work?”

“Yes, it hurts to be separated from you even for the day.”

“And I guess it hurts to call me and tell me that you’re not dead so I have to hear it from your fucking assistant like it’s a delay on account of traffic and not my whole life in the balance.”

“My tongue and lip were too swollen for me to speak coherently.”

“I would have known your grunts, My. I needed you.”

“I’m sorry for that too then. It made sense at the time when I was barely conscious.”

Greg walked out, leaving Mycroft alone for the third time in two days. Mycroft was off the bed, the ice pack careening across the floor as he chased Greg down the hall.

“Greg, please. You have to let me make it right. You have to give me a chance.” He was begging now for his very life.

"Leave it. I can’t. I really can’t.” He heard the weariness then; the sheer exhaustion that he had missed since he had his own to contend with.
Greg shut the door quietly, leaving Mycroft in the hall, his ankle pain searing his body as his cheeks too lit with shame. He heard the snick of the lock, Greg not even trusting him to respect a closed door. When he saw the light go out around the ancient frame, he hobbled back to his room, and taking a pillow, he closed himself in the closet so that no one would hear his screams.
Chapter Summary

After a dark night of the soul, Mycroft Holmes is surprised by reconciliation.

Word Count c. 9013

I'm also on Live Journal. Same name but all lower case. In these troubled times, it's good to have a back up site.

G, it will always be for you. You keep my vision safe. Every word, every hair, every nipple, every water droplet on said nipple. For you.

Fanart: Rusty armour has created the lovely picture of My's wedding band on a chain with Greg's St. Michael's medal 'Safekeeping'
Mycroft lowered himself to the floor of the closet. He hugged his pillow tightly, his face stinging as if the door had slammed directly against it. He was very calm.

*Greg doesn’t love me anymore, and I am fine. I can survive this. I can learn to sleep alone again and wank instead of have amazing sex. I have really grown. I’m fine.*

He sat and the hard floor began to hurt his arse and his ankle was throbbing. The ice pack was in the hall somewhere. Greg had got it for him from the refrigerator in his study. Greg wouldn’t be doing things like that any more because he was too tired. Mycroft’s neediness had used him up. It was all over. Still, he was very calm about it.

*I am handling this so much better than I thought I would. I have really grown. Grown because of Greg’s love which I squandered.*

Greg might leave while he was in the closet! What if he were already gone?! Mycroft pulled himself back up and hobbled into the hallway. The guest room door was still closed. There was no internal surveillance on this floor. Was Greg still in there?

Mycroft rested his cheek against the door and held his breath. Snoring, labored broken snoring.
Greg was still there. Mycroft retrieved the ice pack and slid down the door to sit in the hallway with his legs splayed out.

*Just icing my ankle, nothing unusual in that. I’ll know if he comes out and I can ask him what happens next. I have the right to know that. Will he move out? How soon? Will I get to see him sometimes? Will he start dating again? How soon?*

This last thought sent a gasp that shuddered all through his body. He stifled it with his hands but his breathing was already speeding up as he tried to stand. He hauled himself up by the doorknob and staggered down the hall, the pain in his ankle in counter rhythm to his wheezing, tortured breaths. The pain was white hot, shooting up his leg. He tried to hop and banged his bad wrist against the wall.

Back in the closet, he lay on the floor, breath constricted, the ceiling spinning above him. It echoed and he no longer cared if Greg heard. Greg would hear and come to him and hold him and tell him that it was all a mistake.

But Greg didn’t come. Mycroft finally surrendered to the high of hypoxia and floated for awhile. He had an image of himself there in the closet, his arms and legs at odd angles, his color gray from oxygen deprivation. Morris would find him unconscious and run immediately to get Greg. Greg would say, “My poor baby. He was so brave. He didn’t want to wake me and fainted here in the closet.”

Then Greg would stroke his hair until he regained consciousness. Mycroft came back around, an ache in his chest adding to his pains. He was still alone. His arms and legs were cold. He pulled his winter dressing gown off the hook and draped it over himself, rubbing the plush against his cheek.

He began thinking about all of the things that were not going to happen. They would never put on formal wear and go to the symphony. They would never travel on holiday again even though there were so many places he wanted to show Greg. He wouldn’t be welcomed back by Ginny or ever discover what to call her. Morris would go back into his shell, giving the haughty looks that had cut so deeply, the obsequiousness that kept the distance firmly in place. No more hugs from any source.

He got the pillow to his face just in time. The wails sounded like a lost puppy and an air raid siren combined. The more he tried to stifle them, the worse they got. He pulled his knees up and put the pillow on them and then wrapped his arms around his head. Tears would have been welcome, but the moisture on his face after several minutes was sweat.

Waves of grief were rolling over him until he thought he might lose his mind. The temptation to get one of the guns from the secret cabinet in the hall was overwhelming. He could go to Greg’s room and threaten suicide. Greg was a copper and would talk him down and be gentle and take care of him. But using suicide was a dirty trick, cheap and Machiavellian. After that, he would never be sure if Greg was staying out of love or out of pity.

Because of Greg’s love, he was not suicidal. He had his memories of the good times and those would last awhile. If he couldn’t bear the house any more, he could go away, take a leave of absence and travel. He could do all of the things that seemed to get pushed back because of work. Watercolors and reading Proust and listening to music. Taking cooking classes and going riding and improving his back stroke.

Now he would go to his village; it was necessary. The doctor Graham Lester had been keeping vigil outside the church all night while Michael the vicar prayed.
Graham shifted his feet. He had on a heavy coat and boots and still he was chilled by the night wind. Michael knelt on the stone floor of the church in only his shirt sleeves, not even the robe that he wore on Sundays. Graham had only allowed himself to pass around the church once an hour, but Michael’s face was contorted in agony, tears streaming from his closed eyes. He looked like the picture that hung in the foyer called ‘Gethsemane.’

More than anything, Graham wanted to hold him, to wrap his frail body in his own heavy coat and keep it there by folding his arms around the young man. Although Graham would never tell him so, he was doing quite well and the villagers were healing from the loss of Brother John. Graham’s heart was healing too, and he felt guilty. John would not see it as a betrayal, but somehow it was.

He had to be very sure of his feelings before he told Michael. Was it the thin young man with the fiery hair or was it the dark clothes and the collar and the role of the shepherd? Michael was beautiful and gentle and deserved to be loved wholly for himself. Until Graham could be sure, he would keep Michael at a distance, but that didn’t mean he would stay away. He could watch over him in the long dark nights where shadows were his friend.

Mycroft wasn’t sure how Graham would prove his feelings to himself. Michael was a new part of the village in the past month and outside the familiar and comforting cycle of the story. The characters were doing things that they wanted to do. Sometimes Mycroft missed the old story which he repeated like nightly prayers, but Greg had changed him and some of the village story didn’t work any more. Everything had changed.

He felt himself fading as he tried to sort out what Graham would do next. Michael had to come out of the church, but what then? He pulled the thick dressing gown around him while the next line played on a loop in his head.

Graham Lester stood in the shadows of the copse at the river’s edge and watched as the new vicar sunk slowly into the cold depths.

Mycroft resurfaced, but the cold damp beneath him was not an icy river but a puddle of drool on his pillow. He was not drowning as he had been in his nightmare nor was Greg drowning with him, saying ‘I’m too tired to swim.’ He got his breathing back to normal from tortured gasping and imagined water logged lungs. For a nearly drowned man, he was profoundly thirsty, his lips stuck to his teeth and a fair amount of lint from the dressing gown coating his tongue.

It was 2 a.m. He would go down and make tea which was a normal thing to do after a nightmare, a healthy, self comforting act, not bothering anyone else. But if anyone heard the thump of his crutch on the stairs, so much the better. No one heard. He got to the kitchen alone but was weak with relief to find Morris was at the kitchen table, teapot in front of him.

“May I join you?” The Iceman brought low, asking permission to sit in his own kitchen.

“Of course, sir.”

“Is there anyway we could dispense with ‘sir’ tonight?” Mycroft got a mug out of the cupboard. There seemed to be several missing.

“I’m willing. What should I call you then?”

“Greg’s mother is going to call me Myc. It’s been years. Do you remember? I miss being Myc the Pike.”

Morris added the correct amount of milk and sugar that Mycroft preferred and then poured tea into
the mug. He topped off his own and stirred it in with a thoughtful look on his face. “Myc the Pike and Rory the Tory.”

“And you were Morris the Forest. Still got all that fur?”

“Yes, but it’s white now.”

“Greg likes my chest hair.”

“And well he should.”

Why had he told Morris something so personal? The quiet kitchen seemed like a confessional. “You and Rory were the only friends I ever had until Greg came.”

“I didn’t have so many friends myself.”

Mycroft took a risk. “I’ve missed you. I deserve every bit of your contempt, but I still miss talking and laughing.”

Morris was quiet long enough that Mycroft felt like an idiot for his overture but then it was alright. Morris said, “I miss when we’d have a huge meal of take away and then watch movies until we fell asleep. Like puppies we were, piled on the floor.”

“I miss your cooking from back then, great vats of things drowning in butter.”

“I miss him.”

The guilt crashed over Mycroft and he grabbed onto the table’s edge. “Yes and that’s the break that can never be mended. I killed Rory as sure as if I’d pulled the trigger myself. And with that one shot, I destroyed you both.”

Apparently this was a night for the Iceman to lose everyone in his life so that he could atone. He would be more alone than ever before but he would be clean.

Morris slowly got up from the table and for a time Mycroft thought he might just leave the room or even the house, a deliberate and dignified figure even in a dressing gown. But he walked over and reached up in a high cupboard, reminding Mycroft a little of Greg’s mother, and got down a tin of biscuits. They were the really good brand of short bread with a thick layer of chocolate on one side.

Morris got two small plates. “You’re going to eat several of these for medicinal purposes.” Mycroft dutifully took two but at a raised eyebrow, he took two more. They munched in awkward silence for awhile.

When Morris finally spoke, there was none of the servant about him. “It’s taken me eighteen years to know this but Rory got himself killed. He never was one for following orders, Mr. Hol--Myc. He got it in his head that his way was better, and he hated Bellows for a chief and so our fate was inevitable.”

“But if I’d gotten there sooner--”

“If you’d gotten there sooner, we’d all three be dead and what good would that do? You saved me and got his body for a proper burial. You kept me alive when I wanted to join him. I think that’s more than enough to be going on with.”

“You’ve been miserable.”
“My choice to nurse it, yeah?

“Good god, you hated me.”

“That I did. It was you or Rory and I made him a saint.”

“I let you punish me which is yet another sickness I need to be cured of. That first day when you came out in the uniform and yes sirred me to death, I couldn’t bear it.”

“I enjoyed every minute of twisting that knife, but I think I’m done.”

“So what happens now?”

“I let him go.”

They sat in silence, stirring cold tea.

“I need a fresh cup.”

“Sit. Please.”

Mycroft was grateful that he knew his own kitchen well enough to work the kettle. He was making a cup of tea for his friend.

“Will you go with me? I’m finally ready to see where you put him.”

“I’ll go. Greg will too if we are still speaking.”

“He’ll be right as rain in the morning. A good fight clears the air. Lets you know where you stand.”

He didn’t ask how Morris knew about the fight. In the end, they were a family under one roof. “It’s his turn for awhile. He’s been thinking terrible things that aren’t true. I’ve got to fix it.”

“You can. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“You are letting go just when I begin to realize what you lost.”

“I’m glad that you understand.”

“I did lose someone that I loved very much, but it was long ago.”

“Before Cambridge?”

“No, after.”

“But you never said. We would have heard. Rory could get intel quicker than anybody. Who was it? How did he die?”

“He didn’t die. I lost him.”

“How?”

“He became my butler.”

“Oh, Myc.” Morris’ eyes welled up. “Can you tolerate a hug?”
“I’m practicing.”

“Come on through then.”

Two weary soldiers ended the war.

The tea and biscuits had settled Mycroft’s stomach, and the difficult conversation with Morris had given him back a friend. If Greg didn’t want him anymore, he wouldn’t be completely alone. He had nearly broken even. He stood in front of the guest room door and listened to Greg’s snoring until he suddenly felt tired enough to sleep.

It was cold and empty in the big bed, but he went straight to the village, still stuck on what came next for his people. When Michael came up out of the water, what would Graham do?

Mycroft woke up straining, some fading dream that made him feel heavy and empty simultaneously. He could not get his eyes open and reaching for Greg to find a crisply made bed on the other side spun him back to visceral loss. As quickly as he could, he shifted his mind back to the village. It was the only safe place.

In the shower, his mind turned over the puzzle of this story. It was growing and evolving and challenging him. He had to hang onto it and to take good care of these people that he had made. It was like watching someone through binoculars and suddenly the view sharpened as the focus was adjusted. Seeing razor stubble or a little mole on an ear made them real people instead of targets.

As he let the water run over him, he finally knew what Graham would do. If he’d been thinking clearly, the solution was obvious. Doctor first, friend later, although it was still quite awhile before they became true friends. Mycroft didn’t want an easy peace for them. He wanted the challenge and the fight and a long slow build so that when they came together, it would be earned. He wasn’t sure how he knew this; he had never taken any creative writing classes, but he wanted his characters to come together in increments, many false starts. That was the more honest way.

He dressed hurriedly in clothes from his luggage, packed for a trip that ended abruptly. They were old clothes, at least for him, and Morris had left them unironed. The softness was comforting, nothing starched, nothing binding.

He felt his way down the long hallway to the stairs, not able to look at the closed door. One flight down to his study which was directly below the guest room. He would hear footsteps and the water if Greg took a shower. He sat on the small sofa, the slick fabric chilly. This was not a room of cheer. He lit the fire which softened the harsh morning light. He drew the curtains back and opened the windows, something he seldom did since the antiques needed a controlled environment. He limped around turning on every table lamp.

The entire time, he was not in the study but partly standing in front of a closed door and partly standing in a wooded copse as Graham, but he was also Michael wading into the cold water. Then again, he was himself, thinking a little about ending it all. Greg would be awakened by the shot, he would come down the stairs, he would scream hoarsely, “God no.”

Then he would rock back and forth, cradling his My in his arms and sobbing, “No, baby. I’m so sorry. Oh God, oh God, help me.”

But the cries would only reach the ceiling because God had left the building and there was no hope and no light and no more love because Mycroft had used it all up during the early days. Greg’s supply had not been infinite. Mycroft had broken his most precious treasure by keeping it too close and overusing it.
Then he looked around at the antiques so carefully tended and thought how they weren’t loved at all. Some craftsmen had built them for use and now they were museum pieces, stilted and pinched. If it was meant to end today, if Greg walked out, at least they had some good memories. They had given their whole selves.

Knowing that he was cycling back to an idea he had rejected the night before, he still went down the hall and ran his fingers over the molding until the little door popped open and he had the key. Then he opened the secret cabinet and the sight of the shining and organized guns comforted him. Which one would leave the most beautiful corpse? Where would he place the kill shot? He again envisioned Greg kneeling to hold the pale, still corpse of the husband that he had rejected, turned out into the cold with a broken ankle. Blood ruined the picture in every scenario. He locked up the guns and returned to his study.

He would research poisons. Anthea had his work laptop so that she could type up his notes from the meeting. His home laptop was in the bottom drawer of the desk. He was supposed to journal about his experiences in the British government which would be sealed for fifty years and then enlighten government officials and school children long after he was dust. The last time he had used it was to watch Greg on the CCTV while he wrote his very first love letter. It had postponed the inevitable.

Now to find a poison that would not disfigure him. Dioxin was right out. He read for a long while but something about being in comfortable clothes near a crackling fire made it harder and harder to go that far. If he killed himself, there wasn’t any chance that Greg might leave and miss him and return. If he did it today, he would not be able to support Morris at Rory’s grave. He would not find out if his new frenemy had followed through and sent Ginny Lestrade some treats. And he would never know what happened to Graham and Michael.

Graham was a very strong man and a strong character. He did not obey Mycroft like old Mr. Tinsley or the jolly baker or the wee Lady’s Auxiliary. Graham would just mutter “Bullocks” and do what he liked. Maybe if he were contained somewhere other than Mycroft’s head with all its interruptions but he hadn’t written outside his head in years.

The laptop was there. Mycroft opened a new document. He was rapid in his own strange touch type method, the only reward of an agonizing series of piano lessons. He liked the way his fingers looked against the keys, pale against black. He liked the sound of the keys, the faint clicks, so gentle compared to his old manual back that summer when his father had come home to write ‘implausible’ in red ink across the draft.

“You’re nothing but bones, you narcissistic old prick. I’m alive and somebody loved me once and you can go fuck yourself.”

He typed this at the top of the page. And with the ghost of his father pinned to the screen, he decided to see if Graham would cooperate. He typed the line that had been cycling in his head all night.

_Graham Lester stood in the shadows of the copse at the river’s edge and watched as the new vicar sunk slowly into the cold depths._

_Morris slipped in silently with tray that held a thick stoneware mug of tea with matching pot and a plate of warm biscuits and scones. He squeezed Mycroft’s shoulder but not in the patented Lord Holmes way. “Write it out, Myc. You always were good with words.”_

Mycroft felt love in the food, but of course, it had always been there if he hadn’t been such a cold fish. He ate and didn’t feel nauseous so much as butterflies. Greg would wake up eventually, no sense going down the road of him dying of a sudden heart attack in a locked room. Greg would
wake up and he would come out and they would reconcile or not, but Greg had loved him at one
time and Morris was Myc’s friend again. No one wanted him to die. It was a cheap trick, going
out that way, and way too queening. Might as well put on a tiara and take sleeping pills, lay the
coif down on a pink satin pillow.

Morris had brought him scones with real butter and little biscuits with chocolate and frosting piped
on them and there was whole milk and sugar in the tea with plenty extra in the good stout pot. He
had never seen this service before but it was so right for the village. Graham would make tea for
Michael. Yes, a warming cup of tea to symbolize the possibility of warm friendship. But not just
yet. Michael still had business in the water. That was Mycroft’s last thought in the present for quite
some time.

The young man lowered himself all the way into the dark water. Had it not been early summer,
the dip would have been suicide. But something in the solemnity of the measured steps held
Graham back from stopping him. He was kneeling so that the water swirled around his
shoulders. His voice ebbed and flowed with the current, but he seemed to be pleading for
something. A night of prayers had not brought peace.

Then Graham caught whole sentences clear as day. “If it be your will, Father, let this cup pass
from me. I will go away from the only home I’ve ever known to avoid this temptation. I am
willing, dear Lord, to be separated from a woman who has been a mother to me moreso than my
own.”

A little sob escaped and then he was quiet for a time, but the air vibrated with his struggle. The
light was strengthening by the minute and Graham reluctantly stepped farther away. But Michael
was almost shouting now, his words interspersed with great dragging sobs.

“I want. Oh God, how I want. I’ll resist with your help, but I must have your help every hour. I
am so weak and so lonely.” He bowed his head and the sobs rang off the trees.

Graham became aware of his own body when the trickle of tears down his own face brought him
back. He leaned heavily against a tree, the scrape of rough bark a welcome grounding.

Then Michael scooped great handfuls of water over his head, gasping at the chill. “Into your
hands, I commend my spirit. Show me the way.”

As he rose from the water with his arms outstretched, the sun broke over the trees and bathed the
water in sparkling pink and gold lights. Michael’s ginger hair became a crown of flames, and his
poor and ancient shirt was fully transparent. Graham’s fingers twitched at the sight of a chest
covered in thick ginger hair and peach nipples stiffened by cold. He was thankful that he had
stopped believing in God because he would have needed to stay in the river for days to wash
away the sinful thoughts he was having.

Then the doctor in him took over and he stepped briskly forward as if in the midst of his morning
constitutional and wrapped Michael firmly in his own coat, still warm from his body. It was so
much less than the comfort he wanted to provide, but likely so much more than he should have
risked when his arms ached to pull the young man close.

“What in the devil do you think you’re doing, man? Don’t I have enough people sick with colds
and fevers?” He was talking far too loudly and irreverently for the sacred scene that he had just
witnessed and Michael jerked back, startled.

Mycroft jumped and pushed back from the laptop guiltily as he realized that he was being
watched. Greg stood in the doorway. He was freshly showered. How had Mycroft not heard the
shower? Maybe it was drowned out by the rushing river.
Greg’s damp hair was randomly arranged and his face was dark with stubble. He wore a plain white T shirt and Mycroft blinked because he could see nipples. Greg had on his weekend jeans, tight and faded with a big rip in one knee that needed Mycroft’s fingers inside it. He shifted under Mycroft’s glance, his bare toes seeking purchase on the hardwood. “Hello,” he said, roughing his hair up even more.

Mycroft was frozen, all of the fear that he had pressed down rushing back in. Lukewarm tea and treats now sickly sweet came up into his mouth from a small burp that was nearly a vomit. He inched his wheeled desk chair a little closer to the window. But Greg came over and kissed him on the top of the head and when he looked up into questioning eyes, Greg kissed him lightly on the mouth. He wanted to cling to it, thinking it was the last, but instead he closed his eyes to cement it in his memory.

“You look as rough as I feel, baby. I’m sorry that I was so harsh last night. Are you alright?”

He meant to say yes, but it came out as a whimper.

“We’ll get it all sorted. Don’t worry. We were probably due for a talk anyway. But first, I need to eat. Do you think Morris made lunch?”

Mycroft nodded. He reached for the house phone to call down to the kitchen and found that no words would come out of his throat but the biscuits surely wanted to.

Greg ran a hand down his husband’s cheek and Mycroft felt the quivering in the blunt brown fingers. But Greg seemed perfectly calm as he spoke with Morris. He repeated the menu to Mycroft. “Fresh herb and cheese bread. Spinach salad with warm bacon dressing. Fruit and cheese platter. Orange chiffon cake for dessert.”

He took Greg’s hand when it was held out to him and followed him down the stairs, the pain in his ankle no match for the terror in his heart. He was receiving the calm and gentle courtesy of a man who had decided to leave. Mycroft had been the same with his paramours many times as he escorted them gently away from the rooms where he always slept alone.

His eyes burned as they sometimes did in situations where normal people would cry. But even if he could suddenly be healed and the tears flow, it was the wrong time to do so. Greg would feel only pity and obligation, and if Mycroft truly loved Greg, he would make it easy for him to go.

Greg turned to help him down the last step as his ankle seemed to have reached its limits. There must have been something in his face in spite of his best attempt to let the Iceman take over. Greg pulled him in for a long, tight hug.

“Listen to me, baby. I am not going to leave you. We need to fix some things so that I don’t get that tired again, but we can do it. We saved the world; we can fix this marriage.”

After that Mycroft floated. He wasn’t in his village but he wasn’t present either. He ate what was put before him. He thought that he spoke because Greg and Morris seemed satisfied, but there was a roaring in his ears so that he couldn’t hear himself. He wondered if he was going to faint.

Finally, they were having the cake. Chiffon meant light as a feather and it was like stage eating, nothing actually on the fork. He watched his hands pick up the coffee cup and put it back down in the saucer and straighten the cream and sugar so that the little flowers faced Greg.

Finally, Greg was dabbing at his lips with the napkin. “Is there someplace private we could go? I don’t want our bedroom being a place for heated discussions and bad memories afterwards.”
Mycroft should have been mentally preparing. Where could they go to end things? He did not believe for one minute that Greg meant to stay. “There’s the reception room off the foyer.”

“Excuse me?”

Mycroft turned to Morris. “Is a fire laid in there? And could we have a drinks tray? Thank you.”

Mycroft limped to the front of the house, thinking that he didn’t have one bit of diplomacy left in him. “Here we are,” he said, the stupid sort of thing you said when your world was crumbling.

“I thought that was a closet door.”

“No, this is where we receive people that we don’t want to stay long.”

“I can see why. But now it will be the negotiation room.” Greg was looking at the sturdy but thinly padded furniture, the bland colors, and the absence of knickknacks or art. It was a waiting room.

“Could you light the fire? I’m very cold.” Mycroft stood outside his body and watched the tableau. It might have been any number of meetings he had had in his lifetime of espionage and diplomacy.

Morris kept every room at the ready so the fire was laid and the long matches were in an attractive metal canister, not too attractive however. Greg knelt and struck a match, held it to the kindling, and held his hands to the flame. Early summer but they were both chilled to the bone.

Morris came in with a tray laden with coffee pot and cups, cream and sugar and ice water. Tiny decanters of second rate alcohol and small glasses were already on the sideboard. The smaller the glass, the shorter the stay. Mycroft poured himself a glass of water, but he doubted that he would be able to swallow past the cramps in his throat. He got two pads and two pens from the drawer of the side table and handed one of each to Greg. Thus prepared, he sat back and waited for the guillotine.

Greg fidgeted with the pad and pen then sat it on the coffee table. He cleared his throat but his voice was still husky when he said, “I don’t know what to say. I’ve had some sleep now. Maybe this will all sort itself out.”

“No, I don’t think it will. But I can start by saying that I have never seen you as lesser than I because of your upbringing. Your family is wonderful especially your mother, and I was proud to be welcomed into their home. If I gave you any indication that I felt otherwise, I am truly sorry.”

That little speech had all the warmth of sorbet. Come on, Mycroft, you git. Use the skills but infuse some warmth of feeling.

“You snuck into my closet and replaced my things with more expensive ones as if I didn’t have the sense to buy clothes for myself or my taste wasn’t good enough, but that’s really neither here nor there. What I’m really upset about—“

“I bought you clothes so that I could feel close to you. If you left, I could see you wearing things that I bought you and it would be like I was still in your life.”

Greg was gobsmacked. “You were planning on me leaving? But we would still have CCTV? The Sherlock Surveillance system. I watch you and manipulate you because I love you. God, that’s so…”

Greg sighed and sat back in his chair. He seemed completely stumped by this revelation.
"That's because you are a perv, Mycroft, a voyeur, misanthrope, and freak."

Back to basics. Active Listening 101. "You were saying that what you are really upset about is—"

"Right, I've got to have the goodbyes, love. You can't imagine how awful it was to know you were dead—" Greg swallowed hard. "To see your body on BBC news and to never have that that last word, the last kiss. It hurt, still does."

Mycroft wrote 'needs goodbye' on his tablet. "Goodbye before business trips. I can do that."

"Goodbye every day, My. What if I was the one that didn’t come home?"

Now Mycroft was gobsmacked. Of course, he would want the memory of that last kiss. He was falling through the uncomfortable chair past the security detail in the basement all the way to the center of the earth. Greg in the street, a puddle of blood surrounding him, eyes staring and lifeless. A panic attack beckoned, but he gripped his water glass and drained it, choking when he reached the bottom.

Greg whacked him on the back. "Okay, too strong of an example. One of the reasons that I got married was for goodbye kisses. You all freshly showered and smelling extra nice, your mouth tasting like Earl Grey, mine of coffee and plum jam. Mornings, you know?"

"Our schedules aren't the same, and I don't eat breakfast."

"Then you taste like toothpaste instead. Or maybe it was a stupid idea."

Greg scrubbed his hands through his hair and looked down. It was defeat and Mycroft couldn't bear it.

"It's a good dream, Greg, we can try it. Tell me about other things that you envisioned for our marriage."

Greg took a long time, casting furtive glances at his husband. Mycroft listened to the serene crackle of the fire while a low wail persisted in his mind cupboard.

"Helping each other get ready. You choosing a shirt for me and smoothing down my hair, me straightening your tie and telling you that you look beautiful. Talking about the weather or our itinerary for the day. On Friday's, planning our date night that we never had after that first one."

"We didn't keep that up, did we?"

"I guess I was hoping that you would ask me out sometime. Show me your idea of a good time."

"I don't know what that is."

"Might be fun finding out."

Wasn't it simple now when it was too late? He saw hundreds of things that he could have done better, little things that took less than a minute but would have meant the world to Greg and now it was too late. He was hopeless. Greg would leave.

Greg said very quietly, "If you didn't want me to leave, maybe you shouldn't have put me in the guest room."

Mycroft Holmes was caught, just as he had always feared. If he didn't share his bed and bath with Greg, their marriage was over. If Greg saw what he did in the morning, their marriage was still
over. “Greg, there are things that I do in the loo in the morning that if you saw—“

Greg was leaning forward in his chair now, his voice fast and rough. “I’ve seen and sucked and licked every inch of your body, love. I’m a detective, not as good as your brother but adequate in my own average way. I know that you wear make up to cover your freckles. I know that you shit. I’ve cleaned it off you. And I know that you have your hair colored and that there’s a bottle of Autumn Sunrise touch up under the sink. You get gray around the temples, very distinguished actually.”

Mycroft felt sick at having these foibles spoken aloud. “It’s not any of that.”

“I’m not asking us to strain out a morning loaf on twin toilets, My. I’m asking to be let into the Gentleman’s club of this house. Because right now, the person who sees me off with coffee and a warm smile every morning is Morris, and it’s Morris there with a kind word in the evenings when I come home wet and weary. But it’s you I want.”

Then Greg’s voice broke and his eyes were glittering and Mycroft didn’t know what to do. “Most days I come home feeling like a failure and I thought when we got married, that you’d be standing at the door, and your face would light up at the sight of me. If you were proud of me, I could go on. If you hugged me, you could make the bad go away for the night.”

Greg gave an angry sniff but a few tears trickled down anyway.

“We’ve got all afternoon. Let’s get you moved straight away.”

Mycroft levered himself up, his body stiff from the effects of bad furniture. Greg reached to steady him, and Mycroft took his outstretched hand and pulled him close for a hug. “I am so proud of you, baby. So very proud.”

There was a small hiccupping sob against his shoulder. Mycroft thought about what he liked and rubbed slow circles on Greg’s back. Soon he felt the vibration of Greg holding himself fiercely in check. Had he ever thought about what a hug did for Greg? Mycroft was always clinging to him like a baby monkey to its mother. What did Greg get out of it?

He kept rubbing in circles while he tried to think of something else to do or say. Finally, Greg started to pull away, his body still tense. “Not yet, love.”

Mycroft pulled him back in and held on tighter. He was going to get this right. “I’m sorry for all the hurt, love, but we’re going to fix it.”

Then he felt Greg let go. It was amazing. Mycroft could feel the shift under his hands. Greg sagged against him with a deep sigh. Mycroft moved his hand up and pressed Greg’s head to his shoulder. Greg sighed again and his head was heavy. Mycroft’s husband was drawing comfort from him.

“You need hugs as much as I do.”

Greg sniffled, then whispered. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“The penny just dropped.” Greg stepped back, wiping his eyes. “Every human being on this planet needs hugs, Mycroft. Not all of them deserve hugs, but they all need them.”

“What else do you need that I haven’t been giving you?”
“Praise. Reassurance. Compliments.”

Mycroft was not fond of how easily that answer had come. “But just now, a little better, right?”

“Much better. I’m usually pretty low maintenance, but I let the deficit get too high.”

Mycroft could picture a thermometer chart and his own red zone creeping higher and higher as Greg’s sunk to nothing. “Why didn’t you tell me? You were supposed to tell me.”

“It’s not rocket science, My. Couldn’t you have guessed? Or maybe asked me? I would have welcomed any effort.”

“What if I got it wrong?”

“I would have been thankful for the attempt. Anything to feel like I wasn’t working on this marriage alone.”

Mycroft had sat down again, wincing at the lack of padding. “Greg?”

“Hmm?” Greg had taken his hand and seemed mesmerized by touching each of his fingers.

“If I were normal. I mean, I thought that I needed more hugs and encouragement because I’d never had it before, but you are telling me that everybody needs it.”

“Yes.” Greg lifted his hand and kissed it.

“But even if we were both the picture of mental health, wouldn’t you still have to tell me sometimes what you were feeling? You never said how upset you were and it built and built.”

“I did let it get out of hand, Mr. Have-the-Last-Word Holmes.” But Greg was smiling and it did make it to his eyes.

“I can’t read your mind. I’m not clairvoyant.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Any way you promised that you wouldn’t pull away.”

“Can you forgive me for breaking that promise?”

“Yes, love, just don’t do it again. Please?”

“I’ll try not to if you will help me. Now can we go upstairs and fix it so that I can stay?”

“One more thing.”

“Yes, dear?”

The dear was heavy on sarcasm and Mycroft started to be afraid, but then he felt sure that Greg would like the next part. “I’ve been trying it every day and it fits now. Do you think we could put my ring back on?”

Greg’s eyes were shining and he reached inside Mycroft’s shirt to pull out the chain. He took the ring off and slid it onto Mycroft’s finger. “I Greg, take you My to be my husband in the guest room and the master suite, in old coats and new, --“

So he had noticed. Never again. Mycroft would wear his own clothes to go see Ginny and she
would think him fine indeed.

“With make up or without, with gray or without. You are mine. I love you forever.”

“I promise to always kiss you goodbye—“

His breath left him a minute as Greg’s eyes welled up, but this was a happy cry. He fastened the chain and put it over Greg’s head, the St. Michael’s medal warm and gleaming from his body. “To keep you safe so that you always come back to me. To tell you how beautiful you are and to show you how proud I am and to introduce you to my friends when I get some and to take the initiative in planning our next date night.”

“You may now kiss your husband.”

Greg’s lips were on his, soft and searching. It had been so bloody long since the last good kiss. They kept it going until they needed air. Then they rested their foreheads together.

“Are we ‘us’ again?”

“Yeah. Now I shall move my loofah and toothbrush into your room, and your people will be my people.”

They walked upstairs hand in hand, Greg slowing his steps to accommodate Mycroft’s giant yellow and green ankle. It was the work of thirty minutes to put Mycroft’s fancy dress costumes and heavy winter gear in the guest closet to make room for Greg’s meager wardrobe. Toothbrush, loofah, shower gel, shampoo and conditioner didn’t make a dent in the cavernous en suite.

“Mycroft, love of my life, can’t you trust me with your dark little secret that barred me from your chamber until now?”

Greg’s eyes were sparkly, his manner more confident than Mycroft could remember him being in months. He was dangerously charming.

Mycroft plunged headlong into the icy waters with one deep breath. “Most mornings, I fuck myself in the shower with a dildo.”

“What? I never found one.”

The icy water came to a rapid boil. “The first aid kit has a false bottom.”

“Can I see it?” Greg was actually gleeful, small impish boy or inquisitive chimp excited.

Mycroft was rocking back and forth when Greg returned with the first aid kit. He spilled bandages, tweezers and all sorts of sundries all over the bed to find nothing. Then when he examined it closer, he realized that the side with the big red cross had its own opening and a wee keyhole disguised as a screw. “Hey, it’s locked. Where’s the key, sweetheart?”

Mycroft sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound. “The tip of the Mercurochrome bottle is actually a key.”

Greg took the top off the little red bottle to reveal a small key. “Do they even make this stuff anymore? I think it’s poison.”

Greg’s big fingers had trouble with the tiny lock and key which required a dainty touch. “You go through this every morning?”
“Four out of five business days. I have another one in my room at the club.”

Greg was suitably impressed. “God, it’s huge.”

“You don’t recognize it? The artist viewed our films extensively.”

“That’s me? Purple?”

“Dusky aubergine, he called it, but yes, purple for passion and unquenchable desire.”

Greg’s hands started to shake. “This may be all you have left of it.”

Mycroft was relatively sure that Greg was speaking of impotence, but for once, he stayed quiet and let Greg tell his own story.

“I want you, baby, so bad. I swear I do, but there’s something wrong with my cock. It doesn’t work anymore.”

“Have you talked to anyone about it?”

“There didn’t seem to be a point when you were missing and then so badly hurt, but now all I want is to bend you over this bed and take you. It’s been so long since it was good for us. I haven’t even been able to wank, it just lays there.”

Greg looked up with frightened eyes, and Mycroft could tell that he feared rejection. He was very grateful that they had talked about need already and that he understood far better how to start giving. He patted the bed and Greg sat down beside him. Mycroft took his hand, loving even that contact. “I miss your body, kissing it and touching it. Being close to you, that’s all I ever wanted.”

“You say that now, but after awhile—”

“It’s early days to be giving up. You haven’t talked to a doctor. Most cases can be treated.”

“I’m not taking little blue pills like some old fart.”

“There’s no fart like an old fart.”

“Shut it.” But Greg grinned a tiny bit.

Mycroft started gathering all of the detritus of the first aid kit and putting it back properly. He showed Greg where each bit went and put the dildo back last, locking the little door with a flourish. Then he got up and returned it to its place under the sink. He had held his tongue as long as he could. “Would you consider snogging awhile?”

Greg kicked off his shoes and rolled onto the bed. Mycroft lay beside him. It was strange to be there in the afternoon light, gold and shadow dancing across the bed. They kissed for a long time, deep and slow. There was no split lip or tongue stitches or exhaustion or emotional pain to get between them. For Mycroft, the kisses felt like their first, tentative but with growing promise.

Then a switch flipped and Greg was gripping Mycroft’s hair which felt positively hippyish the way it curled over his collar. Greg rubbed Mycroft’s beard and licked and bit at it, mixing his attack with fierce kisses. Finally, he seemed sated and buried his face in the crook of Mycroft’s neck where the heat from his cheeks was apparent.

“I take it that’s a vote of confidence for the beard.”

“God, yes.”
“I’ll grow it for you, any time we’re on holiday.”

“I need it.”

“I need you. I’ll do whatever it takes, Greg. I swear it.”

Mycroft eased Greg back so that they were on their sides, face to face. Greg’s eyes welled up immediately, slow tears running down his cheeks.

“Is there something else, baby?” He loved calling Greg ‘baby.’ Why hadn’t he done that before? He loved it when Greg used that endearment for him. “Tell me please.”

“I lost hope for awhile. I never thought we would get this far.”

“But you stayed anyway?”

“I love you. I made promises to you.”

“Something has changed, hasn’t it? The bad stuff pulled us closer?”

“Yeah. My cock inside you. That’s biology and lust, passion if you need to sugarcoat it. But this is intimacy. I’m letting you inside my head.”

“It hurts.”

“Yeah, it bloody well does.”

“Can I put my hand over your heart?”

Greg took off his T-shirt and put Mycroft’s hand to his chest. The medal and chain were cold against the heated skin, smooth in contrast to the coarse chest hair. His wedding ring, back in its proper place, clicked against the medal. They both sighed. Everything had slowed down to the low thrum of a heart at rest.

They kissed more. Greg’s hands never ceased playing with the little curls at the nape of Mycroft’s neck or rubbing across his fuzz covered cheeks.

“When we retire, I’m going to look like Rip Van Winkle, aren’t I?”

“You can tuck your beard down your shirt and tie it around your cock to keep warm.”

“You’re the one who slept for fourteen hours.”

After a quiet giggle, Greg kissed him again, tongue moving so slowly that he thought he could feel every taste bud say hello. “Do you think we could do this naked? Not for sex but for reclaiming. If we were dogs, I would piss on you.”

“Thank god, we’re not.” But Greg was standing up to push his jeans down, no boxers. If he seemed nervous, it wasn’t showing.

Mycroft was hard as he always was after kissing Greg, but he truly wanted skin on skin, hugs and kisses and nothing else. How many weeks had it been? After they stripped, Mycroft lined them up, nipple to nipple, his feet a little farther down the bed, Greg resting the top of his feet on his husband’s, his toes clutching and releasing. Rituals still new.

Greg smelled the same—of bread fresh from the oven, coffee, and moderately priced cologne that
Mycro had resigned himself to. He could smell somebody wearing it on the street and get an erection so hard that he had to wank in the car. He did miss the long, hard press of Greg’s erection but he was so thankful that they were reconciled that he could make do.

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Greg’s. They kissed in such a way that they were passing air back and forth and he got dizzy as if it were breath play. He was whispering. “Would it make you uncomfortable if I kissed you everywhere?”

Greg buried his face like a shy child and whispered back, “Would you rub your beard all over me?”

Mycro turned his husband over and kissed the broad shoulders, loving how the tension left them at his touch. Then he nuzzled his chin and cheeks down Greg’s spine. His self consciousness disappeared at Greg’s moans of pleasure. He arched and writhed into the touch always asking for more when Mycroft reverted to kissing or licking.

Mycro moved down to stroke Greg’s sweet ass with his face. Greg nearly rocketed off the bed when Mycroft spread his cheeks apart and rubbed his chin against the tight little hole.

“Oh god, My. You cannot imagine. I’ll have to grow mine out on our next holiday. It’s beard sex. Who knew?”

The soles of Greg’s feet were another revelation, his toes curling in Mycroft's hair, and then Greg flipped over and his eyes were heavy with want. Mycroft fell on the brown nipples, thinking about his village only long enough for the images of Graham washing himself at the pump to fuel his desperation. He licked and nipped and got them as sensitive as he could before applying the wonder beard.

Greg cheered him on, wriggling his hips and grunting. He stroked Mycroft’s hair, twining his fingers in the lush curls at the back. Their sex life had been burdened with secrets, but now they were playful and light. Greg’s enthusiasm was powerful and a little bit funny.

The beard and belly union was quite welcome and Mycroft was relieved when Greg’s delight didn’t wane when Mycroft brushed across his flaccid cock. In the end, it was a body part to love in any state and he kissed and licked at it, giving it a turn before moving on to thighs and balls and knees.

Finally, Greg was quieter and Mycroft was getting a bit sore. He positioned them face to face again. Greg’s eyes were heavy, but he did look at Mycroft. They had stopped looking for awhile, hadn’t they? He stroked his hand over Mycroft’s face. “I wasn’t sure there would be any left. Rubbed off by love like the Velveteen Rabbit.”

“Or your mate Bruce.”

Greg laughed. “He’s not so dapper any more, but he is very much loved as are you. I brought him home with me.”

Greg referred to this place as home. He was going to stay. “You look knackered, love. Much as I should be rested from my marathon, I could sleep as well. But let’s get you sorted first.” He reached down and took Mycroft in hand.

“No, not now. I’ll wank in the shower later.”

“With the Purple Plastic Penis?”
“Indeed. I thought perhaps you’d like to watch?”

“Bloody hell, I doubt it’s a spectator sport. I’ll lend a hand.”

“It’s a plan then, but I’d quite like to hold you first.” Mycroft wrapped his arms around Greg to pull him on top and felt the drowsy weight of him, but it was not heavy. He drifted into a peaceful sleep.
Greg stared at the onion ring. When he had ordered, food seemed like a good idea but he was always either starving or near to puking and starving was not what he felt now.

“You alright?” John asked, chewing very determinedly on a chip.

Greg considered how much to say in a busy pub. His marriage was much improved since the talk they had had on Sunday afternoon. Even a few days of morning goodbye kisses and affectionate homecomings had vastly improved his outlook, and watching Mycroft pleasure himself in the shower had given him hope that their sex life could be adequate if they had to make do with only one functioning cock. His mind wandered back to the sight of the Big Purple, One Eyed, One Horned Plastic Wonder, as Mycroft had buried it deep inside his tight pink hole and worked himself off forcefully and rapidly. Greg had intended to help, but he was glad to have seen the one man show.

“Greg?” John said, half his chips gone. “You went away for a little while.”

“Lots on my mind.”

John licked his lips in a habit that had driven Greg mad once upon a time. “comes with the territory.”

“Territory?” Greg gave up on his basket of grease and pushed it away.

“Being married to a Holmes. All extremes, joy, sorrow, pity, rage but not much routine.”

“Extremes.” Greg snorted. “We had a bad row last week and a long awkward talk on Sunday. Monday afternoon, he fills my office with flowers.”

“Since I’m a Holmes husband, I know you mean that every available bit of your office had real live flowers in it.” John shook his head, a little smirk forming.

“He felt a grand gesture was in order but hadn’t asked me about what kind I liked so he had a dozen of everything sent over. It was a slow day so I walked around the building and everybody took a vase full home whether they wanted to or not. I kept the peach roses.”

“Because they look like him. He is a pretty man, mate.”

“We are so lucky in that regard. My doesn’t know it, but Sherlock on the other hand—“
“He knows it and then some. Arrogant, preening dick.” John paused to take a huge bite of fish. “God, I love him.”

Greg sipped at his Coke and wished it were lager. He needed Dutch courage for what he would have to talk about with John when they were finished with lunch. How did you casually introduce a subject like impotence?

“He wrote me a song one time. I worked a double shift at the surgery and came home to no food, not even milk for my tea, when he had sworn to me that he would go to the shops. I kept it simple. Four things we needed. Milk, washing powder, beans, and bread.”

“He can recite the periodic table from memory but he forgets a simple shopping list.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’ve got your own examples.”

None that Greg would share. He found himself feeling very proud of My just then in spite of the extreme; all of the attention had felt damn good. He didn’t want John thinking that My was inept. That would be disloyal and besides, he liked having picked the better of the two brothers.

“It’s pissing rain and I go out to the shops because he’s still getting over pneumonia, and when I come home soaked to the skin, he’s written a piece. I don’t know shit about such things but I think it’s beautiful and he says that it’s called John’s Theme.”

Greg smiled, something he was doing far more often. “I’m glad, John. You deserve to be loved like that. You’ve got to be to put up with Himself when he’s in a mood.”

“I’m stroppy as hell myself sometimes. Difference is, he seldom notices. I’ve got to do a fair bit of acting to get it to levels that he’ll respond to.”

“I slammed the door in My’s face, watched his heart break as I did it too. I got tired, too tired to even undress myself.”

“It’s not for the faint of heart and we bloody well know it.”

“Then yesterday, I texted him that I was hungry, but we had missed lunch so he sent over enough lunch for the whole team and a few friends from the evidence locker too. ‘Even that rat bastard Anderson,’ he put on the card. Catered from his club. Would have cost me two months pay. I’ve got to be very careful what I tell him.”

“When Sherlock finds out I like something, he gives it to me until I don’t want it anymore.” Greg raised an eyebrow.

“Not that, you pratt. When Weetabix came out with cinnamon Weetos, I lost my mind, had to have them. I came home and Sherlock had bought a case of it, had it delivered. I’ll send you over a box or ten. I’ve eaten so much of it that the smell alone triggers my gag reflex.”

“Being pampered is hard work.”

“Feels good to talk about it. People don’t understand. When I complained, Molly gave me a dirty look. She still has some jealousy issues. Mrs. Hudson pats my hand and reminds me of how worried I’d been when he was missing.” John veered off, remembering a terrible mistake that had happened while Sherlock had been missing, presumed dead.

Greg changed the subject for him. “So now and then, we give ourselves a lunch out. My can monitor us on CCTV and see that we are in a public place for a set period of time. Sherlock can smell you when you get home and know that it was all proper. Aren’t we technically brothers in
“law?”

“So we have a club.”

“Yes, but not a secret one and no dues or permanent building. The Holmes’ Husbands?”

“Happy Holmes’ Husbands. The Three H’s.”

“And the H’s actually stand for?”

“Haunted?”

“Haggard?”

“Horny?”

Greg tried hard, but his face fell.

John had learned too bloody well how to observe. “This lunch is about more than catching up, isn’t it? Why don’t we go back to the surgery? It’s half day on Wednesdays. They should all be gone by now.”

Greg had already asked off for a few hours, giving a doctor’s appointment as his excuse. They took the tube, and he was thankful for the enforced silence of public transport. The surgery was indeed empty, the cleaner gathering up her bag as they came in.

“No rest for the wicked is there, Dr. Watson?” she grinned, showing yellow, crooked teeth. “You would know, Esther.” She laughed at this all the way through the door.

Greg felt that he might jump out of his skin. He was sweating profusely and was reminded of the first time that he had to give a speech in school. Telling one friend about the most shameful thing a man could ever experience was worse than a press conference via Sherlock. Two difficult conversations in one week. Too much for any man. He wanted to do manly things in complete silence. Chopping down trees and digging huge holes in the ground with deadly machines and shouting and breaking dainty figurines and grinding them under his big hulking boots.

But instead of a cold exam table and a paper smock, he ended up in a small office with two desks on opposite walls, piled high with folders. He was in a standard issue office chair with a can of Coke to settle his stomach while John fiddled about on the computer for awhile. He printed several sheets and put them on a clipboard.

“You said you’ve been tired?”

“How would I know? I was born tired.”

“Yes, I’m familiar. But down-in -your -bones -with -an -ache tired?”

“I feel like I’m always catching a cold that never comes.”

John made a few check marks on his papers and then rummaged around in his desk for awhile. He came up triumphantly with three tubes and a packaged syringe and needle for taking blood. Greg started the self talk that usually hid his fear of needles and tried to be amused as John ricocheted around the small office on a wheeled stool. He was like a naughty boy that Mother had taken to work because the nanny was ill.

“Are you able to take a shit every day?”
“John!” This question felt more embarrassing to him than admitting impotence which he had not done yet.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no.’ Another check mark, progress down the list perhaps. John was putting on a surgical glove with a snap, and Greg’s ass slammed shut.

“I’m not doing an exam, mate. Let’s see what the blood work tells us. I’ve got a pretty good guess already. Then if needed, a specialist will probe your happy place.”

“But you don’t know what my problem is.”

“Only one thing would have you this embarrassed, and it’s not necessary to say it out loud.”

“Look at you and the deductions,” Greg said but his voice was rough and he felt the tears burn, way too close to falling.

John cupped his chin and ran the ungloved fingers of his other hand down Greg’s cheek as he looked in his eyes. “There now. It’s going to be alright. You’ve felt bad for a long time, but we are going to make you better.”

A tear ran down and Greg closed his eyes at the shame of it. Still John’s words were very comforting. John’s touch was gentle and he held Greg’s arm and put the tourniquet on and probed for a vein. “I’ll bet Mycroft enjoys these biceps.”

“He does. Lately he’s been way more complimentary since I told him that he had to be.”

“Oh, that. The Holmes’ boys do need training but that doesn’t mean that the compliments when they give them are any less sincere.”

“Sherlock is sincere?”

“Yes, Greg, in the privacy of our own home, he is very good to me. But it always seems like I’m spinning a yarn when I tell the cynics.”

Greg felt the pinch but John had excellent skill and it only stung for a minute. He tried to look away from his arm but couldn’t stop staring as the dark red liquid filled up the tubes. It seemed quite a lot and he imagined himself deflating like a balloon and sliding from the chair down to the floor.

“You can understand my disbelief. He’s been a real git to My who has only tried to protect him. If you could see how he eats his heart out worrying about his little brother. If Sherlock really saw the pain he caused, do you think he would care?”

“Yes, I think he would be ashamed, but trust me, they will have to find that connection on their own. After that nice movie night you had for us, I gave Sherlock a dressing down like you wouldn’t believe and it fell on deaf ears. Unless something happens outside of our control, they’ll stay at each other’s throats to the end.”

John again spun around in his perch and there was the clink of a metal lid on glass and a rustling. Greg started to feel dizzy watching him. John spun back to face him and efficiently pressed on the needle mark with cotton and got the stretchy bandage around it. Then the pressure of the tourniquet was gone.

“So what do you think is wrong with my cock, doc?” Greg giggled at the rhyme. Damn, he was lightheaded. Had he eaten any of his lunch? He couldn’t remember.
The stool flew across the room toward the opposite corner while gloves were removed with a pop and tossed in the bin. There was a sound that Greg should know but his ears were roaring. Then John was back with yogurt and a plastic spoon. “Start with this. I need to listen to your heart and take your temperature and then you can be on your way with a little note that I shall give you. They need to know back at the Yard that you were a very good boy at the surgery.”

John got the thermometer that they used for children that went in the ear since Greg’s mouth was full of yogurt. After getting a reading, John made another check on the list. “What’s that list you’ve got?”

The question flew out along with some strawberry banana culture. John scrubbed at the front of his jumper. Then he zoomed back to the mini fridge and returned with a yogurt of his own, blueberry it seemed. “This is a checklist for hypothyroid or underactive thyroid. When it’s left untreated, symptoms become more severe. One of the end stage symptoms is erectile dysfunction. I’ll wager the Yard’s doctor has talked to you about your thyroid at your yearly physical. More than once.”

“Those pills didn’t do a damn bit of good, John.”

“How long did you take them?”

“A week or so.”

“Same time every day, never miss a day?”

“Sometimes. I mean if I was on a case. Murder doesn’t stop for a little pill.”

“No, but your cock did.”

Greg was feeling nauseous again. The first two bites had tasted amazing but now he felt like the banana flavor was mocking him. A banana could satisfy My better than he could.

“It’s still treatable,” John said with a pat on his arm. “It will take longer because you’ve been a daft prick but it will get better if that’s what it is. But you have to take the pills every day even when you are on a case. Set an alarm on your mobile, carry some in your pocket. Six to eight weeks for improvement if you do as you’re told.”

“Two more months of being half a man?”

“Partial function may return sooner. It varies from person to person. The cock is a complex hydraulic system and the bigger one is, the longer it takes the machinery to get it hoisted.”

There was then a long pause as Greg wavered between shame and pride. Did John remember the big cock that had been his that one time? He seemed very focused on getting the yogurt from the edge of the plastic cup. His ears were red.

“No sense getting too far into it until the blood work comes back this time tomorrow. I can call you with the results and if that is what we are dealing with, you can get your prescription on the way home. Well, in your case, one of Mycroft’s people can get it for you.”

“Is there anything else we can do?”

“There is testosterone replacement therapy. You would get shots at regular intervals if your levels warrant it. The two treatments working in tandem would speed your return to normal, as normal as it gets for blokes like us.”

With hopeful news, all of Greg’s bravado drained away, leaving him weak and shaky. He was
woozily compliant as John took his pulse and blood pressure and then listened to his heart. Greg drew shaky breaths as instructed.

“There now. All of these readings fall in line with my diagnosis; the blood work will only confirm it. Have you been feeling cold lately?”

Greg considered the question. “I think maybe. We keep the house warm for My. In spite of claiming he’s fat, he’s thin as a rail so no body heat. Ordinarily, I’d be sweating at that temperature. Even a fire in the evening sometimes at this time of year. Rich people.”

“Not working stiffs like us going around in our vests and pants and sitting in front of the fan.”

Greg felt stripped down to his underwear. He hadn’t guessed that facing up to his cock problem would be so terrifying. He was feeling worse by the minute.

“Greg, I want you to try and sip on your Coke, okay? Lean back against the wall. That’s it. I’m going to see about getting you home.”

He was faintly aware of John making calls. “Mycroft? It’s John Watson. I know you know that. Force of habit. You’ll be proud that your husband came to me for consult. My best guess? Advanced hypothyroidism. It’s a mildly chronic condition until it’s not. I think he’ll take his pills now. He’s done in though. It’s a very difficult thing to talk about as well as him not telling me that he had a fear of needles. Would you mind to send a car to get him home? I don’t want him on the tube or in a taxi when he’s lightheaded. That would be fine. I’m sure he would appreciate it.”

“Sally? It’s John Watson. Greg Lestrade’s just had an appointment with me and he’s not well. Some sort of stomach bug. He’s quite nauseous. Could you manage without him for the rest of the afternoon? I think he’ll be able to come in tomorrow if you are careful with him. I’m sure you are. No, I wish it was a three pint lunch, but he couldn’t even manage fish and chips. No alcohol at all, I swear it. Tempting, but you would have to ask my husband. Thanks so much.”

Greg must have dozed. He knew that John took the Coke can from his hand and the wall felt quite nice against his cheek just to prop himself up since his head was so heavy. John had drawn blood out of his body so it was very light and it made his head too heavy for his body.

Then Mycroft’s hands were on his face. “Wake up, love. I’ve come to take you home.”

John’s voice murmuring. “A lie down at home wouldn’t be amiss. He’s had quite a shock. I’ll call you both with results tomorrow afternoon. If you could give me a lift to St. Bart’s, I could get these into the lab and perhaps get a rush on them.”

He let Mycroft and John pull him up and guide him to the car. It was nice to let someone else decide things. He had made the big decision and asked for help. The car seats were soft and puffy and reached out for him. Mycroft managed his heavy head, pulling it down on his shoulder. The talk flowed around him.

“When left untreated this long, low thyroid can create a world of problems. Massive fatigue, constant aches and pains, migraines, depression. It’s a wonder he can get out of bed in the morning. You’ll notice quite a difference once his levels come back into line.”

“He’s very brave. I’m so proud of him.”

“He’s quite special. You’re lucky to have found him.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Greg mumbled.
“What’s that, love?” Then My’s lips were at his temple and Greg wriggled himself further against My. “I’m lucky.”

When he woke up, John wasn’t there anymore, but his head was on My’s lap and long fingers had been stroking through his hair. He felt empty of fear and dread. “I slept.”

“You needed to. I had Art drive us around so you could. Are you ready for home now?”

“Just a little longer?”

“Of course. It’s been a lovely afternoon, riding around while petting you. Very peaceful.”

Greg fell back to sleep under his husband’s attention and woke at the crunch of gravel when they finally arrived home just in time for dinner.

The next day, John called and confirmed his diagnosis. “You can start your pills tomorrow. I’m sure Mycroft will help you remember. We’ll begin the replacement injections next week. I’ve ordered the supplies. Call me Monday. You’ll be alright, Greg. Be patient with yourself.”

When Greg got home that night, My was at the backdoor, coat still on, mobile in hand. “I’m so glad. Your whole street, you say? Gracious, that is a lot. But with the best of intentions. Well you should keep it to yourself. It was all for you, my dear. He’s just come in. I’ll hand you over.”

Greg took the mobile while Mycroft took his coat and ancient messenger bag. “Hello? Hiya, Mummy. You alright?”

“Oh, Greggie. I got the kindest letter of apology today from Mycroft’s friend. Almost makes missing our weekend worthwhile. But the presents he sent. Ten kilos of tea, love. The finest I’ve ever tasted and another bag that large of coffee. Your dad loves it; it’s so strong that I’ve got to use half of what I usually would and it would still take the paint off the wall. I’ve had enough to share with the whole street. The gals brought their tins over and we filled them all up and I’ve still got nearly a year’s supply. Orchids too. Every color you might imagine. I hid the ones I liked and give out the rest when they came for the tea. But the chocolate, well, they’re mine alone and I’ve hidden the boxes away where maybe not even a detective could find them. And such flavors that I’ve never heard of. They might put me off but when I taste them, it’s right. So far the sage and cinnamon with curry powder is my favorite, but there’s some with vodka and I get the hiccups every time. I never thought to live so long that foreign dictators would be sending me sweets. That’s your man’s doings, Greg Lestrade.”

She finally drew breath.

“I’m glad, Mum. You deserve all of that and more. You might be getting all sorts of surprises. He adores you.”

“When can you come back?”

“Soon, sweetheart. This Sunday, we are taking Morris to the cemetery, but soon. We both want to see you and sleep on the new sheets.”

“I know that you’ve just walked in the door. You get your hello kiss from your fellow and I’ll talk to you soon. I’ve got to go have another chocolate. I love you, baby. Bye bye.”

Greg was overwhelmed by the wealth of buttons and handed the mobile back to My. “Thanks, love. She’s over the moon and getting to be the star in her neighborhood. I’m glad she’s keeping the chocolates. There were times we couldn’t afford that and she used to crave them. Homemade fudge isn’t the same thing although hers is heaven.”
“She won’t go a day without chocolates. I promise you, Greg.”

Then Mycroft put a hand hard around his waist and pulled him close. “Missed you today.”

They kissed deeply, still not over the scare of the past weekend. “Did you get my pills?”

“Yes, and they will go up in the bath. Thirty minutes before breakfast the chemist said so you can take them before your shower, and I’ve bought you the nicest little pill case with an alarm which I have set to the time that you need them for when you might be out on a case. It’s even waterproof.”

Greg sighed. How could something so awful as taking pills make him feel good inside. It was Mycroft looking after him. He had felt more married in the past few days than the all the months gone by. All of the things that he thought were too small and stupid to mention had made a big difference for him, and My was far more confident now that he had specific tasks and duties to carry out. The best part was that he didn’t feel as if My was following a script. He had been able to take suggestions and make them his own so that it felt natural. His pert little bottom had a swagger to it now that he knew he was making Greg happy.

Morris loved giving them breakfast and had outdone himself with low calorie treats that tempted My into eating. Fresh fruit cut into shapes and yogurt cheese with sweet herbs and tiny egg white omelets. He had opened the breakfast nook, another bit of the house Greg hadn’t seen. The morning light shone in on the small pine table where the brightly colored dishes gleamed. There were the smells of coffee and bacon and Mycroft’s cologne, freshly applied. Morris hummed sometimes, the radio tuned in the kitchen to a retro program of big band music.

My read the paper while Greg watched him. The morning sun shone on his damp hair. He would go back upstairs after Greg left and style it and apply his freckle concealer, the term he preferred to makeup. Morning light glistened on the ginger curls, untamed by product. He had a short dressing gown which he wore over his trousers, but the modest V of it gave a tempting glimpse of chest hair. Sometimes Greg slipped his fingers inside there while they kissed goodbye. The kisses tasted just like he had hoped they would. Earl Grey and jam and My’s love.

There had been so many changes and improvements during the week that Greg had forgot one of their negotiations until My woke him Friday before the alarm. “Do you know what day it is, love?”

Greg nuzzled against My’s chest, his favorite pillow. “It’s Friday.”

My cupped Greg’s bare ass. “It’s Fuck Me Friday.”

Greg was fully awake and out of the bed. “You mean it? I really can?”

“We had a gentlemen’s agreement to that effect.” My slid from under the duvet to reveal a magnificent erection and waggled his ass a bit as he went toward the shower. “Take your pill and then you can have your lolly.”

Greg dutifully took his pill; it was tiny and tasted sweet. Was John lying to him with a placebo? He would ponder this later because My was bending over the sink to fetch the first aid kit and his ass was begging to be grabbed. Instead of a squeal of surprise, My groaned and pressed up into Greg’s hands. He got the little key, fussied with the lock, and then removed the lovely purple lolly.

“Do we have to go through all this, My? Now that I know, maybe we could just leave it in the shower?”
“Morris,” they said at the same time.

“I can’t bear to have it staring him in the face,” My said. “Well, not literally but—“

This was hilarious at dawn o’ clock. Greg felt a little pee dribble out and hurried to the toilet. My was already in the stall, slicking the Big Purple with conditioner. “I have the softest hole in all the realm.”

“Don’t be funny until I get done, My.”

“Be glad that you can. My eyeballs are floating.”

“I’ll trade you places.”

“Sorry, baby, that was me not thinking.”

My looked worried but Greg turned on the taps and then helped My sit on the marble bench. He was looking forward to the time when My’s ankle was healed and they could try more positions, but My on the edge of the bench with his good leg over Greg’s shoulder was no reason to complain. Greg missed his own hard length desperately and yet, without his own need pounding away, he was able to focus completely on My with a clear head, to notice the large dark freckle to the left of his cock just above the hairline.

There was a meditation in watching his own brown and gnarled fingers move carefully in and out of the pink hole, the squelch of them loud over the rain forest setting on their luxury shower head. Hypnotic rivulets of water ran down the canyon of My’s thigh and groin. He rested his head on that thigh for a minute and snaked out his tongue to damn the drops which ran into his mouth. The rosy length of My pointing at the ceiling was like a huge sky scraper from that angle.

Greg worked in a third finger, loving the grunt that always accompanied it. Rituals with far more meaning to him than the bread and the wafer. My’s body was Greg’s tea, his chocolate, his reason to keep going. My took the purple monster in with an eager thrust. Greg still had questions about why My needed it in addition to him but for this time while he was out of order, it served them well.

Once he had a rhythm going, he took My’s cock in his mouth, but he didn’t feel especially coordinated enough for lots of bobbing about while wielding the purple play thing so he just sucked as hard as he could, feeling the strain as My tried not to push in farther. Greg felt it all, the push and pull of the dildo, the quivering tension of My’s sweet cock, and the water trickling down his back and cleft to drip to the floor. My had trained himself to come quickly and silently, but Greg stayed on him until every last bit was sucked away. He eased the tool out and put it on the floor where they could clean it as they cleaned themselves.

My was panting, his head lolling against the wall of the shower. Greg pushed the dripping curls off his forehead. “Alright, baby?”

He moaned and put his hand on Greg’s neck to pull him in for a kiss.

“Rest here while I scrub myself and then I’ll tend to you.” Greg snuck in a few kisses to My’s damp beard. He would miss it like a friend when My had to shave it in a few day’s time.

He hadn’t got off and that was something that My always made sure happened, but his body still tingled at the loofah working over it and his face enjoyed the scratch of the thick Turkish flannel. There was the spice of his shampoo and the shower gel that My now shared with him. He hurried because he was going to give My the best shower of his life, and he wanted ample time to do so.
He shampooed My’s hair, thinking of how he would miss the longer curls when they also went. My tilted his head appreciatively as Greg massaged his scalp and neck. Then he scrubbed down his husband’s back while My rested against his chest; he gave the high, tight little ass a good scrubbing as well. He worked lather down the long muscled legs and between toes as bold and sensitive as fingers. My’s weary cock got a gentle rinse since it was bound to be overly sensitive. Greg tickled his fingers down My’s long arms; he still loved that best. Then Greg gave himself the treat of sucking My’s nipples before he soaped them, his tongue pushing the wet hair aside to bud them for a scrape of his teeth. He shampooed My’s pelt of chest hair as he had the hair on his head, loving the feel of lather in the thick curls and My’s hum of pleasure when Greg kneaded his pecs.

Then they stood together under the spray for one final rinse, hugging and pulling apart, the squeak of wet, clean skin, soft hair against coarse hair. A careful tiptoe across the floor for Greg to put the seat of the toilet down and prop My up there, drying him with the same attention with which he had washed him. He ruffled his hair with the towel, enjoying the look of a wild man before it was put away for a day’s deskwork. When he rubbed the towel down My’s legs, he realized that his toes were still curled. “Was it good, baby?”

My laughed. “Un-fucking-believable.”

My almost never swore when he was himself and Greg didn’t know enough other languages to be sure if My’s other characters did so this was an especially good review and he felt a little taller at having properly rogered his husband even when he was working with his third leg tied behind his back.

“Happy Fucking Friday,” Greg said, feeling cheeky as hell.

My remained slumped on his perch while Greg lathered his face and took the razor to it. He knew he looked good with the towel slung low on his hips and his skin flushed from the heated water. My’s eyes followed every stroke of the blade that cut dark paths through the white foam. His pink tongue licked slowly at his lips and there were tremors in his resting cock.

“I take it you like my shaving.”

“Yes.” A sigh and a repositioning.

Greg felt like a scone fresh from the oven and that at any minute, My would lunge for him and devour all of the buttery, lightly drizzled goodness of him. Desire. His belly grew warm and heavy. My didn’t care about the wonky cock. Greg was wanted.

When it was time for the aftershave, he reached into his assigned space in the cupboard below the sink but My was behind him then, removing his towel. Greg watched in the mirror as My took a bottle from his side of the cupboard and poured a small amount in his hands and then rubbed them together. His long pale fingers caressed Greg’s cheeks and throat, then wandered down his chest to his belly and disappeared below the mirror’s reach to slide down thighs until the hair and goose pimples stood up and begged. Greg knew that he smelled better than he ever had in his life, and the fact that he also smelled just like My was going to keep him close the entire day.

My put a little more on his hands and rubbed Greg’s shoulders then down his back to finally cup and rub his ass. Then he buried his nose between Greg’s neck and shoulder, and they swayed, Greg’s eyes still watching the contrast of his tanned skin against My’s flushed pink body. “I want to lay up against you for hours with your cock between my thighs.”

“Mmm. I want to bite and lick your arse until you beg me to put my tongue inside you. I’d fall asleep rimming you and wake up in the dark to do it some more.”
“I need to get dressed, love, but put that on your schedule for the weekend. While you are at your desk, call down to the kitchen and see that Morris has a pound of sausages ready. I could eat my own weight in meat.”

“I would give my inheritance to watch that, shiny grease dripping down your chin, jaw working, naughty little tongue peeking out now and then.”

Greg shook his head to clear it; there was a burning sensation in his thighs and he hoped it wasn’t an allergy to My’s exotic cologne. He had to close his eyes to tear himself away from the mirror and the huge hands that were teasing all over him.

He dressed hurriedly, but they were actually on schedule to have breakfast at the usual time. His stomach growled indignantly. He had been skipping meals at work from the nausea of nerves as well as the stifling heat of summer finally showing herself in the city. Now it was time to take his life back. In another of their negotiations this week, they had agreed that the strict food regulations could be gentled Friday through Sunday. Morris had been elated.

My languidly pulled on his short dressing gown but no pants or trousers. The burgundy silk stopped mid thigh. Greg couldn’t be sure if the fabric lent color to his cheeks or if he was actually embarrassed at what he was about to do. The loose knot of the sash begged to be untied by the ‘accidental’ snag of a finger, but Greg kept his promise to get them both to work on time, one he regretted.

Morris’ cheeks were flushed with the pleasure of making breakfasts again and of the freedom to go outside the three hundred calorie mark. He slipped out of character occasionally as he brought their plates. Bacon and cheese omelets, a deep yellow from the yolks, after days of the egg white dishes. “It’s turkey bacon, Myc, so don’t get your knickers in a twist although you don’t appear to be wearing any.”

Greg shouted with laughter, but My simply crossed his legs the other way in a pretended huff. The omelet was kept company by sausage links, small cubed potatoes fried to golden brown (in olive oil, they were assured) and thick slabs of homemade wheat toast browned on both sides in the same skillet. On the table, they had clear bowls with a citrus fruit salad and the scones Greg had been imagining, still steaming in the morning sun. These were better than his imagination for they had plump blueberries in them and a heavy layer of frosting. Morris had made iced coffee for Greg, and he drained the glass before he even started on his meal.

My still looked a bit shell shocked but did his meal justice under the watchful eye of his proud husband. He chewed slowly, waving his fork about, looking out at the garden and the birds getting the bulk of their work done before the day got sweltering. He glanced at the newspaper beside his plate but did not open it. Finally, he glanced up at Greg, the seducer replaced by shyness. “I’ve planned a date for us tonight.”

“You have?” Greg was happy, chuffed out of his mind.

“Nothing too ambitious yet and a bit of a copy cat. Pizza Express but we’ll have a table this time and be able to listen to the music. Maybe we can finish the evening with some of our post shave ideas?” My rubbed his hand over Greg’s.

“Hell yes. Well done, love.”

My beamed and Greg didn’t mind the giving of praise at all. The time had flown so Greg had to take his scone with him wrapped in a paper napkin. They did not stint on the goodbye kiss though. Greg swept his tongue firmly over My’s, savoring the blended flavors of bacon and coffee and stinging citrus and salty butter. “I love you so much that I want to take you with me. You
could see Walt and fuck with Anderson’s mind and take me to lunch although I doubt I would eat much after this amazing breakfast.”

“We’ll have Take Your Husband to Work Day some other time, baby,” My said. “Work hard so the day goes fast and we can get on with our date.”

Then Greg was out the door, feeling special and powerful and lucky as hell. He came home ten hours later feeling ragged and smelly and defeated, but My was there and gave him a restorative kiss, his face flushed with excitement. He seemed to understand that Greg was hot and sticky and that hugs were right out. “Tepid bath ready and waiting, filled with cooling mint and eucalyptus. Straight from the bath to the limo. My date, my car.”

“Clothes?” Greg asked, trying to be cheeky.

“I can choose something if you like.”

“Yes, please.” Greg stripped off as he went up the stairs, finally leaving the whole sweaty mess in a pile by the bedroom door.

The bath felt great; he was nearly shivery when he submerged himself all the way. The sweltering crime scene and the surrounding area that they had walked for hours began to fade. He gave himself up to being led. My was in charge and suddenly Greg was ready and alert. Patting himself dry, he called through the half open door, “Should I shave again, love?”

“No, I like your beard as much as you like mine.”

Greg put on the prescribed outfit, chinos and a tan button down with a wee dark brown pinstripe, the sleeves already rolled up for him. The trousers buttoned easily and he realized that he had lost a pound or so since the last time. The cotton felt cool against his minted skin. My fluffed Greg’s hair up into spikes with a bit of product. He rested his cheek against Greg’s as they glanced in the mirror above the bureau. My’s pale blue shirt with navy pinstripe, the same one that he had worn on their first date. It was Greg’s detective skills that recalled this fact and not his husband skills. Nevertheless, he met My’s gaze in the mirror and said, “Hey, beautiful.”

The light that shone there in dark blue eyes was his hope of more. They had a chance every day to make a better life for each other. My was turning his wedding ring on his finger. He was newly proud of it after not being able to wear it for over a month. Greg lifted his hand and kissed the ring finger.

“We should go, Greg, but I haven’t overplanned. We’ll definitely have time for duvet diving when we get home.”

They snogged in the car, the air conditioning set on goose bumps. My stopped things when his erection became obvious and wrapping a bottle of cold water from the minifridge in a bar towel, he iced himself. He giggled through his discomfort.

Their destination was reached with barely an awareness of movement, the car running smoothly and silently through heat weary streets. The stench of asphalt and the shimmering heat waves assaulted them but they were quickly into the dark, cool, garlic scented haven of Pizza Express. Greg didn’t even know which one for awhile and he enjoyed not having to know. Someone else was on guard; he felt the tightness in his neck ease.

My put his hand in the middle of Greg’s back as the server led them to a reserved table to the right of the stage. Live music, a treat Greg hadn’t indulged in for countless months. But dinner first. While he wasn’t nauseous, he wasn’t at all hungry either. The heat had sapped his appetite.
“I thought we would go light and mild tonight and then perhaps have room to share a dessert?”

“That sounds great. Could you order for me?”

“Of course, love.” My didn’t even consult the menu when the server returned so he must have
checked one online in advance. This pleased Greg to no end.

“We’ll have the mozzarella, tomato, and basil salad for starters and then the pizza margherita.”

“Excellent choice. It’s my favorite of our pizzas.”

Greg felt proud that his husband had chosen well.

“To drink?”

My looked at Greg and it was nice that he didn’t assume.

“Club soda with a twist of lime.”

“The same for me and would you make sure there is a slice of cheesecake for us as well.”

Greg closed his eyes and let the cool air flow over his skin and the sounds wash over him. He had
no duties until Monday, nothing but their visit to Rory’s grave and that was something he wanted
to do for Morris. There was some come and go around the small stage, instrument cases dropped
off, set lists put on each music stand.

My handed over a print out with the day’s date. It was about the band they were going to hear, not
just the usual short blurb from a poster but the band’s homepage with biographies and their own
statement about their style and evolution. Research. Adorable.

Other than happy comments about the food, they didn’t seem to need talk. Greg had talked
himself out at the crime scene where extra teams had been involved and as first division on the
scene, the coordination had fallen on him. Now it was quiet, the other customers and the servers a
hum of white noise that didn’t touch the serenity of their corner. Greg could have slipped under
the table for a lie down.

They shared the cheesecake and an iced coffee. Greg desperately wanted a cheesecake flavored
kiss but was conscious of the closeness of the tables and their prominent table by the window. My
did look deeply into his eyes, pride and confidence in himself and their love shining there.

The tuning up brought Greg back from a daydream about being naked on cool sheets. He checked
off the instruments—saxophone, trumpet, trombone, electric bass, standard drum kit, and possibly
keyboards. The baby grand would always be there but might not be in use with this group. As
always, when he was near live music, his fingers twitched. He missed his guitar. It was in the
closet of his study and summer would be a good time to take it up again.

My was quivering with anticipation which seemed strange to Greg, but he was glad that they
could share the enjoyment of the music, something new to add to their bond. The first piece was
excellent, the band jumping right in with energy and fierce concentration. Greg wiggled in his
seat, his head nodding to the rhythm. Occasional glances at My showed him in tiny undulations of
his narrow frame. Greg was glad when one went around the back of his chair, and he then felt it
would be okay to inch his chair closer to My’s until they were sitting side by side at an angle
toward the stage. His hand hidden between their bodies and the table cloth, Greg rested it low on
My’s thigh.

He really liked this band not just for their talent but for their attitude. When the finished the first
song, they didn’t fish for praise but looked to their instruments for adjustments and gave each other those little grins that meant they were feeling it and would enjoy this performance along with their audience.

The saxophone player stepped to the mic. His ginger dreads made him look like a cross between a chrysanthemum and a muppet. “A bloke came to us this week with a challenge. He wanted us to write a song for his anniversary. Now we don’t write to order; the patronage system died out a long time ago in this country.”

He let the audience chuckle appreciatively as he fiddled with the reed on his sax, getting it just right. “But may I say, that the size of his donation gave us the liberation to consume some libation and cement an affiliation with this cat in order to perform some prestidigitation and compose this dedication.”

The audience clapped loudly as Greg did. My was not clapping. He had gone pale and still, the arm against Greg’s back had a tremor to it. Greg saw his teeth clench against his bottom lip. “You alright, baby?”

My nodded and swallowed, and Greg was caught up in the movement of that long throat. Maybe they could sneak out early and in the dark, quiet limo, he could run his tongue all the way down that slim paradise.

The sax player continued as his band mates got a bit restless. “Almost done, kids. We are not a blues band, but I think you’ll understand why we call this little tone poem ‘Newlywed Blues.’ Greg, this is for you.”

The man looked over to their table. Greg. Was that him? My smiled nervously and nodded. Then the sax began, playing one single note. He held it until it vibrated in Greg’s throat and spread all through his body, out into his arms and legs, buzzing his heart and humming against his forehead. When it was getting squirmy, he began to embellish with runs and trills that Greg could see hanging in the air as curlicues and shimmering spirals that fell to the floor and shattered like fireworks. The bright, happy music was love and he started to relax into it.

But the sax began to balk, the notes didn’t finish, and finally there was a squawk. The man began to struggle with his instrument as if a bird were trapped inside. Greg worried. Had My made them do something that they didn’t want to? They were a very good band; was it going to be awkward? Would the audience blame them?

Then the trumpet came in and with his wawa on, he talked to the sax about its tantrum. The trumpeter was just a kid, John’s size but as thin as Sherlock, dark hair looking like it had been cut with a knife, jeans and high tops from a charity shop, but when he played, he was royalty. The trumpet scolded and pleaded and nagged getting shriller to the point of pain from the bright, tinny sounds. The sax’s voice got lower and hoarser and broke several times. There were starts and stops and competitions of holding the notes out. Then suddenly it was in sharp focus; it was them, My and Greg, fighting for power, and hurting each other. Their needs were clashing and cutting, but they weren’t in sync.

The piano came in, notes clashing, running up and down from high to low hyperactively, in a different tempo than the sax and brass. It would have been an elegant piece on its own but it was competing with the other instruments for attention. Sherlock, all black and white and beautiful and dangerous.

Then the trombone, low and mellow and echoing the sax and brass but a few beats behind, trying to calm them, trying to slow them down. Morris with his food and kitchen and comfort. The voice
of reason, the heart of their home.

The volume was growing and the dissonant chords tangled, creating tension and even fear. Frustration was all over the faces of the band and the audience members as Greg looked around. My was sitting ramrod straight, his arm gone from behind Greg’s back, his eyes straight ahead. Greg searched under the table for his hand and held it. Their marriage was being played out on stage and it stung.

The electric bass came in and sassed at the others and there were pauses in the cacophony while they listened to it laying down a line for them to follow, but in the end they refused. John, the peacemaker, wanting everyone in line, skills honed by a chaotic childhood. Even after the other instruments turned away and kept on at their striving, the bass line could be felt, bubbling underneath, present if needed.

The drums came in like thunder, crashing and pounding. The cymbals were the lightning flashes. Greg wanted to cover his ears. His stomach was roiling with the power of it, and the loud noises were gunfire and the slam of doors and the jet engine of an airplane and it hurt. He was fully exposed by this music.

My was a private person and he had done this to try and please Greg, and it was wrong for them. My did not do public displays of affection. Greg had pushed him too far. My had given him all kinds of private loving with the goodbyes and breakfasts but this was over his limit and there would be hell to pay. He didn’t want My hurt or exposed. At the same time, he desperately wanted this to be real, the song and the anniversary and the public claiming.

Greg was panting with the continued clashing of the instruments and he looked to see people squirming in their chairs. He could see shuffling of feet, restlessness, discomfort, even pain for a few with sensitive hearing. He was the cause of it. My was still staring straight ahead, no eye contact, nothing but hands clenched tight under the table. Greg squeezed three times, but My didn’t squeeze back. Instead he turned, worry in his eyes. He pulled Greg’s hand away from under cover and kissed it and then kept their hands clasped on the table top.

Something changed. The drums and bass got together and held their tempo firmly; the trombone slid in beside them. The low, warm beat was something to hold onto. The sax and trumpet were slowing, their taunts at each other becoming softer and intermittent. The piano settled down, followed the bass section. It was music now with a random tantrum thrown in.

There was a pause, sax and trumpet turning to listen to the other instruments. Then they began to play together. Greg saw chords of blue and brown intertwine into chains that flowed from the bells of both instruments, weaving themselves with each other and then with the whole band. He unclenched. My squeezed back four times. ‘I love you, too.’

One by one the others dropped out until it was just the sax and trumpet, fully connected like one hybrid instrument. The two musicians turned to each other and their eyes smiled; they were playing for each other now. The wild man and the kid made beautiful by love. Then the trills and furbelows lessened until finally they were playing the same note, the two sounds were as close to one as two instruments could be. It was the note from the beginning of the piece and Greg felt it again in his forehead, but growing softer this time until it faded although he could still feel it resting against his skin like a kiss.

There was a pause long enough for them to hear kitchen and traffic sounds. Then the applause was crashing all around with whistles and stomps and finally chairs pushed back and the crowd on their feet. Greg and My stood as well. Greg’s hands burned from the hard claps, his body pleasantly tired from the musical journey.
The sax player took the trumpeter’s hand and they bowed. Then they pointed back to their bandmates who looked worn but pleased with themselves. They bowed as their instruments allowed, the drummer inclining his head and waving his sticks appreciatively.

The trumpeter returned to the safety of the group as the sax player stepped to the mic. Little flickering of applause continued as people sat back down. “I hope that will serve, Myc.”

My nodded vigorously, his nails digging into Greg’s palm.

“Why don’t you blokes stand up and give us a kiss? Myc and Greg, married six months.”

The crowd chanted, “Kiss kiss kiss kiss.”

Greg thought of royal weddings and balconies and then he thought of nothing but My’s lips which had come down on his and My’s tongue in his mouth, cheesecake and coffee flavors blending. My took his time and underneath the pleasure of the kiss was the growing delight of the crowd, whoops and claps and laughter. Greg wasn’t a secret anymore.

They sat just before shaking legs gave out, and My buried his face in Greg’s neck. Accustomed to appearing before kings and princes but it was a crowd at Pizza Express that had made him shy.

“Thank you so much, sweetheart. Best date ever.”

The rest of the show went by in a happy haze, My stealing kisses now and then and clinging to Greg’s hand unless either of them needed a sip of drink. Afterwards, the sax and trumpet player came to their table and sat down, tired and sweaty from a job well done.

“Montgomery Johnson, Mojo to my friends,” the sax player said holding out his hand to Greg.

Greg pumped it like a fangirl. “Greg Lestrade, and that was amazing and gorgeous.”

“Thank your man there. When he talked about your love and your struggles, it cut through all my pride about writing for money. We’re chuffed about what we came up with, Brass and me.”

Brass nodded and stroked the shadow of a mustache.

“It was for you chaps but we put some of our own business in there too. We’re taking our share of your commission and putting it in our honeymoon fund.” He leaned over and kissed the boy on the temple.

“I know you think I’m a cradle robber, but he’s well past the age of consent.” They shared an ornery grin.

“Fucking Dorian Gray, he is. Stays pretty after all these late nights and my face is a road map of every drink and bad gig.” Greg thought his caramel colored skin was beautiful but didn’t say so.

“Let’s get you fed,” My said, signaling a server. “We need whatever they would like to order and if you would tell the rest of the band that they can get what they need whenever they are done tearing down. I appreciate your trouble in staying open a little longer.”

He slipped a bill under the server’s order pad that made her eyes bulge out. “Of course, sir.”

They had the place to themselves and My asked several questions about the music itself. Mojo was a storyteller and talked about the evolution of jazz in the UK. Greg listened to cadence of their voices rather than picking out words and ideas. Brass grinned at Greg and nodded. He was the silent partner too. “We’ve got a cd of tonight for you, a rough cut to have right away and in a
“week or so, we’ll send you a proper mixed version with a customized label.”

“I’d like that.”

As Mojo’s low voice bubbled beside them, oiled by whiskey, Brass scooted closer to Greg.
“Nights like this make all the shit and the conflict worth it. It’s not easy to love brilliance but if you can stay in the fire, you’ll come out golden.”

“Gold and brass.”

“Bold as,” he said and took back a shot of whiskey with a practiced twist of his wrist.

Finally the food came and My stood up. “Gentlemen, I’ll leave you to your meal. I have promised Greg some duvet diving.”

Greg blushed furiously as he shook hands with both of his new friends. He couldn’t make eye contact at first but Brass piped up, “We call it spelunking. It’s dark in the cave but always warm.”

Now My was blushing and Greg led him gently to the waiting limo. They were hungry but only so much could happen in the car so they chose to wait. Still Greg unbuttoned My’s shirt enough to slip his hand in and keep it over My’s heart as they disciplined themselves to slow, soft kisses.

The bedroom seemed very far away as they climbed the stairs. Shirts tossed over the railing floated past the banister to the floor below. Belts slid down the steps with a soft clink. Greg had his hands down the back of My’s pants, squeezing that high, sweet ass for all it was worth, as they paused for breath on the landing and then more submarine snogging. “God, I love your ass.”

“I love every fucking part of you,” My said, the swearing making Greg laugh as it always did.

In the bedroom, Greg got everything around My’s ankles and couldn’t wait so he knelt and got My’s cock in his mouth while still removing his shoes. He thought of Mojo and Brass and wondered if they heard music when they made love. Their songs still played in his head as he sucked and teased and took My deeper than he had been able to in awhile. This was his instrument to play and he knew it well.

My came with a triumphant shout loud enough to make the table lamp buzz. Greg finished removing trousers from legs now limp with satisfaction. Then he stripped off his own kit and cuddled up to My and the wonder beard. After a respectable amount of time, My went spelunking. There was no rush as he kissed and licked and rubbed his beard all over Greg’s tight hole, moving onto his balls and the space between, fingers tickling along Greg’s cock. No pressure to perform, just worship.

Greg missed his cock desperately but there was a new tingling in it as My worked him over. There was pleasure to be had while they waited for it to come back online. Finally, My returned to Greg’s mouth for kisses and Greg slotted My’s semi hard cock between his thighs as promised. “Baby, you make me so happy,” he said and finally it was completely true.
Visiting Rory's grave with Morris stirs up old guilt in Mycroft.

Word Count: c. 9874

Warnings: New readers, this is miles outside canon. Just two fortysomething married guys trying to sort it out.

Sunday dawned blue and clear. After tea and toast that none of them really wanted, they took the limo to the cemetery. Art had volunteered to drive them when he knew the nature of their visit. Mycroft was hoping to keep him on longer than the usual rotation.

As they drove, Mycroft was thankful for Greg’s compassionate presence because he was at a loss. Memories of Rory came with crushing guilt that brought him to the edge of a panic attack, his vision graying. Images of Rory’s sparkling eyes and horsy laugh were always followed by that last look at him, his face unrecognizable from the torture. He came to Mycroft in nightmares sometimes and asked why. There was no acceptable answer other than failure. Morris’ forgiveness had not lessened the guilt at all.

This morning, he could not visit his village to survive the pain. Reality was sharp and sickening under the blue sky, like cutting oneself and feeling the pain a minute after. He didn’t deserve the comfort of Lawton. Every bit of pain and grief he got at the graveside was deserved.

He had come once a month since the funeral to ascertain if the grounds and the stone itself were being properly maintained. There were flowers delivered weekly in the temperate months and greenery such as wreaths during the winter. It wasn’t nearly enough.

The three men walked slowly toward the chocolate brown stone, smoky quartz that sparkled in the sun like Rory’s eyes used to, like Greg’s did now. “It’s your day, Morris. Tell us what you need,” Greg said.

“I’ll go on ahead, but I’ll call for you when I’m done. Not sure my old knees will work after being on the ground.”

They watched as Morris knelt, uncaring of his best black suit. He was thin and angular, a smudge of charcoal against the shimmering stone. There was a massive arrangement of daisies, but they did not hide the name or the age, younger than Greg or Mycroft when he died and he had been gone eighteen years. As Greg’s hand slipped into his, Mycroft considered the loss of his husband and the grief washed over him until he thought he would cry out. Greg had already faced such a death; Mycroft had caused that pain when he stormed in to get his people out and didn’t come back.

Morris buried his head in his hands and his shoulders shook. Greg let go of Mycroft’s hand to make slow circles on his back, but Mycroft took a step away. He didn’t deserve comfort especially not Greg’s when Morris was here alone. He couldn’t bear Morris crying and walked over to kneel
beside him. Then he was making slow circles on Morris’ back, but there weren’t any words that seemed appropriate.

The contact pulled a fresh burst of grief from Morris and Mycroft felt it in his pounding heart and churning stomach. Here was the pain he had caused. Here was the loneliness and isolation and grief that could not be washed away by tears. He was holding it in his arms. Then Greg was on the other side and Mycroft felt the burden cut in half. Greg always knew what to say except when it came to his own needs.

Finally, Morris quieted and gave out a ferocious snuffling sound. Greg handed over tissues after keeping one for himself. Mycroft was ashamed that he didn’t need one. After blowing his nose several times, Morris took a clean tissue and dabbed at Mycroft’s shoulder. “I just got this back from the cleaners for you and I’ve snotted all over it.”

“No matter, I hate this suit anyway.”

Then they were laughing but Mycroft looked around at where they were and said, “This is most unsuitable.”

That set them off again and fortunately, most people were at church services so early on a Sunday. Greg hugged Morris to him and looked over his shoulder to check in with Mycroft who put on the Iceman’s tea and crumpet face, his ‘Aren’t we having a lovely time?’ face because it wasn’t about him at all but about Morris.

“What do you think Rory would say to you right now?” Greg asked.

Brilliant question that Mycroft wished he had thought of himself. He knew what Rory would say to him, “Fucking tosser, why didn’t you get there in time?”

Morris was quiet, his face blank but at least not pain filled anymore. He tilted his head to listen. Mycroft watched a smile spread across his hawk like features, the scar almost disappearing when he did so. “Oh, Myc, I heard him just as plain…”

Morris’ face glowed now, his faded blue eyes lit from within. He grabbed at Mycroft’s arm. “He said, ‘I’m dead and you’re alive. Stop wanking off in your room and get out there.’ Can’t you hear him saying that?”

“I can. He was so glad to go out on a Saturday night even when you and I would be half dead—“

Fuck, Mycroft thought, and bit down hard on his tongue.

“And he’d shove one of us in the shower and put on some music and make toasted cheese and pretty soon we were out the door.”

Morris hadn’t noticed the slip or more likely he was kindly covering it over.

“Did he like to dance?” Greg asked.

“liked to but was pants at it. He sort of had seizures to music.”

“I always thought he looked more like a psychotic gorilla, arms waving about.” Mycroft waved his long arms in what he knew was a comical gesture.

Morris grinned. “You do remember. I don’t want to stop talking about him, Myc.”

“And you don’t have to.”
“But I can come back later, now that I’ve done it once. Let’s go home.”

Greg helped him up and then turned to put his strong hands under Mycroft’s elbows and help him up. “Your ankle alright?” he asked.

Mycroft nodded even as the knives shot through it and he wasn’t sure it would hold his weight.

“Liar.” But Greg held steady until Mycroft found that he could step forward in the boot brace without his ankle snapping like a matchstick. Progress.

They walked slowly back to the car. The limo was a welcome haven, Art standing beside it with his hat clasped in his hand. Mycroft had arranged for a quiet brunch in a private room of his favorite restaurant. He regretted that he didn’t know what Morris might like to eat, but not having to cook might be a treat for him. The chef had agreed to prepare miniature portions of all the breakfast dishes, not in a Coeur Sain way but a sizable meal when all of the dishes had been sampled.

They started with steel cut oatmeal and mixed berry compote served in tea cups. Mycroft ordered coffee and appreciated the thick and bracing texture along with the strong scent. Coffee meant Greg now and morning kisses. The sun shone through the windows that overlooked the city. It was all spread out before them, but Mycroft still saw flashes of blood and sightless staring eyes.

Morris admired the oatmeal. “Oh, this is fine. They’ve slow cooked this for hours to get it so creamy. And these berries have come straight from the garden, trucked in no doubt.”

“I’m glad you are enjoying it,” Mycroft said, wincing at how stilted he sounded. One step forward, two steps back. Greg would never see the payoff for his endless lessons in humanity. Mycroft Holmes was a dunce.

The main course came, steaming hot and Mycroft was suddenly sweating profusely in his dark suit, the sun beaming through the windows seeming like an attack. Greg and Morris were tucking in with murmurs of appreciation for the Eggs Benedict, the Scottish salmon and egg scramble, and the goat cheese omelet. Well, Greg did not seem so fond of the goat cheese, but Morris was delighted with every morsel. Mycroft should have had him out for meals more often at least for the holidays. It was the least he could do and he hadn’t and he couldn’t do it over.

For him, the food was too rich even though each portion was tiny, less than three eggs worth on the whole plate. He wanted simple food and casual clothes and to be somewhere truly private like a farm or a cottage, away from duty and pretention and jobs where people died. Morris and Greg were watching him with concern.

“You alright, love?”

“Just some twinges in my ankle. I’ll take something when I get home. Could we talk about something else?”

Greg cleared his throat. “So Morris, back in the dating pool, yeah?”

“I should but I can’t see anybody being interested. Scarred and past it, that’s me. But I’ll try, for Rory.”

Mycroft’s ears roared. He’d killed Rory and fixed it so Morris was destined to life alone. The shame never ended; his mistakes rippled out and destroyed hundreds. But it wasn’t about him today. “I think there are lots of men that might be interested.”

Greg did better. “You’re young and fit for your age, quite a catch. Great hair, funny, an excellent
“It’s one thing to have a pint with some blokes or to chat online but to spend time with someone, knowing that you hope to shag them, that’s a horse of a different color.”

“Or a cock of a different color,” Greg whispered behind his napkin.

Morrис laughed. “Indeed.”

The server cleared the plates and refilled orange juice, coffee and tea. Mycroft had cut his food into bits but hadn’t eaten any. He saw Greg make note of it, but he was keeping Morrис the focus too. “You can take it slow. Keep it casual, a coffee or a movie. Enjoy snogging before you’re off to the races.”

“I know that’s true but I feel like I’ve wasted so much time.”

Greg reached across to take Mycroft’s hand. “It’s never too late, Morrис.”

The third course came in the form of small buttermilk pancakes with the choice of pure maple syrup or more mixed berries in a compote. Mycroft tasted one and found that sugar and carbohydrates weren’t going to provide comfort anymore. No village, no compulsive eating, no shopping for Greg. He was rapidly losing his defenses. Memories flowed over his mind damn like dirty water. He wanted to go home and hide under the bed.

“I like your breakfasts better, Morrис,” he said, his voice breaking.

He had finally said the right thing in the right way. Morrис’ face lit up with that elusive smile that was going to break many hearts, one already.

As they left the restaurant, he faded out. The car was at the curb, the Ministry tag as well as a temporary permit for disability, allowing Art to pull straight to the door. Just a few steps but he must have been limping quite badly because Greg took his arm and bore most of his weight. Greg sat across from him and put the ankle in his lap, holding it still. He let physical pain excuse his silence and closed his eyes, giving into the horror that had gained energy all morning.

Greg intended to fetch two of the security team to carry him upstairs, but Mycroft waved that off and asked for his crutch. He didn’t really feel his ankle anymore; he couldn’t even feel his face and brushed fingertips over his lips to find that they were stuck to his teeth. “I want to go to my study. I have some work there.”

He had to find the village again or he would go mad. They got a stool and an ice pack and propped up his leg. There was a glass of water and his pills which he took obediently, but he didn’t even change out of his tear stained suit as he sat down with his personal laptop and opened the file for his village story. He needed Graham. Michael needed Graham too.

His eyes skimmed over the lines he had put down that frantic Sunday when he thought he had lost Greg forever. They were good; he could imagine these people and if he had been an artist, he could have drawn them. Graham had watched Michael baptize himself in the chilly waters of the river that flowed past Lawton and had met him at the bank with his own coat. Mycroft felt the edges of his study disappear as a garden path rose up in his peripheral vision.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it causing trouble for you.”

“Doesn’t your own health matter?”
“Not so much really unless it makes trouble for someone else.”

“Well it would make trouble so have a care.”

They marched into the vicarage, Graham muttering to himself, wondering why vicars took Romans 12 so literally and made their bodies living sacrifices when they should keep their bodies as temples and…

“Get your wet things off and scrub hard with a towel. Don’t forget your hair. I’ll stir up the fire and put the kettle on. Maybe we can get you sorted before Mother comes over.”

Graham’s hands shook at his tasks. The purity and beauty of Michael’s face as he emerged from the water had shaken Graham to the core. But nothing could have prepared him for the further shock of Michael in a threadbare blue dressing gown, the modest V of the crossed lapels revealing a thick nest of ginger chest hair that begged to be touched.

Graham shoved his hands in his pockets but that didn’t get the tea served. Michael’s chattering teeth could be heard over the crackle of the fire and the bubble of the kettle. Their fingers brushed when Graham put the thick mug in Michael’s hand. He cradled the rough pottery, his fingers trembling.

Graham sat down on the chair opposite Michael, the fire almost unbearably hot with his body already aflame. “Your personal habits are none of my business as long as they do no harm, but you are hurting yourself with all night prayer vigils and ice water baths. Please take care of yourself. The village would not survive another loss.”

“And you, Graham?”

He froze. How much did Michael know? The relief he would feel at confessing would be life changing, but Michael’s upturned face was innocent and shy. He had no idea of the effect of his freckles and long eyelashes or the softness of his voice calling him ‘Graham’ for the first time.

“You lost your best friend. I know what that’s like. I’m very sorry.”

John’s face swam before Graham’s bleary eyes. A parade of images from his first weeks when he had shocked them all by being so friendly and active and on through their many conversations that never quite got to the point until John had died in his arms, finally knowing he was loved when it was too late. He couldn’t let that grief show, not if there was any chance that his feelings for Michael were real. Michael would have enough struggle without feeling he was competing with a dead man for Graham’s heart.

“Thank you. He was a good man.” Graham drained his mug, wincing at the taste. His mother was the tea maker.

“If you ever need to talk about him, I’m told that I am a sympathetic listener. Sometimes when you lose a good friend, there’s no one that you can tell.”

Then Michael’s face fell. The young vicar had already loved and lost. Graham was the older man and more experienced although he felt clueless about this sort of relationship. He needed to be so careful with this young and gentle man, little more than a boy. One thing was certain, when he clarified his feelings for himself, he wasn’t going to waste any time. Whatever Michael could offer, Graham planned on taking.

“Thank you for your kind invitation. But I have many patients to see today. I’ll leave you to dry out. You’d best put a little more on before Mother sees you.”
Graham was carried through the morning by Michael’s adorable blush that ran up his neck to his ears and then across his freckled cheeks.

Mycroft wrote frantically, pushing back the memories of Rory. If he stopped, he must face them and he couldn’t. Before, self punishment and daily life had been one and the same, but now Greg had made home life a safe and comfortable place. Mycroft knew he didn’t deserve happiness, but he wasn’t sure that he could give it up.

He typed until his fingers cramped and then he continued typing at a slower pace. He wrote of the long summer and Michael’s daily struggle in prayer and Bible reading to stop the love that was growing in his heart for Graham. Mycroft’s eyes burned several times when Michael cried at his prayers, begging God for forgiveness and to take the awful cup away from him, this love that refused to die.

If he could just keep writing, he could get to the part where Graham comforted Michael and eased his mind. He needed that comfort for himself, and he couldn’t ask Greg who was still worn out from months of Mycroft’s selfish and oblivious taking. It would be quite some time before Greg’s tank was full enough for him to offer anything and Mycroft accepted the situation as more than fair. In addition to being sucked dry emotionally by his emotional dwarf of a husband, Greg was dealing with a debilitating illness.

Mycroft turned back to the village, every bit of his body aching from his marathon at the computer. It was a blistering summer day and Michael had stood up to give the homily, unaware that Graham was in the foyer listening.

_The crowd shimmered as heat waves danced before Michael’s eyes, his black cassock a great reservoir for the heat. He made a grab for the pulpit but it was small and far away and then the floor was coming toward him at a rapid rate before all went black._

Mycroft startled, bumping his knee on the desk, when Greg’s hand squeezed his shoulder.

“Sorry, love, but it’s late and you haven’t eaten all day.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I know, but you don’t want a migraine either.”

“I wanted to finish this section.”

“You will—tomorrow.” Greg kissed the top of Mycroft’s head, nuzzling his cheek there. “Save your work and come on upstairs. Morris made us a tray.”

Mycroft saved the document which was becoming satisfyingly long and then also emailed it to himself and put it on a thumb drive. There was no such thing as too much backup. The last time he had committed any of the story to print, he had been sixteen and manual typewriters were still the standard although he got an electric to use at university. Sometimes he missed the sounds the click clack of the manual and the happy ding at the end of every line for the return or the hum of the electric, like anticipation buzzing. However, carbons were the only way to save work then. He remembered his fear of fire and Sherlock’s destructive curiosity and how vulnerable his manuscript had seemed.

“Mycroft Holmes, you are wanted in the bedroom.”

Upstairs, a tempting tea had been laid out on the low table in the sitting area under the window. He sunk down in one of the chairs, only then noticing that he still had on his suit. Standing up, he stripped to shirt sleeves while Greg got a stool for his ankle which had not been helped by a day
of immobility.

Mycroft put just enough food on his china plate to appease Greg and ate as a discipline for his health. Even as he looked on Greg’s lovely face, images of torture flitted through his mind, Rory and Morris now joined by others down through the years, his friends and his victims, dead by his hand. His most recent failure, Stuart and Elaine, both mutilated by horrific violence. The last bite of his egg mayonnaise sandwich stayed where it was; he couldn’t swallow. He closed his eyes to block out the images but they were behind his eyes too. Finally with a gulp and a shudder, he swallowed the last bite.

Greg knelt in front of his chair. “Baby, I know something’s wrong. Can you tell me? Please?”

“It’s nothing. A few old memories but I’ll be fine by morning. Good night’s sleep will put me to rights.” Greg must not be dragged down into the darkness. It was Mycroft’s to carry alone.

“You’ve been driving yourself hard today. I’m concerned. I hope we are past the stiff upper lip part of this marriage, and you can bring your troubles to me especially here in our bedroom.”

“It is ours now, isn’t it? You feel at home finally?”

“Yes, you’ve been very good to me. I love our life together.”

“I’m glad.” He wanted to take Greg’s hand but if they touched, Mycroft would never be able to hold it all in so he rubbed at his beard instead, a habit he would have to break.

“How much longer do we get to keep the wonder beard?” Greg said, his eyes hungrily tracking Mycroft’s movements in the ginger fuzz.

“It comes off tomorrow along with my curls. Sorry, Greg. I know that you will miss it.”

“Let me do it.”

“What?”

“Let me shave you. I loved it most, give me this last.”

Greg was being playful. A shave would entertain him while Mycroft would need to remain silent. It was perfect. “I would like that.”

“You get comfortable while I set everything up.” Greg bustled about fetching the valet’s chair from the dressing area and rummaging under the sink for clippers, straight razor, and strop.

Mycroft removed his shoes and ankle boot, socks, and trousers. He limped into the bathroom, feeling oddly naked in just his pants. Greg pulled him close and he allowed himself the comfort for long enough to allay Greg’s concerns. Then Greg was all over the beard, kissing and stroking and nibbling one last time.

He put Mycroft in the chair and pinned a towel around his shoulders. “Can I play?” He held up his mobile and made a clicking sound with his tongue to indicate picture taking.

Mycroft nodded, again feeling oddly vulnerable since Greg still had all his clothes on. He hated having his picture taken although their occasional films had eased this phobia somewhat. He gave himself up to the process. “For your eyes only.”

“Alright, James Bond.”

Greg had all of his materials laid out on the little shelf of the chair behind Mycroft’s head. Greg
took snaps of Mycroft’s face and then the profile, both sides. Then he used the beard trimmer but only along the jaw. “I thought we would enjoy a variety of looks.”

Greg ran the hot tap until the water was steaming in the basin and soaked a towel in it. He held it to Mycroft’s face but only pressed firmly along the sides. The heat made Mycroft logy and he was glad of the high back on the chair. Greg applied cream and then sharpened the razor. Mycroft pushed his head hard against the wooden shelf.

Mycroft couldn’t bear the wait for the blade or Greg’s face that close for a purpose other than kissing. With his eyes closed and the smell of the shaving cream overpowering, he imagined Greg drawing the knife across his throat and watching the blood run. When Greg paused to rinse the blade, Mycroft shuddered.

A glimpse of himself in the mirror and the foam and Greg leaning close led to a fantasy of being shaved everywhere, of Greg taking the foam and blade to every last part of his furry body and leaving him smooth as a baby. While Greg would never allow it, he enjoyed the idea of submitting to such an erotic shave. Such things were always better left to the imagination because he had shaved his chest once for an undercover operation and the itching had tormented him for weeks as the hair grew on its own time.

Greg was showing him in the mirror that he now had a goatee. Pictures were again taken. “Wait, let me get some without the towel.”

Mycroft blushed as he was photographed bare chested and disheveled, but he was a little mollified when Greg said, “As soon as I get my cock back, I’m wanking to these.”

His face was dried carefully and then Greg, with his tongue hanging out in concentration, did a tiny, precise trim. A small amount of the cream was applied and two whisks of the razor left Mycroft with a van dyke. With his topknot of curls hanging down, he looked rakish or deranged. More pictures and the towel was not replaced this time.

Greg took off the little triangular patch of hair easily and then mustache Mycroft was photographed. He was weary and getting restless of the game. Greg finished quickly and then kissed his smooth cheeks and chin before gently applying aftershave, a soothing one for night time. “There’s that pretty little face,” he said, his fingers stroking Mycroft’s jaw.

Mycroft didn’t let himself lean into the touch. He wanted to pull Greg down onto his lap and cry on his shoulder and tell every bad thing he had ever done. Greg would never stay if he knew all, and Mycroft suddenly wanted him to know every last lie and kill so that he could be clean and worthy of Greg’s love. Greg would be terribly hurt by the confession and he was happy at present so Mycroft would keep his fool mouth shut.

“Go on to bed, love, it’s been one bloody long day. I’ll do the washing up and join you shortly.” He meant to wait for Greg and get a cuddle, but his eyes were weary from the computer screen and holding back tears that would not flow anyway. Strident sounds woke him. He pounded the alarm but the sounds continued, two of them warring with each other. Greg’s alarm? No, mobiles. His was? Not on the bed side table and neither was anything else after his half numbed arm swept across it.

“Mum? You alright?” Greg was asking. “No, we hadn’t heard. My’s answering his mobile now.”

Greg had switched on the lamp at his side and Mycroft remembered that he had stripped off beside the chairs by the window. He fumbled through the pile to find his suit coat and reached in both pockets. He felt like a drugged orangutan with too long arms and fingers and of course the ginger fur although his arse was not ruby red and enflamed often enough. There were so many buttons
on the bloody mobile when his eyes were barely open.

“Sir, he died this morning.” She read the official statement off the wire.

“We were just there, Anthea. Do you think he knew?”

“Must have. He’s laid the ground work for you to be there at the regime change. We need to go immediately to stake our claim. We’ve already lost time with the death occurring in the night.”

“What time is it?”

“Quarter past four.”

“I need an hour here. It’s nonnegotiable.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll start on the official statements and notes for a meeting.”

Mycroft ran a hand through his wild hair. “I’ll need a haircut. You can brief me during the styling. If Ormond can’t be summoned at this hour, you’ll have to do what you can.”

“I’ll start with that, sir.”

“You have your priorities in order. Oh and confirm that Greg has full clearance for the airport, arrivals and departures. I know we did that weeks ago but I don’t want any mistakes this time. He’s been through enough.”

Greg was motioning with his mobile so Mycroft rang off and took up Greg’s. Ginny was distraught. “Mycie, that nice man. It’s awful. He just sent me all those lovely pressies.”

Mycroft’s mind was a thousand spokes in a wheel turning faster than the eye could see. He thought of Mimi and Ginny and said, “Gigi, that nice man. It’s awful. He just sent me all those lovely pressies.”

“Leslie Caron. Maurice Chevalier. Thank heaven for little girls. You’ve grown up in the most delightful way.”

“Oh, you gave me the shivers. That’s your name for me, love. Just yours.”

“I’m glad. Still enjoying your treats then?”

“Oh yes, but now I’ll think of him and his lady when I have a chocolate. Do you think she might like a card? I always send a card straight away when one of my friends loses a husband which is most every week at our age. And I usually crochet them something. I’ve got a lacy little shawl that I made in gray. Would that be inappropriate?”

“Not at all. I think that sounds lovely. I’ll have Anthea dispatch a courier to get it and I’ll give it to the lady myself.”

“Look at me, conversing with queens and princesses.”

“Well this queen must get ready. I’ll have to fly out today after some emergency policy meetings, but look for the courier, dear.”

“Be careful, Mycie.”
“Ring Greg for me this week, won’t you? He might miss me while I’m gone. Goodbye….Gigi.”

She giggled like a school girl and rang off. Mycroft handed the mobile back to Greg and took his own up again to arrange for the courier. It would be tight scheduling, but he knew that the lady would be charmed by a handmade gift especially one from his mother in law and it would please Ginny greatly.

Greg’s arms came around him from behind and a stubbled cheek rested against his shoulder blade. “Morning, love,” he mumbled, his lips brushing Mycroft’s back.

Mycroft squeezed both of Greg’s hands where they lay against his chest. “I’ll have to go for the funeral, Greg. I wish you could come with me. He invited you for a visit.”

“I want to be with you but this sounds like something official with news crews and paparazzi, and it wouldn’t be proper.”

“I won’t be there in an official capacity and you’d be quite welcome but the meetings will be closed and I should think you would be bored. It’s not a pretty time of year there.”

“Then I’ll miss you all week and give you a big welcome home.”

“We have less than an hour, but you can ride with me to the Ministry if you like.”

“I do like. It will be a long week without you.”

“There isn’t time for Big Purple. You wouldn’t want to shower with me anyway?”

“The hell I wouldn’t.”

They took a minute to hold each other while the water ran down their bodies. Then they gave each other a quick scrub. A brisk toweling while both of them ignored Mycroft’s erection and Greg’s lack of one.

‘I’ll go down and make us some tea while you pack.”

Mycroft wanted to ask him to stay even that separation seeming too much, but he was embarrassed to be so clingy. He overpacked as always and both large cases and a bulging carry on sat in the hall when he finished. They sat at the kitchen table, not even whispering for fear of waking Morris. Greg took his hand and ran his thumb back and forth across Mycroft’s fingers.

If there hadn’t been a discreet tap at the kitchen door just then, Mycroft might have begged Greg to go along on the trip even if he had to wait in a hotel room for most of it. He might also have confessed how sad and scared he felt, overwhelmed with guilt and flashes of blood and gore. But Art was on time and life lurched forward on its own track, the baggage stowed, the car speeding quickly through streets still empty.

Greg put his arm around Mycroft and pulled his head down onto his shoulder. He kissed the top of his husband’s head. “Someone will cut your hair for you at the Ministry?”

“Yes, Anthea was ringing the stylist on call. Not my favorite one but adequate for funerals.”

“You’ll be safe?”

“I’ll have a security detail with me and the plane will wait at the hangar there. You’ll remember to take your pills?”
“Yes, you’ve made it impossible to forget.” But Mycroft heard the smile in his voice.

Mycroft remembered their last big goodbye and how angry Greg had been, his lips hard and bruising, his eyes flashing. “Greg? Kiss me?”

Greg tilted Mycroft back against his arm and kissed him with depth and passion, his tongue swirling until Mycroft was dizzy.

Then he was holding Greg tight and saying the things that went unsaid on ordinary days. “I love you so much, baby. Thank you for giving me a chance and marrying me and staying with me when I was so bloody selfish. I’ll make it up to you, I swear it.”

“Come back to me. That’s all I want. You make me happy, My.”

“I promise to be back for your birthday.”

“What?”

“Saturday is your birthday.”

Greg laughed. “I completely forgot.”

“You can think about how you would like to spend the day. I’m going to lose some of my planning time this week, and I don’t know much about birthdays anyway.”

“Keep it simple, love. I’m still in afterglow from our half anniversary.”

“I do have your gifts planned.”

“You are my best present.”

“That was a little cloying but I’m proud anyway.”

“It’s a bloody good thing that I start my testosterone therapy today or you might come home to find me in a house coat with lactation pads.”

“I’d suck on this teat,” Mycroft said, pinching Greg’s firm pec. Humor was the right way to go. “No phone sex on this trip, love, if we can speak at all. I’ll try to email when I can, but I don’t fancy giving them an earful of rump rugby.”

“You’ll be that closely monitored?”

“By various and sundry, too many to count. That’s likely true here at home as well but somehow it’s different. I’m sorry. It will make the week interminable.”

“I’ll make it up to you when you get back. Maybe with a little winky pressie.”

“That would be birthday and Christmas all in one. I miss having you in my arse.”

“I miss being there.”

Then they were at the ministry and the bags were unloaded and it was too fast and too soon. Greg held his hand and looked into his eyes for as long as they dared. His were shiny with tears while Mycroft’s burned without result. One last soft kiss and Art was taking Greg back for a proper breakfast with Morris since it was at least two hours before he needed to be at the Yard. Mycroft gripped the handle of his bag until it hurt to keep himself from hobbling after the long black car.
Three nights later, he came to the end of himself in an opulent hotel room at three a.m. The whole
stay, he had slept in ninety minute bursts, waking in a sweat to half remembered nightmares that
made his heart pound. It would take a few hours to calm himself enough to sleep again, and then
the cycle would repeat. He was being tortured in almost enemy territory while the almost enemy
slept.

Carefully worded emails to Greg had been unsatisfying. Greg’s replies back were even more so
full of odd trivia about Morris or his family, non committal and polite. He felt as if he were back to
those early days when he watched Greg on CCTV, as close as a cold screen but as far as the
moon. The yearning was so intense that he had taken his pillow to the loo and rocked back and
forth for awhile. If they had bugged that room, they had certainly got a show.

He had tried herbal tea, herbal soothers, warm milk, biofeedback, the village, a massage, and
wanking. Nothing he ate or drank soothed him in any way. The village was stuck at Michael
collapsing in a heap of black robes while Graham looked on in horror. The massage had been
more of a bullying and had left livid bruises. His cock hung its head with exhaustion. He wished
Greg could be there to see that no cock performed one hundred percent of the time.

Far beyond the worst of his harshest diets, he had a craving that was specific and did not subside
with time and distraction. He wanted Greg’s voice and he wanted Greg’s counsel. This was not
possible because of surveillance and the late hour. Greg needed his rest. Mycroft would be home
soon. It was just one more day really and then a travel day. When the self talk failed him after ten
minutes, he paced.

The beautiful room with rich oiled woods and luxuriant fabrics had become a prison. Being gone
from home at a time when he was plagued by memories had nearly undone him. His mind went to
the darkest places. He could kill himself here. Greg would not be the one to find him. Morris
would not have to clean up the mess. In their grief, they would turn to each other and eventually,
Morris would move into the big bedroom at the top of the stairs and all would be tidy and calm.
Morris had learned not to grieve too long. He would share this wisdom with Greg who would be
rejuvenated by his medications into a sexual powerhouse.

Mycroft stepped on the balcony. At the coolest part of the day, the heat was a physical force that
took him to the ground. A sweltering wind brushed his silk pajamas and he wanted to be naked.
Still the heat was something real in a temporary existence that was muffled by wealth.
Three hours until he could go down to breakfast. Thirty minutes of that for shower and grooming
still left over two hours to get through. His scenario blossomed. Morris didn’t have to cook
anymore so he could greet Greg at the door and take him upstairs for a quick shag while the
supple young cook Benoit made crepes for their ‘deenair.’

The mobile dialed itself because he had no memory of clutching it in his hand or going through
the complex process for international dialing. He was committed now. Sweat ran down and
tickled his back and sides. His pajamas were soaked. He crawled back inside and closed the
sliding door. Leaning against it, he unbuttoned his top and pushed his bottoms down until he was
indeed, naked, and the rings had mounted to one last before voice mail.

“Hullo?” Greg, sleepy and confused and real.

“It’s My, love.” And that was all he could say right then. Sweat was streaming down his face so
that was what was in his eyes and burning.

“Are you alright? You said that we shouldn’t talk.”

“We’ll keep it to the mundane. At this hour, I think it’s allowed.” Who talked this way? Prim and
proper and naked in the fetal position on an exquisite Persian rug. Who the bloody hell was
flippant when contemplating suicide for the thousandth time?

“The mundane. Way too posh a word for my weary mind.”

“Sorry, I’ll ring off and let you rest.”

“The hell you say. I’m awake now. But no wandering around the point. It’s after midnight so get
straight to it. Time for truth. What’s wrong, baby?”

“I can’t tell you because I’ve used up all my tickets.” He scrubbed his face with his pajama
bottoms, wincing at the sour smell of wet silk.

Greg sighed heavily. “It doesn’t work that way. We take turns, we fill each other up.”

“But if we are both empty?”

“Then we hold each other for a bit and go downstairs and get Morris to make us toasted cheese.”

His fingers ached from gripping the mobile so hard. “I can’t stop thinking about Rory and how he
would still be here if I’d got there in time.”

“I thought as much. Visiting his grave like that stirred the whole thing up fresh, didn’t it?”

He nodded as if Greg could see him there, damp and pitiful. “I’ve let myself get content, Greg.
You’ve made me feel happy and safe and I don’t have the right to. He’s in the ground and I’m
skipping round the fucking Maypole like a school girl and it’s wrong.”

Greg laughed. “I’m picturing you in a wee plaid skirt and long red braids. Pippi Mycroft
Longfucking. You little minx.”

“Stop it. Don’t mock me when I’m brought low with remorse.”

“You aren’t sleeping, are you? Strange place, lots of work pressure. Maybe even missing me.”

“Missing you. It’s a very big bed.”

“Get off the floor and get in it. I’ll wait.”

He didn’t question how Greg knew he was on the floor but crawled over and hoisted himself onto
the Egyptian cotton sheets that were much nicer against his bare skin than the scratch of wool or
the stick of wet silk.

“You’re deep in hotel blues. That’s not to say that your guilt is any less real, but you’re lonely and
exhausted and everything has got out of proportion.”

“I don’t know how to stop. It keeps coming ‘round.”

“We’ll talk it all out when you get home but considering the hour, I’m going to short hand this,
okay? Can you trust me, My?”

“I’ll try.”

“Ah the ringing endorsements that you give me. I’m a lucky man.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m in distress.”

“Milady, you are going to get a BAFTA for all this drama.”
“Greg, please.”

“You are still blaming yourself for Rory’s death after eighteen bloody years of penance. Right?”

“Yes.” Mycroft wanted to add a ‘sir’ because Greg was using his longsuffering teacher voice.

“How long should you have to pay?”

“I don’t know. Forever, I think.”

“You should have been raised Catholic. We get absolution for things. All sin is finite, say some prayers and erase the most heinous of sins like gum in my sister’s hair or looking at dirty pictures of busty women which did absolutely nothing for me. Hail Mary.”

“Now I’m picturing you in a wee plaid skirt.”

“Shut it,” but then Greg laughed very low and husky.

Suddenly Mycroft’s defeated cock looked up and took note. “Did you take your pill today?”

“I did and yesterday and the day before that and I had my shot. It was an enormous needle and I was very brave. But John had to send me home in a taxi.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. Next time, call Morris and he’ll get Art to you quickly. Morris would even come along with some restorative biscuits.”

“Off topic. I’m fine. Back to you and not so fine. You’ve paid long enough, baby. Even if you had stopped for a cappuccino on the way over or to have your pretty hair cut, you ought to be done with the blame by now. Rory went off book, Morris says, and without a plan or back up, he got himself killed.”

“I should have known he would do that. He was a rebel always.”

“And you are beating yourself that you aren’t psychic? That’s a new one. You were at your brother’s side where you were supposed to be.”

“Rory was more a brother to me than Sherlock ever—“

“Sherlock was a frightened kid and he needed you even as he fought you.”

“And he hates me still.”

“He’s in the habit of it but the spirit has gone out of his rebellion now he’s got John.”

“I could have saved Rory and Morris and been back before Sherlock ever woke up.”

“You cannot know that. Nobody can know that. Morris has forgiven you. Past time you forgive yourself.”

“I can’t, I just can’t. “ He crushed his hand against his forehead, the struggle pulsing through his whole body.

“Then you don’t have to, not tonight. We’ll work on it when you get home. Now put down your mobile and go wash your face and clean your teeth. I’ll wait. You’re paying the charges.”

Mycroft felt a bizarre burst of relief at being able to carry his guilt a little longer. He wasn’t ready
for the terrible emptiness of pulling the thorn out. He followed Greg’s instructions, scrubbing the sweat off his face and obliterating his foul breath with toothpaste.

Then he padded back to his nest of twisted sheets and scattered decorative pillows.

“I’ve done it.”

“Feel a little better?”

“No.” But he did, the tiniest bit.

“Well done. Now, this is the hardest part of my clever plan. I’ve got pen and paper. Tell me very very slowly how to ring you back.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to leave you a message to play for yourself. A mantra if you will.” Greg stressed the word ‘mAHntra’ with a little posh accent.

“It won’t work.”

“You are bloody well going to try it before you say that. Do not test me, young man.”

Mycroft gave him the codes and Greg repeated it all as a double check.

“Now, you cannot pick up or it defeats the purpose. But you can listen to it as soon as I’m done. I love you, sweetheart, so much. I’m very proud of you for calling me instead of tormenting yourself further. Morris and I will help you when you get back. When is that?”

“Friday afternoon.”

“I will be there when your plane touches down. Look for me.”

“You don’t have to do that. We may be delayed.”

“Have Anthea call me with your flight plan. I will be there. Now, you play this message once an hour until I see you again. Play it over and over until it loses all meaning like a record you bought your thirteenth summer.”

“Greg?”

“Hmm?” Greg was getting sleepy.

“I’m never leaving you again.”

“We’ll discuss the feasibility of that later. Good night, love. Have some happy dreams now.”

“Good night.”

It was a full two minutes before his mobile buzzed and he watched for the indicator light while biting his lip hard. The message took forever to retrieve, ten whole seconds. Then Greg’s voice, shored up to nearly chipper. “You’ve paid long enough, baby. You are forgiven.”

The bed swirled and dipped like a magic carpet as he experimented with the idea of taking forgiveness in, but Greg hadn’t said that he had to let guilt go yet. Greg only said that he had to play the message often. He could do that. He listened until the mobile got too heavy and by then he was cool enough to pull the sheet over him and doze.
The following night, he still had nightmares and little appetizers of sleep without a main course, but he had Greg’s voice and he knew that if it came to the point of desperation, even the created drama kind, that he could call Greg again. Instead he took the idea of penance to the village, writing away the night until breakfast.

Graham watched frozen as Michael swayed and then fell to the floor with a sickening thud. Then he was running up the aisle, ordering this one to fetch the stretcher from his buggy, another to get a cup of water and a wet cloth, but it still took a nightmare’s slow and straining speed to get him to Michael’s side.

There he was allowed to touch the pale, clammy face, to hold the thin wrist in his hand, and to run his fingers through soft ginger hair to check for a bump. Michael was so still that he had to reassure the frightened crowd that his pulse was strong and steady. When it was determined that no bones were broken, four stout men carried him to the vicarage, but he was already beginning to stir as they went to move him to the sofa in his study. Two of them got Michael under the arms and helped him up to his room at Graham’s instruction.

“It’s just the heat, fellows. Tell the people that he’ll be fine after resting today. We’ll have him preach in shirt sleeves if we have another scorcher such as this. Collins, could you bring up a bucket of water straight from the pump? Get it as cold as you can. Thanks, mate.”

“I’m not going to puke again,” Michael said in a quavering voice.

“That’s reassuring.”

Michael sat on the edge of the bed, the very picture of misery. His shoulders were hunched over and he was shaking with sudden jerks and gasps. As always, Graham wanted to hold him and say loving things that made the sadness leave his dark blue eyes, but while Michael had struggled for weeks with grieving for some lost and unrequited love, Graham had struggled with John’s memory. They had both been fighting so hard that they barely acknowledged each other and now they were in the most intimate of circumstances without any warning.

Graham had the easy way as the doctor. Michael was his patient and the boundaries were clear, but Michael would be feeling vulnerable and conflicted. Graham thought that the attraction was mutual but those sad eyes didn’t give him nearly enough assurance. To shore himself up, he spoke too heartily for the narrow, spartanly furnished room. “There now, we’ll have you right in no time. Let’s get your kit off and bathe you with a cool cloth and you’ll soon be feeling yourself again.”

Michael clutched at his waistcoat like a virgin maiden. “Oh no, I’ll bathe myself. I’m fine now. Really.”

“I’ll decide who’s fine. I watched you fall.” Graham saw another black figure, falling before him, until he caught the small man up in his arms and carried him to the vicarage. “You gave your flock quite a scare and they will need me to look after you this afternoon for their peace of mind. You’ll have all kinds of treats tomorrow. I shall be coming by to sample the pies and cakes.”

While he spoke, Graham knelt and removed Michael’s shoes and socks, the least threatening of garments, but he still felt a piercing need to lift the slender foot and kiss the sole. His tanned hands looked nearly black against the soft, pale skin and warned him to take the utmost care.

Collins came back with the bucket. “I pumped ‘er til my arm were sore, Graham. That’s as cold as ye’ll get in this heat.”

“Thank you, Collins. I’m sure it’s fine. Now, tell everyone not to worry. The vicar will be alright.
by tomorrow in time to receive his goodies.”

“Aye, my missus is already planning a little cake for him.”

Then they were alone and although Graham’s hands trembled, he kept his voice firm. “Come on, lad. Off it comes for your own good.”

When Michael’s shaking fingers couldn’t manage the buttons, Graham took over and opened the shirt to find cuts and burns all over his chest and back. “My god, man. What have you done to yourself?”

“Mortify the flesh to save the soul,” Michael whispered.

Graham was furious. He should have sensed that a lonely and troubled boy would take to dramatic self punishment. Hadn’t he kept watch many nights while Michael prayed, sobbing and pleading before the picture of Christ in the small sanctuary? Michael didn’t resist as Graham removed his trousers and pushed up the leg of his underpants to show more wounds on his thighs. “Most of these are infected. You could go septic.”

“I’m sorry.” Michael’s jaw was clenched manfully, but tears rolled down his flushed cheeks.

“Lie down on your belly. I’ll tend to your back first.” Graham got what he needed out of his bag very slowly, trying to gather himself before he needed to touch the tortured skin. He needed a god to pray to in this moment, but he wasn’t so fond of John’s god and Michael’s seemed even worse.

Wounds of the spirit were beyond him but he could tend the flesh. He began the familiar ritual of cleaning and in some cases, bandaging. He heard himself talking and listened. “I know that men of god need to do penance. But I ask you, would you want one of our sweet villagers to do to himself this way?”

A muffled ‘no’ and then the quiet crying continued. Michael might think he was hiding it with his arm across his face but Graham felt the humiliation buzzing through the torn flesh.

“Still, if you need to discipline yourself, you might choose something that does someone good. John used to—“ Would he ever be able to say that name without his voice breaking? “John believed that his penance could be things that helped the village but that were hated chores. He had a quick temper and the swearing that came with it.”

“Nobody ever speaks ill of him.”

“They wouldn’t. Death glorifies ordinary people.”

“I’ll never be as good as he was.”

Graham let the statement lie there. It was a time to pick his battles and that one was too big for this day. There was enough challenge in not kissing the scar that showed Michael had been punishing himself long before he came to Lawton.

“People didn’t love him because he was good. They loved him for owning up to his faults. He always tattled on himself and then weeded gardens or dug a new privy trench or cleaned out a hen house. He was definitely punished but he didn’t harm himself, and instead of wallowing in his failures alone, he was working side by side with his people.”

“I could do that. Would they let me?”

“They already love you, Michael, just as you are. Who wouldn’t love you?” Then he had to go to
his bag for more salve because his arms were shaking with his own discipline of not saying the words and not showing the words with caresses.

Michael was still but his body was no longer tense. Graham worked in silence, his small store of wisdom empty. Working on Michael’s chest and back presented more challenges, but Michael was in pain from these deeper wound. Graham was worried; some were deep and old, festering for most of the summer, it appeared. He knew in order to heal them that he was giving more pain. But somehow they bore it together.

Finally, the last burn on a wiry, muscular thigh had been treated and Michael’s skin had returned to as normal a temperature as could be expected under the circumstances. Graham would be submerging himself in the river for the night and perhaps several nights following. He knelt before Michael who was sitting on the edge of the bed. “Whatever you think you’ve done, you’ve paid enough. No more pain. This world has enough pain. Michael?”

Ginger lashes spiked with tears, navy blue eyes shining with adoration. “I’ll do penance as you’ve taught me.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise not to hurt myself.”

A squeeze of the shoulder would have been the appropriate level of comfort, but Michael’s shoulders were sore with wounds. Graham rested his hand on top of the bowed head, letting his fingers caress the damp curls. He excused the liberty by thinking of all that he wanted to do and had refrained from doing. “I’m going to have Mother make a poultice for you. Apply that to your chest tonight and I’ll change the dressing in the morning.”

He found himself in the hall, fighting tears like he hadn’t since the day he knew that John’s illness was fatal. Why was some love accepted and other love an abomination punishable by law? John’s god had much to answer for.

Anthea called to Mycroft to put away his laptop since they were making their descent. As they taxied along the runway, Mycroft saw the limo first and then a lone figure in a white shirt. It seemed like hours before they were allowed to disembark. He used the handrails to propel himself down the steep metal steps, his eyes never wavering from his husband.

Greg had been waiting on the tarmac for over two hours. His hair was on end and his shirt was rumpled and he was the most beautiful sight Mycroft had ever clapped eyes on. The security guy got his laptop and Anthea got his umbrella, and he limped as fast as he could toward his highest priority. Greg met him halfway.

Nervously licking his lips and taking in the entourage, Greg stuck out his hand and said stiltedly, “Welcome home, Mycroft.”

Anything else was muffled against Mycroft’s shoulder as he pulled Greg in tight. He smelled of hot tar, and his moderately priced, nay cheap, cologne had fermented in the blistering heat. Mycroft couldn’t let go of him.

“Alright, love?” Greg asked, lightly tapping three times on his back.

“I missed you to the extreme.”

“Then let’s go home.”

They climbed into the limo and in spite of Anthea and Clive aka the security guy, Mycroft took
Greg’s face in his hands and kissed him as if they were in the shower, little whimpers with lots of tongue and need. Greg resisted enough for propriety’s sake and then gave back. When they pulled away, Anthea was buried in her Blackberry while Clive pretended there was something to see out of the fiercely tinted windows.

Greg and Mycroft squished into the opposite corner and whispered as if privacy existed. “I played your message over a hundred times.”

“Did it work?”

“I think so. Will need some follow up now and then.”

“You can let it go, love. You have the right to be happy.”

“Maybe you can quit the Yard and become a motivational speaker.”

“Client is avoiding the issue at hand. How do you feel without all that guilt?”

“Empty. The hole where a bad tooth used to be, can’t keep my tongue out of it.”

“Fortunately for you, I’m an expert at filling up holes.”

“The first aid kit?”

“Pervert.”

Then Greg took Mycroft’s face between his big, rough hands and looked past all the posturing into the depths. “I love you, Mycroft Holmes, you know that. But I also like you and I’m very proud of you, and I’ll sleep the night through for the first time in a week because you are back where you belong.”

Then they kissed until Anthea removed her jacket and crossed her legs hard and Clive removed his tie and crossed his legs hard and Art put the air conditioning on high.
Birthday, Book, and Bath

Chapter Summary

Since My has been out of the country all week, Greg requests a quiet day in for his birthday.

Word count c. 9459

For G, who rescues, redeems, and radiates a reason to go on. Her Reichenbach adventure is so amazing and complex and deeply, epicly romantic that you have to read it right away!

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Greg woke up on his birthday to the sound of pouring rain. He flipped off the alarm before it could ring and went to the loo for a piss and a pill. When My still hadn’t moved when he came back, he took his mobile from the nightstand and texted Morris. “Lie in. Maybe lunch.”

“Sandwiches for you. Happy bloody bday, lazy sod,” was the reply and Greg thought back fondly to when he had been Mr. Lestrade or even Mr. Greg.

In the dim, gray light, Greg watched his husband for awhile. My was exhausted enough that it had shown in his face when Greg had retrieved him from the airport. Somehow, the man had managed to lose weight in just five days and was pinched and extra pale when he got off the plane. Morris had fed them as soon as they came in the door and Greg had his weary husband tucked in bed by eight.

My had whimpered through a few nightmares and finally went into deep sleep around midnight. He lay now with his mouth hanging open and one arm flung out across the bed, whether to welcome or defend, Greg could not say. Just as he went to the bed to curl back around him, My came straight up, breathing heavily. Another nightmare.

“You’re home, love. It’s pissing rain and we’re going to have a lie in.”

“Birthday,” My said, limping toward the loo.

Greg went along since he wasn’t sure My was awake yet. My’s face was still heavily lined with exhaustion and his hands shook as he took care of business. Then he stood in front of the basin, seemingly confused. Greg turned on the taps and wet My’s hands and rubbed the soap across them.

“Pill?”

“Yes, My, I took my pill.” Nagging means love, Greg repeated to himself. The whole bloody world was monitoring his medication.

“Time to plan. Make your birthday special.”
My was staggering about as if he had forgot where the bed was. He usually came out of sleep on a hair trigger, poised for action whether that be danger or sex. Greg knew that struggle had worn him completely down. “Any morning that I get to sleep past the alarm and hold you is special. There now, under the covers.”

My curled up obediently under the duvet. Greg cracked a window so that he could listen to the rain. A breeze billowed the curtains up and the air smelled clean. He climbed in and pulled My onto his shoulder. My flung a leg over so that he was almost fully on top of Greg. Greg made long strokes down his back until he could feel My’s muscles relax. When his breathing evened and he went slack and heavy against Greg’s chest, Greg felt proud at being able to comfort My, the whole world in his arms under the duvet.

Later, he woke when My rolled over, but Greg was relieved to see that it was a position change and not another nightmare. My’s face was unlined now, his cheeks flushed. Greg was torn between letting him sleep and knowing that he needed to eat. From the looks of him, he had skipped most of his meals in the past week. No reason to risk a headache.

He could give him a happy wake up though. Greg kissed lightly across the back of My’s neck, missing the little curls that had been shorn for state business. He kissed the freckles along My’s shoulders, convinced that they tasted of caramel. He danced his fingers up and down the arm that lay on top of the duvet. My loved it when he trailed his finger tips up and down his forearm until the ginger hair stood on end.

There were mumbles and a shifting toward him. He licked his way up the curve of My’s ear and swirled his tongue inside. My buried his ear against his shoulder to stop the tickle. Then he rolled back toward Greg, keeping his eyes closed but reaching out, his lips in a pucker. Greg snogged his husband awake.

My groaned. “All that insomnia and I never settled on the right plan for your birthday. It was supposed to be extraordinary.”

“We’ve both had a shit week. I think the extraordinary thing would be to stay in and be quiet with each other. Morris will be making us some naughty bits to eat including cake, and we can do rainy day things like a movie or read and definitely a lie down in the afternoon.”

“You wouldn’t miss going out to a restaurant or having some special activity?”

“I’m forty nine, love. You don’t have to take me to the pony rides. You’re home. That’s what makes it a happy day.”

“If you change your mind, we can go out later.”

“Let’s take this as it comes. I thought some cuddling before we go down to lunch?”

Greg’s mobile rang just then and My tensed, but Greg smiled and showed him the display.

“Happy Birthday, Baby Greggie. Rich, say happy birthday to Greggie.”

Greg heard his dad mumble and the snap of the paper being folded to the sports page.

“He says ‘many happy returns.’”

“The hell he did, Mum.” Greg laughed. His dad was always stroppy on Saturdays until the matches came on.

“My got home alright?”
“Yes, he’s here. We had a bit of a lie in. Neither of us slept well apart.”

Greg watched as My bolted from the bed to put on clean pants as if Ginny Lestrade could see through the phone. His face was a clashing shade of red that did not look right with the ginger.

“A birthday rogering?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m an old man now, Mummy. Once a week but never on a Sunday.”

“You don’t take after your dad there.”

“Mum.” Now Greg was blushing. “He needs to rest today. I’m worried about him.”

My looked up at him in shy surprise then leaned his head on Greg’s shoulder to hear Ginny.

“You having a quiet day then? Forecast says you’ll have rain the whole time.”

“Yes, I hope we’ll settle in for a movie or something and probably sleep through it.”

“Morris making you proper food?”

“Always, Mum, but you know I miss yours on special days.”

“It would have been too hard on Mycie for you to come down this weekend, what with him being gone so far on important business.”

“Yes, I know. That’s why we are here and not with you.”

“Still, if you had brought the limo, he could have slept in the car.”

Greg ignored the broad hint. “We will be down soon, love, I promise.”

“Could I speak to him then? If he’s awake.”

“Oh, I see how it is. The birthday just a ruse for you to speak to your new favorite son.”

My took the mobile eagerly, and Greg’s throat clenched at how desperately his husband took in motherly love. He was starved in so many ways. But My was putting on a bad French accent and calling her Gigi this and Gigi that and making her giggle. Greg rolled his eyes. There would be no stopping them. He nuzzled his cheek into ginger chest hair and listened.

“She loved it, Gigi. That gray was perfect with her dress and she put it on right out of the wrappings. It looked lovely. She let me take a photo which I’ll send to you. You should get a thank you letter from her some time later.”

“Oh, Mycie. I’m so proud. The things you get me into. I’m right spoiled.”

“You deserve to be, Gigi. Greg hasn’t done a proper job of it.”

Greg pinched My’s hip, not hard, but the message was clear. “It’s my birthday, Mum; you’re supposed to love me best.”

“He had a huge head, Mycie, nearly tore me in half. Full head of hair besides. Forty nine years ago today, I was screaming and praying for death.”

Greg took back the mobile. “I think we’ll end on that lovely memory, ‘Gigi.’ Mycie hasn’t eaten
properly all week and we’re going to have an early lunch before he gets a migraine.”

“You haven’t been looking after him, Greggie.”

“I guess there are many things I haven’t done right, by you or old Myc. I’ll spend my birthday fixing the damage.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“No, you’ve been quite clear.” He winked at My who had started to look alarmed.

“You’re still my favorite, love. It’s just he’s missed out on having a real mum all his life. There’s lots to make up for.”

“I agree, but you don’t have to do all of it today.”

They went through their ritual sign off with My chiming in, and then Greg put the mobile on the nightstand and sank back against the pillows.

“Thank you for letting me share her sometimes. Tell me if I overstep my bounds.”

“I’m glad you care about her, My. You might have been ashamed of her or shocked.”

“Greg, I love her.” This earned him Greg’s damp eyes and a long kiss.

Then Greg had filled up on soft kisses and fluffy duvets and took action. “Since it’s my birthday, can I choose your clothes?”

He was already rifling through My’s side and a half of the closet and came upon a blue polo shirt and jeans, unfortunately nearly new and pressed with a crease but on the right track. Since My was unlikely to go barefoot, he also chose driving mocs but did not get any socks for them. They were as soft and buttery as slippers anyway.

He put the clothes on the end of the bed and went back for his own, his weekend jeans with the rips and holes that drove My wild and a white cotton vest. It was his birthday and they weren’t going out so he left off pants.

My was a little squirmy in his outfit, but Greg’s heart thumped in response to it. His husband’s high tight ass was framed in denim and when he could tear away from that happy sight, he saw sparkling blue eyes and flushed cheeks. “You look like a prince, love.”

“Charles?”

“No. Harry.”

My ducked his head with shyness or an imitation of Diana. Greg didn’t much care and kissed him while doing a bit of pre lunch cupping. Then My admired the way Greg’s medal rested in his chest hair, shown off to advantage by the skimpy vest, and there was a bit of pre lunch bicep squeezing. They went downstairs holding hands.

Morris had threatened sandwiches but of course, they were on his signature bread, big slabs of ham and roast beef and slices of artisanal cheese. Cups of split pea soup were just the right amount for a rainy summer day. There was crudite as well as several kinds of fruit, one of each cut in pretty slices. After they had begun the meal, he brought in the cake, a single candle in the center of the three dark chocolate layers with Morris’ own raspberry jam as filling and topped with raspberry buttercream frosting.
There was more than enough food and they made Morris sit down with them. The rain continued, a gentle background to their stories and laughter. After lingering over coffee and cake, My declared that he couldn’t wait any longer to give presents. Greg loved giving gifts but always felt a little awkward when receiving them. He had no idea what to expect from My after the extravagant date that had ended with an original song commissioned exclusively for their anniversary.

My and Morris left to fetch their gifts, and Greg tidied up the table, pouring everyone a second cuppa and then taking empty plates to the kitchen. Morris came out with his arms overflowing with packages, and Greg got scared. “I hope you haven’t overdone it, Morris. I’m used to a card and a call from my mum and that’s about it other than jokes at the Yard.”

“This is about receiving, Greg. Show your husband how it’s done, yeah?”

He gave himself up to it, watching them grin and wiggle like little boys. They alternated giving him their gifts. First was a new watch from My, outrageously expensive but very understated. It would pass for a knock off. “I know your watch went in the trash after my intestinal accident so I wanted you to have a good one. It’s waterproof and has an alarm.”

Murmuring this thanks, Greg put it on right away and turned to open Morris’ gift of a knitted scarf. “You did this yourself, didn’t you?”

“Lonely evenings in front of the telly before you got me into chat rooms. It’s taking me forever on my latest project.”

The heather gray yarn was soft as kittens and had a brown fleck in it. It would be perfect with the coat My had bought him for their first date. “It’s lovely, Morris. Thank you. But I’m glad you’ll be out more instead of knitting.”

Then he had a coffee table book about jazz from My, the sort of book he always looked at in the store but couldn’t justify buying. The pages were thick and glossy, and he couldn’t wait to read it. “This will look great on the coffee table in my study. Thanks, love.”

He felt strange being the center of so much love. Their faces shone with it as they gave him gifts perfectly suited to him. Morris gave him a pair of hand knitted socks in gray and brown stripes with a small navy blue stripe between. “You’ve got my colors and My’s color in them.”

“You noticed! I couldn’t believe when I found yarn that was perfect for both of you. Blue does so much for his eyes.”

Then My had bought a cd that matched up with every single chapter of his new book; it was an entire history of jazz and as Greg totaled up what one cd would cost and multiplied that by eleven chapters, he felt a bit dizzy. “Bloody hell, My, this is too much!”

“It’s for both of us, love. Something to share, we can learn about it together, and I’ll not be such a dunce next time we talk with Mojo and Brass. If you think what tuition would cost for a class, this is quite reasonable.”

Morris had found a book about hypothyroidism. “I know that it’s not a fun present, but I thought it might be something for bathroom reading.”

“Especially since one of the symptoms is constipation?”

They laughed. Greg hoped there might be a chapter on impotence because he desperately wanted to get his cock back. That would be the best gift ever, to fuck My again with something besides a bloody plastic substitute. “Thanks, Morris. I’ve got two good books to read this afternoon.”
Then there was a new shirt but it felt like a present and not a judgment on his fashion sense. It wasn’t as fancy and it was a color he hadn’t tried before, a medium khaki that looked gray or green depending on the light. “It’s just a work shirt so no worries when Sherlock spills his coffee all over you,” My said.

Morris had a work gift for him too. A tin of home baked biscuits and a novelty mug that said ‘Cat piss’ with a picture of a mangy tom cat shaking its tail. Morris started to giggle when Greg took it out of the wrapping. “If you’re going to break a mug, this is the one. You know nobody else is going to walk off with it either.”

Greg and My laughed because Morris was laughing, which made him laugh harder and he raised one of his long bony fingers and mimicked a tom cat tail jiggling as it sprayed.

My handed Greg a small box. “I sense a theme.”

Greg opened the plain white box to reveal a gorgeous bottle with a G etched on the side and tipped in gold, which he realized was real gold not plate.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t smell like cat piss. I commissioned a cologne for you, but the perfumer will fine tune it for you once he can monitor the scent on your skin. You will also have a summer and winter scent.”

“Are you saying that the stuff I usually wear is cat piss?”

My blushed instantly and thoroughly, cheeks, ears, throat, neck. “I’m sorry, Greg. I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“It’s alright, love. You always smell so good. Now I can too. We’ll both enjoy it although I’m not sure I’ll like some bloke sniffing me.”

“I’ll go with you. I would never leave you unattended around Jean Thierry.”

Greg spritzed some of the cologne on his wrist and let My and Morris smell it. My had taken the cheap stuff that Greg had worn most of his life and translated it into something much finer. While Greg pondered how far he had come from his humble beginnings, Morris handed him a heavy squat box. “Something else to hide your stink,” he said, still giggling. “Peppermint bath salts. You loved Myc’s eucalyptus ones.”

“I did.” Greg remembered the quick, refreshing bath before the night of jazz.

“I make these myself and I’ll refill the jar whenever it gets low.”

“Thanks, mate.”

“They are supposed to be good for aches and pains too. Pains you might get from overexertion.” Morris actually winked.

My gave Greg a garment box. Greg saw at a glance a photograph of a villa taken shooting upward from a beach, sunglasses, a scrap of black fabric, all nestled in white cotton fabric, curtains perhaps. He looked his question.

“I’ve rented a villa for an extended period so we can all have our holidays.”

“We? All?” Greg was trying to grasp renting another house besides the town house. He knew it was done; he had just never known anybody that did it aside from families pooling their money and renting a ramshackle seaside cottage with sandy mildewed carpets and rickety pipes.
“Anthea will go for a week of setting up security and reconnaissance and then a week to enjoy her efforts. Then we’ll go. Then Morris if he wants to, by then perhaps with a friend. Then I thought we might send Mojo and Brass on a proper honeymoon there. And then, we could send your parents last when it’s cooler.”

Greg was gobsmacked. With all of the other things happening in his life including almost being beaten to death, My had been thinking not just of his husband but of inlaws that he barely knew. His parents were going to have a special time that they could remember forever. He stared at the photograph, the rough hewn stone of the house seeming as timeless as the cliff it was built on. They would all make happy memories there.

For all of their giggling, he now felt the bloody tears welling up. He was so weary of being emotional, but My was tipping his chin up for a long kiss. “I’m glad you’re pleased, Greg.”

Greg put on the sunglasses to hide the glint of tears, and looked at the other items in the box. “New underwear?” he asked when he realized the tiny scrap was a pair of briefs.

“New swimsuit.”

 Apparently they were going to take turns blushing the entire day and it was his turn. My expected him to wear a suit the size of a handkerchief in front of other people?

“Private beach.”

“Oh god,” Greg and Morris breathed together.

Then Morris was busy collecting empty coffee cups and fetching a carrier bag for Greg to put all of his loot in. Greg held up the loose cut white linen tunic and drawstring pants which were a safer gift to examine. Morris took the biscuit tin and novelty mug so that he could pack them with Greg’s lunch on Monday, but the bag was still overflowing with all of the lovely pressies.

“Guys, I don’t know what to say. This is more than I’ve ever got in my life for a birthday. Thank you. That’s really all I can say. Thanks.”

He hugged them both and was glad of the sunglasses although it didn’t take Sherlock to guess what he was hiding. My helped him carry his bounty up to his study.

“Bring your laptop over, love, and you can write while I read my new book.”

Greg cracked the window so he could hear the relentless rain. He displayed all his gifts on the coffee table. My returned with his laptop and set up on the huge desk.

“Would music make it hard for you to write, sweetheart?”

“I doubt a air raid siren would get through once I’m there.”

“Well, come out of your village now and then to give me a smile.”

Greg lay on the leather couch for some time, the large book propped on his chest, while the jazz for that chapter played softly in the background. The raindrops and distant thunder did not harm the music at all but enhanced the mood. He read slowly, looking carefully at each photo and enjoying the feel of the thick pages beneath his fingers.

When he had played a whole cd, repeating some of the tracks, he looked up to find My reading instead of typing. He looked up from the screen to give Greg the sweetest smile. “You can read over here,” Greg said, patting the couch suggestively.
“Yes, I can. Let me just print out a copy that I can edit.”

Nimble fingers flew over the keyboard, and then My shut the laptop down and went across to his study, coming back with a small stack of pages on a clipboard. He had on reading glasses and a red pen tucked between his teeth and Greg thought he looked adorable. Greg pulled his knees up so My could have half the couch, but after he settled himself at the opposite end, he put Greg’s feet into his lap.

Greg traded out the jazz book for Morris’ book about hypothyroidism. It was simple and easy to read with encouraging messages about improvement, but Greg was tired of reading and watched My over the top of the small paperback.

Sometimes My’s lips moved as he read; his face reflected what his characters were experiencing, it seemed. There were occasional shy smiles and now and then a chuckle, followed by a wrinkled brow and lip biting. Greg was treading very carefully since writing down his village thoughts seemed to be a new hobby for My, but laden with baggage from his father’s criticism. Still Greg hoped that someday, he would be allowed to read the story.

Greg might have dozed as he watched My become more and more involved in his manuscript; he came back when My’s hand gripped his foot, his fingers lightly squeezing the toes and then a thumb pressing firmly into the pads and working down the instep. It felt amazing. Greg looked up and realized that My was unaware of what he was doing, his thoughts fully at the village. There were pauses while My made notations, but he always came back to massage first one foot and then the other.

Greg hadn’t known how much tension he carried in his feet until it was gone. Just when he was sated, My’s hand trailed slowly up to slip inside the large rip over Greg’s left knee. Greg’s eyes flew open to see that My’s pen, clipboard and glasses were on the end table, and the shy smile had been replaced by a knowing one. “Put the glasses on again,” Greg was able to choke out before My’s fingers teased around to the back of his knee.

Putting on the glasses, My looked Greg over intently. He stared at Greg’s nipples until they hardened on their own. If Greg’s cock could have, it would have hardened and leaked under My’s laser blue gaze. There was heat penetrating the worn denim.

My moved out from under Greg’s feet and knelt beside the couch. His fingers explored other rips in the jeans before moving up to tease Greg’s nipples through the thin cotton of the undershirt. Greg let himself enjoy it even though he knew it would end in disappointment. My had not initiated anything since he had learned Greg’s secret. He was always up for anything that Greg suggested, but he hadn’t made any moves, and Greg grasped at this memory of what they used to be.

As My pushed Greg’s top up, Greg felt his toes curl and a warm, heavy throb took over his belly, but there was no answering pulse from his crotch. It was like needing to sneeze and not being able to; the feeling of almost there was torture. My trailed hot, sucking kisses across Greg’s nipples and then down Greg’s treasure trail. My had always loved the way that dark line of hair cut Greg’s torso in half and pointed toward his best asset. Since most of Greg’s other body hair was turning as gray as that on his head, he was quite proud of the dark bit himself.

The feel of My’s lips could have been enough. Being together on the couch with the sound of rain in the darkened room was nice after a week apart. Feeling wanted was even better, but the anticipation spoiled it. Greg had that sick feeling in the pit of his stomach like taking an exam or waiting for a lab report. He arched up as My reached his navel and swirled his tongue there, but the pop of his jeans being unsnapped brought him back.
He pushed My away and scooted off the couch to kneel beside his puzzled husband. “I want you to fuck me, My. Get the lube, please.”

My grinned and pulled Greg close for a dirty kiss, squeezing his ass and sucking on his tongue like a tiny cock.

“Oh can cuddle me after, love. I need the fuck.”

Looking a little hurt, My pulled back and reached in the supply drawer. They kept one stocked in every room with lube, wet wipes, and hand towels. Greg shimmied his jeans down to his knees and got on all fours, resting his cheek against the smooth leather of the couch, warmed by his body. His cock was somewhat hidden in this position. He prayed that he could still give his husband some pleasure. Competing with a plastic replica had got old quick.

My kissed his ass cheeks and then seemed to catch himself and went on with the prep. He was being careful since it had been weeks since Greg had been penetrated, but at two fingers, Greg said through clenched teeth, “Get on with it.”

Still trying to be gentle, My rubbed his lube slicked cock in Greg’s cleft and then across Greg’s quivering hole, but Greg wanted the pain in his body to match the pain in his heart. “Get in me for Christ’s sake.”

With a shuddering sigh, My pushed in. He went slowly at first, murmuring loving words, but Greg bossed him with commands until My let go and pumped hard and fast. He snaked his arms underneath Greg, but Greg was quick and refocused My’s questing hands on his pecs. My squeezed the muscles there and pinched his nipples, and when My’s rhythm stuttered just before he came, Greg thought he felt a phantom flicker of arousal, little tingles like pins and needles. But his cock was still limp as a tea towel when he tucked it back away after swabbing his sore hole with a handful of wipes.

Undressing only enough to take care of business had been a good kind of nasty. My had thoroughly shagged himself and had a dopey grin on his face. After clumsily cleaning himself off, he climbed on the couch and reached for Greg, pulling him down on top of his lanky body. Greg wasn’t especially sleepy, but he couldn’t think of anything else that he wanted to do. Even though My was fading into an afterglow nap, he slid his hand under Greg’s shirt and rubbed his back.

Comfotered by touch that had no performance pressure in it, Greg was able to relax. My’s hand stayed on his back even after he fell into a deep sleep. Greg liked the feel of My’s slow breath across the top of his hair like a breeze. He thought back over the day and how much love he had been given. There was something nagging at him though, a memory of a time when he had been sad and lonely, feeling hopeless and discouraged as he was now in spite of the occasion. It had been raining then too which matched his mood.

The bookstore! That rainy Saturday when My was in Tokyo, Greg had holed up in Foyles, reading books on marriage and dreaming about what then seemed an impossible fantasy. He had desperately wished for a husband who was emotionally open and enjoyed spending time with him for simple activities and lots of cuddles. Hugs and hand holding and shared smiles. If they got in the car right now and drove to Foyles, Greg could live out his fantasy.

My had no qualms about public displays of affection anymore. Whether it be a public restaurant with a chanting crowd or his whole entourage at an airport, My claimed his husband as he pleased. Greg was probably the shyer party now. They were slowly working into more casual clothing for weekends although My’s preferred weekend suit seemed to be his birthday suit. Greg grinned at the pun.
They had enjoyed a slow, lazy afternoon of books and papers, and Greg was going to request such time again. It was important to make time for puttering about. There was so much to be thankful for. My had worked hard to change and his emotional growth was apparent to everyone so Greg needed to quit whining to himself about his cock and be glad for what he had. With that bracing decision made, Greg snuggled up and dozed.

They woke about an hour later. Greg put on another of his new cds and they rested on the couch while listening. “This was my dream day, love. I used to imagine what it would be like to cuddle with you and not have forty layers of couture in my way.”

My sighed as he took a turn being the petted one. “It’s a sorry excuse for a birthday, and it’s your first with me. I wanted to do so much more.”

“All I ever want is you, the rest is just frosting.”

“You have very low expectations.”

Greg tugged a little at My’s hair where he’d been carding it. “No self deprecation today, please.”

“What else did you dream about?”

“It was winter then so I imagined coming home to a long hot bath and early bed time with spooning and maybe a slow, soft fuck.”

“We could have a cooling bath and a cuddle.”

“That would make the whole day perfect.” Except that I can’t get off, Greg thought bitterly and then caught himself.

“I want to make you as happy as you’ve made me, Greg.”

The cd ended and Greg clicked off the sound system. “I have a suspicion that Morris is making a nice dinner even though he thought we would be going out. Maybe we should dress up a bit?”

“Perhaps some clothes without such tempting holes.”

Greg got his new shirt from its box. “This okay?”

“Yes, I’d like to see you in it before it gets ruined on the job.”

They took time dressing, making a mutual decision not to shave or wear ties, but they did put on nice trousers and My let Greg choose a cadet blue button down for him. The house phone rang and Morris invited them down to dinner. At first they thought the dining room was dark, but as they rounded the corner, candle light glowed from the highly polished surfaces of the table and sideboard. The French doors were open enough for the rainy sounds to come in but not enough for the growing breeze to fan the candle flames.

Morris had prepared Greg’s favorites and since My was not fond of seafood, he had his own separate courses. “So much work, Morris. Bloody hell, this is a fine spread.”

“It was a good day for cooking and baking. I’ve enjoyed it.”

Greg dug his spoon into the thick clam chowder, wishing he could have a whole meal of just his favorite soup. He talked a long time about what he had learned in chapter one of The History of Jazz in the UK. After a week of stressful meetings, My was content to listen. They worked their way through fish and steak and summer vegetables and a leafy green salad with a strawberry
Then when Greg was full to the point of discomfort, Morris came in with a brand new cake, a single candle in the middle like the masterpiece from lunch. “It’s an experiment, the flavors of tiramisu in a more traditional cake, chocolate and coffee. So instead of coffee with your cake, I’ve chosen a dessert wine.”

Greg would deny it if anyone asked, but My fed the cake to him in small, slow bites. Morris had gone to the kitchen and stayed there, perhaps fearing dining room sex. His radio played loudly to cover the possibility of heated moans, but both men were mellowed out by the large decadent meal. The big band orchestral pieces seemed perfect for a Saturday night in. When My had licked the last chocolatey bite out of Greg’s mouth into his own, they stood and joined hands.

“Mood Indigo” finished and the opening chords of “The Nearness of You” played. “May I have this dance?” My asked.

Greg let My lead since he was a few inches taller. The lyrics seemed to instruct that Greg rest his head against My’s shoulder. My’s collar bone prodded Greg’s cheek but he still could have slept like that, cuddled close and swaying in time. They were having more and more moments where My was confident and generous with his love. An old fashioned word came to Greg to match the old fashioned song. Cherished. My cherished him.

Greg was his own man, but on a quiet Saturday night when he was feeling a little sad in spite of being showered with gifts, he liked feeling protected and valued. My was a rich and successful man, but his most prized possession was Greg. Anything else could be replaced.

The song could have gone on forever; they were both content to hold each other regardless of what was playing, but Greg was worried about My’s ankle which was still mending. “How about that bath now?”

“Get your bath salts. Morris comes up with some amazing scents and textures.” They stopped at Greg’s study to fetch them and he noted that the amazing stack of gifts was quickly being incorporated into the household.

“I’ll get things ready if you want to put on some mood music.”

Greg heard the taps and started stacking the player with ocean waves and instrumental guitar cds and then went back downstairs for one of his new cds, Cool Jazz. There were speakers in the bath. He was getting accustomed to luxury.

My called to him. “It’s ready, love. Come to me in your birthday suit, birthday boy.”

Rolling his eyes at My’s camp wording, Greg stripped off, sighing as his cock swung easily with no weight to it at all. But My was there in the candlelit room, already in the tub and holding his arms out so Greg again counted his blessings and lowered himself into the tepid water. The salts tingled on his skin and cooled it; he was glad of My’s warm chest to rest his back against.

My held him for a long time in silence, now and again kissing his hair. Recorded ocean sounds blended with rain sounds as the storm outside persisted. Sometime before summer’s end, they might listen to the same sounds in their rented villa. Greg sighed and sunk lower. The tub was nearly big enough for him to float. He again felt cherished as My held him close.

Finally, he had things to say. “You will never use up all your tickets with me, baby. Do you feel that now?”

“Yes, love.”
“I want you to come to me with anything, and you don’t have to agonize about it first. In fact, it might be easier if you didn’t work yourself into such a state. Come to me or call me if you are away. I promise not to judge. I may be sleepy or confused at times, but I’ll always be glad that you trusted me.”

“I do trust you more than anyone else in this world. I hope as I improve, you’ll turn to me too. Maybe eventually, things won’t build up before we ask.”

“That would be nice. Less drama although you do enjoy a bit of drama.”

“I am as God made me.”

“Twisted old fruit.” They laughed at the beloved Spinal Tap quote Greg had taught him then fell back into silence. My took shower gel and loofah and pushing Greg gently forward began scrubbing his back. It was the perfect amount of pressure and hit all the spots that Greg had trouble reaching. He leaned down until his face brushed the water so that My could scrub his ass too.

He hadn’t planned on asking ever really, but when he was leaned against My again and his chest was getting the same treatment, he was lulled until the words flew out. “If I ever get my cock back, will you still need Big Purple?”

My continued scrubbing and Greg knew he was working on a diplomatic answer which was the last fucking outcome Greg wanted. “Because I must not be very good even at my hardest if you have to use that monster every day, but I still keep thinking ‘why not me’?”

Taking a cup from the wide ledge around the tub, My filled it and rinsed Greg’s chest and then began scrubbing down Greg’s arms, caressing the muscles. “There’s so much shame for me in talking about this. I can hear the hurt in your voice, and it’s my shortcomings not yours.”

Greg exhaled shakily and waited.

“I’ve had lots of sex in my time, alone and with many people. But I’ve only made love with one man. You taught me about tenderness and affection, and so when my sick compulsions mean that I require sex three or more times a day, I use equipment. I never want to use you, Greg.”

“But now that I’m getting affection regularly, a fast, hard shag is alright too. There’s not a right or wrong if we both enjoy it.”

My rinsed the scrub from Greg’s arms. “I would always rather have you inside me.”

“That’s not possible now, is it?”

“But you’re making progress, love. We’ve got to be patient.”

“Do you even miss it?”

“Every day.”

Greg pressed his hands to his forehead to keep the feelings in. Relief that he was still wanted warred with devastation that he couldn’t give My what he needed. The pain was sharp and cut through him.

Fortunately, My was doing his emotional inventory aloud. “So sometimes, we could do like in your study? Holes and a handshake and fare thee well.”
“What?” Greg was surprised out of his misery.

“I feel like shit about this afternoon because it seemed like you were just my glory hole.”

“Sometimes all you need is a convenient receptacle. I liked it, My, because you were feeling good and you let yourself go in a way that you hadn’t since you came back from the dead.”

My slid down until they were both in the water to their necks. “Are we ever going to get this all sorted?”

“No, but some of the basics will stay resolved. Now, switch spots so I can scrub your freckled splendor before we both succumb to hypothermia.”

Greg took his time with the loofah and once back and ass were thoroughly clean and exfoliated, he lost himself in nipples and chest hair as My wriggled against him. Finally, they had to leave the tub which had grown cold and murky as the Thames in January. A brisk chafing of towels felt good as did the duvet when they climbed under. “I cannot believe we could be this chilled in midsummer.”

My was nearly asleep in less than a minute. “Spoons?” he mumbled.

Greg threw an arm and a leg over and My pressed back into him. In this position, Greg didn’t have to feel My’s hopeful cock which was probably rock hard and dripping.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart. I love you.” And My was dead to the world.

Greg lay there for over an hour, struggling with the reality of being only half a man and only able to give My half a sex life. His response to Greg in the study made it clear that My’s needs were not being met by his elderly and impotent husband. He had received many extravagant gifts, and he couldn’t even give My one simple one, but the one he needed most.

Greg’s whole body ached as if he had been trying to strain out an erection all day. His throat hurt from holding in tears. Against all common sense, he had hoped that there might be a miracle on his birthday, his cock magically restored in spite of John’s caution that progress would be nearly imperceptible. Now he felt stupid and ashamed of such a childish thought that left him at day’s end, alone with his disappointment.

How long would he be enough for My? At the rate My was growing, he would be emotionally healthy soon, and then he could go out to greener pastures or purpler ones. ‘I have needs, Greg’ he would say, patting his ex-husband gently as he ran to the red Ferrari. My’s new lover Roberto would give a little wave and then gun the motor so that gravel sprayed on Greg’s shoes.

As if to reinforce the point, My rolled away to his side of the bed. Greg slid out from under the duvet and fled to the guest room. He tried to watch telly for awhile, but his mind couldn’t keep focused. Minutes went by and he didn’t have any recall of what he had been watching. Clicking through the channels increased his restlessness. The quiet day and a lie down hadn’t worn him out enough for sleep, and if he couldn’t settle down for telly, there was no sense trying to read or listen to music.

Finally, he turned off the telly and the light and lay in the sterile room that smelled of nothing but cleaning products. The expensive sheets felt like sandpaper compared to his own bed. He wanted My’s snores and moans and the scent of him, the weight of him holding down the bed so it wouldn’t fly out into space.

He reached in the nightstand for the lube and slicked himself. It was odd to slick up a limp one.
There was no change as he tried all of his favorite moves. He pushed on his perineum, put fingers in his ass, and put the damn thing between his legs and squeezed. Nothing. He rubbed hard, the pain causing him to grunt, but the lube was the only thing that heated up from the friction.

The tears burned his eyes and then his cheeks. His head hurt from trying to stop them. If he didn’t have a dick, he might as well cry like a woman too. This thing was going to cost him his job as well. Who wanted a dried up copper on the case? No fire in his belly. Who would follow a man that couldn’t fuck? Dimmock was hungry and horny. Greg was the old stag that got sent into the woods to die because he couldn’t fuck the does anymore. His nose was stuffed up and he gasped for air, the blood pounding in his ears so he didn’t hear the door open.

My climbed in beside him and held him. He’d had to do it too many times that day. “Leave me alone, My. I’ll come back to bed after awhile.”

“No. You’re here in the dark tormenting yourself with thoughts that aren’t true. I know how that works and I won’t let you.”

“I’ll be alright in a minute.”

“No, I think this has been a long time coming.”

Greg sucked it in and sat up, trying to keep My off him. “I’m better now. Nothing but a giant poof, am I? I wish I’d never cry again.”

“You don’t mean that, love. It’s awful, never being able to show you how much you move me or how worried I am. Sometimes I think you’ll leave me if I keep being so cold.”

“And you’ll leave me if I can’t fuck you.” Greg’s voice was loud and wavering and outside of himself. “If I can’t be in you, I’ll go fucking crazy, My. I can’t stand it.”

The sobs were dragged out across his throat, ugly hitching things like when someone had the wind knocked out of them. Backwards and wrong, tearing at the tender membranes. They went on forever and My was strong, rocking him and stroking his hair.

Tears and snot and drool were running down My’s pretty chest hair, and Greg was clinging with no thought if My could handle it. Crazy wasn’t on the way; it had been in Greg all along. He had a death grip on My’s arm as he came to the edge of hyperventilating, but then My started talking, talked him back from the edge. “Crying is just another form of release, baby. Give all of it to me and you’ll feel better.”

Greg didn’t feel better but he felt the absence of tension. Tears still streamed from his eyes but the sobs were over. A few stragglers leaked out as he panted, weary and sad against fur and bone. My was serene, making slow circles on Greg’s back. His heart thudded slowly in Greg’s ear.

Finally, when there weren’t any more tears. My kissed his forehead and handed him a box of tissues. “I’ll be right back.”

He returned with a flannel. He made Greg lie back and put it over his nose and forehead.

“Fuck, that’s hot.”

“Give it time.”

The pain and congestion in Greg’s sinuses eased. The weight of the heat slowed him down. When the cloth had cooled, My gave him the tissues again, and he got better results. After using a pile of tissues and feeling bloody sheepish about it, he said, “I’m sorry for all that drama. I guess I’m the one that waited too long to ask for help.”
“I think we can leave that irony alone.”

Greg was grateful. My had every right to rub it in. Who was the dramatic one now? But in spite of venting his hurt, he still felt a pounding urgency to be inside My and banish the competition of Big Purple. “I want you even if I can’t show it.”

“It strikes me that my lack of tears is another kind of impotence, love. I’d have given anything to cry with you just now.”

Greg kissed him gently, then ran a hand down to where proximity alone had made My’s cock semi hard.

“It’s the nearness of you that excites me.”

Greg whacked him with a truly uncomfortable guest pillow.

“I’ve done some reading and talked with a doctor. Not John,” My hastened to reassure. “Would you be willing to let me try some things?”

“All I have to lose is hope and my pride.”

“The pressure is all on me then. I’ll get some supplies.” My handed him the flannel. “Get that guest room lube off your dick. I’ll not buy that brand again.”

Greg wiped himself off with the flannel, wincing as the temperature and texture reminded him of his rough handling earlier. He lay back and closed his eyes and tried to imagine any solutions that My could have. They had tried everything, he was sure.

My came back with one of their cooling eye masks for migraines and put it over Greg’s eyes. “I’m going to kiss and touch you randomly all over your body. You won’t know where next. If you are feeling good or getting sleepy, we can stop with that for tonight.”

It had been quite awhile since My had been so top. Greg liked it. The touches were truly random, not just in location but in alternating between soft and hard, pain and pleasure. A scratch down his calf, sucking his elbow, biting an earlobe, nuzzling behind his balls. There were also touches he wasn’t even sure had really happened. My might have been holding his hands over Greg’s pecs. He thought he felt the warmth of them. Either way, his nipples took an interest.

There were licks and kisses up his side while My rubbed circles on his belly. Greg was starting to feel like it was a surprise party for his body. He was definitely not sleepy. There was teasing. He heard the snap of the lube bottle, but My’s attention to his opening was brief, slow circles around but no fingers inside. Then My lay on top of him and kissed him until stars burst behind his closed eyelids.

Desire burned and throbbed in his belly, intense as cramps. “Do something, My,” he begged. “Help me, please.”

Hearing his own voice so weak with need was also a turn on. My really was taking him apart, regardless of how it ended, and Greg was determined to keep an open mind and open legs too. Besides, he had tried some strange things on My like the library licking. Being blindfolded was keeping him off kilter; he was too surprised to worry about his cock. Since it was his birthday, he allowed himself to focus on the sensations without reciprocating. He couldn’t see My to assess his emotional state or to touch him back as he flitted around Greg’s body.

More licking kisses down his belly and he began to tense up, but just as they reached his hairline,
My pinched both of Greg’s thighs; it stung badly enough for Greg to yelp, which was when My eased a finger inside his reeling husband. One hand soothed the pinches while the other edged inside a finger at a time until he had a solid three working his prostate with My’s thumb pressing behind Greg’s balls. God bless My’s big and coordinated hands.

Greg started to feel that odd tingling again as if something were about to start, not quite an erection but a response. My’s fingers were never still, a mix of light brushes and firm pressure, scissoring and reaching very deep. God bless My’s long, long fingers.

Then when Greg started to think the evening would conclude with something like milking, all flow and no go, My engulfed his cock. One motion and Greg was all the way down past My’s tonsils. He yelled as his hips shot up. He was panting and sweat trickled down his forehead. The eye mask was no longer icy; that was for damn sure. He took it off to watch My’s sweet lips around him. My was keeping pressure on with his lips and tongue, and it didn’t seem to matter if Greg was hard or not. His skin still loved the warmth and the slide.

My’s fingers still teased him inside, and finally, Greg felt a change. He couldn’t call it an erection, but he wasn’t floppy anymore. My stopped for a minute to reach for something, and then Greg was wearing a cock ring. He touched himself and it was like a half full balloon. Not enough for penetration but not dangling between his legs like a sock full of oatmeal either.

Reaching for the lube, My handed it to Greg. “Slick us both, please.”

Greg hadn’t worn a cock ring for awhile and certainly not while only half hard, but he continued to stay open to My’s plans. Rubbing their cocks together felt good as long as he didn’t look at the contrast so he closed his eyes. My groaned as the friction did its work on him too.

Then My pulled his fingers out and took the lube. He slicked his balls and in between his legs almost to the knee. It took the whole bottle. “Should have used the cheap stuff.”

“I think you can spare it,” Greg said, laughing suddenly without any tears behind it. “Unless the villa costs even more than I think it does.”

“I haven’t taken a holiday in years. We can afford it.”

“And I think we can afford to keep the guest room stocked with better supplies if it’s going to be our sex lab.”

“Agreed. Now, on your side and give me a minute to get all the parts aligned.”

Greg rolled over obediently and let My pose him. Soon My’s cock was hard against his belly, pressed close between them, and Greg’s half mast was between My’s thighs which were slightly parted. My had crossed his ankles or something; Greg didn’t give a shit about the logistics by then because My’s fingers were back in his ass, three blind mice crawling all over his prostate.

“Small, shallow thrusts or you’ll break my wrist, love.”

Then Greg was in a simulation of stimulation, almost like being inside My. It was wet and warm and tight and every tiny thrust pushed him against My’s cock and gave him a jolt inside too.

“Tell me when you need to come.” My was grunting in that little way he only got when he was feeling very good.

Something did build in Greg, slow and quiet, but a response to his movements. Under My’s fingers, his prostate was getting ready. All too soon, he felt the end coming. “Now, My, get it off.”
My fumbled between them and there was a spurt. A tiny baby fart’s worth of sperm, a teaspoonful. But My swiped down the back of his thigh and held it in his hand. “You did it, baby! Look at this. We should put it in a test tube and have it bronzed.”

Greg felt the tiniest bit better but nothing like a full release, yet he couldn’t disappoint My. He refocused them on My’s leaking erection, a magnificent one really when he was so tired and had shagged Greg in the study not so long ago. Greg took it in his mouth and within a few pulls, he had far more than a spurt to contend with but it was all hidden away. Then as My lay back in a haze, Greg got the stack of clean towels to wipe off the ocean of lube that My had used on his thighs.

“It’s clear down to your ankles, My,” Greg said, laughing again and noticing that it was easy without the lump in his throat.

“Well, better too much than not enough.”

“Enough when it gets to your feet.”

My whacked him with another truly uncomfortable guest pillow. “Let’s go back to where the sheets are one thousand thread count. I need the comfort of Egyptian cotton.”

They left the mess for morning or Morris and went back to their big soft bed. The rain had stopped and the absence of it was a sound. “You wake me up if you feel sad again, Greg. Promise me.”

“I promise.” Greg was finally feeling sleepy, his eyes gritty from the tears.

“Thank you for letting me experiment. It wasn’t so awful, was it?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind trying that again.”

They settled under the duvet, on their backs, side by side. My reached over in the dark and took Greg’s hand. “You were very brave. I’m so proud of you.”

Greg felt the tingle of tears but he had cried them all out. “Spoons?”

My wrapped his mile long arms and legs around Greg so it was a net instead of a spoon. The next morning, Greg woke to find that the whole night through, My had never let go.
Chapter Summary

Greg has trouble unwinding on their holiday. My applies a hands on approach. In spite of some nightmares and anxious moments, Mycroft's feelings of love and security grow under the Tuscan sun. This is a double chapter with the first half in Greg’s POV and the second half in My’s.

Word Count c. 20,175

Chapter specific warnings--There may be parts that seem like they are leading up to dub con, but they are not. Still follow your instincts about triggers. Mycroft recounts an episode from his distant past where he did not tell an older, more experienced partner about his inexperience and subsequently had some rough, painful sex. I’ve been as vague as possible.

This chapter has been an extreme struggle. Thanks to all of my commenters, the small, select group, who keep me plodding along.

For G, who lit a candle in the darkness.

For my emerald eyed, white mitted tabby girl who left me August 8. Fourteen years was not enough. I carry your name, Maggie. I’ll never forget you.

Greg’s Holiday

Greg moaned as the masseuse pressed both thumbs hard into the middle of his spine and felt the pain and tension disappear. This was nothing like the flimsy back rub he had had in hospital after a shoulder injury. His muscles were being reshaped into healthier positions. He had been skeptical when My suggested it, but now that his body was slowly being turned to taffy, he was willing.

The man had said very little when he entered the room where Greg lay in his swimsuit as My had instructed, a sheet over himself. Apparently, the custom was to receive massage in the nude, but even in his prime, Greg would have been shy about that, and now feeling a little past it, he didn’t care to have some stranger observing his vestigial cock.

The man had whipped off the sheet, and goose bumps raised on Greg’s back from the breeze. The five star hotel spared no expense in keeping the rooms on the brisk side of cooled. A sleeping mask prevented Greg from seeing the staffer, but he smelled the man’s heavy spicy cologne and felt his bulk as he leaned over Greg’s head to massage down his scalp to his neck.

Greg had begun to understand what My had been talking about when he said that Greg didn’t have much awareness of his body outside of sex. “You don’t take care of yourself, Greg. You get hurt and ignore it. I want you to feel good, baby, not tensed up from knots in your neck and back and the pinched nerve in your leg. Your body is telling you to take better care of it and I’m listening to it.”

Now Greg felt it when the masseuse rubbed away a headache that he didn’t even know he had, and he also felt how the catch in his shoulder had been irritated by carrying his heavy bag down
the stairs that morning. My had made sure that Art took care of the bags from there on and the
porter did so at the airport.

Greg realized how long his shoulder had been twinging since that chase after Sherlock where they
were both shoved down the stairs. Greg had caught himself with an arm around the metal handrail
as his full weight pulled forward wrenching the shoulder out of place. He remembered how his
armpit had bruised black from the impact, and how he had burning and weakness in that hand for
six weeks.

Hands pressed hard on the small of his back, the fingers slowly working outward like hungry
spiders, pain fleeing in their wake. He grunted at the onslaught. It was as if those hands knew
everything. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes. It bloody well hurt, but the relief after was
overwhelming and tears ran down and trickled out from under the mask.

A low gentle voice said, “It’s okay, signore.” Only he pronounced his I’s as E’s which was
somehow even more comforting. “Ees okay. The hurt will go.”

Greg was thankful that My had given him three paracetamol which just took the edge off of the
pinching and stabbing pains, the unhappy surprises of a body ignored finally allowed to talk back.

Now questing thumbs slid to the end of his spine just under the waistband of his tiny swimpants.
White hot spasms shot through Greg’s lower back and legs. He cried out and thought that he
might shit himself. He grunted again and pressed his hips hard against the table. He was panting
and when the pressure stopped and warm, oiled hands circled gently where they had just been
tormenting, Greg took in the comfort.

“Ees okay, signore. You need release.”

Greg’s head was still spinning from the shock of how much tension was locked away in his body
without his knowledge when the hands of pain and pleasure started sliding his tiny clothing away
from his ass.

“No, please don’t.” But Greg’s arms were so warm and heavy that he couldn’t lift them up and
back to slap the hands away. He whimpered, hating the helplessness.

“Permit me, signore. Ees okay. When in Rome.” He chuckled at his own joke. “I need to work
your glutes. You have very bad muscles. Your husband said so.”

My wanted this. Greg squirmed but finally let go as strong hands peeled his suit off his sweaty
arse and down this thighs, whispering touches leaving his legs shivery. He was alone in a strange
country while My finished one last hour of work details so that they could have fourteen work free
days. He was in a strange room with a stranger and was now naked and groggy. He needed to
stop thinking about homicide. Most murders started exactly this way.

Then the hands introduced themselves to his ass and he didn’t much care. The place flared in the
middle of his left ass cheek. The doctor called it sciatica but Greg thought of it as a burning match
running all the way from ass to knee. It flared up at the worst possible times, usually when he’d
been standing at a crime scene for hours in the rain. He cried out and lifted himself two inches off
the table with his jelly arms as the line of pain burned and throbbed.

“Sh sh sh, ees okay.”

A lighter touch then, gentling the attack, starting up from the middle. Both hands were kneading
his cheeks like twin loaves of Morris’ whole wheat bread. When thumbs pressed into his cleft, he
wiped it from his mind as accidental or necessary for balance. Oh god, they worked in it though.
Greg felt a flicker and ignored it. Then it became a fluttering beat like a puppy’s heart. Greg was aroused. Oh shit. Good, not good, and bloody hell, why now?

But the man finished his work on Greg’s ass and moved down to work his thighs. If he occasionally brushed his fingertips against Greg’s balls, it was understandable. Greg’s cock stalled at interested but noncommittal.

The pain was worked down his thighs, past his knees, and purged from the soles of his feet. Now his legs were as warm and heavy as his arms so when he was turned onto his back, his protests were ineffectual. He tried to cover himself with hands that flopped about like an infant’s and even his head was heavy and wobbly on a neck free from tension.

While he was allowed to leave his hands over his semi soft cock, soon the healing touches working his shoulder and armpit nudged one hand away, and the relief he felt as the pain was worked down and out through his fingertips caused him to drop the other hand. His body was calling the shots.

The mask still on, he was not taking in any information other than a sense of the man as far larger than himself and wearing a cologne that made his eyes water. The mix of unrelenting strength tempered with gentleness was allowing him to let go, but he wondered where My was and at the back of his foggy brain, he worried that My would not appreciate a stranger touching his naked body. Every time he thought he understood posh people, he encountered another open secret that reminded him of his lowliness.

As the man worked his pecs, Greg’s nipples beading up in his palms, Greg justified that he was doing as My had requested and that because Greg was clueless about massage and the practice of rich people, he was not responsible for anything dodgy that might occur.

This decision comforted him as his belly was worked over, suddenly an erogenous zone. His mind scurried in a little circles as he felt himself pass from semi soft in an accidental response kind of way in the area of the brush of fabric or a medical exam into the decidedly hardening state of sexual arousal.

“Ees good,” his pleaser/captor breathed, reaching now to massage his balls with oil.

“This is not right. This goes beyond massage,” Greg said, but his voice went up at the end of each statement like a question.

“Permit me, signore. Your husband paid. You need it. Ees okay.”

Ungloved oiled fingers cupped his balls, lifting them to massage behind them and then pressing down, down to circle his hole.

Why now? Why was his cock coming back online now? Greg needed to stop things, needed to honor his vows, needed to sit up if only he could lift his eighty pound skull. He managed to prop himself up on his elbows. “Please, I feel uncomfortable.”


Greg groaned as a finger slipped easily inside his moldable muscles and went straight to its mark. He fell back as a second quickly joined the first. His balance was all strange when he couldn’t see, and his head, both of them really, was quite heavy. “My husband should be here.”

Three fingers pressing inside him, another perhaps a thumb, pressed up and under his balls, circling. Greg was fully erect now, splayed out like a whore, and pointing upward like a birthday candle, come running down like melted wax.
“Feels so good. Ees very nice. You enjoy.”

Much, much later than it should have, it occurred to Greg that he could take the mask off and look at the man who was pleasuring him, and if he couldn’t stop it, he could at least take a more active role. With all his concentration, he managed to remove his mask and blinking in the light, saw a familiar ginger curl over a flushed forehead. “What the fuck? My?”

“I thought if you weren’t pressuring yourself so much, you might relax and something would happen. You’ve been too focused on the cock instead of just letting yourself feel good.”

“How did you--?” Greg’s cock was alive and well but his brain not so much as the unveiling had not stopped My’s searing touches.

“I have access to no end of disguises at the Ministry, and I took classes on my lunch hour the past few weeks. I’m actually certified now so there’s a second career if the Ministry ever folds.”

“I was so scared that you would be hurt. This stranger was touching me in my naughty bits.”

“Shh, all that’s done now. Let’s enjoy our miracle.”

Greg could barely keep his eyes open, but he could see My glowing with joy as he worked his husband to completion. My’s long agile fingers worked inside him and now with his cover blown, he wrapped a commanding hand around Greg’s prodigal cock.

Every touch and every response struck Greg hard as they had the very first time he had touched himself. It was brand new. For all his trying in the past few weeks and all his worries about not being able to perform on their holiday, he needn’t have. My had been working to fix it. Greg had gone from little spurts to false starts and minute mixes, and getting it halfway up only to have it fall down again or coming in tiny squirts just from snogging had been another level of humiliation.

He was still going to come too soon, but he had kept it up for a respectable amount of time, and when he shouted My’s name, he coated My’s hands in a normal amount of stuff. He was crying for the thousandth time and he didn’t care. He felt like he had blown all the rust out of his pipes. He loved and adored everyone in the whole world even Sherlock. Maybe not Anderson, but he felt tolerant of Anderson.

My was wiping him off, gently touching the newborn cock which was very sensitive. “Welcome back, my love.”

Greg had to have help to get to the bed. He had hot cocoa in his veins. My shed the padded suit that had fooled Greg and climbed under the duvet to take Greg in his arms. “So proud of you, baby. You’ve been patient and brave and now you’ve had your reward. And tomorrow, you’ll fuck me up the arse.”

Greg wanted to giggle at the romance mixed with practicality, but he was so sleepy. “Fuck good,” he said, a bit of drool running out of the side of his mouth.

He woke an unknown time later and noticed that nothing ached. His body was free of pain for the first time since before he started games in school. My had on his glasses and was peering at a small instruction manual. “What have you got there, love?”

“Your new camera. I’ve been trying to understand the finer points while you slept. There’s a quick start booklet. I think we can manage.”

My snapped several shots of Greg, who winced when presented with the photos of his extreme
bedhead and just shagged, heavy eyes. “Oh, nice. Pornographic photo snaps for Sally and Anderson to paw through.”

“In that case…” My lifted the sheet and snapped several shots of Greg’s cock, which was weary but chuffed. “Now get a shower, love. The villa awaits.”

After a hot shower, Greg messed about with his new camera in the foyer while My dealt with the parking valet. Greg was surprised when a Land Rover pulled to the curb. “The road to the villa is unpaved. We’ll get a sports car next holiday.”

Since it was not a sexy vehicle, Greg was content to let My drive, taking pictures of the city and then the different trees and plants and architecture than he was used to as they drove further and further from the city. “Rest if you can, Greg. You haven’t slept the night through since your last dosage change.”

“It’s that change that got things working again.”

“You are an adult and I’ll say no more, but I am concerned.”

“We’ve got nothing but rest ahead of us. I’m too excited to sleep.”

Once fully free of the city, they grew hungry, breakfast having been long ago. They stopped at a small roadside eatery and had Italy’s version of pub grub. My groaning at the calorie count, but Greg knew he was adorable with his new camera, and he took snaps of My with a huge plate of bruschetta. My got into the spirit of things and posed with a great slab of the artisanal bread layered with tomato, basil, olive oil and three cheeses.

Shadows were long by the time they left the main road, a pile of stones the only landmark, and bumped up a track that was little more than flattened grass. My handed Greg the old fashioned key and let him open the door to their holiday home. Light flooded the small entry way from a sky light and the large French doors that looked out into nothing but sky.

“Let’s get down to the beach. The holiday doesn’t really start until I dip my toes in the ocean.” He took Greg’s hand and they walked out onto a covered terrace, huge ancient beams woven back into tree trunks by the grape vines braided around them. Greg caught the scent of green, growing things and nearly ripe fruit. They stepped out of the cooling shelter of the terrace to sounds and smells of the sea. Gulls circling below, the height of their villa startling Greg. The surf seemed far away but the scent of it was unmistakable.

They walked down the wide curving steps which had been carved from the rock of the cliff. An iron handrail had been drilled into the solid rock and twined with vines which kept it from being ugly. The stone was worn from the feet and the salt air of centuries. My took his hand and they moved quickly down the stairway until their feet touched powder fine sand. Greg copied My who took off his shoes and rolled his pant legs to the knee; then the cold water was a welcome relief from the heated sand. It felt great to walk after being in the car so long. It really did feel like the holiday had officially begun.

Pinks, oranges, and purples spread across the sky and were reflected in the water. They waded until their trousers were soaked, and a wave higher than the others soaked their shirts. The water washed off the heat and dust of travel. Greg tried to fully realize that they could do whatever they wanted; they were under no obligations, work or social. They had seldom been truly alone, but My had assured him that any staff would remain unseen. It was their play time after working so hard on their marriage and their own growth and healing.

As the colors began to fade into a deep indigo the color of My’s eyes, Greg let himself be led up
back up the stairs and about halfway, the steps divided into a landing. He had barely noticed on the way down, the horizon holding his awe and attention. “We’ll spend much of our time here, I would imagine,” My said.

Two decadently padded chaise longues were against the rock wall, and a heavy awning bolted into the rock, made a full outdoor room. Some of the rock had been chiseled away on one side so the view could be appreciated, otherwise the lounge chairs were sheltered on three sides and above. My showed him the cooler that would be filled for them in the wee hours of the morning. There was also a box with many bottles of suntan oil, healthy snacks like nuts and dried fruit, a first aid kit—a real one, not a dildo cover, and an extra large bottle of lube. There were magazines and several current paperback best sellers, books of crossword puzzles and Sudoku (which Greg hated). Torches, tea lights and candles, plastic dishes, drink mixes and plenty of alcohol for cocktails, citrus fruit, and extra sunglasses and sandals. Greg had seen seaside shops with less selection.

They heaved their dripping selves up the rest of the steps, motion sensor lights flicking on for their foot placement and then off again so that they could turn back and see the beach slowly putting itself to bed. Halfway up again, My showed him the outdoor shower, a rainwater reservoir supplemented by a small artesian spring. Before Greg even knew he needed something, it was provided for him.

They went inside and shucked off wet clothes, hanging them over the shower rod and scrubbing dry with the deliciously rough towels. “If you’d like to unpack, love, I’ll put our dinner together. I hope you won’t mind microwave dinners some of the time. It’s the drawback of privacy.”

Greg was ready to eat one of his sandals at that point even after the mountain of roadside bruschetta. Between sea air and higher doses of all his medications, he was ravenous. He was hungry for other things too since My didn’t seem to think that cooking required clothing other than an apron. With their bags still in the Land Rover, Greg put a towel around his hips and went out to air noticeably cooler in the short time since they arrived. The first thing he noticed was that the only lights he could see were the ones from their villa. All else was earthy twilight and stars. Paradise.

They ate a simple meal of pasta Alfredo with chicken, spinach salad with freshly sliced tomatoes and mixed olives, roasted beets rolled in shavings of three cheeses and lots of wine. My’s cheeks flushed as he consumed three glasses compared to his normal one glass at home. Sergei had a hollow leg, but My had his limits.

Greg felt strange that there was no case looming, no work for either of them, and he also was sorting through the discarding of all his fears and worries about his cock. It had stirred when My brought out dessert, a peach tart glazed with honey. There was decaf coffee, no different from at home, but the sea air made everything taste better, perhaps the well water too. The massage had not been a fluke; the cock was back.

My’s team had installed a big screen telly and sound system so after a quick washing up, they took a second cup of coffee into the living room and watched, or intended to watch a movie, but before Greg could sort out what the thing was all about (it was black and white and grainy with subtitles), My had rubbed his back which led to rubbing his ass which led to his pants being removed which rendered him naked which wasn’t fair so then Greg stripped My and gave him a thorough blow job. The wine had slowed My’s reflexes so it was a lengthy process.

They had only slept in short naps for the past two days and Greg had been awake for longer since the upgrade on his meds made him jittery. An early night seemed like a brilliant plan. After cleaning My up with discarded clothing, Greg took them both upstairs and tucked My in. Then he finished unpacking especially his medication and the things they would need for morning showers.
and the comforts of routine.

My was sleeping soundly enough that Greg could wander down stairs to put away a few favorite movies and music they had brought along. He wandered into the kitchen to see what was available for breakfast and snacks although hunger was not an option. He took pictures of all the downstairs rooms for his mum. He would be able to email them to her the next day.

Still not sleepy, he went back upstairs and opened the balcony doors so My could hear the ocean and the white noise of the waves would mask his puttering. He put some of this books and magazines on the nightstand with his hated reading glasses, and the rest he put in the beach bag his mum had sent. He was thankful for private beach and his new sunglasses because it was not a bag a bloke should look at directly with the naked eye.

He added his swimsuit, tiny cheeky scrap that it was, and My damn well better have one just as tiny. He put his sunglasses and his suntan oil in as well although the chemist’s shop under the umbrella on the steps had all he would need. He took the bag down and put it by the door.

Then he got into both of their laptop bags and set up their computers. My was going to work at the big dining table in front of the French doors that opened onto the terrace so Greg put his in the small downstairs bedroom. He imagined this was where him mum and dad might end up sleeping on their visit, the other rooms being too grand. There was a little white desk in front of the window on the seaside of the house, and he’d only be checking email and messing with his photos. Personal email account only, thank you very much.

He emailed his mum that they had arrived safely. Then even though My had promised to help him the next day, he messed about his the thick manual in tiny print until he managed to get pictures onto his laptop. After that, he needed to send some of them to his mum. Then he thought of Morris and emailed him a snap of the kitchen and told him what they’d had for dinner and about the bruschetta at the little café by the road.

Morris emailed back almost immediately, asking why he was still awake, and Greg was shocked to see that My had been left alone in the big, white bed for over three hours. Still not sleepy, he checked all the doors and window and then slipped out onto the terrace. The grape vines whispered in the breeze, and Greg could almost feel the grapes filling with juice. He tiptoed to the small pool past the terrace. Motion sensor lights flicked on here too, and soon he was in the water. It was tepid, having baked in the sun all day. He let it lap at his muscles, still loose from the massage.

He could wank if he wanted to. He was outside, wearing thin pants that were see through when wet. He’d had an amazing meal and there was nothing required of him for the foreseeable future but swimming and sex. He would save it up for My, but the miracle of having the option of his own hard cock in his hand was enough to bring tears to his eyes, but no, he didn’t have to cry either. He was getting his man hormones back.

Not having brought out a towel, he hated to track damp all through the house, and the downstairs only had tea towels or powder room towels the size of a tenner. He went down the steps to the outdoor shower and found enough towels to dry his whole team at the Yard. The shower looked so inviting with the terracotta tiles still warm underfoot and the assortment of sea sponges and huge bars of scrubby soap that smelled like coconut that he went ahead and had a shower. It was the sort of shower for waking up, he realized after he finished. He was up for anything.

The sky was lightening, and he wanted to watch a whole sunrise with My, something they hadn’t done since their honeymoon. Wanting to let My sleep as long as he could, Greg set up everything for breakfast. A search of the cabinets revealed a regular coffee maker which was less intimidating than the gleaming cappuccino machine that looked part automobile, part pub tap, part boiler.
Once the smell of coffee was in the air, Greg was highly motivated to get out bacon and eggs for fry up along with some brie, just because he loved brie. He found oranges and grapefruit in the crisper of the fridge and made a little citrus salad, and then he sliced the crusty Italian loaf and was pleased that the toaster was designed for extra thick slices. There was even the brand of plum jam that he favored. Anthea had been busy stocking the pantry.

He got the electric kettle going for My’s tea, a tin of his special blend was also in the pantry. Then he went upstairs and smothered his husband with kisses wherever he stuck out from under the duvet. “Breakfast in ten minutes, love, and sunrise after that.”

My was adorably confused. “It’s still dark.”

“Usually is before sunrise.”

“Did you even come to bed?”

“No, I was productive.”

Greg was treated to full frontal nudity, flushed with sleep, before he left to start the fry up. My was soon beside him, making his own tea and starting some toast. It felt good to cook together. My disappeared for a few minutes and came back with a newspaper, a carrier bag, and a cooler.

“Anthea will have grocery delivery for us on the porch each morning. Let me know if you are hungry for anything special. Otherwise, we’ll have an assortment of prepared entrees and seasonal fruits and vegetables. I also asked for the occasional steak or fish for grilling, and we can email her about anything else.”

Greg just shook his head at the well oiled machine that was the Holmes’ lifestyle. My’s people had people. If he had known fully what he was marrying into, he wouldn’t have had the courage. He divided the bacon and eggs equally between two plates and poured himself a second cup of the good strong coffee, dripping a bit of heavy cream in it. Even the toast smelled magical. They ate in companionable silence, My handing over sections of the paper when he was finished.

Washing up took seconds, and then with fresh cups in hand, they went out to watch the sunrise and sip. The sky was navy, then gray, then sparkly blue. They pulled a chaise out from the terrace and against the railing that overlooked the ocean so that they could lean against it to face east and watch the streaks of pink and peach fill the sky over the villa.

“Thank you for my breakfast, love,” My whispered in his ear, giving it a little kiss.

He leaned against My’s shoulder, and if it weren’t for the three cups of coffee pounding through his veins, he could have slept there. But the ocean was waiting. He changed into his swimsuit right by the back door, and My came down with his beach bag. His suit matched Greg’s but the navy with the red stripe suited his coloring better. His legs went on for miles.

Under the awning, they began the long process of protecting all that skin with suntan oil. Greg’s bottles were brown while My’s were baby pink. He was fair enough to get severely burned. When they had covered it all, helping each other with the tricky spots on their backs, they needed to wait for it to soak in.

But My motioned Greg to stand at the edge of their shelter. “Do you see that villa on the rise there?”

Greg looked far into the distant and thought he could make out a whitewashed boxy building. “I think so.”
“That’s where my security field team is located.” He put his arm around Greg’s shoulders and turned him the other direction, leaning them both around the escarpment. “We’ve nothing but cliff on this side but about five miles southward is the villa where Anthea is staying along with cleaning staff, a driver on call, and the chef for our meals.”

“So you’ve rented all of those places?”

“For the privacy. So that I could do this.” My hooked his thumbs in the waist band of Greg’s swimsuit and pulled it down to his ankles.

Greg cupped his hand over his cock which was alert and curious about the sea air. “Fuck, My. It’s broad daylight.”

“We only need clothes if we leave the villa, Greg, and I don’t plan on leaving for several days.” My skimmed his own suit off.

“Let’s oil up the naughty bits. Pink bottle for both of us this first day, I should think.” My patted the chaise and Greg was soon spread out, ass in the air, getting it thoroughly protected by My’s competent hands. He was relaxing into the motions of My’s squeezing and rubbing everywhere when the bottle was put in his hand. “Do your front and then while we wait, you can fuck me.”

My was oiling up his cock and balls, and Greg was mesmerized. He was thankful to be doing his own privates because if My touched him like that, it would be all over and they had both been waiting months for Greg’s cock to be ready. He had some performance anxiety, but My looked at him with so much love and lust that he knew whatever happened would be alright and they had plenty of time to try. All of My’s experiments had been fun and had taught them to enjoy being together without being so results focused.

He closed his eyes for a minute to finish, tugging at his balls to slow himself down. “Is this stuff safe for asses?”

“The pink stuff is for babies so it’s even safe in eyes and mouths.”

My flipped onto his belly and Greg enjoyed the high round globes of his husband’s perfect ass. Wiggling it a little, My sighed with pleasure as Greg cupped and squeezed, spreading the oil before moving on to slather the cleft and then circle the sweet pink hole. “Doesn’t sting?”

“No, love. Get on with it. It’s Christmas morning and I want my present now.”

Greg’s cock was chafing against his treasure trail as he got one finger in My, and slowly worked it around. He could finally feel like he was preparing My for the offering of his own cock instead of some damn toy or just fingers. So even the prep felt great, but My wiggled again and commanded, “We’re both slick as a whistle. Just take me, Greg.”

Greg put a second finger in because it had been a while since they’d done anything. The last week before leaving had been doubly busy so that they could be gone two weeks. My was on all fours, pushing back until it pinched. “Get in me, damn it.” Perhaps realizing his tone, he corrected himself. “Please, love. Now.”

Greg’s hands were shaking as he pressed his cock into its one true home. There was a pause where Greg sighed and My grunted. And that was the last quiet bit because in front of God and everybody not needed to run the Ministry and a hundred seagulls, My got shouty.

“Harder. Fuck me.” This chorus was shouted constantly with emphasis on different syllables punctuated by the occasional hand motion, pointing, yoga moves, and keening. Greg felt like he
was suddenly in the steeplechase and the horse had started talking.

Greg’s thighs and ass had not needed to thrust for quite awhile and their complaints were silent but effective. Still with My now pounding on the chaise as it slammed against the rock wall, there was a certain mob mentality and Greg gave it all he had. He was quite proud to remind My later that he came first, squeezing down on Greg with a tightness that made Greg fear castration. Greg’s orgasm started in his toenails and every individual leg hair stood at attention as the motion passed by. He hoped My kept down his breakfast when the come passed through his system and shot out of his mouth; there had to have been a gallon at least.

Before he blacked out, Greg saw the score cards and even the German judge had given them a ten. When he came too, the light and heat much brighter beyond the umbrella, his tongue was lolling out against My’s ass cheek and the suntan lotion might have been safe for the mouth but it was not pleasant. “How long was I out?” he mumbled, peeling his face off his husband’s ass.

“About an hour,” My said rolling over, the texture of the cushion tattooed into his cheek.

While in years to come, they told the story that they ran to the beach, truth was they limped. Greg was bowlegged as any jockey and My dragged his bad ankle behind him like an arthritic wolfhound. But the salty water soon washed away all soreness.

Greg watched My slice through the water. While Greg’s moves were adequate and serviceable, basic swimming lessons at the city pool, My was a dolphin, his long arms and legs undulating with the current or moving him at breathtaking speed beyond the breakers. Greg could only watch his beautiful husband with awe and pride.

They swam until the bright sand hurt their eyes and was heated to molten lava by the unforgiving sun. Then it was good to stagger their gravity resenting bodies back up the rock steps to the outdoor shower. Greg had loved the feel of the water across every part of his body, but the down side was sand in every part of his body. Fortunately, they had harsh outdoor lighting and My was not at all averse to checking every nook and cranny. He did not complain either, at the hand job Greg gave him, saving blow jobs for a less sandy, soapy part of the day.

Lunch was fruit and cheese and bread. They ate on the terrace which remained cool, thanks to the heavy vines. Watching My eat a peach naked was art that should have been on a chapel ceiling. Greg felt more sure of a divine presence than he ever had before as he watched the juice drip down his husband’s long fingers to his belly and thighs. “Tell Anthea we will need more peaches tomorrow, please.”

My grinned. Cheeky bastard knew exactly what he was doing. Greg was going to have blisters on his cock from overuse. The constant nudity was like wearing vibrating boxers. My had planned this for months; he truly was the smartest man alive. Best and worst of it was, there was nobody he could tell. When he had a drop of blood in his brain, he would go over his list of friends and acquaintances, but he was pretty sure that there was no one he could tell.

They went inside for the hottest part of the day. My asked first, but when Greg didn’t mind, he went straight to his computer and began writing. Greg wanted him to but felt a little lost until My said, “In a day or two, I think I’ll be ready for you to read a bit of it, if you wanted to.”

“Of course, I want to. You’ve been working on that story like a full time job, and I’m bloody curious.”

Greg saw the hope and fear mixed in My’s face and prayed that it would be brilliant or that he would be given the right words if it wasn’t his cup of tea. He had seen a guitar in one of the upstairs bedrooms and went there and messed about, most of the chords coming back to him. He
took it to where his laptop was and got charts for a few songs. By the time My came looking for him, he could play two blues riffs and “Smoke on the Water” which lost something on an acoustic.

They snogged and dozed in their big white bed until dark when they both agreed it was time for dinner. My grilled on the small patio beside the kitchen door while Greg made green salads and a hot dish of angel hair pasta, tomatoes, sliced zucchini, and olives topped with asiago cheese curls. There was wine again but My had club soda too. “We must never tell Morris what good meals we made here.”

They toasted Morris. Dessert was tiramisu, light as air, the bitter and sweet in perfect harmony. They shared a second piece before going to the living room. My put aside the movie he had tried to get Greg interested in the previous evening and selected an action movie. Greg’s eyes drifted closed during the first car chase. My woke him a short time later and they went to bed early again.

Greg slept hard for three hours, hard enough to sweat from the effort, but he found himself wide awake at three. His head was pounding and he realized how much caffeine he had cut from his home routine. Before he had submitted to John’s medical supervision he had chugged coffee throughout the day and had two cups with dessert at home, but now he had an approved eight ounces at breakfast with My, and the rest of the time he had decaf or herbal tea. He seemed to have fewer headaches and had slept better except for the weeks when John increased the dosage on his synthroid.

The tiramisu had been made with coffee. It was enough to disrupt his sensitized system. He was up for the day. Downstairs, he answered email and then tried to read one of the books he had brought along, but he couldn’t settle. His heart and head were having a pounding contest. The downstairs powder room had some paracetamol, but it only took the worst edge off. He needed to take a preemptive dose of migraine meds but he didn’t want to root around in the en suite for fear of waking My. He got his guitar and walked all the way down to their outdoor room and played with the sound of the waves as his backup band.

He nearly jumped out of his bare skin when a man came up the steps with a torch. It was then Greg realized the faint hum he’d been hearing was a speedboat. “Good morning, sir. Sorry to disturb. Fresh supplies.”

He had two huge duffels and he put away fresh towels, more bottles of suntan oil, and other things Greg couldn’t see without an impromptu show and tell. Greg was thankful for his guitar. With supplies stowed away, the man stood crisply, military all over his posture. “Is there anything else we can supply you with, sir?”

“No, you’ve been very thorough.”

“I’ll leave you to enjoy your morning then. Thank you, sir.” He was gone into the darkness, and then Greg heard the gentle zoom of the speedboat.

His heart had finally moved from his throat when a hand on his shoulder made him yip. “Fucking hell, My. Call your shots.”

“Sorry, love. I’m worried. You haven’t slept beyond a nap in five days now.”

“I can’t settle down. I keep thinking I’ve forgotten something.”

“You don’t know how to relax.”

“I don’t know how to have a holiday. Most of the time, I used my vacation days for laundry and
errands and sleep or when I was sick. I’ve been to the shore with my sisters and their kids now and then but that was anything but relaxing.”

“And I made our honeymoon a working trip.”

“You know I loved every minute of that.” Greg squeezed My’s knee in reassurance.

“Do you trust me, baby? I have an idea.” My was kissing the back of Greg’s neck, his nose ruffling the fine hairs there.

“I’ve come to like your ideas very much.”

“Do you remember your birthday? I blindfolded you and drove things for awhile so you could focus on your reactions. I think perhaps if you were blindfolded and I made the choices tomorrow, well today really, you might be able to decelerate. Can you let me take care of you?”

“That won’t be much of a holiday for you.”

“It would be my best dream of a holiday. And it’s only for the day unless you request more.”

“Will there be fucking?”

“Do you want fucking?”

“Smart man, stupid question.”

“Come back to bed for a bit. You don’t have to sleep, but I can at least stroke your hair until that headache goes away. You should have wakened me, love, so you could have your medicine.”

“I can’t hide anything from you.”

Gregory Lestrade was blind for a day, and because he wasn’t used to it, it was something like being a baby again. My guided him down the stairs, one toddling tentative step at a time. My fed him and put his suntan lotion on and when he needed a piss, My directed the stream where it should go. Greg had pissed outside now; there wasn’t a whole lot left unfulfilled in his exhibitionist fantasies.

He was afraid of swimming blind so My kept behind him and they walked into the waves. The water washed over him, but My was a steady wall to lean against. They lay down near the edge too, and Greg could feel the sun hot on his body alternating with the cool waves, the water dancing and tickling across his skin. Later My’s fingers continued the dance, washing him gently in the outdoor shower.

After a sensuous lunch where My fed him all sorts of flavors and textures and licked the mess off him, they climbed up to their big white bed and My lay him down on the cool sheets. He was sucked to rock hardness, and then My lowered himself on the cock he had missed so desperately. It was the slowest, sweetest fuck Greg could remember. After a long while of savoring the slow slide, he remembered that he could participate. He ran his fingers up and down My’s arms in that light way he loved and then he tried it along My’s thighs. He felt My shift; he was leaning back because it felt so good.

Greg traced where they were joined; he teased a finger underneath My’s balls. He traced a vein from root to tip of My’s cock. My squeezed around him in response. Then My slowly lowered himself until he could kiss Greg; his body taut from an angle that overstimulated him. Greg thought he could feel My’s prostate swollen against his cock. They were having epic sex, fuck of the gods.
My took his hands and put them on either side of his head on the pillow and then pressed into
them, palm to palm. Whenever Greg thought he might come, My stopped, squeezing the base of
Greg’s cock to keep the orgasm at bay. My leaned back and pulled Greg’s legs up so he could
tease at the back of his knees and his shins. Then he leaned forward for another kiss and then back
up so that he could slide his palms over and over Greg’s pecs and then trace a spit slicked finger
down Greg’s treasure trail.

Finally Greg was getting frustrated so My gradually increased his movements, harder and faster,
until Greg didn’t know how he didn’t get a cramp or groin pull, and then all worries disappeared
as the friction built to what felt like an open flame. Greg was panting and arching up into the silky
depths of his love, and behind his covered eyes, he could see the rays of the sun and the stars and
he was flying into the white hot light.

Later, he couldn’t imagine how My was able to walk, but he did and returned with cool cloths and
wiped Greg down, and it was the last thing Greg knew until dark. My woke him with kisses,
reminding him of why he was blindfolded. “I’d let you sleep, baby, but you need food and I’m
hoping we can get into some sort of normal sleep pattern in a day or two.”

Greg’s growling stomach won out over a longer nap. Not wanting to leave Greg while he cooked,
My used the chef’s prepared meals. There was lasagna and a grilled vegetable medley heavy with
eggplant. Greg could taste the flavors better when he couldn’t see. Being fed took longer and had
there been any tension in his body after one of the top ten best fucks of his life, he would have
released it at being so cherished by My’s attention. The amaretto cheesecake had no caffeine. In
spite of his nap, Greg’s eyes felt heavy as his body grew logy from the pasta and then the creamy
dessert.

Greg was ready for entertainment; My did all the voices, man, woman, and child. Hidden talents
of his husband, always a delight. Greg laughed and was startled to find that he hadn’t been doing
much of that lately. When all of My’s characters got croaky, My put Greg on the couch and after
fiddling with cases and remotes, crawled in behind him to wrap him in his arms. Soon familiar
sounds were behind Greg’s eyes and in his forehead. My was playing their song, “Newlywed
Blues.” They had nearly worn out their copy since their anniversary, but Greg always looked in
My’s beautiful sparkling eyes when they played it. Now he was hearing the music without any
visual clues. The only thing he could read was My’s body language.

The colors danced behind his lids and he saw starbursts, brown and gray for him and blue and
gold for My. Shimmering fireworks of sound that fizzed in his veins, hardening his nipples and
even his weary cock, a little. My’s body grew tenser and tenser as the instruments told the story of
the early months, but when one by one, the notes fell into harmony, Greg felt the couch had
disappeared and that he was floating on My’s body like a magic carpet, a ginger shag carpet. They
were swimming in the music, through golden air.

My rolled him over for a kiss and kept their lips together until they were breathing each other’s air
in a light game of breath play. Now Greg truly was floating with nothing to anchor him but My’s
lips. They came to, panting, three songs past their own. “Alright, baby?” My asked, when Greg
hadn’t spoken after they got their breath back.

“You are every kind of brilliant, sweetheart,” Greg said.

“One last thing?”

“Sure.”

My led him out to the pool and slowly down the steps, the water moving up until it was lapping at
his throat. My had one hand on Greg’s shoulder, his arm firmly under Greg’s neck; the other was
Greg went limp and felt the water lift his body; he was floating like he had imagined, cradled in My’s arms. As Greg adjusted to the buoyancy, My slowly removed the support and Greg floated free. My extinguished the lights around the pool and then came to join him. He removed the blindfold and because it was dark, the first thing Greg saw was a sky full of stars. My floated near him until they could hold hands, letting the water move them around the pool as they marked the constellations.

Even without the blindfold, Greg needed help up the stairs. He didn’t remember anything beyond the stars the next morning. He was finally completely on holiday.

Most of their days were similar to the first ones, simple rituals of swimming in the cool of the morning and being creative with writing or music in the hot afternoons, sex was as regular as meals and My got his three squares and a snack. Greg could still manage only one major orgasm per day, but he was able to enjoy other pleasure along with My.

One rainy day, there was a session of sixty nine that broke their personal best in duration. They didn’t shave and beard sex became a treasured routine, all the more precious because it would end with their holiday. While Greg had enjoyed My’s beard, My was new to the experience of thick curls being rubbed in his most secret places. Greg hoped there would not be a Big Bearded Purple commissioned.

The few times they left the villa to allow the cleaning crew in, clothes felt strangely tight and heavy on their sunkissed bodies. They tore off their shirts as soon as they got to the car for the trip home and trousers were shed the instant they walked back into the villa.

On their last day in paradise, Greg stared a long time at his husband as he lay on the sand beside the huge castle they had built complete with moat. My’s ass was as rosy and golden as the peaches he loved to eat, firm and round with a fine sheen of blond fuzz, ripe for nuzzling and biting. His nipples were as brown and freckled as the shells of the country eggs they cooked up every morning. His hair curled fetchingly without a drop of product, bleached to strawberry blond. Greg would miss the constant access to that beautiful body.

They had rediscovered each other at this seaside villa, and there had been a reclaiming of each other that felt as unshakeable as the stone cliffs. For the first time since his twenties, Greg felt completely rested and ready for anything. The sun was at high noon. “It’s time to go, love.”

My sighed and nodded. They would shower, eat a light lunch, and then pack so that they could drive during the heat of the day and enjoy an evening in the city. They had the next day for souvenir shopping and then an evening flight.

They stalled at every step, watching the waves conquer their castle, tidying up the outdoor lounge area even though the staff would see to it. They lingered in the outdoor shower, holding each other and swaying as the water caressed and tickled.

Finally they were standing at the top, leaning over the railing to listen to the waves one last time. Greg could feel My vibrating with tension, and he feared an outbreak of anxiety and self doubt after My’s very peaceful, confident self had prevailed for the entire holiday.

But My was smiling when he turned to Greg. “I never knew that when somebody stayed, the love would keep getting bigger. I love you so much, Greg.”

His arms were tight around Greg’s neck, and Greg knew that My was naked before him in all ways, stripped of posh words and social convention. He kept one arm hard around My’s waist and
the other rubbed slow circles on his back.

All of the Mycrofts were in his arms. The carrot haired baby that no one wanted to hold, the toddler who was passed off to hardbitten nannies, the little boy whose best friend was a stuffed rabbit, the school child who was supplanted by a beautiful curly haired baby brother, the spotted chubby teen whose only encouragement came from the family’s cook in the form of calorie laden dishes, the uni student who became surrogate father and husband with no one to help him through his own grief at the loss of a cold and critical father, and the young graduate thrown into a position of authority far too soon. He held My longer for all the lonely years of a guarded heart and a quick, nasty fuck, and a cold sterile bed after, for all the self punishment with Morris there to reinforce the exile.

Finally he pulled back enough to see My’s shy smile, the open one that pressed straight to the center of Greg’s heart every time it made a rare appearance. “I love you too, baby. More all the time. I am so proud of you. It’s been heaven on earth.”

“Except for the sand, and the devil taking your arse now and then.”

“Time to put on some of those holiday clothes you bought me. The ones I never even unpacked.” He patted My’s ass as he walked into the kitchen. “Time to stop impersonating the slave ship scene from *Ben Hur*.”

They were quiet on the drive back and spent the evening having a nice dinner and trying not to draw back in shock at the pace of city life. Everything was too loud, too dirty, too big, and too close.

Greg used headphones and sunglasses the next day to manage his errands and he took taxis. The desk clerk had helped him pick a likely shop near the hotel as well as a place that developed photos in approximately one hour. Because they had kept to the villa for most of the holiday, Greg had spent none of his pocket money. He took camera and laptop to the photo place, and they helped him by taking what they needed. He could afford three sets of good prints.

While the pictures were being made, he went to the leather shop and was chuffed when they had an album that was exactly what he wanted; he purchased three photo albums. He also bought a wallet for his dad, the plainest they had. His dad never took his wallet out of his pocket even when mowing the lawn or gardening and so they did not last. This one was soft as a baby’s bottom and would probably wear out in weeks, but Greg loved the smell of it, and he was proud to be able to give his dad something fine. He bought Morris a shoulder bag for his upcoming holiday.

Greg had time to walk back for his photos and found a little jewelry shop, all handcrafted originals. He got his mum a necklace of Murano glass beads that looked fun and a little gaudy in bright colors. She would wear it to her Women’s Institute meetings with that horrid pantsuit and never be the wiser on the cost. He selected more youthful, understated Murano hearts on pendants for his sisters.

He popped into other shops and got Italian cookbooks for Mum and the girls and Morris. His mum and Morris could try some of the recipes during their visits. He found maps of the area for Morris and his dad. Tourist guides for both of them, not the great big generic one but one tailored to the specific area with great detail and lots of good color photos. Feeling a little sheepish, he also went into a yarn store and got several likely colors in bundles. Morris might enjoy a bit of knitting while he had time off. Besides, the yarn felt luxurious and finished filling up the shoulder bag which had turned into a nice gift bag.

He got his prints and went to a restaurant with large tables. Once he explained what he needed to do, the staff smiled and took him to a back table near the kitchen. They were in between the lunch
and dinner rush and did not mind a handsome Brit taking up space. They brought him cappuccino and brioche and left him alone.

He set up an assembly line and filled each album, his own having some extra pictures that he blushed about as he realized the developers had seen all. But it wasn’t so different from their home movies outside the bedroom or what the security team had seen on the beach. The albums for their mums needed some editing. But he had taken enough scenery and many extra shots of the few times they wore clothes so that there were enough photos. He would round it out with some shots at the airport and around the house.

Still, so he wouldn’t lose his nerve, he made out the label for Mummy Holmes’ album.

Mycroft Age 45 Month 10.

He had purchased an ornate greeting card in one of the shops and used the back of some packaging to practice what he might say. What he wanted to say was, “I think you know where to put this.” But he didn’t mean the library.

He did want the album there, a third one on My’s shelf to counterbalance the hundred or so of Sherlock’s. He finally settled on, “I hope you will keep this with My’s other albums, and I will send you more from time to time so you might want to make some room. Thank you for giving birth to such an amazing man. I promise that I will love and cherish him for the rest of my life.”

She had given birth to him, but her contribution had ended there. The gift alone would make her furious as it was photographic proof that My was happy without her. If there was any true kindness in her, she would enjoy it nevertheless. She deserved a chance to start treating My better. Greg thought of his own mother who would pore over every picture and ask questions and laugh in all the right places and shed a tear of happiness at being included.

He put Morris’ gifts all in the shoulder bag and was pleased that it fit exactly. Who knew he had the skill of making gift baskets? Perhaps he was gayer than he thought. With shopping for and assembling gifts completed, he munched on the fine brioche and sipped his cappuccino. In spite of constant togetherness for a fortnight, he missed My at his side and wondered what he was doing.

His phone buzzed and he took the text, responding with the name of the restaurant. Within minutes, My was there beside him, sharing the brioche and an espresso. “I’m going to miss the food, Greg.”

“I know, love, but we can’t stay here forever.”

“I’m going to miss having you naked all the time.”

“Me too. Can’t we have more nudity at home?”

My made his problem solving face. “Morris will be gone for awhile on his own holiday.”

“Naked dinner? We’ll need cushions for the chairs.”

“We’ll spread towels everywhere.”

“I’m going to get rug burn in inconvenient places.”

“No worse than sunburn or sand burn.”

At the airport, they watched one last sunset before boarding their homebound plane. It was as beautiful as the first one they had seen from the villa’s terrace and still as miraculous as the ocean’s
Mycroft's Holiday

Mycroft Holmes lifted tired eyes from his laptop to rest them on his husband who was napping close by on the terrace. He was brown as a gypsy, hair wild and silvery from the sun, and he slept as hard as a toddler in from play, his sweet toasted arse bumped into the air, one hand curled near his chin where his beard was making welcome progress. Mycroft wanted to lick and bite every inch of him in lieu of dinner.

Greg was finally unwinding, and Mycroft marked the change. Greg’s posture was less hunched and the dark circles under his eyes had disappeared. A change that had been happening even before their holiday was the slow fade of his wee paunch as the synthroid corrected his metabolism. He was so beautiful that it still took Mycroft’s breath some times.

He had been somewhat concerned about a long holiday that wasn’t based in adventure, but after the intensity of the past months, they both seemed to thrive in the long, unstructured days. Being alone in the house, being in the country away from the grit and tension of the city, being away from Mummy and Sherlock and Greg’s team, it was good.

Mycroft was pleased to find that he loved working side by side with Greg in the kitchen and that he had more experience in preparing meals. His time undercover as a sous chef was now paying off. His insecurity wasn’t completely gone and it was nice to be better at something than his gorgeous, winsome husband. In the water, Mycroft also was superior. Greg’s swimming was adequate at best; he wouldn’t drown but there was no art to his movements. Mycroft knew that he was good in the water.

Swimming naked together had been an amazing gift; the water felt like little touches. There was something of paradise in it, innocence and sex tangled. He had never felt more married than he had when they came out of the water and went straight to their little outdoor oasis and fucked on the chaise. Their days were full of food and sex and so much love.

Mycroft turned back to his laptop and the village. Greg would sleep for another hour so there would be time to finish the chapter. He was finally back to the forward movement of the story, having taken over a month to write the back story of Graham and Brother John’s unconsummated love. It was time to get on with Michael and Graham’s relationship and where better to write temptation and sexual tension than in Eden.

Graham put the finishing touches on the final bandage of Michael’s deepest self inflicted wound. The edges of torn skin were finally closing; the infection had been purged from the depths, and there would be no need for Graham to tend it any longer. The rest of Michael’s injuries had been healed for weeks.

He was going to miss this quiet time of attending to Michael. But he had this night, with Michael sitting silently on the edge of his narrow bed. “So you’ve traded one pain for another, I see.”

Kneeling before the vicar in a strange charade of confession, Graham turned Michael’s hands over to reveal masses of blisters and strips of skin hanging from his raw palms and fingers. “When I suggested hard work as penance, I didn’t mean to this degree. The Widow Perkins didn’t need her garden dug in one day.”

“I didn’t mean to, Graham. It’s work where I could see results and I got carried away with finishing. But I kept my promise to you. I didn’t hurt myself on purpose.”
Michael’s cheeks were bright, and he was the picture of innocence. Graham’s heart turned over, and he focused on treating the hands he longed to hold. Since this was perhaps the last time they would be so close, he knew that he had to make one more try at getting Michael to talk about whatever was tormenting him.

He dabbed on salve, wincing harder at the sting than his patient. “Get some gloves and stop for water now and then, but you won’t be doing any work with these for at least a week.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you sorry enough to tell me what’s bothering you?”

Michael was instantly tense; the pretty flush leaving his cheeks, which grew white with something. Terror? “I can’t tell anyone.”

Graham waited awhile, hoping that the silence might draw his friend out. He bandaged the battered hands and when nothing broke the silence, he finally said, “There has to be someone you trust, lad, because you’ve been struggling with yourself since you came here. I’m very concerned.”

Michael shaped words with his lush pink lips, nearly gagging on the trapped thoughts, but he could not seem to get the sounds out.

“If you cannot tell me, you must tell someone. But would you allow me an observation?”

Michael nodded, staring at his bandaged fingers.

“You’ve fought a good fight, but it’s not a sin to love someone.”

“How did you--?” Michael broke off, realizing that he had confirmed a very good guess. He put his hands over his face and rocked back and forth, the picture of misery.

“Who was he?” As the shocking pronoun left Graham’s lips without judgment, Michael began to sob.

As dangerous as it was, Graham wrapped his arms around the boy, for boy he was in affairs of the heart. “Let it all out, lad. It’s been poisoning you.”

Michael fell to his knees as the sobs shook his body, and Graham gathered him up, one hand cradling his head, the other tight around his waist. When the grief was finally spent, he got his last two white cotton towels from his bag, one for Michael and one for himself.

Then huddled on the floor, he listened to a familiar tale of roommates, studying together, a friendship growing into more. His stomach hurt at what he knew was coming.

“And then I won a prize for poetry. It was an ode to the ideal man, and in our room that night, I told him it was for him. He hit me and called me terrible names and we never talked again.”

“He was afraid of his feelings.”

“Afraid of being tainted by a pervert, he said.”

“It’s no comfort, but it’s his loss. If he couldn’t see how pure and good that love was, first love, he missed something extraordinary.”

Michael blushed, the struggle to take a compliment all over his face. “He didn’t have to love me.
All I wanted was to love him."

“You deserve so much more.”

“You aren’t shunning me.”

“I’m not a hypocrite.” Graham felt a huge unbinding in his very core to have Michael know. His secret would be safe. He didn’t dare hope beyond that.

Michael’s eyes blazed. “I’m glad. I know it’s selfish, but to have someone else that understands. I feel as if I can go on now.”

Graham’s relief was short lived. If being near Michael had been difficult before, it was nothing to sharing a secret with him when he was still in love with some undeserving twit.

As happened so frequently, Mycroft jumped like a shot when Greg leaned down for a nipping kiss to his beard. Nothing took Mycroft as far away as the village did even though he went there now for satisfying work as often as he did for escape from neuroses.

“Sorry, love, you seemed to look right at me.”

“I think I was seeing Graham.”

A look of sadness flitted across Greg’s face and was quickly hidden. “I was on my way to check my email, but I wanted a lump of sugar.”

Mycroft’s heart leapt in his throat. To keep the story from Greg any longer would be selfish and hurtful. But as long as he didn’t show it to Greg, there was a chance he might like it. He would know if Greg were lying, and he wasn’t sure if he could survive the loss of the village if Greg couldn’t enjoy it with him. There would never be more ideal conditions for taking this risk. “Greg, would you like to read some of my story?”

The huge grin that spread across Greg’s face made whatever came later worth it. “I didn’t want to push, but yes, I am dying to read it.”

Waffling, backtrackying, seeking reassurance, providing an exit, testing the waters. “Perhaps just a chapter?”

“No, all of it. The big thick stack of pages you put in the binder, every one of them, every word.”

“Greg, it’s your vacation. You don’t want to spend it reading. Maybe a chapter a day?”

“We’ve got a few hours until dinner. I’m rested. I’d like to get as far as I can.”

Mycroft’s hands shook as he gave the manuscript to Greg. He knew Greg would see how nervous he was, and he hoped that wouldn’t be construed as a lack of faith.

Greg put the notebook down on the table and took Mycroft’s face in his hands. He waited until Mycroft had to look up. “I will love it because it comes from you and because you worked so hard.”

They hugged and one drawback to being naked was that they could tell each other’s emotional state by their cock indicators. Greg said, “This is the limpest you’ve been since I met you. Don’t worry, okay? It’s going to be fine, baby.”

Mycroft nodded, feeling like he could cry, but his stomach hurt instead. “I’m going for a swim.”
When he turned back at the door, Greg was already on the couch with the binder open. He was moving it back and forth, trying to get the words in focus. Eventually, he would go upstairs for his reading glasses or borrow Mycroft’s which weren’t strong enough.

Mycroft stopped at their pavilion. They were calling it different names each day. Fort Fucking was a personal favorite. He applied sunscreen but didn’t wait for it to kick in. He gagged on the smell a bit. He was nauseous with terror and needed physical distraction. The superheated sand burned his feet since he had forgotten sandals. The pain helped ground him.

He plunged into the water and swam fiercely past the breakers into open sea. Soon there was nothing except the waves and the blinding light and heat pressing on his head and back. Fleeing, he swam to an unknown destination. Simply away, away from possible rejection, away from the shame of exposure, away from the fear that it was over Greg’s head, away from the embarrassment of his education that created distance from his husband, away from the memories of his father’s feelings about ponces, his constant lectures about what a real man was.

If his eyes burned now, it was from sun and salt, and if there was any moisture on his face, it was sea water. An object came into view. The surveillance boat. Damn, he had come that far. Suddenly, very tired, he nearly swam for it to shelter himself while the speed boat came for him. But he was naked and nervous so he turned and headed for shore.

The last half of the distance was agony; the beach never seemed to get closer. He finally closed his eyes and counted to one hundred and then looked so that he could discern his progress. In spite of the scorching sand, he lay on the beach for some time, dragging in tortured breaths.

When he finally made it to the awning, he used bottled drinking water to rinse the sand and salt off himself and was asleep halfway through trying to rehydrate with chilled orange juice and seltzer. His own whimpers woke him at twilight. Anthea’s provision of paracetamol in the first aid kit was the only thing that got him up the stone steps to the outdoor shower. The tepid water did little for his taut muscles, and his skin was reddened and feverish.

Greg was where he had been left on the couch, Mycroft’s reading glasses perched on his nose the only indication that he had moved at all. “Hello, love,” he called out. “I’ve got about ten pages left. Would you mind starting dinner without me?”

Mycroft fell back on some of the precooked microwave dinners and a simple salad. He thought his arms might fall off and clatter on the tile floor like a mannequin’s and his legs needed to be moved as if they were prosthetic. He got everything on the table before he called Greg so that he could be seated when Greg came in.

Greg’s smile lit up the room as he sat down at the table still holding the binder. “Sweetheart, this is great!”

“You weren’t bored to tears?”

“No, to be honest, I thought I might be, you know like it would be Downton Abbey, but it’s so fucking hot. I almost wanked to it and they haven’t even had sex yet.”

Mycroft was shaking with relief. Greg looked honestly happy. Better still he bombarded Mycroft with questions. How did he come up with the idea? How did he know how to make them so real? Would they get together? Would the village accept them or would they have to live a secret?

Dinner was like a press conference. Mycroft forgot his muscle aches and answered the questions as best he could, losing some of his shyness as Greg pursued the topic doggedly, with his inspector’s keen curiosity.
The last question was hardest. “It’s us, isn’t it?”

Mycroft placed his cup back in the saucer. “I gave them parts of us, but not completely. I don’t think you would care to be a doctor. John isn’t as saintly as the dead vicar, and I’m nowhere near as tentative and clueless as Michael.”

Greg grinned and took a big mouthful of his cannoli.

“What does that look mean?”

“It may not be how you see yourself, but it’s how I see you. Gentle and shy and always taking care of people.”

“You’re biased. You’ve got on your love goggles.”

“That’s all you’ll let me wear this week.”

“You can put your clothes back on any time you like.”

Greg stood up and began collecting the dirty dishes. “I’ll do the washing up since you cooked. Now that I’ve read your secrets, maybe you can relax tonight. But I’m warning you, I plan to read your new pages every day.”

Mycroft put on some music but fell asleep on the couch waiting for Greg. The extreme exercise put him immediately into a deep sleep where his father waved the manuscript at him, shouting “Implausible” over and over, his face red, spittle hitting Mycroft’s cheek.

*He was naked before his father, trying to cover himself, when Greg arrived fully dressed in work clothes. He put his trench coat over his husband.*

“I’m sick of looking at it,” he said, pointing at Mycroft’s limp cock.

“This is a ponce’s story written by a little poofter. He was rotten from birth. His mother and I despaired.”

Mycroft apologized and tore the manuscript to bits, cutting his hands on the rough edges of paper, but his father and Greg walked off, shoulder to shoulder. “You’re a real man’s man. I can tell. Wish I’d had a son like you.”

Mycroft was calling for Greg as loud as he could, but it came out as a whisper. He ran after them but his legs hurt terribly; everything hurt. The faster he ran, the farther away they got. Someone was holding him back, shaking his shoulders and it ached. His arms were going to fall off.

“Mycroft!”

He came straight up with a gasp, his ragged breaths tearing at his chest and throat. Greg pulled him into a hug, rubbing and patting right on the most sunburned parts of his back, but he didn’t care.

“That was an extra bad one, baby. You were running.”

“I haven’t been having as many.”

“No, you haven’t, but it’s nothing to be ashamed of in your line of work. Besides, you’re burning up. You got too much sun today.”
Mycroft sighed against Greg’s shoulder. The swim seemed silly in retrospect, but in the moment, he had been fighting for his life.

“Will you be alright for a bit while I go get some things to cool you off?”

“In a minute?”

“Sure,” Greg said and kept on holding him even though the position wasn’t comfortable for either of them. “I thought you were taking a dip in the pool, but you went in the sea during the hottest part of the day, didn’t you?”

For someone who loved to be in control, Mycroft also loved when Greg scolded him a little or bossed him about eating lunch or getting some rest. This sort of caring was something he had always imagined a marriage to be. He reminded Greg about his pills, and Greg made sure he didn’t work all night before a big meeting. “I’m very embarrassed.”

“You should have trusted me, love, but I’ll say no more about it. You’ve already punished yourself. Just like Michael, yeah?”

“You had better not start preaching at me with my own story, Gregory, or I will have your character do some very unsavory things.”

Greg winced at his scolding name. “On that note, I shall go make preparations.”

Greg kissed his cheek above the unruly beard and hurried away, returning quickly with a glass of ice water. “Sip it. We are heading off a headache.”

Chuckling at the double use of ‘head,’ he went upstairs. Mycroft closed his eyes. As he leaned back, the fabric of the couch’s slipcover was rough on his back and arse which seemed to be gathering heat with each passing moment. He could feel the waves buffeting him as if he were still in the water. He put the glass everywhere he could reach, letting the condensation dampen the inferno of skin.

Greg had been upstairs and now went to the kitchen with some bottles in his hand. The freezer door opened and closed. The thought of ice cold lube sealed Mycroft’s back door decidedly. But Greg came in with a small carton and a spoon. “Close your eyes, love. Now open your pretty mouth and taste.”

Mycroft rolled the smooth iciness around. “Lemon and something almost floral.”

“Yes, lavender. How far I’ve come from copper to connoisseur. Look at the rich purple color.”

Mycroft took his turn at another spoonful. “It reminds me of something, but I can’t think what.”

Greg was swirling the treat around in his mouth, and Mycroft was fairly certain that he’d rather be hot than eat anymore of it. He couldn’t decide if it was the taste or the smell that was triggering his memory. Then it came to him.

“Morris treats the linens with lavender spray. It reminds me of when I bite the pillow while you are fucking me.”

Greg started to giggle. “It tastes like sheet.”

When Mycroft reached up to smack him playfully for the pun, his shoulder twinged too much for him to follow through.
“Serves you right. Here give me your glass. I want you to have another before bed.” Greg went back to the kitchen. “Basil mint puts us in a similar situation, I’m afraid. Oh nice. Got it.”

He came back and Mycroft sighed as another glass of ice water cooled his hand. He rolled it over his forehead while Greg opened the new carton, hiding the label with his hand. “Open, please and taste.”

“Oh god, plums. Nectar.” They finished the carton quickly.

A tepid shower cooled Mycroft’s skin and a massage with chilled aloe vera lotion soothed his enflamed muscles. He would be sore for a few days, but not like it would have been without loving care. Greg also put cold moisturizer on the tops of his ears and his forehead and cold conditioner on his scalp.

The day was over to soon and there would never be another first time Greg had read his story. The encouraging words were already slipping from his memory; the smile on Greg’s face, one like any other. The nightmare had faded the reality of Greg’s approval, and his father’s voice was louder as they got ready for bed. Mycroft’s stomach hurt with disappointment.

Greg held his hand in the dark. Thankful they had picked out some code words, Mycroft asked for what he needed without feeling like a bigger ponce. “Spoons?”

“You know I love to hold you anytime, My, but won’t it make you too hot?”

“I don’t care.”

Mycroft turned on his side toward the window, which was cracked and let a bit of salty breeze in, billowing the curtains. They had the air conditioning on as well, but the heat of Greg’s front against his back as he pulled Mycroft close was searing. When several minutes had gone by and Mycroft wasn’t any closer to sleep, Greg whispered in his ear, “Tell me what’s wrong, love? This is more than the heat, I think.”

Mycroft really tried to confess without thought, but it was such a foolish thing to be upset about, he didn’t think he could bear to say it out loud. He settled for a tangential truth. “My stomach hurts.”

“Did that gourmet ice give you a stomachache?”

“No although I don’t care to have that flavor again.”

Greg put his hand on Mycroft’s stomach and began making slow circles. Since Mycroft’s stomach had escaped sunburn, Greg’s hand felt good there, warm and gentle.

“Does that help?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Something that might help more is to talk about it. That nightmare is still bothering you.”

“My dad, mocking my story and his poof of a son.”

“You were calling my name. Was I there? Because in real life, I would not let him hurt you. I don’t care if he is your dad.”

“He won you over. He always charmed my friends and people who might have liked me, given half a chance.”
“You know it’s not true, don’t you? Tell me what I can do.”

“Maybe you could talk about the story some more, the things you liked? It happened so fast and I didn’t listen carefully enough and now it’s all faded.”

Greg’s hand continued rubbing and even though Mycroft’s stomach didn’t hurt anymore, he didn’t want Greg stopping. He lay with his lips near Mycroft’s ear and spoke slowly. “I’m proud of you. All the time you surprise me with new talents.”

He stopped, seemingly waiting for Mycroft to process the compliment.

“Your story is deep and powerful. There aren’t enough people writing about our heritage as gay men, and your gift for history makes this story sing. It’s very important.”

Mycroft sighed. He wished he had a little tape recorder. But Greg gave him time to repeat the words in his head until he had memorized them.

“Whenever we get discouraged about the bigots, we can remember what those men had to do for love and be thankful to them for paving the way. That’s our community’s history, but you’ve made them real and not preachy.”

“Spatula?” This was a recent code word for being nearly on top of each other. Greg rolled onto his back and waited for Mycroft to wiggle into position, an arm and a leg thrown over. Since Mycroft’s front was not burned, he could get a cuddle without Greg’s body heat amping him up to spontaneous combustion. They called it spatula because one partner could flip the other as needed.

Greg turned Mycroft’s arm over and started slow tickles. “I love your characters. They are men that I would like to have a pint with. I can’t wait to see what happens to them next.”

A jaw cracking yawn overtook Greg and Mycroft reviewed all of the nice things. He would not let them fade this time.

“You wake me up if you have another one. I’ll kick that old bugger’s ass.”

Mycroft was secretly thrilled at Greg’s disrespect for Lord Holmes. “I think I will let you.”

“If you get worse in the night, I can put more lotion on or we can float in the pool to cool off. Don’t you dare suffer in silence.”

Then Greg was asleep, and Mycroft lay awake repeating the words, his favorite being, ‘I’m proud of you.’

The next morning, Mycroft knew that swimming was out for him, and Anthea reminded him via text that the cleaning crew needed time in the house at least to replace linens and sweep out the sand. Over breakfast, he broke the news to Greg that they would have to leave the villa.

“I really don’t want to put pants on.” Greg rubbed against Mycroft in a most effective argument.

“I’m glad you like staying in since I didn’t plan much for this trip, but we do need to let the cleaning crew have a go at our mess. There’s only one thing I want to see, some Etruscan ruins nearby. Lots of chances for pictures and a picnic if you like. Then we could have a nice dinner and maybe some dancing?”

“I’ll go anywhere with you.”

“Wear your new birthday outfit, please?”
Mycroft emerged from his turn in the shower to find Greg wearing the loose fitting white gauzy tunic and drawstring trousers. With his tan and beard, he looked stunning. He also looked uncomfortable and was squirming.

“What’s wrong, love?”

“I haven’t had pants on in five days and it feels like my balls are in a vise.”

“Take them off then.”

“You can see right through these trousers.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Really? And I won’t be arrested for indecency?”

“The ruins are not a public site and we’ll be in some dim, candlelit place for dinner. No one the wiser.”

Greg was already shimmying out of his snug briefs. He sighed as he pulled the trousers back up. Mycroft checked, but the tunic provided a second layer, and there was nothing unseemly about Greg’s almost au naturel ensemble.

“You planned this bit, didn’t you? From the very beginning?”

Mycroft heard his own laugh and knew it sounded villainous. “I had hopes, but no idea how far you might go. Here, put on these while I finish.”

Mycroft handed him a new pair of Birkenstocks in his size and began to dress himself in a similar ensemble. Greg sat on the bed, mumbling something. He really was disgruntled about leaving the villa. At least Mycroft could jettison his guilt about needing a quiet holiday. Greg was fully embracing the lazy days.

Mycroft turned his attention to carefully applying sunscreen to his face and neck. When he looked up, Greg stood in front of the full length mirror hung on the closet door trying to smooth down his hair, which was longer than Mycroft had ever seen it. He realized that Greg had not looked in the mirror for quite some time, the bath having only a small mirror over the sink for shaving. His expression was odd. “Do you have a staff?”

“You know that I do.”

“Not people. A staff, a walking stick, a shepherd’s crook. I look like a debauched and elderly Jesus in this get up.”

“More Moses, I would say. “If you wear the full kit, I’ll give you a blow job after our picnic.”

“Fair enough.” Greg put on his sunglasses and grabbed the car keys.

He didn’t have to know that Mycroft would have blown him no matter what he was wearing.

Greg had amused himself with taking photos of Mycroft beside what seemed like every rock of the ruins. Then he had left Mycroft to it and shot snaps of the road and the worn paths through the wild grass and artistic shots of the gnarled olive trees. “You have to bore the hell out of people with your holiday snaps. It’s required, but most of ours are with full frontal nudity so I’d best get lots of scenery.”
He even took pictures of the picnic when it was laid out on the large rug. “Mum and Morris like to know about the food. And since they will have their holidays here, this gives them some ideas.”

Mycroft had a wide brimmed hat on but they still ate in the shade of a huge tree that was near a low stone wall. Because of the shade, the wall was cool against their backs through the thin fabric of their shirts. Even so, Greg looked around and then removed his. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to tolerate clothes again.”

“Mmm, I’m considering all of your normal London activities, but with you naked.”

They did justice to the prosciutto and melon, the cold pasta salad with olives and parmesan cheese, and the fruit bruschetta for afters. There was a wet flannel for washing up their hands, and a can of Coke for each of them as well as bottled water still frozen. With the picnic lunch gone, they could rest on the rug. Mycroft made sure his sunburned bits stayed in the shade.

He stroked lazy fingers along the seam of Greg’s trousers. “I think I have a promise to keep.”

Greg was drowsy from heat and a full belly as well as a restless night with Mycroft feverish beside him. He sighed as Mycroft pulled his drawstring trousers down and even though Greg was sleepy, his cock was ready for attention.

Mycroft lay his head on Greg’s thigh so his full belly wouldn’t have any pressure on it. Then he languidly kissed and sucked, more like nursing than having any particular goal. Greg made quiet little moans of encouragement. These were the moments Mycroft wished could be captured as home movies of their holiday, the times when he made love to Greg.

He became very mindful of the salty, bitter taste of pre come and Greg’s skin, the feel of Greg’s cock in his mouth, the texture of skin and veins. Then there was the shade of the tree and the sounds of birds and insects in the tall grass and the wind ruffling the leaves over their heads. He wanted to recall the smells of the fresh fruit they had eaten mixed with the smell of earth and growing things and damp timeless stone. He thought he might be able to feel the earth turning, and he wondered about other people, the ancient people of the ruins and all the visitors since. Had anyone else made love here?

He looked up at the sky, a crisp nursery blue with the white puffy clouds of fairy tales. Greg shifted. “Please, My?”

He picked up the pace but still went as slowly as he could, bringing Greg to the edge and pulling him back with a squeeze at the base. Finally when Greg was writhing on the ground, arching up into his husband’s mouth, Mycroft took him all the way over. He drank down the warm liquid, thankful that it was the normal amount now that Greg was whole again.

He tucked Greg back into his trousers and gave it a little pat. Then he split a can of Coke with Greg before they both felt the need for a nap. This was another kind of outside living like they did not get to do at home or on their forced visits to Riddleston Hall where everything was closely monitored by Mummy and her staff. As Mycroft curled into Greg’s side and began to doze, he thought of other places they might go where they could camp out in peace and nudity.

Their nap was abruptly ended by a cramp. Mycroft’s calf was trying to remove itself from his body via knots and spasms. He needed to walk on it; he couldn’t bear to put weight on it. It needed rubbed, but he couldn’t stand to touch it. If he pulled up his trouser leg, he would see the pain in great neon bumps.

He stood and gripped the trunk of the tree, the rough bark sending pain into his hand. Greg knelt in front of him. “If you touch it, I’m not responsible. I may kick you in the face. I may knock out some teeth.”

Mycroft was panting and he had a sweat mustache under the furry one. “Maybe now you can touch it? But stop if I scream.”

“I think screaming is a fairly clear signal.”

Greg’s touch was slow and light at first. Then Mycroft knew that he needed tough love. “Knead the knots out, Greg, even if I scream. I’ve got to walk back to the car and you can’t carry me.”

Greg helped him sit back on the blanket and began working the tension out. Mycroft focused on slowing his breathing, gasping only once when Greg found a second knot lower down, but he was able to block most of the pain.

Once the muscle was pliable again, warm and smooth, Greg leaned up to kiss him. “Sorry, love. Cramps are the worst.”

“Not as bad as being shot in the head.” They both laughed at the dark humor.

The shadows were long as they left crumbs and fruit peels and a little bit of pasta salad for the ants, bees, squirrels, and birds. Greg poured the half bottle of water at the roots of the tree as a thank you for the afternoon of shade and shelter. They held hands in silence on the way back to the car, walking slowly to accommodate Mycroft’s limp.

Dinner was nice--hot simple food and plenty of it at a local place. The wine was not up to Holmes’ standards but it was adequate and Mycroft spelled it with mineral water since he would be driving. Afterwards, they asked about dancing. The waiter smiled which they took as discomfort via homophobia. But when they had followed directions, they ended up at what appeared to be the local senior center. The war time music that Morris favored for the kitchen was playing, and all heads on the dance floor were gray, white, or bald.

Greg took his hand. “One dance. Then I need to get you home and out of these damn clothes.”

They stayed in a dark corner near the door and swayed while holding each other. There was something powerful in these elderly couples who had toughed out years of marriage. Mycroft thought about how difficult the year had been and wondered if he had the stamina for a second year.

Greg pulled him tighter. “Stop thinking, love. Just dance with me.”

But when the dance had finished, Greg’s eyes were wet. “I’m thinking of Mum and Dad.”

Mycroft drove as quickly as he could over the winding roads, Greg humming bits of tunes. The stereo had seemed too loud after the quiet day. Finally Greg put his fingers over Mycroft’s on the gear shift and said, “I want to grow old with you.”

“I’ll have a hump so we’ll be the same size and you’ll shout everything.”

“I’ll have stains on my trousers and you’ll have cataracts.”

“We’ll eat oatmeal for breakfast and complain about being constipated.”

“But I’ll still fuck you even though it flares up my arthritis.”
“And I’ll give you amazing blow jobs when I take out my dentures.”

Then Greg grew still and finally in a wavering voice said, “This is forever, baby. I hope you can feel it.”

Mycroft raised Greg’s hand and kissed it. Words were superfluous.

At the villa, the car had barely stopped when Greg leaped from it, and as soon as they were in the foyer, he had stripped off his trousers and shirt and was reaching for Mycroft’s. “I need you naked and wet.”

So they hurried to the pool and sighed as they sunk into it, feeling the grit and dust of outdoors wash away. The water was cool on Mycroft’s burned places and soothing to his sore muscles. They stood neck deep and Greg started the slow box step, humming the tune from the dance. Mycroft thought it might be “Stardust.” He had a sense that the song was wistful and felt sad that anybody ever had to grow old. Now that he had found love and friends, he didn’t want it to end.

“Thinking too much again, love. Time for your turn.” Greg led him out of the pool and lay him down on the terrace before extinguishing the lights. Then there was a cushion for his head, and he could look up at the stars. There were more than he could ever recall seeing, and they were twinkling. He again felt himself spinning with the earth’s slow rotation.

The tile was damp and cool against his back. Greg rubbed his dripping beard all over Mycroft’s cock and balls. It felt insanely good, and Greg was taking his time as Mycroft had done under the olive tree.

There were little warm licks everywhere and after the tongue moved on, the cool breeze tickled. There was sucking that made him feel like his soul was being pulled out through his genitals. And there was a pointed tongue deep inside him until the stars really were spinning as he shouted and arched, desperate for release. Then Greg took him all the way in and Mycroft thought that they might get old, but their love making would not.

Greg sped his movements. Mycroft cried out his husband’s name and then couldn’t stop saying it as he felt himself falling down through the terrace into the ancient soil and toward the earth’s core. But Greg caught him, holding him tight, stroking his hair until he came back. There were drops pelting his heated skin. “Did I come that hard?”

Greg chuckled. “No, love. It’s raining.”

They sprawled out and let the rain touch them everywhere. It was the gentlest of showers, a soaking rain. Finally common sense prevailed since the terrace was not a forgiving surface for sore muscles. Greg helped him up and took him to the loo where he dried him with the scratchy white towels. They fell asleep to the sound of rain hitting the parched ground and to the scent and breeze of fresh water from the open window.

They woke to continued rain and Mycroft’s laptop told him that the weather front was there to stay. “What shall we do on this rainy day?” he asked Greg around a bite of toast and plum jam.

Greg ducked his head with shyness, and Mycroft knew that whatever was in Greg’s mind was going to be an adventure worth reckoning. Greg mumbled his request first and Mycroft had to ask him to repeat it.

“I want you to fist me.”

Mycroft put his hand under Greg’s chin to tip his face up, but he closed his eyes, his cheeks flushed. “I’m glad that you asked. Of course I’d try anything you wanted. Have you done it
before?”

Greg shook his head. “I never trusted anybody enough.”

“I’ve had it done to me but I’ve never been the active party.”

“Then we’ve still got some firsts left.” Greg took a deep breath, and the words spilled out in a rush. “I want to be as close to you as I can, My. I want you filling me all the way up.”

“You’ve given it a great deal of thought.”

Greg nodded. “Yes, but I wanted to wait until my cock came back.”

Mycroft found himself deeply moved. All of these acts that had been about power and domination in his ugly past were now about love. It would be a positive exploration rather than the awkward jockeying for dominance and his subsequent feelings of humiliation and emptiness. Greg would always have his best interests at heart, and he must do the same.

“You’ve probably done some research so you know that it takes preparation. We wouldn’t be able to get that far today.”

Greg licked his lips. “Not even if we worked at it all day?”

“If I wanted to hurt you and risk permanent damage.” Mycroft was shaking and the kitchen was dissolving into another place and time when he was much thinner and younger.

Greg’s voice came from far away. “I thought since your cock is so big, and we’d been playing with Big Purple some the past month that we could manage. You can get it much further in me than when we started.”

“That’s a replica of your own cock, love, not a fist.” Mycroft pulled back the apron Greg had been wearing to cook their fry ups and held his closed fist beside Greg’s half hard cock. He traced a finger across the widest part of his hand where his knuckles were clearly far wider than Greg’s cock. Then he rested his fist on his own thigh so Greg could see the size difference again.

“I feel a right git now.”

“May I make a request?”

“By all means.”

Mycroft took Greg’s snippy tone for what it was, embarrassment. “Let’s wait until we get home. I’d like to order the supplies myself. We’ll need an arsenal far beyond Big Purple, and I’d like to do some research. If I hurt you, Greg, even accidentally, I wouldn’t survive it.”

Greg unhunched his shoulders and rubbed his hand across Mycroft’s fist which was still clenched on his thigh. “You are taking this very, very seriously. We’ve experimented before. Why is this giving you pause?”

“If I had paws, it might be easier.”

“Don’t.”

The word cut through the air. Mycroft could almost see it smash against the rainy window pane. He wanted out of the kitchen even if it meant standing in the rain. He wanted out of his humiliating memories.
“You can say ‘no.’ You don’t even have to give me a reason. If you don’t want to, that’s good enough for me.”

Greg had given him an out, but he felt like a refusal without explanation was cold and a bit rude. “I’m not saying no. I’m saying that we need to talk about it some more and get some supplies. If you want to begin while we’re here, I could order them by overnight mail.”

He poured the rest of the breakfast tea into his empty cup and drained it, grimacing when it was lukewarm and bitter from longer steeping.

“I’ll make a fresh pot,” Greg said, taking the china one from the table.

Mycroft watched as he switched the kettle on and measured the exact amount of special blend that Mycroft preferred just as Morris had taught him. The red strings of the apron hung down and nestled in the cleft of his arse. He was beautiful, swarthy skinned as a pirate, wild haired and making tea for his husband. He deserved to know the reason why Mycroft was reluctant about fisting, but if only it wasn’t yet another sad story about the bloody past, in this case literally so.

Something about Greg seemed to pull the past out of him. He didn’t have good memories to share when Greg told stories about his mum and dad and sisters and a herd of French cousins. Sometimes Mycroft thought he did have a nice, normal story to share and then would catch a glimpse of the horror and pity in Greg’s eyes.

The tile floor was chilly against Mycroft’s bare feet and the cold was creeping up into his calves and knees. His hands shook where they rested on his thighs. For the first time since they stripped off on the beach that first day, he wanted his clothes.

Greg put a warmed, empty cup in his hands and formed his fingers around it. “Tea in two shakes.”

“How did you know I was cold?”

“Your shoulders are around your ears. Do you want a blanket?”

“No, this works.” Mycroft felt like a maiden aunt.

Greg leaned in, his eyes full of sympathy. “I’m sorry I got snippy. I was embarrassed that I didn’t know what all was involved. You are allowed to have secrets from me, and I won’t press about your past. But if some memory has you this upset, I think it might help to talk about it.”

Mycroft sighed. “I don’t want to tell you any more sad stories. You must be weary of them.”

Greg laughed. “Do you think you tell me lots of sad stories?”

“Constantly.”

“You don’t talk about yourself at all, love. What little I know I’ve pieced together with skills greatly lacking compared to yours and Sherlock’s. You’ve got a whole dossier on me.”

“It’s not a holiday story.”

Greg gripped Mycroft’s knee. “It’s us whether we’re at home or on holiday, and we’ll do whatever it takes for you to feel more comfortable. Better out than in your pal Gigi would say.”

“I just don’t know.”

“Rainy days are good story days. You are a good story teller. Start at the beginning. When did it
happen?"

“When I was with Rory and Morris, my first year with the ministry.”

“You had the big house then, right? They were your make believe staff?.”

Mycroft smiled at the term ‘make believe’ for that operation. “Yes, my pretend staff.”

“Who was the bastard that hurt you?”

“He was one of my professors, a good decade older at least. Looking back, it was obvious. The song that was always on the radio that winter was George Michael’s ‘Father Figure.’ Mummy had run through the glamour of having a missing husband and the benefits of widowhood. She was bored and rung me every day. Sherlock was on the cusp of puberty and his headmaster rang me nearly as often.”

“Some things don’t change.”

“John got him past puberty, thank god.”

“Weren’t their rules about professors dating students?” Greg looked fierce even with his Medusa bed head and charming apron.

“There were, which would have warned off any sensible boy, but I was naïve and lonely and desperate to impress him. He wasn’t a saint or a villain. He believed the international playboy persona that I showed him.”

“It’s still wrong even if he hadn’t hurt you.”

“I agreed to it, love. He made it all seem adult and sophisticated. I wanted that. I also wanted him to hold me and let me cry on his shoulder about Father. Sometimes after sex, he would rub my back a little. I would have gone through a world of pain for that affection.”

Greg’s hands shook as he poured the tea. Mycroft didn’t know if it was anger or something else and if it were anger, whom it might be directed toward. He had been so stupid back then.

“You mustn’t blame him. He gave me instructions and supplies for preparing myself, and I didn’t do as much as I needed to. If I asked questions, he would know how inexperienced I was. It was easier to imagine that I could bluff my way through.”

“Didn’t he know you weren’t ready? What about safe words?”

“He had me choose a safe word but he said, ‘If you can’t take it, use your safe word.’ I’m a Holmes; of course, I can take it.”

“Fuck.” Greg ran his fingers through his hair until it was straight up all over like gray flames from the fury escaping. “Even casual partners look out for each other.”

“I know now that he was angry at himself for believing my act, but I was the one that got scolded. I had bled on him and the sheets, and I begged his forgiveness but he went to shower. I think he was scared. I was playing underage for the operation.”

Mycroft sipped at the tea but his stomach was hurting again and it didn’t taste right.

Greg took the cup. “You don’t have to drink it. Let’s finish this under the duvet.”

Greg kept a welcome warm arm around his shoulders as they climbed the stairs, and he tucked
Mycrof in, making sure the covers were up to his neck. Then he climbed in on the other side and asked, “Spoons or spatula?”

Mycroft wanted face to face but that hadn’t been one of the choices. “Spatula.”

He lay his head on Greg’s chest and continued, eager to have the telling over. “I was in the laundry trying to get my own blood out of the sheets and I decided that even if I had bragged and posed, I didn’t deserve that much pain. There was a door and I walked out without my coat or shoes and drove home.”

“You shouldn’t have been driving.” Greg was rubbing his back, and the only cold was on the inside now.

“Morris had made a special dinner for them. I’d forgot until I saw the candlelight. I was nearly to the stairs and on my way to a hot bath when Morris came in the kitchen for the dessert. He took my fumbling explanation until I turned and he saw the back of my trousers. Light colored trousers with a dark navy blazer was the style that year. Do you remember?”

“A bitch to clean and had to be ironed to look proper.” Greg wasn’t letting him get sidetracked. “Did Morris look after you then?”

Mycroft nodded, Greg’s chest hair tickling his cheek. “They had a doctor friend who was closeted. We took him away from his baby’s bath time to treat me in his surgery. I don’t remember getting there, but I remember the ride home, lying in the backseat with my head in Morris’ lap. He stroked my hair and called me ‘lad’, and I formed the most monstrous crush on him that lasted until I killed Rory.”

“Until Rory got himself killed by not following protocol,” Greg corrected.

Mycroft did not want a repeat of the guilt over Rory conversation. “I would never want to hurt you or use you, Greg.”

“You never would, but we won’t talk about it again until we get home.” Greg kissed the top of his head.

“I’m very tired,” Mycroft heard himself say.

“I know, baby. That was a hard story to tell. You’ve been writing while I nap in the afternoon and then staying up late with me and making like a fish at sunrise. You have a good lie down. I’ll keep watch.”

Mycroft was exhausted but also stirred up by the bad memories; he doubted he could settle enough to sleep. But Greg petted him and murmured little comforts until Mycroft’s head was too heavy to lift. He fell through the bed into a deep hole of gray quiet.

The next thing he knew he was sandwiched between Greg and a man sized version of Greg’s teddy, Bruce. Mycroft was warm and loved and cuddled. Bruce’s fur felt amazing all over Mycroft’s naked body. Greg was naked too and if bears could be naked, Bruce was. There was nothing but fur and love everywhere. Bruce was touching him and furry paws on his cock were the most magical thing he’d ever felt. “Bruce, god Bruce, so good, Bruce.”

But Greg was getting jealous trying to pull them apart until Mycroft woke up.

Greg was stroking his hair and kissing his forehead and cheeks. “Come back to me, love. That’s it. Another bad dream? Was that bastard called Bruce? So help me, I’ll find him.”
“He’s long dead of AIDS and Bruce is the name of your teddy.”

“You were having a dream about my teddy?”

“Mmm, a wonderful erotic dream about fur on my cock.”

Your cock was furry.”

Mycroft woke up enough to laugh. “No, Bruce was touching my cock with his fur.”

“That would explain you nuzzling into my chest for the past five minutes.”

“Was I?”

Greg reached down to stroke Mycroft’s iron hard length. “More beard sex?”

“Yes, please. Nearly there, just put your beard on my cock.”

“I guess Bruce stole my chance at foreplay.” But Greg obliged and the feel of warm, soft fur along
his shaft had Mycroft's balls tightening and then Greg rubbed his chin across the head of
Mycroft’s cock and it was enough. Mycroft sprayed Greg and his chest and possibly the ceiling.
Thank god for stucco.

Mycroft drifted back into his dream. Greg kissed him on the forehead. “I’m going to fetch a
flannel, teddy lover.”

He was half asleep by the time Greg came back. Water dripped on his face. “Greg, have a care.
The flannel is dripping.”

But Greg had the flannel on his chest, wiping him gently. Was the roof leaking? Mycroft came
awake and observed. Greg was crying. “Sorry, I’m a little sad but also very grateful that I can look
after you now.”

“Oh, love. I should have never told you.”

“I asked for it and I’m glad you did, but maybe you could hold me for a bit. You know, until we
get back to London and your other lover, B.L.”

Mycroft held out his arms and Greg wriggled close, but then he propped himself up to say, “I
can’t fix your past but I swear to god, I’ll see to it that your future is happy.”

Then he snuggled against My’s chest, his hands busy with slow stroking while he sniffled.
Mycroft reveled in holding him with no time limit. There would be no alarm clocks or ringing
mobiles or knocks on the door. A great flood of possessiveness came over Mycroft. “My lover,
my husband, mine.”

He had never been first with anyone, never had first claim, but Greg was his before anyone else.
Greg didn’t have a possessive mother and so Gigi gladly acknowledged that husbands had first
preference. Greg’s body was his alone to touch and lick and bite and cuddle and fuck. No one else
would be allowed. Other than medical exams, all of Greg’s intimate touches would be exclusively
from Mycroft. He was only now gaining the confidence to receive this truth.

No one else got to touch Mycroft either. No more clandestine gropings in the Gent’s. No more
one night stands that left his physical needs sated, but his heart tainted with shame and loneliness
and guilt. No more settling and pretending and keeping his hopes a secret from his own mind and
heart. All for Greg for always. Mycroft felt so full of love for him that he thought it must be
running out of his ears.

He wanted to tell Greg how much he loved him, but all of the words had been used already. There wasn’t a new way to say it and he wasn’t sure Greg would understand that it was something new and much larger. He let sleep resolve the issue.

The second week passed quickly until it was their last night at the villa. They had tried every position they could imagine. They had listened to all of their music, watched all of their movies, and read as much as they wanted to. There was very little packing to be done so they lay on the bed, almost bored. It was too early for sleep, but too late to go out.

“Wait here.” Greg disappeared downstairs for awhile and Mycroft could hear cupboard doors slamming as a search took place. When he came back, he went into the bathroom first, and the sound of zippers being opened had Mycroft somewhere between curious and concerned.

“Close your eyes and you will get a big surprise.”

“You aren’t going to circumcise me, are you? Because if I’m going to take that step, I’d prefer to have a bris.”

“Excellent idea. Maybe next holiday.” But Greg rubbed his foreskin reassuringly. “No permanent alterations, I promise.”

Mycroft dutifully closed his eyes and felt cold metal on his chest and then a cooling gel followed by the scratch of a razor. Greg worked quietly for a long time, the razor making the smallest of touches. Finally, the click of small scissors around his nipple tickled and stimulated.

Mycroft sat up on the bed so he could see himself in the full length mirror. Against the backdrop of ginger chest hair, a heart shaped patch of paler skin glowed with his pink pert nipple dead center. “Gregory Lestrade, I have a physical when we get back.”

Greg’s shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“And a steam with the Prime Minister.”

Greg burst out in guffaws, falling back on the bed and cracking his head against the headboard, but even that did not stop his laughter.

“My turn?”

“Alright but you have to do something different. I don’t want us to be twinsies at the hotel pool.”

Mycroft got a fresh razor and a Sharpie pen from his briefcase. Greg’s brow furrowed and his tongue stuck out in concentration as Mycroft swiped the razor at intervals all down his treasure trail. Then he held Greg’s skin taut as he printed carefully below the line and then wrote in cursive with a flourish on the line. Since it would be backwards in the mirror, he took a snap of it and showed Greg. “I signed on the dotted line per instructions. I bet my hair grows back before that indelible ink fades.”

“But my love for you will never fade.” Mycroft felt a bit dreamy until Greg added, “Say cheese. Get some wine to go with that cheese.”

“Sometimes I like cheese.” He pouted. “And sometimes I like a bit of ham.” Mycroft tickled Greg’s belly right across the dotted line and then his thighs and with Greg giggling helplessly, he flipped him over, decidedly not in a spatula kind of way, and spanked his toasted bottom.
He was working up a fine sweat when he realized that he was roughhousing just like he used to envy in the dormitories. It was the affectionate cruelty that he had always envied, that easy manner of boys who were socially perfect. The hazing he received was petty and mean spirited and left him with bruises and ruined personal items that had to be replaced with his own pocket money. But Greg was playing with him and teasing him because he liked him; it was the best mate part of their relationship.

His reverie had put him off guard and soon Greg had him upended and Mycroft treasured every bit of the nipple twisting and rope burn that Greg gave him. They took a long bath after to soothe the shaved places, and after that a mutual wank got them sleepy enough for bed.

The next morning they were up early to enjoy the last hours before driving back to the city. They had time for a swim and a sand castle, their best ever. It was nice enough that Greg went back to the villa and got his camera for several pictures of it.

Too soon however, the sun was getting hot and it was time for them to go in. As they tidied up their fort and then showered for the last time under the outdoor spray, Mycroft felt the pangs again. Something had happened to him at this place. He had started believing in forever. It seemed that Greg was different than all the other lovers, and that no matter what stupid things Mycroft did, Greg would stay.

He hadn’t worried about Greg leaving for a whole week, and on the other side of things, he had more confidence that he was making Greg happy not just in bed but all the time by being himself. When they finished their shower and stood at the top of the stone stairs for one last look, Mycroft took the chance. “I never knew when somebody stayed, the love would keep getting bigger. I love you so much, Greg.”

Greg held him for a long time, and when he pulled back, Mycroft smiled because the look in Greg’s eyes was understanding. “I love you too, baby. More all the time. I’m so proud of you.”

There were other words and some teasing, but Mycroft mostly just heard, ‘more all the time’ and ‘proud.’ Greg did understand. It wasn’t going to be a one year trial membership. They were lifetime members.
Standing in the foyer of the townhouse, Greg watched as Morris took Mycroft’s raincoat, umbrella, and briefcase. Then Greg helped My take off his suit jacket and waistcoat which he also handed to Morris who now looked like a coat tree. “If you will excuse us, Morris, I’m going to fuck my husband now.”

Morris’ mouth twitched in that way that was almost a smile as he adopted his long discarded butler persona. “Very good, sir. I shall be in the kitchen, preparing dinner with the radio turned quite loud.”

My was already unfastening his belt as Morris left with his bundle of clothes. Greg got out the bottle of lube and snapped open the top as My’s trousers slid to the floor. He wasn’t wearing pants. “I won’t need the lube, Greg. I prepped myself in the limo on the way home.”

“Oh fuck.”

“Precisely,” said My, spreading his legs wide until he was the same height as Greg and then grabbing the long narrow table opposite the front door.

Greg got his own pants and trousers down, wincing as they caught on the plug he had been wearing since lunch. Preparation for fisting was a long term commitment apparently. “Are you sure that you’re ready, love?” he asked, his hands squeezing the pert ass under My’s snow white shirt tail.

“I’ve been ready since I wanked at lunch.”

Greg slid home. They both paused for a happy sigh. Friday night with a free weekend beckoning which they had both worked very hard to clear. They planned to spend the whole time in bed and bath, revisiting the spirit of the villa.

Grabbing My’s hips, Greg started the fast, rough fuck they had agreed on via text. With each power thrust, the silver tray on the foyer table jumped and clanged. My grunted and they heard the faint sound of Morris’ kitchen radio playing “Mood Indigo.” My started up a chant of “Fuck me, Greg,” second verse same as the first, the emphasis varying as the rhythm sped up.
“I am fucking you, love,” Greg finally felt compelled to say as if the instruction was a criticism. He was creating enough friction that the entry way, both to the house and to My’s arse smelled of lube and the starch of his shirt tail. The small lamp on the table has walked across from right to left and there was a wee line of varnish on the pale wallpaper.

With his long narrow foot, My dragged the umbrella stand from beside the table to directly underneath himself and took charge of his own cock. Greg’s cock was extra hard from the stimulus of the plug. It was as close as he cared to get to a threesome and he could see the appeal. They would have to try with the next level of dildo in My’s new toy box. Greg’s prostate kissed him hello on both entrance and exit and didn’t complain of the silicone at all.

His body had been easy to please since the villa. They were riding high on the triumphal return of Greg’s cock, libido and stamina. With his hormones and thyroid levels nearing the normal range, he was sometimes able to go twice in one day, and they tried each day regardless.

They were in the best shape of their lives; the swimming and healthy eating of the two weeks in Italy had started a trend. My swam before work and sometimes at lunch too. Greg worked out with the guys on his team whenever My had a late meeting and on the weekends, they planned special workouts to do together in addition to extreme sex with its bonus calorie burn.

They looked at getting their bodies in shape as gifts to each other. Clothing was optional after dinner; Morris had been warned. Greg’s typical evening wear was reading glasses and a cock ring but the trend was definitely shifting toward plugs. A whole set in a pretty little box, graduated in size like wrenches, but each one a different color. Only the best of tools for a Holmes.

Greg came back to the present as his next thrust sent My’s load into the elephant’s foot. Fortunately the umbrellas had been removed after the last time. My slumped against the table, panting and loosening his tie, his thighs trembling as Greg re-focused his efforts.

His balls had just drawn up for the big finish when My said, “How lovely! A post card from Mojo and Brass.”

Greg’s orgasm was not what it might have been, but he would make My pay later. He stepped out of his pants and used them to clean both of them off. “I thought they got back on Monday.”

“They did. Must have written their postcards on the plane same as we did.”

“What’s it say?” Greg pulled My against him and read over his shoulder.

_Took all your advice. Christened the fort daily. Aprons only. Many thanks._

They went into the icy reception room and sat down on the iron wear sofa, the upholstery a bit scratchy on well used arses. The pile of mail was nearly sorted when both of their mobiles rang at once. All of the afterglow turned off like a tap. Before he looked at the number, somehow Greg knew.

John’s voice was far too calm. “Greg, he’s been stabbed. It’s not good. He lay there for hours before he was found. The hospital is contacting Mycroft, but can you come too?”

“As quick as we can. We’re here together. He’ll pull through, John. He always does.”

He went back in the foyer for his trousers, nausea rolling through his stomach when he found out which hospital. The closest one to where Sherlock had been found, but the most ill equipped and underfunded, notorious for fumbling care. My would have to bring in his own people which would take time.
My, who was now icing the entire room with cold anger at incompetence, “That blood supply is for my brother and myself only. If this error costs him his life, there will be massive changes to staff. Save your apologies; time is of the essence.”

Only a faint tremor in his fingers betrayed his fear as he motioned for Greg to hand him his trousers. Greg watched as he dressed one handed while barking instructions to Anthea who apparently had been prepared in advance for a Holmes’ medical emergency. Then while Greg was still wondering how My had produced a fresh waistcoat and suit jacket from the hall closet that still matched his trousers, they were out the door, My making the command decision that the panda would be their quickest means.

It was possible that they would need to pull over and be transported by helicopter the remaining distance but Anthea would coordinate that by searching traffic reports and patterns. In the mean time they needed to be on the move. Greg focused on his driving as Mycroft sat beside him, pale, tense and closed.

Greg didn’t remember much of that drive later. There were flashes of the white ovals of other drivers’ faces as they pulled over for the flashing lights. There was the discomfort of the plug which he had forgotten to remove, and the oddness of a Friday night homecoming fuck turning into stark fear. His hands were cold on the wheel.

My continued a mix of texts and calls, finally instructing him to turn into an abandoned building where they met the helicopter on the roof. Even the time they gained didn’t help the feeling that they were moving in toffee sweets, and that Sherlock might not even survive for them to say goodbye.

Greg had never let himself go to that place where there was a world without Sherlock. Not even when the boy had vomited for eighteen hours and hung limp in his arms, looking more like the Pieta than Michelangelo’s marble. He had stupidly believed that Sherlock was forever, and now, contemplating his death or more importantly and selfishly, what Greg and My’s life would be without him, Greg’s stomach rebelled. He was thankful he hadn’t eaten that day.

All of his anger at Sherlock’s jibes at his husband disappeared, and he saw the skinny kid, the fallen angel in that alley, looking up at him with eyes that begged for sympathy all the while that his words defied help. My must be having similar thoughts, and Greg reached for his hand. All his calm preparations done, My had met something that he could not manipulate.

The wind nearly knocked them flat when they got out of the helicopter onto the hospital roof. The pilot lifted off immediately to clear the way for others. Greg had heard My instructing Anthea to have all of the blood he had donated at each hospital in the city to be brought to this one. From what John had said, Sherlock would need every drop. Who had stabbed him and why?

The hospital administrator met them in the stairwell, trembling with nerves. “Mr. Holmes? Your brother is on the table now. Still alive, but he’s lost a lot of blood and as I came up here, they were giving him the last of our supply. It’s a rare blood type.”

“Which is why I donate regularly. We are not just the same blood type. We are also a tissue match. That supply was under the strictest of codes.”

“As I told you earlier, there was a mistake. A new member of staff gave it out when we had another emergency. It saved a young mother and her newborn infant.”

“But why wasn’t I notified that the supply had been compromised?” With cold eyes made pale with rage, My glanced at the administrator who had the good sense to look cowed.

“Again, new staff in that department. It will not happen again.”
“It certainly will not. You have direct access to the surgeon?”

“Yes, but protocol does not allow for interruptions during emergency operations.”

After two flights down, they had come to a landing and the shaken man motioned them through the doorway. Greg could feel My’s rage as if they had passed an air vent. Cold fury was far worse than a hot temper. He did not envy the man who would be demoted or sacked.

Mycroft removed his coat, suit coat, and waistcoat and handed them to Greg. “Notify someone in that room to prepare for a direct transfusion. More blood is coming from all over the city, but I will donate in the interim. You will need to have staff ready to receive the blood via helicopter as well as traditional courier, and see to it that any surplus is protected this time.”

“Direct transfusion is just not done any more. No one would take the risk.”

“No one else has so much to lose.” My was rolling up his sleeves, his arms nearly as pale as the crisp white shirt. “This isn’t just about family. It’s a matter of national security.”

“Yes, sir, but it’s not up to me. It will be the surgeon’s decision.”

“Take me to him. He will do as I ask.”

My handed Greg his tie. “Find John. Once Anthea arrives, she will come to me and then get word to you and John.”

The lift doors closed on Greg, who had a strange flash of undressing My less than an hour before. Morris had been the one holding most of his clothes then. Greg wished that he had taken a second to kiss My. It felt like he was in danger too.

John was pacing the waiting area, his anger as white hot as My’s had been cold. Greg held his questions and let John choose what he needed to say. While he waited through several sputterings, Greg folded My’s clothes carefully and put them on the chair as if they were a part of his husband and needed care.

“Oh, it’s a fucking comedy of errors, Greg. One bloody shit faced idiot after another. Even if he doesn’t bleed to death, the chances of brain damage are sky high. So help me god, somebody will pay for it.”

Greg nodded. The hospital’s mistake with the private supply of blood had put his own husband at risk. His frustration hadn’t escalated yet, but he would soon be game to fume with John about the whole damn mess. Besides, John needed anger for emotional survival. Once you stopped being angry, the fear came in and the reality of the hopelessness, and that was like losing faith with your partner’s ability to survive.

“Anthea will get word to us as soon as she can get here and talk with My. He’s bullying the surgeon into a direct transfusion as we speak. More blood is on the way.”

There wasn’t anything else to say. He settled himself in one of the plastic bucket chairs that were welded in a row of six. He had spent half his life with the damn things molded to his ass and making it sweat until when he stood up to visit the Gent’s, his back and the seat of his trousers would be dark with damp.

John continued pacing, making a circuit of the room and a bit of the hallway. He gave Greg a tidbit of the story with each pass. Between times, Greg cleaned out his pockets to see what he had in the way of supplies. It was too soon to go for drinks. He needed to save that for when the wait
had chipped at his sanity to the point of screaming. He checked receipts, most of them ancient. He
counted his money and lined up all the notes properly. He transferred a few numbers on scraps of
paper into his mobile. He found a pack of gum that was ancient but pliable with effort. And all the
while he listened to the story of what very well might be the demise of Sherlock Holmes.

“It’s that damn homeless network he’s got. I’m a compassionate man, aren’t I, Greg?”

“You are.”

“But it ends when they try to kill my husband. He went in for information this morning. Rode the
tube with me to work, and we argued the whole fucking time about him going undercover.”
“We don’t have a case on.”

“Private one which likely won’t get solved now. He’s safe enough with his own people, I thought,
but I didn’t like him dressed so tatty that he might get roughed up by coppers, no offense.”

“None taken. I agree.”

“Friend of mine that works A and E tells me that the bloke that brought him in carried him several
blocks because the ambulances won’t go there and nobody would help him because the homeless
are afraid of establishment and establishment’s afraid of them.”

John kicked the row of chairs and Greg squirmed as it sent an inappropriate vibration to his inner
depths. “Who did it? I should get someone over there.”

John’s eyes switched from angry to scared. “It’s not a homicide yet. Have a care, you bloody
vulture.”

Greg had a terrible urge to laugh. John slumped down on one of the chairs and again Greg felt as
if a Christmas parade were marching through the tunnel of his ass.

“I’m sorry, mate. You didn’t deserve that. If they know who stabbed him, they aren’t talking, and
he can’t tell us.”

“Let’s agree that whatever you need to say to me is fine. Because anger will get you through the
wait, and I’m no stranger to it.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Shall I get the tissues and give you a hug?” Greg said it jokingly but really wanted to give John
comfort.

“No, save the tissues for your wanks, poofter.”

“And the same to you.” Greg had felt a wee bit of anger at that in spite of his offer for John to use
brutal honesty.

“I’m done with the yelling for this round. Best get that plug out and go for tea, if you would.”
“How the hell did you work that out?”

“No, you work it out before it gets stuck in there because I don’t care to perform a plugectomy in
the Gents.”

Greg did as he was told with some relief, and having missed dinner, he got a sandwich and a
cuppa even though the sandwich bread was like paste in his mouth. After their tea, the first of a
hundred cups they might drink that night, he asked John’s permission and then called his mum to
say a prayer for Sherlock. She was business like with an assignment at hand and the call was brief, but the sound of her voice shored Greg up as did the sound of her rosary beads clicking in hand as she said goodbye.

Then in spite of John’s protests, he rung the Yard and asked for volunteers to gather forensic evidence if they could find the scene. Of course, Mycroft’s people might have their own methods already in place, but Greg needed to respond somehow, and talking to his people made him feel more in control.

John had settled into a silent fume, arms down at his sides with clenched fists. Greg distracted him as he could; having him ring the surgery and leave a message that he would be out for some time. He talked to Harry and canceled a lunch date for the next week. She was in a sober period, and Greg could see that her empathy helped John a little, but then he had to call Clara, Harry’s ex and alert her that he wouldn’t be as much of an accountability partner for Harry as he had planned.

The calls that needed made having buoyed their spirits, they tried to think of other people to contact. Mrs. Hudson had been home when John got the call. It was telling that the last person that occurred to them was Mummy, the person who would have wanted to be consulted even before John.

“Fuck,” John said as they both realized the whirlwind of drama that informing her would create.

“I usually tune out anything to do with Lady H. but My said something about her traveling?”

“She’s in Antigua for the turtle watch also known as gambling.”

“What excuses can we use for waiting to contact her until after his surgery?”

“The time difference although that’s in her favor actually, earlier there.”

They looked like boys outside the headmaster’s office. Greg knew it. “Flights out?”

“Yes, that’s it. There’s just the one airport. No point in worrying her when she can’t get a flight out until tomorrow.”

“And it really does seem more humane to know the outcome of the surgery.”

“No sense bringing her home quickly if it’s a funeral?”

“God, John, no. I just meant that I would want to know all I could before I got on the plane. Where the hell is Anthea anyway?”

She came around the corner at that moment, convincing Greg further that she was part witch. “Both still with us,” she said in a way that Greg appreciated.

No drama. Just what they most needed to know. Clad in surgical garb, including booties and hat, she looked reassuringly medical. “They repaired the wounds to his heart, first of course. Those were minor, surprisingly so, but still contributed to substantial blood loss. That’s the biggest challenge really besides infection which they say will be inevitable. He lay there for quite some time.”

“How many other organs did the bastard cut?” John asked.

“Liver, gall bladder, spleen which had to be removed, left kidney and stomach.”

“ Fucking hell,” Greg said and wanted to call his mum all over again.
He watched the color drain from John’s face. Anthea was gentle but bracing. “It could have been so very much worse, John. You know that. Mr. Holmes got there just in time with the transfusion. The couriers are here. Mr. Sherlock has all the blood that he needs, and it’s just a matter of embroidery, which takes time.”

“He will have a love hate relationship with those scars.”

“We can call him Tapestry.” Greg tried to join in the tone of forced courage, knowing how crucial it was for morale.

Anthea shot him a disapproving look before she said, “I must get back to them. If there are any complications, I will notify you as soon as I can. It will be a much longer wait.”

She disappeared as quietly as she had arrived and John looked at him with panic in his eyes. “It’s much worse than my worst scenario.”

“You can’t go there, John. He’s come back from the dead too many times.”

“Talk to me, please. I won’t hear the words, but do it anyway. Tell me all the stories again of how you met him and saved him.”

Greg talked until he was hoarse. John sometimes asked him to repeat things; Greg thought he might be catching about ten percent of the monologue. Somehow even though he had tried to go slowly and avoid it, he ended up at that night, the one where Sherlock had been so ill that Greg could feel the life leaving his body. His voice grew hoarser still and he said the kinds of things that men don’t say to each other without alcohol to ease the way.

“I wasn’t a copper that long before I stopped being certain about God, but I prayed that night, John. I begged God for his life.”

He dared John to sneer or roll his eyes, but he whispered, “I’m familiar.”

“Sherlock always comes back. He’s been put on this earth to teach patience, and he’ll outlive us all.”

This seemed to be the right thing to say. John had seen the man through many near death injuries and ailments, and he’d seen lots of miraculous recoveries on the battlefield, including his own.

Anthea was back. “They are closing on Mr. Sherlock, but Mr. Holmes has been taken to recovery if you would like to be with him, Detective Inspector.”

Through the maze of corridors, Anthea led them, striding as confidently as a runway model, her grace not dimmed by the hospital issue scrubs. “The doctor says that he’ll be weak and tired for the next few days. He’s quite pale.”

Greg understood that Anthea was trying to prepare him, but the sight of his husband in a hospital gown and bed was still a blow. A few hours ago they had been shagging in the foyer and now My lay still as death, his freckles livid against skin without color, dark circles under his eyes like Tiny Tim’s in a Christmas Carol.

Far too many people were bustling about as if it were an ordinary night while My lay there, fragile as glass. The gown had slipped low on one shoulder revealing a bit of his furry chest, and Greg hurried to pull it back up and get the blanket over him, wincing to see a black bruise bigger than his hand in the crook of My’s arm. He hated that My’s body had been exposed to strangers. The vulnerability made a lump in his throat, his cheeks burning that this body that was his to share would be touched without love.
Greg had struggled when My came home from the rescue mission battered, and it had hurt to see him in so much pain. But this was a stupid sacrifice made necessary by some little bitch at the blood bank who had casually offered up My’s blood as if it were nothing, and Greg was furious with nowhere for it to go.

John squeezed his shoulder but he shrugged it off. He didn’t want comforted. My looked old, his mouth hanging open and his arms and legs at strange angles, not like he slept at home. A puppet with his strings cut, he was too broken to touch. Greg gripped the rail of the bed until John stopped him. It had been creaking but Greg hadn’t recognized that he was causing the sound.

Personnel came and went, checking the bag of blood that was going back into My. Too late the couriers had come with the supply, but Greg was worried about what might happen if they needed more. They had used all of it that My had carefully donated as often as his doctor allowed it. A rare blood type and neither brother with any to spare.

Anthea had arranged for the brothers to share a private room in intensive care and was now contacting private nurses. Since mobile phones weren’t allowed around the medical machines, she came in person every hour to update Greg and John on her progress.

Soon Sherlock was wheeled in, every inch of him bandaged or hooked to tubes, it seemed. John’s face was a mask that Greg didn’t recognize, and he understood now how cuddly, jumper-wearing John had been as a soldier. In spite of the pain and fear that Greg knew was there, John stayed coolly professional, checking the chart and the readings on the machines and examining the bandages with a light touch.

Anthea came in with the next report. A private nurse would arrive for Sherlock within the hour and would work closely with the intensive care staff and John. Specialists had been summoned, and would arrive the next day as weather and travel allowed. Now Anthea was working on Mycroft’s schedule for the following week, removing all routine meetings and pushing back anything that she could, using the time difference to start with the countries where it was now morning.

When My let out a moan, Greg thought he might vomit. It was a strange sound, pain ridden and shaky. But he didn’t wake, not even when Greg braved his fears and lifted his hand to kiss it. His ring was gone, and that hurt too. But Anthea would have it and they would put it back on and soon as My woke. His fingers were icy and Greg tucked the blanket close around him.

After an hour in recovery, both men were carefully moved to the private room, not up to the Holmes standard or even Greg’s for that matter, but the best the hospital had. It was too dangerous to move Sherlock to another hospital. Greg knew that My would need to be by his side, and so they stayed. Greg tried not to think about the quality of care being as shabby as the room. That was John’s look out and the private nurse’s that would join them.

They had put My by the window since his needs were minimal, and whenever Greg wanted to scream in the enforced quiet, he looked out at the empty parking lot where trash blew about in the drizzle. Finally the half assed sun struggled up and Greg went to wash his face in the adjoining loo. He felt filthy, his eyes gritty and his throat sore from talking the night away for John.

He came back to find My sitting up and trying to remove the bandage securing his IV. “A bit of help, John,” Greg said in a stage whisper.

John who had been discussing Sherlock’s chart with a nurse just inside the doorway, came quickly making sure that My hadn’t pulled out his IV and wasted any of the precious blood. He was taking My’s pulse, making eye contact, asking him silly questions about the date and the Prime Minister.
“I’m not altered, John, merely weakened by minor blood loss.”

“Minor blood loss for a minor consultant in the British government. It was a fool thing to do, Mycroft Holmes, and I’m bloody glad that you did.”

“The less said about blood the better. I need my trousers. I cannot be in this room when he wakes up.”

“You are in no shape to leave.”

My looked put upon and glanced up at Greg, trying to communicate something that Greg regretted he didn’t have a clue about. “I’m aware of my condition, but I’ll need to be transferred to another room. Think about it. If he knows the blood came from me, he will have a psychosomatic reaction to it and his body will reject it.”

“But he’ll deduce it.”

“Not if you help me get out of here. His deductive powers will be diminished for awhile. I will be fully recovered by the time he gets them back. He wouldn’t survive being obligated to me. You both know that.” Having made his point, My sagged back on the bed.

Greg tucked the blanket back around My’ shoulders. “I’ll have to leave this floor to ring Anthea. She’ll get a new room and a nurse for you, but you need to stay put in the mean time.”

John patted My’s arm and that small show of affection told Greg more than anything that both of their husbands were in danger. “While we are sorting things, we ought to notify Lady Holmes. Do you think, My?”

“I’ll have to do it,” My said, his voice flat.

“No, you won’t.”

“She’ll suspect something.”

“I’ll tell her that you didn’t want to leave Sherlock’s side even for a minute. I’ll ring her after I ring Anthea.”

“She has Mummy’s number. I’ll make it up to you later, love.”

“Just rest and get well. That’s what I need.” Greg kissed his forehead, shivering at the clammy skin against his lips.

He felt locked in a nightmare where everything moved too slowly. He rang Anthea to get another nurse and then asked her for Lady Holmes’ contact information. She gave Greg a few pointers on how to break the news. The call was still a mix of Greek tragedy and flirtation. Lady Holmes wailed loudly until the waiter came back to the table, and she ordered a calming drink. Instead of ending the talk with Greg so that she could arrange her flight, she took the time to get in a few digs about how Mycroft didn’t really love her if he was willing to let his husband break the news.

Greg bit his tongue hard to keep from telling her that My had saved Sherlock’s life and was paying the price. “We are all doing the best we can in a difficult situation. Let’s keep the criticism and drama to a minimum, shall we?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’ll have an entire transatlantic flight to sort it out. I must get back to them now. Goodbye.”
Greg couldn’t think about the consequences of being curt with his mother-in-law. That was a problem for the next day. He felt like he had been on his mobile for hours while My lay alone, cold and weak. But he had to talk to his mum, to update her, he rationalized.

One of the things he loved about his mum was that she knew when it was alright to hassle him about not calling and visiting more often, and when that sort of teasing was too much to bear.

“Greggie, I don’t know if we should go to Italy when Sherlock is hanging in the balance and Myc is ill from saving him, poor little love. He’s so thin that he couldn’t spare that blood.”

“He’ll be alright, Mum, and he would be very upset if this incident ruined your trip. I think he’s more excited about it than you are.”

“I’m nervous. It’s a bit posh for the likes of us. I don’t mind for myself; I’ve waited my whole life to be treated like a queen, but your father will fart or dig in his ear, and we’ll look right common.”

“Morris will be there to help and he’s not one to judge. He once had to wipe gravy off me with a tea towel. He’s seen far worse than anything you and Dad could do.”

“It was awful nice of him to take his holiday with us. Are you sure that it won’t ruin things for him? He’s a young man and might want to go to the disco.”

“I doubt it. He’ll have some time on his own, but you know what I told you the last ten times we discussed this. He’s a bit lonely still and he enjoys helping people.”

“Will you tell us what’s happening? Right up until we get on the plane? I’m praying for all of you, Greggie. Your father is driving me to the church to light candles.”

Greg turned his body into the wall because he wanted her there patting his back. “Thanks, Mum.”

“There, love, don’t cry yet. It’s a long day you’ll be having. But if you can’t hold it in, you go to the chapel. That’s the place for tears.”

“My will be more worried if I don’t cry. I’ve been such a lady.”

“But you’ve got your man juices back now, and you are yourself again. A proper Lestrade. You tell Myc to get well quick so you can keep your shagging schedule.”

“I think you are forgetting yourself, Gigi. Just what all do you two talk about?”

“Nothing that should concern you, baby Greggie. We enjoy our little hen parties.”

“I need to get back to him. You pack your bags, love. You’re still my best girl.”

“I love you, Greggie.”

Greg counted to five before he was able to choke out a reply. Then he took the stairs, not able to wait for the lift. Shortly after he returned to his husband’s side, the nurses came to help move My to a room on another floor. Sherlock’s nurse stayed with them for the hour until the new nurse arrived.

Helen Grady was stout and ruddy with a severe orange bob and a strip of gray roots. Within five minutes, she had scanned My’s chart, checked his IV drip rate and pulse, fetched him another blanket, and adjusted his arm to a more comfortable angle with a pillow. My had barely stirred through the transfer, his head lolling back as he rode in the wheelchair. He slept hard, each breath audible.
With someone competent at My’s bedside just for him, Greg felt the weight of all that had happened crash in. In spite of still wearing his rain coat, he felt cold. All he wanted was a hot shower and a cuppa. He looked up to see Morris in the doorway with two overnight bags, a picnic basket, and a thermos. Greg also saw a halo over his head.

Helen was looking the man over with lust she didn’t bother to hide. After eating the her share of the gourmet breakfast he had packed, she nearly humped his leg. Greg needed the comedy relief of Morris being flirted with and not realizing it. My roused enough to take a few sips of tea and a bite of biscuit. Now that his request to be separated from Sherlock had been granted, he seemed to be fading instead of gaining strength.

It took both Helen and Morris some time to convince Greg to get some air, and he regretted it because when he came back to the room, Helen was trying to wake My from a nightmare. He was moaning Sherlock’s name over and over.

“Best thing for it is if you got in there with him, Mr. Lestrade. Hold him, get him warm.”

“What if he pulls out his IV or I doze off and roll over on his sore arm?”

“You won’t. I’ll look after the IV. He’s stable; he just needs creature comfort.”

Helen looked quite a bit prettier than she had when she arrived, and Morris’ appreciation of her open attitude toward gay marriage was being thoroughly misconstrued. Greg took off his shoes and belt, and awkwardly climbed in beside My who was panting and bleary eyed.

“Sherlock is still alive thanks to you. John has a private nurse to help him. Your only job is to rest.”

Greg lay propped on his elbow for awhile while he warmed My’s cold hands and stroked his face and hair until he felt the tension ease. Then he wrapped himself around My the best he could in the narrow bed with Helen and Morris watching, and in spite of feeling like a performance artist, he slept.

They struggled through the day, convincing My that he needed to stay in the hospital but did not need to keep vigil at Sherlock’s bedside. Being in the same building was enough, and they continued to get reports from Anthea. Unfortunately, the only change in Sherlock was a growing fever from infection. Helen encouraged Greg to sleep in the narrow bed through the night and woke him when the frantic text came from John that Mummy had arrived in high dudgeon.

Preparations were frantic. Greg could get My dressed, but he had no clue about his hair. Anthea was summoned from her post in the waiting area and quickly got it coiffed. Greg knew how rough My felt when he asked for the wheelchair. They would leave it in the ward behind the double doors and walk the few steps to Sherlock’s room so no one would be the wiser. “Mummy can’t know either,” My said, reaching for Greg’s hand to pull himself up.

Greg hoped their delay would keep them from the initial drama although he hated John having to manage it alone. They could hear her complaining about the room as they walked forward at a stately pace. My was barely able to stand upright so the slow steps were necessary.

John rushed in where wise men fear to tread. “He’ll be moved when he’s stable, Lady Holmes.”

Greg and John had agreed months ago that they would not call her Mummy under any circumstance. If she’d had a clue she would have realized that it was a reflection on the distance they felt toward her. There was a certain subversive thrill in keeping her from getting her way in this one small matter.
“Nice of you to stop by, Mycroft,” she said, making Greg want to smack her in the mouth.

He could feel all of My’s energy drain away at the sarcasm, those little digs that she was so damn good at. “My has several operatives in danger because of that bloody film against Islam. We haven’t left the hospital, but he can’t use his mobile here near the machines.”

“No one was there to meet me at the airport. I had to rent a limo myself and wait for it like a common street person.”

“I’m sorry, Mummy,” Mycroft murmured, kissing her cheek.

Greg’s mum would have known instantly from that kiss that something was wrong if she didn’t spot it when he walked in the door. She could rival Sherlock in deducing her boys, and Mycie was as much her son as Greggie.

“I cannot believe that you’ve allowed him to be treated in this pig sty. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that I believe his doctors when they say that he is too ill to be moved just now. I trust them as well as John who is not just his husband but a vastly experienced trauma surgeon.”

“The wallpaper is hideous and it reeks of cheap disinfectant.”

“I’ll pass your concerns on to the administrator but they have been very accommodating of our special circumstances and demoralizing staff will not improve Sherlock’s care.”

Greg wanted to tune her out as he usually did, but his goal was to end this appearance as soon as possible and bundle My back to bed. He maneuvered himself so that he was behind My and supporting as much of his weight as he could.

Sherlock moaned and tried to move. John threw them a means of escape. “Too many people are agitating him, and we’re breaking hospital rules by having more than two in the room anyway. Why don’t you boys come back for the night shift when I’m sure Lady Holmes will need a few hours’ sleep for her jet lag.”

“I do need to check on a few hot spots,” Mycroft agreed. “Do summon us, John, as needed. We won’t be far.”

He lifted his mother’s hand and kissed it and somehow walked to the door with his back straight. Greg pulled the door to behind them and then caught My, half carrying him to the wheelchair. Greg burned silently at Lady Holmes’ razor tongue, and the hurt he had seen on My’s face. One of the most powerful men in the realm brought low by a bitter, narcissistic old woman. My napped fitfully the rest of the day, ending each nap with another nightmare where Sherlock was in danger. He had to be told repeatedly that Sherlock was ill but alive.

The next day My was released from the hospital with strict instructions for a day of bed rest. But on Monday, My insisted on going to some diplomatic meetings that involved life or death issues for his field agents. Greg worked as well, his worst fears coming true that he had used all of his holiday leave and most of his sick days and personal days for their trip to Italy, and now he desperately needed them to look after My.

All that week, Greg went straight from work to the hospital where My spent most of his time, acting as a buffer for his mother’s drama. Sherlock lapsed into a coma from the blood loss, shock, and fever. All of them wondered if he would ever awaken, and if he did survive, would his mind be the same. He was very near sepsis.

Their world was reduced to that one small room with the ‘hideous wallpaper.’ Their breaths were
in sync with those of the respirator. They would send Lady Holmes away for the night and spend another hour with John. He would eat something if they ate with him; he needed their support after a full day of Mummy.

As they drove home one night in Greg’s panda car, he remarked on John’s demeanor. “He hasn’t cried, not a tear. He was angry the first night, but all I ever see is the professional. What’s he like during the day?”

“The same. It’s the bravery of a soldier, Greg. He’ll fall apart when it’s all over.”

Greg stopped for a traffic light and turned horrified eyes toward his husband’s.

“No, I mean when we know that Sherlock is well and with his brain intact.”

Then My sighed heavily and leaned his face against the cold window. He was sound asleep by the time they reached home. Greg sat in the drive way and texted My’s substitute driver Clarke since Art was getting his time in Italy as well, doing the daily grocery run and any sightseeing that Morris and crew needed. Clarke was a strapping man, 6’4 and a massive muscled twenty stone. He lifted My from the car and carried him upstairs as if he were a schoolboy.

Greg should have awakened him because as he undressed My, he had another nightmare. He called Sherlock’s name several times in a highpitched voice before Greg was able to shake him awake.

“Sherlock is safe, love. You’ve got to know that so you can get some sleep.”

But My’s breathing was rough enough that Greg staved off a panic attack by ringing the hospital. The nurse’s station did not mind their calls since they had been enjoying catered meals for each shift as well as huge boxes of sweets and pastries courtesy of Mr. Holmes. Even though they had left hospital only minutes before, My had to hear the nurse’s status report before he could try to sleep again.

Greg helped him into his pajamas since he was cold even with Greg’s body heat. They were both nearly to the end of themselves, plodding toward a weekend that promised to be more bedside vigil. The next day was Friday and certainly not Fuck Me Friday because they both stayed in bed until the last possible minute. No good Morris breakfast; it would be quicker to get something at the club or in Greg’s case a soggy sandwich from a machine. He could feel the long hours and bad food taking him backwards to the way he had felt before John’s firm diagnosis.

Fortunately, there was a break in a case they had been working and Greg’s full attention was needed. It was the sort of detective work he had done before Sherlock, and he was grateful to feel that his skills were still needed sometimes. He worked a few hours over, barely noticing that My hadn’t texted him.

When he came to the end of all that he could do until Monday, he texted My about dinner and finally the silence sunk in. The nurses had not seen the elder Mr. Holmes all day, but they did have good news to report. Sherlock’s fever had broken, and he was breathing without a ventilator. Signs pointed to him trying to wake from the coma.

Anthea was more helpful. She had pushed Mr. Holmes out of the office after his second meeting. She assumed that he had gone home. Clarke texted that he had driven Sir home from the Ministry and had not been summoned since. Greg hurried as much as traffic allowed.

He didn’t put the car in the garage, and he didn’t bother with the first floor rooms. He heard the whimper as he was climbing the stairs. Both studies were unlit without Morris there to turn on the welcoming desk lamps as part of his evening ritual. Greg cursed as his shin hit some useless piece
of antique furniture. He knocked something off the desk that tinkled when it broke and he didn’t care. He swiveled My’s chair around. “Mycroft, wake up! You’re dreaming.”

My was deep in the nightmare. Greg shook him but it only made him flail.

“I’m the man! I’m the man!” My’s voice was high and strained, the accent childlike.

Greg fumbled until he found the fucking switch on the fucking antique lamp. Then he could see how My’s body language said frightened child, but when he gently shook him by the shoulders, My gathered himself for a fight. His breathing was ragged, and Greg was afraid for him.

“Take me. Not Sherlock. No!” His own shout finally woke him.

Greg pulled him close. “Just another nightmare, love. I’ve got you now.”

But My was too weary to use his rational mind, and his body responded with a panic attack. His breathing got faster and faster. Greg eased him back into his desk chair and knelt before him. He had to talk over the awful sound of asthmatic breaths, air pulled through a throat constricted to the size of a drinking straw. “Listen, My. I just called the hospital. Sherlock is off the ventilator and trying to wake up. His fever broke today.”

“What day? What time?” My gasped out.

“It’s half past seven. Have you been sleeping at your desk all day?”

My nodded, but he couldn’t seem to collect himself. He was hyperventilating. Greg had no clue where a paper bag might be. He pressed his lips to My’s and breathed normally until he got a little dizzy as they breathed each other’s air. My got enough carbon dioxide to stop the hyperventilating, and then Greg pulled away and took deep breaths, counting each one until his husband’s breathing returned to normal. Completely spent, My leaned forward and rested his head on Greg’s shoulder.

“Let’s pop you into bed and I’ll bring you up some supper on a tray.”

“I can’t. I need to see him.”

“Baby, you are going to be in the hospital alongside him if you don’t get some rest. He’s doing better.”

“The nightmares won’t stop until I can see that he’s improved.”

“Promise me that we’ll go and then come right back home? And that you’ll have a proper meal?”

“I promise, sweetheart. I’ve slept all day. I’m ready to go.”

Greg laughed ruefully at that. The dark circles under his eyes did not say rested. But My was gaining a little strength back each day and was able to navigate the stairs on his own. They drove silently through streets full of people beginning a happy weekend.

Sherlock did look better. Less machines and his color seemed more normal. John appeared worse for the wear and Greg thought that they all looked ready for admission except Lady Holmes who was fresh as a daisy. She’d found time for a manicure and a dye job, Greg noted.

“Just where have you been, Mycroft Holmes? I’ve been completely alone all day.”

“I see where that puts me,” John muttered.
Greg stifled a nervous giggle at stroppy John. “My has been at his desk all day. I pulled him away just now.”

“Everyone in the world comes before me and poor dear Sherlock.” She dabbed at her eyes when clearly there were no tears.

Greg had reached his limit. “Well lads, My has promised me that he would eat a proper dinner. Lady Holmes and I are going to fetch takeaway. What are you hungry for?”

“You certainly don’t need my help for that, Gregory. Even in this part of the city, they must have delivery available.”

“We’ve tried local places all this week and so we need to go farther afield. It’s time for something better than sandwiches.”

“Mycroft, you have people to do such things.”

“I didn’t ask his people. I asked you. Time we had a little chat.”

“Greg, be careful.” My had a mix of worry and relief on his face. Greg knew in the end that he would be glad that perhaps for the first time in his life, somebody was defending him and putting him as the number one priority.

Continuing to argue but being ignored, Lady Holmes put on her coat and hat and picked up her bag. John was deep into explaining Sherlock’s remaining challenges to My as Greg placed a firm hand in the middle of his mother-in-law’s back and steered her out the door. He let her prattle on about how ludicrous it was to make her do the work of a common delivery person, but once the lift doors closed them in, he took his turn.

“I’ve given you several days to get over being tired from your trip, and I’ve given you far too much credit at being worried for Sherlock. But I have reached the end of my patience and beyond. Stop picking at My or you’ll find yourself in a situation far more dire than going on a food run with a shabby copper.”

“I never said that you were shabby.”

“No, you’re very clever to make your hits with sarcasm and innuendo, but even a dolt like me is aware of this carping. I know that it is the way the posh set speak with each other, and much of it is probably habit. Well, you have loads of free time so spend some of it improving yourself.”

“If I don’t?” She was every inch Sherlock, nostrils flaring, lip curled, eyes cold.

“If you don’t, you’ll see less and less of My. If his behavior isn’t to your liking, I’ll see that you aren’t exposed to it as often. We’ll make an appearance at Christmas dinner and you’ll be on your own the rest of the year.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Could and would. That’s the thing about common folk, m’lady. We don’t make idle threats.”

“If you make him choose, you’ll regret it.”

“Let me be as coarse as you seem to think I am. If he has to choose, he’ll choose me because I’m the one fucking him and the cock always wins over sentiment.”

She gasped, shuddered, and pulled her coat around her as if the lift was dirty. She tottered along beside him through the parking garage only coming to herself when they stood at this panda car.
“I am not getting in that monstrosity.”

“Then you’ll walk back to the room on your own.”

She got in, her face a mask of disgust as if she were sitting in a puddle of snakes. Greg chatted about safe topics, the weather, the autumn flowers Morris had planted, his gratitude at My sending his in laws on a lovely trip, Morris’ and Art’s kindness in caring for them. He spoke a little of the villa and how she might like to go for a few days since they had an extra week at the end of My’s rental agreement.

He hated her behavior but she was the person that had made My and carried him in her body for nine months. She was also an old woman like his mum, a product of her class. She needed a scolding but not banishment if she would make an effort.

He deferred to her knowledge about My’s food preferences. They chose a family style restaurant with a meat and two veg special and got a pie for afters. He made sure to praise her choices and thank her for her help in keeping the drinks steady on her lap. She was still stiff with embarrassment, but she was responding to his conversation.

He had exhausted most of the safe topics on the way there so he told her about Mojo and Brass and the anniversary song. She asked for a copy, and he suggested she might like to go and hear them sometime when she was in the city. They could go with John and Sherlock when he had recovered. Greg felt almost guilty when she seemed very thankful for a forward looking promise of time with her sons. He wondered if she thought John would join him in solidarity and take Sherlock from her.

They got back to the room to find the nurse alone at Sherlock’s bedside. “Up on the roof for a bit of air,” she told Greg, taking the bag of meals from him. “Mr. Sherlock woke and said enough that we know he’s not mentally impaired by his ordeal.”

“And they leave him here completely alone. I guess their obligation is done now that he’s out of the coma.” Lady Holmes was going to have a hell of time breaking her filthy habit.

“Shut it,” Greg called back over his shoulder, hurrying to find his husband and best friend.

They were on the leeward side of the stairwell. John was sobbing into My’s coat, and Greg’s heart turned over at seeing the two men he loved most in the world, comforting each other. My had learned how to give comfort such a short time ago, but he was very good at it. “There now, the worst is over,” he said, stroking John’s hair.

Strong, fierce, brilliant doctor suddenly small as a child in My’s arms. Greg reached around both of them, sandwiching John in a circle of support. They were at the beginning of a long road, and it would take all of them to help Sherlock survive the boredom of weeks in bed.

John cried hard and then was done. My had a silk handkerchief to offer, not needing one himself. Greg provided paper napkins from his pocket which were far more absorbent than tasteful grey silk. John blew loudly into several napkins and then leaned back against the wall. “Times like these, I wish I smoked.”

My sat on the low wall running around the roof. Greg squirmed at the height and My’s recent bouts of dizziness, but let his husband be a grown up. If My wasn’t afraid of heights, Greg sure as hell could keep that one to himself, one less neurosis.

“Did the nurse tell you what he said?”

“No, I ran as soon as I knew where you were.”
“A whole day on the ground bleeding and alone, then major surgery and several days of brain killing fever and coma. He wakes up and plain as day says, “My IV drip is not at the correct rate.”

“Bloody hell.”

“That’s my brother. Down to three of his nine lives, but the cat always comes back.”

“Mummy’s recovery may take a little longer.” Greg said sheepishly, begging My’s forgiveness with his eyes. “She had to ride in a panda car and actually hold beverages in her couture clad lap while being scolded with harsh truth and coarse language by her disappointment of a son in law.”

“What all did you say to her?” John’s face shown like a child on his birthday.

“The most recent was that I told her to ‘shut it.’”

“The fuck you did.”

“She’s not taking it well.”

There was an awkward silence as they both looked to My. He gave a shout of laughter and nearly plunged backwards. They both caught him and when they had recovered from the terror, they laughed longer than they had cried.

Another round of the paper napkins was required before they went back to see if Sherlock had said more clever things. They sat awhile just watching him breathe easily as he slept. He was down to an IV which Nurse Katie said could come out as soon as the next day if he was able to keep down semi solid foods. Lady Holmes was blessedly silent, stroking a light hand across Sherlock’s curls and then retreating to the corner of the room to wait.

They ate the food that Greg had brought, warming it in the nurses’ lounge. Greg was surprised at how vegetables could make him feel healthier within minutes of eating them, but a week of sandwiches had taken its toll. There was pie and coffee for afters.

Sherlock sniffled and tried to roll over which still was far too painful. His eyes fluttered open.

“Coffee, John. Need it.”

“Maybe tomorrow, love. Nothing but water for now.” John held the cup for Sherlock to drink.

“Small sips. That’s the way.”

Greg felt their love in the room and it made his tum feel funny. My squeezed his hand and it was alright.

“Mycroft?”

“Right here, brother.” Mycroft moved closer, not sure what to do with his hands. Greg stood beside him.

“The man who did this—“ His voice was husky from being intubated for so long. John gave him another sip of water.

“He’ll pay, you can be sure of it.”

“No, his clinic closed. Lack of funds. Didn’t get his meds.”

“Sherlock, we can talk about it later.” John had his protective look.
Sherlock was determined. “Find him before he hurts someone else. Get him his pills. Help him, please?”

He lifted his hand a few inches off the bed, groping for something, and hesitantly My grasped it. “I’ll find him and help him. Don’t you worry.”

Satisfied, Sherlock drifted back to sleep. They all sunk back into chairs, shaken by a kinder, gentler Sherlock. What if his intelligence remained but his personality was permanently altered? Would a friendly Sherlock be any easier? They were looking at the contemplation on each other’s faces when a querulous voice from the corner said, “He didn’t even ask for me.”

Knowing they would pay for it later, they still muffled snorts and giggles into their hands. Greg felt they should end the evening on a high note. John walked them to the lift. “I’m speaking as doctor, friend, and brother. You need to rest all day tomorrow, My. And start taking your iron pills before you get anemia.”

“But they made my shit look and smell odd.”

John was off in giggles again. “Black and tarry sulfur as opposed to what, navy cashmere with a hint of sandalwood? Greg, get him home.”

He hugged them both before waving them into the lift. Greg put an arm around My who slumped against him.

“He called me My and he hugged me.”

“Yes, tragedy brings people closer.”

“He said that I’m his friend.”

“You are and you were even before this, I think. But John doesn’t share his feelings easily, and he didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Maybe things will be different from here on.”

“I hope so, love.”

Greg wanted better relationships for My. He needed friends besides Greg and easier interaction with his little family. One change at a time. Lady Holmes had been told, and now Greg would continue to train her for as long as she continued being a harpy. He had mixed feelings about her cooperating since he really would prefer carrying out his threat of not going back to the huge country house where My was only respected by staff.

The less said the better about all of that when My could barely keep his eyes open. Greg got him to the car and once his safety belt was on, Greg leaned over and kissed him. After all the poison that had been filtered into My’s system for the past few days by Mummy, Greg needed to spend some time on the antidote. “I love you, Mr. Holmes. You are my friend and my hero.”

“Hero?”

“Yes, baby. The bravest man I know.”

My smiled and snuggled down in the seat. He was asleep before Greg could even get the car started and there were no nightmares in the car on the way home or in their bed the whole long night.
Gifts, Grace, and Gratitude

Chapter Summary

Greg fills an entire week with gifts and activities for Mycroft's birthday with surprising results.

Word count c. 30,000

Triple Length Chapter divided into three titled sections Gifts, Gratitude, and Grace

This was originally intended for Mark Gatiss’ birthday in October and then for Thanksgiving, but it’s still the season of giving and receiving.

All my best wishes to Megan Bob, Canadian Ginger Girl, Lyrical Soul, and Ancient Reader who are especially supportive and steadfast women of truth.

GIFTS

Mycroft was tired and sore. It was Wednesday but it felt like it should be Sunday. The week had started with dinner out. Greg and Morris had surprised him with a birthday itinerary for his birthday week. Seven separate celebrations with the dinner for starters.

Tuesday had been ‘lunch’ at his club with Greg. His arse still hurt from the feisty fucking Greg had given him upon request, and his throat hurt from silent screams. There was a vein in his neck that still hadn’t gone down, and he had received a bill in the morning’s post for a leather club chair. Worth every penny.

The previous evening involved dinner with Mojo and Brass who were still so newly wed that they could barely look away from each other to speak to Mycroft and Greg, but they had found time to write a new composition called "Villa."

Tonight was Greg’s crew at the pub. Walter had insisted that they be included in ‘Microphone’s’ birthday plans. Greg rightly concluded that the small and tasteful soiree for ministry colleagues would not be the right place for his Yarders and so two separate parties, polar opposites.

At the moment, Tuppy Hendricker sat in front of Mycroft’s desk, fresh in from the field and eager for reassignment. “Myc the Pike, you old sod. Marriage hasn’t slowed down your cock one bit. You can barely keep your seat with that fuck bruise your arse has got.”

Tuppy had been his trainer back in his salad days. Now Mycroft was going to have to tell him that he was being forced to retire. It was a loss to the ministry, but Mycroft had already waggled an extra five years for him. A master of accents, Tuppy also had the unique trait of being average in height, weight and features, no distinguishing marks. He was invisible. Age had worked in his favor, and he was able to play infirmities well. Spry as a lad when out of character, when on assignment, he could have toughs nearly carrying him across the street, his shaking and liver spotted hands gripping a cane.
Best to say it quickly and neatly. “Tuppy, they won’t let me send you out anymore.”

Mycroft watched it sink in, and it hurt terribly. Greg had thawed the Iceman and now there were
times when his job was unbearable. But it was about building a new life for Tuppy, not about
Mycroft’s feelings. “Go out while you’re still our best agent. You’ve earned this time, man. Let it
be your best years.”

“How the bloody hell do I do that? A fair amount of my mates are dead, and with the exception of
present company, any friends left worth having are still out in the field.”

“You’ll have all of your skills and the time to make new friends. I won’t insult you by saying that
it will be easy or that it will be the same as your work for us, but I do believe that you can have a
good life.”

Mycroft watched Tuppy summon his inner reserves, stroking his balding speckled head. He stood
and extended a hand to his former pupil. “Thanks for being the one to tell me, Myc. I know it was
tough news to break.”

“It’s my birthday today, and I’m going to the pub with my husband’s work friends. Tomorrow
there’s a small party at my house. Could you come to both, Tuppy?”

“Have a care. I’m not superannuated yet, and I’ve never been a charity case.”

“The charity would be to me not from me. I need an old friend in my corner.”

“Still faking it with crowds?”

“Master thespian at parties. Greg’s team is lovely but also raucous and scathingly honest. I’d like
them to see I’ve got a true friend that’s not a toff.”

“But I am a poofster and I’m too old to hide it.”

“Their boss is married to one; they’ve made adjustments.”

“I will come to the party at your house because that’s business. Maybe my last chance to see most
of them.”

“Nonsense. You can pop by the ministry any time. Come to the pub tonight, please? Morris will
be there and you can talk over old times.”

“Morris raising a glass with you? He’s finally got over Rory?”

“Never over him, but letting him go, yes.”

“They were a pretty pair. Question is, have you let Rory go?”

“Trying to.”

“I’ll go off to the country for walking tours and wicker chairs and lap rugs if you’ll forgive
yourself for Rory being a high spirited lad disobeying protocol.”

“Come back at half past five and go with me for a pint. Then we’ll see.”

Tuppy shrugged into his coat and grabbed his briefcase. Setting it on the seat of the chair, he
fumbled about in it a bit, then produced three thick files bound by rubber bands. His hand shook
and Mycroft saw tears in his eyes. “My three active cases. I would like to have finished.”
“We’ll need your for training and consultation for the next few months. That’s another selfish need of mine not to mention I know what an amazing teacher you are.”

Tuppy gave a snuffle that should have pulled the polish off the desk and stuck out his hand. Mycroft gripped it, moved himself but the ever elusive tears stayed in the ducts.

“Damnedest thing is, I don’t feel old, Myc. I’m still me, and then I’m shaving or walking by a shop and see an old man reflected back. I don’t know who that is.”

“My husband taught me how to hug. Do you need one?”

“By god, I think I do.”

He gripped Tuppy tight, and when there was no joking or resistance, he gently patted and then finally rubbed the older man’s back. “It will be a big adjustment but I hope you’ll spend time with Greg and me. I need friends, Tuppy.”

Tuppy dashed the tears away and snuffled up a great deal of phlegm. “Half past five, you say? If I do this fool thing, you’ll stand me the first round.”

“You and the rest.”

“See you then.”

Mycroft closed and locked the door to his office. Middle age was a series of losses and goodbyes. He had moved up a range in demographics with this birthday and the further end of it was people who were solidly senior citizens. The grim reaper was juggling portents like apples. It was very bad karma to force someone’s retirement; he would be the one winnowed out in future.

It was a fucking long day and he hadn’t even had his mid morning tea. He had crushed the spirit of an unsinkable man. It was time to strangle a kitten and tell some children that Father Christmas was a dirty lie. Maybe on his lunch hour he could take a walk in the park and look in prams telling women their babies were ugly and then kick some squirrels into the pond, goose some geese with his brolly. Let a gander have a sore arse. Misery loves company.

Incoming text. He wanted to press the vibrating mobile to his aching neck.

You are not old. You are hot and mine. G

I’m yours, but that’s all that I agree with re previous. M

You won’t feel old when I get you drunk and have my way in the Gents.

Threesome with Walter?

Call your shots. I just spit coffee all over my tie.

The mobile rang. “The more I have you, the more I want you. Morning, noon, and night.”

“Spare a thought for my arse, Greg. I can barely sit.”

“Mmm, me either. Four fingers, my favorite number. It’s important to stretch before and after strenuous exercise.”

“Do you think you could have too much testosterone now?”

“What’s wrong, love?”
“Nothing I can talk about right now.”

“Would it help to know that I’ve been thinking about your nipples all morning?”

“In what way?”

“In a way that involves licking and sucking until you come.”

“That could be arranged.”

“It’s your birthday but I have a candle that I want to blow out tonight.”

“You’ll have to light it first.”

“I don’t even know what we’re talking about anymore.”

“You called me.”

“Oh, right. Richard has his kid’s play, scheduled long before this little festival. He always gives Walter a ride. Would you mind too much if we took Walt home after?”

“Do you mean for the night?”

Greg laughed; he seemed so happy, almost giddy. “No, see him home, you know, because he doesn’t have good night vision and I don’t want him riding the tube alone after three pints. We could maybe get dinner there. He’s so isolated, My, I couldn’t just leave him.”

“It’s fine. In fact, I’m bringing someone from here that’s about his age. Maybe they can make friends.”

“You are a prince, but that doesn’t make me a princess.”

“We can both be princes. Anything else?”

“Get your nipples ready for my tongue.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Mycroft rang off and buried his head in his hands. The light hurt his eyes, and his heart was as sore as his arse. He needed time to process all of the things that had happened, and they weren’t even half way through the week. In addition to nonstop social occasions with a variety of people, there were Greg’s daily gifts. He dutifully opened them and displayed them in the little sitting area in their bedroom, but he hadn’t been able to process that they were his. The gifts and surprises kept coming too fast to appreciate each one.

Before Greg, Mycroft’s social engagements outside the family were getting farther and farther apart. He loved his home and was thankful to be in that fortress whenever possible. Having ministry colleagues at the house again terrified him. Opening gifts was enormous pressure. He wanted to think about Tuppy; he wanted to strategize a survival plan for the rest of the parties, dinners, and other awkward surprises; and he desperately wanted time alone.

But his next appointment was in ten minutes. He went to the bathroom and checked his mask. The Iceman still lived superficially at least. It was going to be five more days of matinee and dinner theater performances. The carousel was whirling and he had a tenuous grasp on his wooden horse. He was motion sick.
The afternoon passed quickly because he did not want it to, and soon he and Tuppy had ventured to the pub where Walt was holding court telling the story of meeting his second best pal Microphone in the Gents. Tuppy roared at the tale which had grown considerably in subsequent weeks. Then Tuppy had his own ‘meeting Myc’ story. “He was undercover as a maid. Long auburn curls pulled attention away from that beak of his and he was quite fetching. Legs like Jacob’s ladder, straight up to heaven.”

Greg handed Mycroft a drink and a plate with a sampling of pub grub. It was too raucous for whispers so Greg kissed his cheek and squeezed his hand under the table. Mycroft smiled, feeling his face stretch. Then he slipped away to the village. Years of multi tasking meant that he could have one foot in each world. Besides in a roomful of talkers, all you needed was a nod and a half smile. People saw what they wanted to see.

Since the villa, Mycroft had written less. Work had piled up at the ministry while he was gone, and when things were about to clear, Sherlock had been stabbed. Since then much of his free time had been spent acting as liason between Mummy and John and finding new ways to keep Sherlock still while he recovered.

The same village scene played in his mind whenever he had time to think but not time to write, Graham’s declaration. He was chipping away at the scenes leading up to it, wanting to take his time with details about village life so that Michael’s transformation from self punishing to happy would seem real. He wanted to write what was true. But those scenes didn’t make his stomach hurt the way Graham’s voice husky with emotion did.

Graham was exhausted as he walked slowly from the little shed where he had just curried and fed his poor horse. They had been at Oliver Wheeler’s little cottage for two days before the injuries from a sick cow had taken him. His petite and pregnant wife had fainted dead away and might lose the baby, but her mother had sent Graham home for the night.

His body had been tired before, but his soul was weary. He wanted to walk through the darkness to the vicarage where a light still burned and cry his heart out into Michael’s lap. He would be welcome too, but if he had to go one more day of talking around the big feelings he had, he was going to go as raving mad as the poor cow that killed Oliver.

Michael was happy and blossoming into a strong, confident spiritual leader. He was doing good work, and Graham could not ruin that for him with dramatic declarations. He had sworn to himself when John died that he would never harbor secret love again and that was exactly what he had been forced to do.

Michael stepped from the shadows and Graham thought it might be a hallucination. “I just came from the Wheelers. There isn’t much comfort to give her. She’ll have to move back with her mother.”

“I can’t decide if I want her to have that baby or not. Something to remember him by but a dependent when she’s just a schoolgirl herself.”

“She’s in agony because her last words to him were sharp, a row about money. I want to give my roses to people while they are still alive.”

Graham knew that he should go in the house right then. Michael was sensitive and still young enough to be shocked by death. He was going to say things in the shadows that he would regret later. But he hurt all over, and he wanted stolen moments with Michael in the middle of the night when no one would see or care.

“You’ve been such a wonderful friend to me, Graham. You saved me from so much pain and
gave me a new start. I can never thank you enough for that.”

He put out his hand, but Graham reached up in the dark to brush the tears away that he knew were on the younger man’s cheeks. “I love you, Michael.”

Then Michael was wrapped around him. “I love you too. You are my best friend.”

He held tight, hoping the misunderstanding would keep them both safe for awhile longer. His words were true, and maybe that would ease the pressure for awhile until a voice said—“I’m in love with you, Michael. Have been since almost the beginning.”

Michael stiffened and stepped away. A string of whispered denials were jerked loose as he walked backwards over the rough ground. “You can’t do this. It was fine just as it was. Why did you have to spoil it?”

Graham sat down hard on the frost stiffened grass and then rolled over on his hands and knees to retch up bile and heartache.

Mycroft started as Greg rubbed a hand over the nape of his neck and whispered. “Come out of the village, love. We’re deciding about dinner.”

Most of the group was reluctantly leaving for dinner at home, some for family obligations, one for a night class, still another because of an early morning doctor’s appointment. In the past, Mycroft would have assumed these all to be excuses, but the way each person stopped at the head of the table to look him in the eye and shake his hand proved to him that he was liked by Greg’s coworkers. Mycroft was pleased to note that Anderson shook his hand and said happy birthday but did not indulge in sycophantic drivel.

Soon a large table full of people was reduced to Mycroft, Greg, and a plotting trio of Morris, Tuppy, and Walt. Morris spoke quietly. “It’s such a busy week. Why don’t you two go on home? We’ll have dinner nearby and then Art can help me get Walt and Tuppy home.”

“You need a birthday shag, Microphone,” Walt shouted. There was a smattering of applause from the tables surrounding them.

“You spent too many years polishing the bishop, Crofty.” Tuppy never drank to excess but he was leaning against Walter and they were giggling like school boys.

Morris winked and made a shooing motion. Greg didn’t need to be told twice and took Mycroft’s hand. “Let’s go home, love.”

They got take away on the trip home, and Mycroft picked at his enough that it looked like he had eaten. He had done a great deal of composing documents without his reading glasses that afternoon and his eyes hurt. Village Graham’s weariness had been contagious. Tuppy’s behavior was worrisome; the ministry party was looming closer. His skin crawled at the thought of friends and foes swarming all over the room he was in right now, a room where he had made love to his husband many times. It was like finding ants in the sugar bowl after already adding a spoonful to his tea.

Greg was taking him by the hand with The Look in his eyes. Damn, damn, damn. The birthday shag when for the first time ever, Mycroft was not horny and absolutely not hard. Greg walked him backward toward the bed, unbuttoning his shirt as he went. Mycroft felt exposed and raw. When his knees hit the bed, he sat down heavily, jarring his arse. Greg was by his side, working free the last button and pulling up the vest. For once Mycroft was thankful for his thick coat of chest hair because he didn’t want to be naked and the hair made him feel less so.
Greg was caressing one pec and swirling his tongue around the other side and of course, Mycroft’s nipples liked it even if their owner wanted to be locked in the spare room in the dark, thinking about the terrible things he had done that day and about how bloody unworthy he was of all the fanfare. He closed his eyes and started doing his survival countdown for the party. By this time tomorrow, the party would be half over and—

“Am I disturbing you?”

The sarcasm triggered something ugly in Mycroft. “Not any more than the rest of my day. I got enough mauling down at the pub to last me quite awhile.”

“Say the word and I’ll call off the whole week. I’m sorry that my attempts to honor you have been such a trial.”

Mycroft wanted to fight. Then Greg would leave him alone to think; there hadn’t been any time for thinking in so long. But he didn’t want to make Greg so angry that he didn’t offer his support at the party. “I’m sure you didn’t intend for it to be a trial.”

“But it is. You aren’t happy. You barely spoke to my team tonight when some of them had made quite an effort to be there.”

“And what would I chat about with them? Tell them what a great fuck you are? How sore my arse is?”

“I heard you the first time. You think my ass feels great? You’re always putting something up there and I can assure you, it’s no Christmas morning to be plugged like a kitchen drain every minute of the day.”

“I knew you would resent it which is why I resisted you at the villa, but you always get your way, don’t you? I back down every time because you are so out of my league. So here, gnaw on my fucking nipples until they bleed.”

“Not for all the tea in China.” Greg started to storm out.

Mycroft grabbed his arm hard enough to bruise it. He heard his voice getting louder and louder, the words coming too fast like everything else. “Oh no. If anybody is leaving, it will be me. You won’t let me talk about my arse, but my head hurts too and my stomach. My eyes won’t stop burning because I’m tired and, and—I’m afraid.”

He turned away then, waiting for Greg to leave. But there was silence long enough for him to review the terrible things he had said, and then sorry was coming out in ragged gasps, a panic attack imminent.

Greg was beside him and then in front of him, and Mycroft got ready to get punched in the face. Instead Greg pulled him into a hug. “Well done, My. Thank you for telling me.”

He was panting against the solid, familiar body. “I don’t know how to do this anymore. When I was the Iceman, I faked it, but these are people that I don’t want to fake it with and I haven’t a clue, love. I don’t know what to do, and I’m failing you again and it hurts and—“

“Shh, I know. I set you up for something that you weren’t ready for. That’s on me.”

Greg cupped his hand around the back of Mycroft’s head, and he kept his neck stiff for awhile but finally rested his forehead on Greg’s shoulder. “Being loved is terribly frightening.”

“Do you feel like sitting down while I get your migraine pills?”
“I don’t have a migraine.” Mycroft took inventory, but he was achey all over so it was hard to tell.

“You have a migraine pending because you skipped breakfast and lunch and you picked at your dinner and you worked all afternoon without your reading glasses.”

“Thank you for that incriminating itinerary, Detective Inspector.”

“Sometime when you don’t have a headache, I’d like you to be this stroppy in our bed, maybe with a whip.”

“Oh no, not after your whinging about the plugs.”

“We’ll be gentle with each other’s asses for the rest of the week. I really don’t mind the plugs even if they do make me throb like a virgin.”

Greg led him over to the chair and then went to fetch pills and a bottle of cold water. During his recuperation from the last undercover mission, Mycroft had ordered a micro fridge and an electric kettle for the en suite. They had cold drinks and ice packs and sometimes little cups of yogurt or custard as well as bed time tea or cocoa. Once in a great while, Morris let them have little microwave meals. It was nice to have when they were ill or shagged out.

When My had taken the pills, Greg pushed the water toward him. “You didn’t drink enough today either.”

Then Greg was silent, sitting on the arm of the chair and running his fingers through Mycroft’s coiffure, loosening the thick application of product. It felt comforting and aimless, not a preamble to sex. Mycroft closed his eyes, resting his palms over them. Greg went into the bath again and came back with eye drops which they also kept in the fridge. They stung for a bit and then his eyes relaxed and he no longer felt like his eyelids were stretched to the breaking point.

Greg was running his fingers through the hair at Mycroft’s nape and that was nice, but when he started firmly massaging below the slight curls, Mycroft felt the tension and his tongue loosen. “I had to tell Tuppy that he can’t go undercover for us anymore.”

“That must have been very difficult for both of you.” Greg’s thumbs worked over and around the knot that always ached when Mycroft worked at his desk. As he pressed hard on the spot, Mycroft wanted to tell him every secret of the whole country.

“He had tears in his eyes, Tuppy the Tough. I hugged him.”

“You have had a lot of physical contact today.”

“I have.”

Greg slid Mycroft’s shirt off his shoulders so he could work his fingers into the tension held there, far more than either of them had realized. “Did Tuppy know Morris back in the old days?”

“Yes, he was my trainer and we reported to him for the first six months. He posed as my father once for that assignment.”

Greg made listening noises but he didn’t seem to be aiming at anything particular, other than turning his husband’s aching muscles into warm goo. “Can we get this off?”

Mycroft removed his shirt but hoped to keep his vest on. He was a little cold from nerves. “Tuppy has worked with nearly everyone in the ministry at some point or other. He will really enjoy the party tomorrow.”
“If we don’t cancel it.”

“That’s not an option.”

“It’s always an option, love. The polite thing would be to email people tonight or first thing in the morning, but Anthea can see to that. I won’t have you doing something that scares you when you have a way out.”

“I’m out of practice entertaining. People coming here where we love and fuck each other feels like a violation. The bad kind of voyeurism. They will laugh at me and then I won’t feel safe here anymore.” God, he was being such a baby and telling way too much if he wanted Greg’s respect, let alone continued love.

“What would they laugh about?” Greg had lifted the vest near the hem just enough to work on Mycroft’s lower back.

He leaned forward as Greg’s fingers pushed out the pain until it felt like the words were being pushed out too. “They will say that you are way out of my league and all the other things that your Yarders probably said. Walt was the only one with the balls to say it to my face.”

“They might. But if you decide to follow through, I’ll be right by your side looking damn sexy, and they’ll see how much I want you.”

He couldn’t say it to Greg, but he knew some of the kinder people would say that Greg was a gold digger and common which would hurt far worse than any trash they could say about Mycroft. He had been the Iceman for years, but he didn’t want anyone hurting Greg.

Greg was rubbing all over his back now and he leaned over to whisper, “Whatever they say about me or you, they can’t touch our love. We’re strong together.”

Mycroft sighed all the way from his toes. Some of the aches were gone but the headache and weariness remained. “I want to try. If it’s terrible, we don’t have to repeat it.”

“That’s my brave boy.” Greg moved around to kneel in front of Mycroft and remove his shoes and socks and then reached for his trousers. “Not for naughties, love, but to get you more comfortable for your supper.”

“Not really hungry.”

“Too damn bad. I am cooking you something and you are going to eat it so that tomorrow goes better than today.”

He brought Mycroft’s warm, soft dressing gown and fleece lined slippers then changed into his old jeans and a tatty jumper. “Soup and a sandwich. You’ll survive it.”

He took Mycroft’s hand and they walked down to the kitchen where Greg put on Morris’ old radio and shimmied about to swing music while heating up a tin of soup and making cheese on toast. He also cut up a banana and put an orange on the table. Mycroft got his can of Coke but also a large glass of water at his place.

While Mycroft munched on the hot cheesy bread and sipped at his soup, Greg peeled the orange and broke off the sections. The kitchen smelled like home and it was hard to imagine the place crawling with caterers while the first floor was filled with guests. Mycroft pulled his dressing gown tighter around himself and scrunched his toes into the fleece.
Greg rubbed a hand up and down the soft sleeve and said firmly, “Say the word, sweetheart, and it’s over.”

Mycroft shook his head no and offered Greg a spoonful of soup. They fed each other back and forth, soup and bread traded for fruit. Greg was just clearing away and making herbal tea when Morris came in.

“Hello, lads. Worked up an appetite?”

“Not like you mean. My is very concerned about the party.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Morris disappeared into his tiny cupboard of an office and came back with two key rings in hand. “I’ll be locking everything on the second and third floors except for the powder room and the guest bedroom. These are all labeled should you need access.”

Greg leaned down and kissed Mycroft’s cheek. “See, baby, Morris has thought of everything to protect our privacy.”

“Which included collecting a wide assortment of supplies from every occasional table in this hulk of a place. Large box in Greg’s study for now. I’ll replace it all when the party is over, or if things tomorrow night should take an interesting turn, all of your guests’ needs can be met with the big box of fun.”

“Tuppy alright when you dropped him off?” In spite of his fears about the party lessening, Mycroft still had many worries.

“He was a rather far gone before dinner, but once I got some steak and kidney pie in him, he was himself again. Walt and I are going flat hunting with him on Saturday since you will be at Rich and Ginny’s.”

“If we don’t go, we’ll forage for ourselves.”

“Why wouldn’t you go?”

“My’s exhausted and overwhelmed. I’ve tried to cram forty some years of missed birthdays into one week and it’s all too much.”

“I’m in the room, and it’s not too much if I could just take it as it comes.”

“A party this size would weary anyone to the bone. I’ll finish the washing up. You two go on now. Take your tea.” Morris was quick with the mugs, and they soon each had cup in hand exactly the way they liked it.

After stripping down to his boxers, Mycroft got straight under the covers, plumping his pillows against the headboard. He was cold on the inside from nerves, and he cupped his hands around the heat of the mug. He sipped a little bit of the tea, but the herbal blends didn’t always appeal. His taste was sometimes changed by a migraine or the pills.

Greg was in the bath, washing up. Mycroft settled back on his pillows and enjoyed the sounds of his husband getting ready for bed. He would hear those same sounds every night for the rest of his life. Three taps of the toothbrush against the sink; the little throat clear and sniffle, the scratch of Greg’s fingers across his stomach after he took off his shirt.

Mycroft put his mug on the night table and turned out the lamp on his side. He had just settled in when Greg slipped in beside him. “Come here, love,” Greg said, pressing himself against Mycroft’s back.
Mycroft sighed as strong arms wrapped around him. Now he would get warm. Greg kissed the back of his neck. “Your neck is still tight. Is your head any better, baby?”

“I think so.”

“Did eating help your tummy?” Greg rubbed circles around Mycroft’s navel.

“I’ll be fine by morning. If you wanted to have another go at my nipples, I won’t object.”

Greg laughed. “That’s the most lukewarm consent I’ve ever heard. No, love, it’s time for sleep now.”

Mycroft was still in throes of guilt over his earlier snarking. “I really do like having such a fuss about my birthday. I’m sorry that I was hateful when you were trying to make me feel good.”

“I’m not sorry. Feels good that we are able to be tired and grouchy with each other and survive it with minimal drama.”

“Honestly?” Mycroft put his hands over Greg’s, playing with the thick fingers.

Greg squeezed his fingers around Mycroft’s. “Honestly and truly. You are adorable when you’re in a snit.”

“What will you tell them when they ask if I got my birthday shagging?”

“I’ll tell them that I gave you what you needed. I have, haven’t I?”

“You took very good care of me tonight.”

Mycroft had a whole list of things that were bothering him and he would keep at them until Greg fell asleep or got stroppy again because there was no way that Mycroft himself would be sleeping not only because of the caffeine in the migraine tablets but also the colossal dread. “Greg?”

“Hmm?”

“You do hate the plugs, don’t you?” Mycroft turned around even though he couldn’t see Greg’s face in the dark.

“I don’t hate them for games now and then, but I do rather hate that we’ve made fisting such a focus. I miss our playful times.”

Mycroft could sense how difficult this was for Greg to discuss, almost as painful as the impotence that had thankfully departed. “We can stop if you want to.”

“Maybe not stop so much as take a break if that won’t undo all your effort.”

Mycroft leaned forward and kissed, getting somewhere near Greg’s cheek. “You shouldn’t see it as effort, love. It’s something you wanted and I’m glad to do it.”

“But it’s so much more of a production than what I pictured. I don’t know that it’s worth it.”

“What did you think it would be like?”

“I wanted you inside me deeper. I wanted to be so full of you that there wasn’t any room for more. But it’s plugs and plastic and silicone and I feel like I’m getting my annual exam instead of getting closer to you.”
“If it was my hand pushing in a little farther each time, would that be more like you wanted?”

“Yes, but maybe not this week? You know I hate the term ‘making love’ but that’s what it is. I don’t just fuck you even though that’s what we call it.”

“I think we do some of both. The other day at the club, I wanted rough fucked and you gave me what I wanted.”

“And your poor little bum is paying the price. You did ask me to go in without much prep or lube, you know.”

“I did. But you said that I was supposed to tell you if I was feeling sick or sore and to not push through the pain for more sex. So I whinged a bit tonight.”

“That’s right, and I’m glad you did,” Greg said, the words garbled from a jaw cracking yawn. Mycroft snuggled down onto Greg’s chest, the body heat like a beacon. But he still wasn’t ready for sleep. He knew Greg would reach his limit with the next bit, but finally he couldn’t help himself. “Greg?”

“Huh?”

“Tell me about the plan for tomorrow.”

Greg rubbed his hand across his face and then began. “You’ll start the day with a proper breakfast so no more headache. Then work as usual although Althea said it’s a lighter day for you, and I’ve asked her to have you home two hours early. I want you to come home and rest. I’ll be home at the usual time and we’ll have a little snack and time for a shag or a cuddle or a shower or bath. Multiple choice.”

Greg’s fingers were trailing up and down Mycroft’s arm, and he felt his head get heavier, his cheek pressing into the slightly furry part of Greg’s chest. “We’ll really have time?”

“Morris and I have planned very carefully. He’ll have a picnic for us here in the sitting area so we are out from underfoot of the caterers. And we are to come down about ten minutes late which gives us time for all sorts of things. You’ll get to see my new posh kit. We have our keys and we’ll be locked away. If you decide that you don’t want to come out, you can stay under the duvet and Skype a greeting like a reclusive billionaire.”

“That’s just not done.” But Mycroft loved the idea of it.

“My party, my rules. Nobody is going to hurt you or even make you uncomfortable, love. I will not tolerate it.” Greg said this last in a very posh accent.

Mycroft was delighted. “Could you talk that way the whole night? Damn, that’s dead on. I had no idea.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was mocking you so I put it away. Used to be all the rage at Yarder functions. I can do the lady’s side of that too. Here’s Mummy.” Greg shifted up a bit on the pillows, pulling Mycroft with him.

Then Mummy’s voice was underneath Mycroft’s ear and cheek. “Oh Sherlock, if you weren’t my son, I would take you with me to the Galapagos Islands and shag you on a nest of turtle eggs.”

When Mycroft was done laughing, he said, “I think I know what John would want for Christmas. A whole CD of you saying those sorts of things in the Mummy voice.”
“It’s better with the hat and gloves.”

“We’ll make movies.”

“You can thank me later that she is not on the guest list for tomorrow night. She could have easily come to the city a day early.”

Mycroft shuddered and pulled Greg’s arm back over his body. “She’s my mother, but—“

“We’ll tackle that another day and not in this bed, okay? Now are there any other worries on your list?”

Mycroft took his time but Greg seemed to have every contingency in hand. “I feel better.”

Greg rubbed slow circles on his back until sleep pulled him under, his hand resting heavy between his husband’s shoulder blades. Mycroft went to the village but he couldn’t seem to get past Graham kneeling on the lawn, in terrible pain at having his love revealed and rejected. He was trying for a different catalyst leading up to the revelation when he finally felt himself dozing off.

When the first nightmare came, the old familiar one where he was small and alone with the sole care of baby Sherlock, he wanted desperately to get up and do his security checks especially since Sherlock’s recovery had been long and painful. But Greg’s arm was resting heavy across him, and he didn’t want him to lose sleep. The nightmares had been less frequent at the villa and when they came home until the stabbing brought them back. He went into the village again, deciding that there was so much angst in the story already so the catalyst would be a long labor and delivery of twins. Michael would stay with the father to help Graham and hold one of the babies when it was born. New life would be the trigger for Graham to share his love.

He was trying to decide how to describe Michael’s shining face at holding a baby when he faded out again. The second nightmare was so vivid that he could feel the blood on his hands when he woke. That was the worst of it. Since the stabbing, the dream went further sometimes where the black hooded figures with red eyes were able to get the baby from him and use it in their rituals which always included knives. The remnants of the migraine were still tugging at the crown of his head and his neck and eyes. There wasn’t going to be anymore sleep. It was ninety minutes before the alarm. Since he would be leaving work early, he decided to go in early.

He slipped out of bed, showered, and shaved, and was down in the kitchen just as Morris was coming in to begin breakfast preparations. “Greg says that I must eat breakfast, but we’re having so much restaurant and party food this week. Could we keep it at oatmeal, tea, and toast?”

“You need some protein, Myc. I’ll make you a three minute egg as well.”

Morris started the tea and hearty oats then fetched the morning paper for Mycroft. They read and cooked in companionable silence. As Mycroft was eating, Morris worked at a formidable task list. “Did Greg tell you that we’ll have a family meal after the guests have gone? A late supper. I’ll keep back some of the choicest bits from the caterers and there will be cake left. I thought we’d feed the band, and Tuppy will need a ride so I’ll have him stay until after, and then anybody else you care to ask. Maybe Anthea? She’s been a big part of the success of this week. Greg called on her a lot.”

“That will be nice. Then I don’t have to worry about eating at the party. I never can enjoy the food at my own event, and I don’t like eating in front of people anyway.”

“Greg really did consider every angle of your comfort.”
“I love him, Morris. More all the time.”

“It shows, mate, in the best of ways. Go up and give him a kiss. I’ll cook him the full English this morning since he’s got such a long day, and you’re up early.”

Mycroft kissed Greg awake just as the alarm went off. “Did you sleep at all, My?”

“Enough, and it’s a short day that you’ve arranged for me.”

“Ring me if you start to feel stressed about anything. I love you.”

It was hard to leave a tousled, husky voiced Greg behind. To be honest, it was hard to leave the duvet behind, but Mycroft was used to self denial.

The morning passed quickly with meetings, and while he was dutifully eating a light lunch, Greg texted.

I want you in bed in pants or less when I get home today. G

Mycroft was thinking of a suitable reply when he got another one.

I remember that your ass is sore. I’ll have to be creative.

No plugs. I promise.

Do you still love me?

More every day.

I hate Anderson but I love you bunches.

I Love your cock.

Then simultaneous ones that read

Meeting in ten. See you at home.

During Mycroft’s post lunch meeting, it began to pour great torrents of rain with thunder. For a happy moment, Mycroft wondered if the weather would be a good reason to cancel the party, but it wasn’t as if he lived near a river. He accepted his fate.

By mid afternoon when Anthea forced him out of the office, he was beginning to feel the consequences of his broken sleep. He would never have imagined that he could relax enough to nap before the party, but stripping to his pants and crawling in bed were powerful nudges, and the historical novel on his night table was not the most sparkling read. When his neck snapped back from nodding over an in depth description of Lord Nelson’s uniform buttons, he put the book and his reading glasses on the night table and succumbed to the duvet. The sheets were chilly without Greg’s warmth, but he soon fell into a deep well of dreamless sleep.

Greg’s key in the lock had Mycroft awake and confused. Was he in a motel? Then it was fine because Greg flipped the lock on the door and that snick meant that they were safe in their own private world. Greg stripped out of his clothes and left them in a pile by the door. He prowled toward the bed with a naughty grin. “Hey, beautiful. Food, fuck, nap, or bath?”

Mycroft stretched, feeling kittenish. “Fuck but not my arse. I can do you.”

“You are barely awake, My. Let me treat you to a pre party rimming to soothe that weary ass.
Budge over.”

Mycroft snuggled deeper in the cocoon of soft bedding and Greg went duvet diving. He was kissing his way leisurely down Mycroft’s back when the bed gave way to a pile of pine branches and—

Bruce the bear had carried Mycroft to his cave where it was warm and dark. There was the sound of rain on the roof, but Mycroft was safe and dry. He had honey in his belly, and Bruce wanted that honey. He was puzzling in his slow, beary way how to get the honey out.

First he licked all around Mycroft’s arse and it felt incredible so Mycroft kept quiet even though he knew his friend wouldn’t get any honey that way. After a long and futile pursuit with his long firm tongue getting very deep inside, Bruce sniffled around Mycroft’s front. Mycroft’s perineum and balls and even his belly button got lots of licking. He moaned and squirmed when it tickled a bit.

Finally, Bruce figured out that Mycroft’s cock would work like a straw. This was about the time that Mycroft realized it was just like the children’s story. His arse was too hot, his balls were too cold, but his cock was just right. Bruce sniffed and kissed and licked around Mycroft’s cock and when he finally commenced sucking, it was a victory for them both. Mycroft petted his furry head in encouraging strokes. Bruce sucked very hard until the honey shot out as his pal reached orgasm.

“Bruce!” Mycroft shouted.

He came awake to Greg staring at him. “Bruce will be living in my study from now on.”

Mycroft was having trouble choosing a reality. He squinted to see if Greg was really angry.

In the posh accent, Greg said, “I shan’t be cuckolded in my own bed by a stuffed bear.”

This would have been funny at any time, but right before a huge and terrifying event, it was the stuff of legends. Mycroft laughed until his stomach hurt and he coughed. Greg’s hair was standing straight up and his nudity made his feigned hauteur even funnier. Fortunately, Greg had been teasing and he got his teddy and together they acted out a lewd sort of pantomime with Mycroft’s sleepy cock as a third character.

Then it was time for their picnic. Morris had taken great care in packing the basket as if he didn’t have the weight of the season’s biggest social event on his hands. They fed each other, trying a little of everything. Time was moving too quickly, but Mycroft made sure that Greg got a very thorough blowjob in the shower. It took the edge off and gave his skin a certain glow.

Greg in formal wear was a revelation. His silver hair shone; his eyes sparkled with total sexual satisfaction. Mycroft was still nervous but putting on the armor of his own evening suit got him into performance mode. As Greg and Morris had prearranged, there was no grand entrance. Greg locked the bedroom door and taking his husband’s hand, they went down the back stairs together and entered the party through the kitchen so that they blended with the other guests.

Mycroft conceived a plan where they circled their way through the main floor, starting with the dining room. In this way, they could greet everyone and avoid the accusations of favoritism but also avoid the dreaded receiving line. Greg was introduced as a starting point to each brief conversation. “I’d like to present my husband, Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade of Scotland Yard.”

Greg looked each person in the eye and shook hands firmly. He would say hello and ask some
question about their work or how long they had lived in London or remark on some aspect of their attire. Mycroft knew that Greg was good with people, but he was seeing the professional side of Greg in a new capacity.

Greg lightened the heinous task with small asides in his posh voice. “Lord Sagbottom needs to adjust his truss.”

“Agent Douchebag did not pull off that green chiffon.”

“It is not on tonight for Mr. Addison. His wife looks like she had a bad prawn.”

Mycroft liked being on the edge of laughing out loud, but most of all he liked that when one of his old bullies came close and he felt the panic, he held his hand down at his side, palm outward, and Greg took his hand, squeezing three times. Mycroft squeezed back his answer and knew in spite of the twit before him, he was safe.

Not all of the people were comic relief or cruel. He was glad to see some old acquaintances from other departments and a few agents that they had all been concerned about returned safely home. There were kind comments amongst the superficial.

“Marriage seems to agree with you, Mr. Holmes.”

“You make a striking couple.”

“You always gave the best parties, Mycroft. Glad to see you enjoying this one.”

He was grateful that Greg had pushed him a little because he had surprised himself and managed it. Before he even had to consult his internal survival time table, Mojo had stopped the music and Greg was leaving his side to step to the microphone.

“I want to thank everyone for coming tonight to honor my husband during his birthday week. I hope this is the first of many parties that we will host for all of you.”

He was interrupted by a chorus of “Here here.”

“Please raise your glasses to my brave and beautiful husband. I love you, sweetheart. To Mycroft.”

Mycroft was the only one that knew how close to tears Greg was. He could not take his eyes from that smile, but he could feel the movement of glasses being raised and hear the echo of his name. Then someone in the back started a chorus of the birthday song. The band picked it up. Mycroft, who had spent childhood birthdays at school having the package from home pilfered by bullies and who had spent his adult birthdays since Rory died with an extra large glass of liquor, was being serenaded by a houseful of happy coworkers. His cheeks flushed with humble thanks and shyness.

If he hadn’t been struck by how much Greg had improved his life, tonight would be a strong and lasting example. He was saved from having to make a speech by Morris wheeling the cake out. After Mycroft had cut the first piece, his obligations faded to saying goodbye to the guests after they had finished their cake. The consumption of excellent food and drink for two hours made guests more biddable and the goodbyes far more comfortable than the greetings. Some folks slipped off without a farewell, which was the best birthday gift anyone could give. Mycroft got back to Greg as soon as he could and grasped the back of his jacket for comfort since they both needed a hand free for handshakes.

But finally, the door closed on the last guest, and it was time for loosening ties or even in some
cases, taking off new, tight shoes (Brass) and going to Morris’ kitchen for family supper. It was laid out buffet style on the kitchen worktop, all of the remaining delicacies from the evening plus two of Morris’ home made pizzas, an enormous shepherd’s pie, and an equally gargantuan lasagna. The cake had been large enough that they all could have a hefty slice for dessert. But Morris, knowing the appetites of young men and musicians, had also put out the small tester layer cakes he had made before baking the huge one, and since some didn’t like cake for afters, there were two pies and a trifle along with fresh fruit and biscuits.

Morris kept beer and wine flowing as well as soft drinks and coffee, decaf or regular, and buckets of tea. Greg finally made Morris sit down and took over drinks service. “Copper’s got to have many skills to earn a living.”

Mycroft would feel the brush of Greg’s hand along his back or a gentle squeeze of his shoulder, and once when he looked up, Greg leaned down and kissed him in front of the whole table.

Anthea was texting, and Art squirmed a bit; he was definitely more comfortable behind the wheel. The band members were tucking in like Dickens’ orphans except for Mojo who never stopped the soft, rumbling patter. Brass glanced over at Mycroft and made the flapping motion with his thumb and fingers of too much talking. He winked.

Glancing around at friendly faces, jaws working with food or talk, the table groaning with loaded plates, Mycroft felt full, not just in his belly but somewhere deep. This was something he hadn’t even thought to wish for because it was so far beyond what he thought he could accomplish. He belonged.

“I like everyone here,” he thought. “And they like me just as I am.”

Mojo told another joke in that deep, rasping voice of his and Mycroft had missed the beginning but the punch line was “That dog didn’t wanna go huntin’ either.”

Tuppy laughed so hard that got choked on a cracker, and Morris had to whack him on the back. Greg looked up at Mycroft over the edge of his coffee cup and smiled. “I love you,” he mouthed, the din of laughter and advice leaving them to their world.

But Brass saw and scrubbing his hands through his still ragged hair cut, he piped up. “Before we tear down, I say we sing for our supper, mates. Those that can’t play, can dance.”

With some good natured whinging, the musicians went back to the reception room which had been turned into a comfy corner for live music. It was a tight fit but enough for the combo and kept them safe from the posh folk, Mojo had said. The sliding doors had been pushed back so that dining room and library were one big room. Without the furniture and the guests, it was a more than adequate ballroom.

Greg held out a hand, Mycroft took it, and the band surprised them with “Black Satin” by Miles Davis. Mycroft knew it from sharing Greg’s birthday jazz CDs which they had worked their way through at the villa.

“Now that’s from when they made music the same way they made love, slow and smooth,” Tuppy said.

Soon Tuppy and Morris had joined them on the dance floor and for one repetition of the song, Burch the piano player took over and Mojo and Brass danced too. Anthea surprised them all by asking Art to dance and once he stopped blushing, he complied.

When the song was over, Greg tipped his face up for a kiss and Mycroft pulled him in with the
loose ends of his tie. The kiss heated up, only the silence stopping them. When they looked around, the others began to clap. The applause made Greg blush. “Happy birthday indeed,” someone said.

Morris put a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’ll lock up. Tuppy’s offered to stay and help. Why don’t you two get some rest, eh? Another long day tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? Because that’s quite a spread you gave us. You’ll send some home with the starving artists?”

“Yes, that’s the plan although they may decide to eat it here. I don’t know where they put it.”

“We’re eating out tomorrow and then at Mum and Dad’s for the weekend so distribute as you see fit.”

Mycroft yawned. The scariest bit of the week was over, and he hadn’t been harmed. Someone else was cleaning up the mess. Tuppy would enjoy being part of things and feeling useful, and it wasn’t a contrived need.

“The birthday boy needs his beauty sleep,” Greg said to the room at large. “Thank you to everyone and good night.”

Mycroft waved and docilely followed his husband up the stairs to their cave. He kept yawning as they hung their things up, jackets and trousers and ties and cumberbunds. Morris would provide fresh shirts for the next evening’s outing. “I shouldn’t be so tired. I had a nap.”

“You also have had a lot of nightmares this week.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice.”

Greg pulled him close. “I notice everything about you. Occupational hazard and being crazy in love.”

He savored the feel of Greg’s warm body, only vest and pants in the way. He nuzzled into Greg’s neck, taking in the scent of him.

“Hop into bed, love. I’m too close to my supper to carry you without a cramp.”

Mycroft stripped off the last of his clothes and crawled under the covers, feeling like he had swum the Channel. Greg left the small lamp in the seating area on when he came back from cleaning his teeth. It was one of their signals for sex, and after the amazing night Greg had given him, Mycroft was willing although his body was half hearted.

But Greg just lay on his pillow and looked over at his husband, stroked a hand down his cheek, and said, “Did I pass muster?”

“Absolutely.” Mycroft didn’t know how to process the fact that Greg had been worried about being enough. “Beauty trumps breeding every time, but you worked that crowd like a pro, love. Impeccable manners and excellent conversational skills. You won them all, and I was so proud to be by your side.”

Greg exhaled loudly. Mycroft took his hand and began warming the fingers that were surprisingly cold. “I’m so sorry, love. I was all caught up in myself and didn’t think that you might be nervous.”

“One of us had to appear confident and that seems to be an easier role for me.”
“Don’t get too good at fooling me, please?”

They moved closer and traded soft kisses; sleep was tugging, but Mycroft was glad of the low light and being able to look in Greg’s eyes.

Finally, Greg asked, “Hold me?”

Not the cowardice of code words, but the courage of the real words, Hold me. Mycroft liked being relieved from the fear and fragility of the previous night and taking his turn at being the reassuring husband. He got Greg on top of him and wrapped arms and then legs around Greg, repeating in murmurs that Greg had done very well and that he was proud.

He could feel the tremors then of nerves and weary relief. He stroked the silver hair that had turned many heads and rubbed the broad shoulders, so glad that they were his to touch. Mycroft thought that it was his turn to tell a bedtime story as Greg had gone over their itinerary the previous night to lull them both asleep, but he couldn’t think of anything that Greg might like to hear.

Greg’s voice was slow and wistful. “Tell me what’s happening in the village. What happens after Graham tells Michael he’s in love?”

“Michael is terrified, of course, and overwhelmed with many feelings. He feels betrayed by the secret. Gullible and duped that he didn’t see it happening and for all the times that he nattered on about friendship when Graham had something else in mind.”

“But being loved is what he needs, right? What he’s dreamed of. Being loved back.” Greg rubbed his nose in Mycroft’s chest hair, tickling them both.

“He’s dreamed of it but the reality is nearly too much. I think he’s got school boy dreams still of a courtly sort of love, one that doesn’t get acted on with all the dirty bits of grunts and semen. Still he knows Graham is a man’s man, and that there will be a reckoning.”

“Michael loves him back though, yeah?”

“Love at first sight, but it’s all tangled up with his old love for his roommate and his need of a dad, and now he doesn’t have anyone he can talk to. He misses Graham terribly but he’s so frightened. And what if Graham is just looking to him as the next vicar. How could he ever measure up to John, who will always remain perfect and saintly in death?”

“This is so complicated. I can’t guess how they will sort it out.”

“Neither can I.”

“Well, you’d better because this reader is hooked, mate, and I want my story to have a happy ending.”

“I think anything that we do together will have a happy ending.” And with that hopeful thought, Mycroft took the remote and clicked off the lamp and with one last kiss to Greg’s shaggy head, he pulled the duvet over them both.

Gratitude
Mycroft was trying to get Greg’s tie straight. They had spent far too long under the duvet after Mummy had called to cancel a pre-symphony dinner in lieu of a late supper after the concert. Mycroft knew how long it took to dress and Greg knew how abysmal traffic was on Friday nights, and yet Mycroft had taken both their cocks in hand and given a virtuoso pre concert hand job that left them both logy and content.

They were well on their way to shifting the focus away from stretching Greg’s hind parts. Mycroft needed a new word for it, or he really was being as clinical as Greg had gently hinted at. A leisurely shower had nearly resulted in round two, and there were some areas that had been much too thoroughly cleaned.

Now they had ten minutes to finish hair and, in Mycroft’s case, make up. Greg was silent, and Mycroft sensed that it wasn’t just to keep his adam’s apple out of the way as Mycroft fiddled with the bow. “Greg, I want you to tell me if there’s anything that concerns you about this evening. Don’t suffer alone like you did last night.”

Greg held his peace as Mycroft gave one last tweak to the tie, and then they were both fiddling with their hair although the amount of product and the desired results were somewhat opposite. Finally, their eyes met in the mirror. “If your mother puts you down in front of me, I don’t know what I’ll do. I can’t stand it.”

Mycroft shrugged. “She’s never forgiven me for turning out ugly, that’s all.”

“She was blind and for that I will never forgive her.” Greg’s nostrils were flaring the way they did when he was holding back tears.

“You don’t have to.” Mycroft tugged Greg over for a hug and then watched it in the mirror. He’d seen them together in their many explicit home movies, but those were about lust and passion and occasional acrobatics. Hugs were almost exclusively about love. He wanted the image of Greg loving him burned in his brain as an antidote to his mother’s toxic tongue. Greg must not see how much it hurt, or there might be a verbal battle of epic proportions.

Greg wiped his eyes sheepishly and then messed some more with his hair. Then their eyes met again in the mirror. “Next year for your birthday? A quiet weekend at a country inn.”

“Agreed.”

Art had the door open for them as they stepped into a fine mist that had coated everything in silver. Mycroft was glad of it since it would blend the concealer he had applied too liberally. Nature had taken care of the final step of his grooming ritual. He reached in his pocket and got the bottle of Maalox tablets, took three, and offered the bottle to Greg who took four. Sharing a bottle of water, they gazed out tinted windows as if they could see the route. Once Mycroft’s mouth was coated with chalk and the water was gone, he fidgeted with his clothing, picking off invisible lint until Greg reached for his hand. They rubbed each other’s fingers, the stress faded and their delayed post coital nap claimed them.

Art’s voice over the intercom made them both jerk, and so they exited the car feeling groggy and dry mouthed and unprepared for whatever Mummy had in store.

She was waiting for them, dressed in red like a wicked queen. Mycroft kissed her heavily powdered cheek, and the cold ran from his lips all the way down his spine. He didn’t realize how tight he was holding Greg’s hand until Greg winced as his wedding band cut into his fingers.

“Since you kept me waiting, I’ve already procured our tickets at Collections. John got us near the front but not the best seats.”
“It’s for charity, Mummy. Let’s focus on that.” Mycroft put his hand in the small of her back and guided her to coat check. “Have you already checked your things?”

“Yes, but I wish I hadn’t. I’m absolutely frozen from waiting in this icy foyer.”

“I’m sure it’s warmer here than under a bridge,” Greg muttered.

The lights flashed indicating that the show was going to start precisely at eight. Mycroft was thankful that the music would stop the complaining. He put himself in the middle, wishing for poor John who played the buffer and referee far too often. Greg squeezed his hand three times, and Mycroft squeezed back four, feeling more like he was in an airplane just before takeoff perhaps on a suicide mission.

The master of ceremonies was one of those small men who puff out their chests and rock up on tiptoe to seem larger. He was self-aggrandizing and Mycroft knew that the evening was going to be interminable. He had a plummy voice and Mycroft constructed various scenarios involving the man’s head and the business end of a spade.

“Honored patrons and guests, we would like to welcome you to the first annual Symphony for the Homeless. Immense gratitude goes to the anonymous benefactor who contributed all administrative costs so that any proceeds from ticket sales will go directly to staff and supplies for local clinics, shelters, and kitchens.”

Obligatory applause. Greg looked at his watch. Mycroft grinned ruefully; Greg would probably be the one to have a survival clock tonight. He tried to refocus on the gratuitous introduction. One of the reasons that they had an MC was because they hadn’t printed programs. It was a way to save on costs, and to keep it from turning into a lot of self-promotion, but apparently Pouter Pigeon had not received the memo.

Mycroft began to sense the rhythm of when the man would rise up on his toes. It would have been comical if they weren’t all prisoners. He was pulled back to the speech by hearing his brother’s name.

“Our first soloist of the evening is Mr. Sherlock Holmes who needs no introduction. His tireless work in solving crimes brings him frequently in contact with our city’s less fortunate citizens. Recently, he was injured by a brave but hapless veteran who had not been able to obtain his medication from a clinic that was closed due to insufficient funds. Mr. Holmes survived; the need for additional funding in these troubled times was brought to light, and we are here tonight to see that these clinics keep their doors and hearts open to prevent further tragedy.”

Mycroft could imagine that Sherlock would be pacing back stage, barely contained by John’s firm command. While Mycroft had funded the event at Sherlock’s request, since the concert was a far more worthy and understandable deduction from Sherlock’s trust fund, he hadn’t realized that Sherlock was going to perform. John had given him the impression that Sherlock would be saying a few words since he had still not got his strength back and was also vulnerable to infection.

Good god, the puffin was still talking. “Mr. Holmes composed the piece that he will be playing with the help of our gifted and unpaid orchestra for the evening. Knowing his hobby and passion to be the solving of crimes most often dastardly murders, it’s no surprise that this fledgling composer had entitled the piece ‘Blood.’ And we have a mystery, our eminent violinist has dedicated this evening’s performance to M. Just the initial ‘M.’”

Sir Blowgut waved his index card about as if to prove to the audience that he had spoken correctly. “Perhaps you can ponder the mysterious ‘M’ while you listen to Mr. Sherlock Holmes, our orchestra, and the debut of “Blood.”
Sherlock was breathtaking in formal wear, a whole new get up for the evening since he had lost nearly two stone from his ordeal. He was runway model thin, cheek bones looking sharp enough to cut, skin still deathly pale from the inevitable anemia. His hair was longer than usual because John said he was resisting any unnecessary procedures after being manhandled in the hospital for so long. The dark ringlets glistened in the spot light.

The applause continued for some time at the appearance of such a beautiful and elusive figure; his recovery had not been kept out of the papers despite Mycroft’s constant efforts. The city wanted to welcome their curmudgeonly sleuth back even if he scorned the welcome. When Sherlock held up his hands for silence, the crowd obeyed. When he looked at the orchestra, all instruments were lifted and at the ready.

Then Mycroft saw that there was no conductor. Sherlock was going to do it all, and he kept a willing audience waiting as long as possible. The song started with the unusual choice of the timpani playing a two part rhythm BOM BOM, BOM BOM. Almost like a heartbeat.

Sherlock’s violin played the melody, strange and lonely against the beat of the drum. The string section joined him, one instrument at a time, echoing the melody. There was a shimmering quality to it; Mycroft thought of sunlight on water, but the drum's vibration set heavy on his chest. He felt uneasy as his body began to sync to the incessant rhythm of that drum and he thought of films with jungle drums foretelling the death of missionaries. His throat spasmed, wanting to cry out as the drum continued.

But the strings had the narrative which was compelling enough that the drum soon dropped back to a tolerable persistence. Sherlock moved in the waves of sound as if they were physical. Only the soles of his feet appeared stationary as he moved from the ankles upward, every slender inch of him swaying with grace as if he too shimmered. It was a trick of the lights, but his clothing seemed to sparkle.

The music changed and suddenly Sherlock and all the strings behind him were striving with the tubas and bassoons. Mycroft could hear the strings gain ground and then get pushed back by the low and hefty tones from the deeper instruments. He was missing a key element, something simple. This was not a piece documenting a crime although Sherlock saw criminals as musicians of a sort. Other meanings of blood—Mycroft did not want to accept the obvious meaning but there it was.

Not blood at a crime scene, but life’s blood flowing through a body. Sherlock knew, and he was communicating his gratitude in the safest way he could. Mycroft gripped Greg’s hand hard enough that his ring hurt. Sherlock was doing something lovely, and the rare times he had been generous, there had always been backlash.

Greg raised Mycroft’s hand and brushed his lips across fingers grown icy. They exchanged a look that told Mycroft that Greg was as clueless as he was. At a raised eyebrow from Greg, Mycroft settled into the moment. He would deal with the repercussions as they arose. Now was for the music.

It was a brilliant piece in its own right. The timpani heart continued pumping the blood outward, and the stringed melody of pulsing life began to sneak past the stem and vigilant valves of brass and woodwind. Sherlock’s body was tossed about by the current; his melody far more difficult than the echoes he had written for his supporting strings.

Mycroft thought of a river too and the lower instruments as rocks in the path of the light but persistent current. The trombone and oboe came in and formed a net of countermelody around the strings, a cupping of the arteries around the precious liquid.
Sherlock had only composed for violin before. Mycroft was pleased that the gift of keyboard, headphones, and state of the art composition software had been put to use to keep Sherlock entertained. John and Mycroft hadn’t dared to hope. But even with the expensive tools, the scoring would have taken several days for a seasoned expert in perfect health. Sherlock had outdone himself.

Mycroft smiled in delight as the trumpet and clarinet entered the piece as capillaries, containing a flow of strings that had lightened to violins only, swirling around Sherlock’s embellished central melody. Then finally the strings fell away so that Sherlock alone was on the mission of getting the oxygen to the cells. The thin stream was welcomed by the tiny sparkling tones of flute and piccolo with gentle application of brushes on cymbals and little touches of the triangle. Mycroft’s nipples hardened and chills ran over him, something that only happened to the best of music.

The audience was lighter, and Mycroft realized that Sherlock had written the timpani to decrease in volume as the flow moved away from the heart. Sherlock played beautifully, the symbolism a light touch, as the melody took over. There was a poignancy to it. Mycroft heard the sadness that Sherlock felt for his homeless network who had been devastated that one of their own would hurt a benefactor like the detective. In protective custody, the man had been given his proper medication and was so shattered by what had happened that he was on suicide watch.

Sherlock’s eyes were shut, but Mycroft didn’t have to be emotionally close to his brother to read him. His body language was another symphony, and the pain was written plain. Perhaps this piece wasn’t designed for Mycroft after all. He could only hope that the secret of the transfusion would remain concealed.

The flute and piccolo coaxed the grief away from the story with their sprightly dance until the melody gained purpose and volume again. The strings rejoined Sherlock for the trip back toward the heart, and so the second movement of the piece. The now familiar melody traveled through in reverse, moving away from the friendly hosts of capillaries (trumpet and clarinet) to the veins. The trombones and oboes were no nonsense transit, big city buses getting the waning, oxygen poor blood to its destination quickly.

Then the seesaw of the valves again; never had tuba and bassoon communicated such urgency. Mycroft found himself exhaling and then grabbing deep breaths as if his own blood were lacking oxygen. Sherlock’s body continued to move, his shoulders bowed with the weight of carrying the whole orchestra. He seemed so very small with the musicians circled round him. He was buffeted by the high tide of the music, and there was the timpani which had been increasing in volume all along, suddenly at that unbearable volume that constricted throats and triggered arrhythmias. Soon it was the drum and the lone soloist/conductor, slowly returning the audience to the destination of reality.

The last note lingered. Sherlock in place, eyes still closed, cheek against his instrument as if it could sustain him. There was the glorious silence before the applause, the indicator of an audience transported. As Sherlock bowed low, he winced. Mycroft was out of his seat without a word to anyone and striding at a near run toward the lobby before the next music began.

“Art, I need the car at the stage door. Sherlock is ill.”

Greg had commandeered an usher. “Shortest route to the stage door, mate. Mr. Holmes needs to get his brother to medical attention. Take us there?”

The three men moved out into the chilly night, bracing autumn air penetrating evening clothes, but there was no time to waste on coat check. At the whispered instructions of the clever usher, they moved quickly to the dressing rooms where John’s grim face confirmed Mycroft’s observation.
“Mycroft, can you get us home? I don’t want him in a cab.”

“Art is on his way. He won’t be but a few moments in spite of the maze of alleys down here.”

Sherlock was silent, his tie off and his shirt unbuttoned. John was all trauma doctor, monitoring his pulse, watching his pupils, coaxing small sips of water into his patient.

Mycroft noticed the violin on the dressing table and asked, “Would you like me to put away your violin?”

Sherlock turned in his chair, a muscle in his cheek fluttering as pain or nausea coursed through him. His hand hovered over his stomach as if it might be too hot to touch. He nodded sharply once. Mycroft hated that he had to do something so personal and thus make Sherlock uncomfortable, but he knew the most about the care of stringed instruments and Sherlock’s habits. Coats could be replaced; this specific violin was more vital to Sherlock than his coat.

He heard a familiar tap of heels on the tile and wished for a gun instead of a bow. “Mycroft, you abandoned me without a word.”

Sherlock had wiped the pain from his face and was sitting up straight smirking. Mycroft was the convenient brother scapegoat yet again. “I wanted to congratulate Sherlock right away.”

“Oh, it was lovely. My baby is so talented, and to dedicate a song to his Mummy like that. But why the secret, little love? People know how much you love your mummy.”

“I do which is why I need you to stay here and represent our family. John is making me go home and rest.”

“Pardon? But what about our little supper afterwards? I’ll look pathetic returning to my seat alone.”

“Sir Henry is doing a dramatic reading about veterans right now. I’m sure he would be willing to escort you or stay with you here so that you’ll be ready to receive credit for the success of the evening on behalf of all the Holmes.”

Sir Henry was a magic totem, a most eligible widower. Gay as a maypole, but Mummy had a healthy faith in her own abilities to cure homosexuality in anyone save her own sons. Sir Henry and the attention of a full audience together were an irresistible pull, but first the false demurring.

“If you really need me to help, of course, I’ll stay, but Mycroft, why can’t you just send your car to Baker Street and then have it return for us later?”

“Because I’ve got diarrhea,” Greg announced to John’s delight. “Had a bad sandwich or something and to say that it’s projectile, is an understatement. I did my damnedest to rise above, but it’s coming in waves and—”

“Sounds like we all could use some rest, and here’s Art now in the nick of time.” Mycroft waggled his mobile. “Mummy, we’ll have to stand you a concert and late night supper another time.”

Air kisses all around and then Mummy was pointed toward the wings and an unsuspecting Sir Henry while Sherlock sagged against John, his skin waxen with a ring of pale green around his mouth. As they exited, the wind whipped down the back alley, and Sherlock shivered, his evening coat no match for the onslaught.

Greg climbed into the front, promising to help Art with traffic, but really wanting to give John and
Sherlock some privacy. When Mycroft offered to do the same, John barked, “I’ll need your help back here.”

Sherlock gasped as he lowered himself onto the seat. Sweat was running down his face, dripping off his damp curls. If he resented Mycroft’s presence, he was too far gone to express it. Only a critically ill Sherlock was this silent.

Mycroft’s stomach lurched as he remembered his sixteenth summer and a stealthy Sherlock coming to his room, his arm held at an odd angle, broken in two places. Not a peep out of him as the bone was set and the heavy cast applied. Or the time when he was even smaller, Mummy and Father both traveling of course, and the nanny’s day off when he spiked a fever that climbed within hours. Sherlock wouldn’t allow any of the staff to touch him. Mycroft had held the feather light body in his arms, afraid to breathe or touch heated papery skin for fear it might flake off like a butterfly’s wing.

All the cutting words and snarks meant nothing when Sherlock suffered. Mycroft was pulled out of his memories before he could dwell on a teenaged Sherlock in rehab. John was asking for things. “A blanket, please and towels or flannels if you have them and bottled water.”

Mycroft went into the compartments under the seat and produced the necessary items. He wanted to wrap the blanket around Sherlock, tucking him in, but it was a husband’s job or a doctor’s even. Thus supplied, John seemed to forget Mycroft’s presence. John eased the blanket aside just enough to remove Sherlock’s cumberbund and pull up his vest. He palpated his husband’s abdomen. Mycroft knew that John was being exceedingly gentle, but Sherlock groaned through clenched teeth. “Sorry, love, I know that hurts. Did you vomit while I was at the Tesco this morning?”

Sherlock made an affirmative noise, and again, Mycroft knew that such admissions indicated grave distress. He wanted to take the hurt. Pain was nothing for him, an old friend. Sherlock didn’t deserve it.

“And backstage when you sent me for ginger ale? So your last meal that stayed down was yesterday.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. John knew the truth. Mycroft felt as if he were violating them both by his presence. He never enjoyed Sherlock’s comeuppance or the voyeurism of which he was so often accused.

John reached in his coat pocket and pulled out a bottle with two pills in it. “Sherlock, you’ll have to take these.”

“John, please don’t?” Sherlock’s voice was frighteningly weak.

Chills ran up and down Mycroft’s neck. He was back at the hospital, despairing of Sherlock’s life, all the times and all the narrow white beds, and all the guilt and recrimination when Sherlock awoke, surviving another day to resent the hell out of Mycroft’s efforts. A compulsion stole over him to stop the car and climb into the front seat and Greg’s arms.

John’s calm, firm voice centered Mycroft as much as Sherlock. “A compromise. One now and if you aren’t getting relief, one when we get home.”

“I can’t rely on them.”

“You overdid tonight as we both knew you would, and this is the price. I won’t let you fall. Doctor Patel and I are managing your pain.”
John held out the pill and supported Sherlock as he swallowed, holding the water when Sherlock’s hand proved too shaky for the bottle. Sherlock was panting with the pain, unproductive Lamaze breathing.

“Is it better if you lie down?”

For an answer, Sherlock curled into a ball, hands guarding his stomach. John scooted off the seat and eased Sherlock down, tucking the blanket around him as occasional shivers still passed over him. He stroked Sherlock’s hair until the panting stopped. “There now.”

Finally John’s attention turned to Mycroft who would have preferred the fetal position himself. “Is it infection?”

“I don’t think so. We’ve kept very close check on his white cell count because of the spleen. The knife was serrated and damaged his nerves especially in the belly where there was no bone to deflect. Overexertion, like captivating a sold out audience—”

“He was brilliant.”

“—overexertion triggers phantom pain. It’s like being stabbed all over again. Vomiting didn’t help the stomach muscles that were also torn and just now mending.”

“I shouldn’t have let him have the benefit so soon, but I thought that a brief speech wouldn’t be taxing. I had no idea that he would compose an entire orchestral piece, let alone perform it.”

“Mycroft, guilt goes nowhere. Dr. Patel and I discussed it. His mental state was also crucial to his recovery. The equipment you sent over was a welcome distraction from pain and boredom. You saved his mind not to mention my sanity. He needed tonight even if he is paying a price for it.”

“But if it slows his recovery or—“

“He’ll be sore for a few days, and tomorrow he’ll get a scolding from me about hiding the vomiting, but otherwise he’ll be unscathed. This is part of healing from severe trauma. It’s okay.”

Sherlock stirred, legs shifting restlessly on the seat. “John?”

Mycroft realized that John’s name was Sherlock’s endearment for him; he caressed the name in that low, vibrating baritone until it was beautiful.

“Right here, love.”

“I need the other one.”

John was in his pocket right away, his other arm going to help Sherlock sit up. “Well done, baby. I’m so proud of you for asking.”

Mycroft turned toward the window, determined to look out as if the tint weren’t there, but he could see the couple reflected in the glass. John kissed Sherlock’s hand before tucking it back under the blanket. He stroked Sherlock’s cheek and murmured soothing words, too low for Mycroft’s ear. Sherlock whimpered, snuggling into John’s touch.

Mycroft wanted Greg desperately; even with John’s reassurance, Mycroft knew that Sherlock’s pain was his fault. If he hadn’t scheduled the benefit so soon, Sherlock would be at home, bored but comfortable. Still Sherlock had insisted that help was needed immediately. The stabbing would have never occurred at all if he had been watching Sherlock more carefully, monitoring his security detail more closely, but Mycroft had grown lax now that John was on the job. He tried to imagine Greg’s voice, coaching him away from guilt and into grace.
Then he remembered the hot, acrid night in a motel when the weight of his sins had brought him to the floor. Greg had given him a mantra. He took out his mobile and scrolled through saved messages, all from Greg, all words of love. He found the one that he had played over 100 times and he played it again. Greg’s voice, husky with sleep, “You’ve paid long enough, baby. You are forgiven.”

Both of the Holmes boys had procured husbands far more generous and compassionate than they could ever be themselves. Climates were warming, glaciers were melting. They could change even with each other, but Mycroft didn’t dare hope. Sherlock had accepted help with his violin and a ride home. That was enough to be going on with.

At Baker Street, Sherlock struggled from the car, hunched over his throbbing stomach as if to protect it from the wind. As John unlocked the door, Sherlock wavered on the steps and to everyone’s surprise, spoke his brother’s name and turned toward him. Mycroft’s arm shook as he tried to give support without expectations.

When they were inside, John took the violin case and hurried up the steps. Sherlock didn’t say anything so Mycroft wrapped one arm around his waist and put Sherlock’s other arm around his neck and slowly moved them up the steps. They were both trembling, and Mycroft knew that he would pay many times over for Sherlock’s need. He could not imagine the rage and verbal arrows that would pierce him once Sherlock was back in fighting trim.

But it was over quickly. Greg was behind them in case they stumbled, John in front unlocking doors and turning on lights. He barked orders and all were relieved to have a plan. “On the couch. Mycroft, can you manage tea and dry toast? Greg, help him undress. I’m preparing an injection.”

Greg hadn’t seen the extent of Sherlock’s pain in the car. “I thought he was off of pain meds.”

“He was, but he overdid tonight. I’ll be checking in with his specialist. Don’t worry, Greg. We’re doing things properly.”

John went to some hiding place for the vial and needle, and Mycroft ducked into the kitchen. He could spare Sherlock the embarrassment of being stripped to his pants in front of his brother. Never mind what Mycroft had seen on film, Greg had cared for Sherlock more recently even if it had been more than five years.

The kitchen had been returned to food service while Sherlock was recuperating. Mycroft filled and switched on the kettle and found toaster and bread. He prepared four mugs, the colors helping him keep track and he was proud that he knew how each man would take it. He could be giving; in the past, he had chosen not to.

By the time the tea had steeped, Sherlock had been given his shot and changed into pajamas and dressing gown. He was sitting up but snuggled under two blankets, one knitted by Mrs. Hudson. When Mycroft held out the mug, he took it, eyes only on the tea.

John took his mug in his right hand, his left holding syringe and empty vial. “I need to dispose of these correctly and check in with Dr. Patel. Takes a few minutes to get past his answering service. Will you two mind him for me?”

“I’m not a child or a puppy, John.”

John put mug and medical waste down and straddled Sherlock’s legs so he could sit on the coffee table. He put his hands on Sherlock’s cheeks, still disturbingly pale. “You are a genius who behaves like a child most days and sometimes even a naughty puppy. You’ve hurt yourself tonight quite badly, and you need to do as I say which means you need watching while I’m out of the
He kissed Sherlock’s forehead, and Sherlock kept his head tilted up a long time after John’s lips had brushed there. “Now, eat your toast like the good boy genius that you are. You know the side effects of this med taken on an empty stomach.”

John left the room, and the confidence left Mycroft. Of all the pleasing things about John, competence in emergencies was a favorite. Mycroft started at Greg’s touch to his shoulder. He had been staring at Sherlock, who was struggling with the toast. Flaring nostrils indicated that nausea was still present.

Greg said, “As soon as John gets back, we should go.”

Sherlock’s head whipped up. “No, John needs the company. If you can, please stay.”

“We could come back some other evening when you are feeling better.”

“When I’m feeling better, I won’t want you here.”

Greg snorted. “That’s more like. I’m sure you’ll tell us when you would like us to leave then.”

“As soon as you say something stupid.”

“That soon?”

Sherlock actually laughed at this, then moaned as the movement went straight to his tortured stomach.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea that your injuries would render me funny.”

Sherlock glared and tore off another bite of the fearsome toast. Mycroft felt as if he were at Wimbledon watching two of the best across the net. John returned before it escalated, and Sherlock let his pain show again.

“It’s all fine. Your doctor agreed with my choices, and we are to call him in the morning with an update. Any relief, love?”

“It’s shifted from nine to seven.”

“That’s something. How’s the toast?”

“Dry and tasteless. I want egg drop soup, John, so hot that the bowl burns my hands, and rice.”

“Worth a try and if you can’t manage, we’ll keep it for tomorrow. I doubt takeaway soup will be that hot, but we can warm it here. Mycroft, would your driver get it for us? That will be much quicker than the delivery boy. You and Greg will stay and have some.”

Mycroft gave the sizable order to Art with the address of Sherlock’s favorite place, the one with the sticky door handle. He exhaled as Sherlock’s color returned to normal and his body relaxed. He was more affectionate with John than Mycroft had ever seen him, but the brothers spent so little time together outside of business. Sherlock had slid over to lay his head in John’s lap and was being petted like a nervous thoroughbred before a race.

An awkward silence fell and Mycroft went to the topic upon which Greg could not remain silent. “I wonder if Mummy has wooed Sir Henry yet?”
“I wonder if she’s recovered from Greg’s announcement about his bowels. You really can’t resist baiting her, can you?”

“She makes it so easy.”

“If there was any truth in that little announcement, I have something in my bag that would help you. You know, before more food comes and you stink up our flat.”

“No, I’m fine really.”

“Sherlock has a very sensitive nose.”

“John! …Oh, you’re taking the piss.”

“I am, and come Christmas, I shall use constipation as my safe word with the old girl.”

“Dibs on hemorrhoids,” Mycroft heard himself say before the laughter started. A low machine gun chuckle finally penetrated his conscious as Sherlock’s. Cuddled safely in John’s lap, Sherlock could admit that his brother’s dry wit was amusing. They were definitely through the looking glass.

John was wiping his eyes. Dr. Watson had left the building and their friend John was fully present. “Baby, will you be okay for a few minutes if I change out of this costume? I’m strangling.”

“Mmph,” Sherlock protested but he lifted up enough for John to stand before he huddled back under his blankets.

Mycroft sat on his hands to prevent himself from going over and replacing John. Thirty odd years had not erased the knowledge of how Sherlock liked to be touched before his father’s death and puberty had shut him down. Mycroft again yearned for the little boy who had followed him around, his best friend and tormenter in one. Three years old and more articulate than most adults, little Sherlock was winsome and lived for his big brother’s holidays from school. “Mycoff, look at my experiment. Mycoff, how come you look so different from Mummy and me? Mycoff, when is Father coming home?”

“It wasn’t for Mummy.”

“What now?” Greg asked Sherlock.

“I did not write that music for Mummy.” Sherlock’s eyes met Mycroft’s, and although they were heavy from pain and medication, his meaning was plain.

Mycroft was trembling all over, afraid of hope. “Let’s give her that delusion, shall we?”

Greg was looking between them, thinking there would be more. Mycroft knew that this was as close as they would ever come to reconciliation. Sherlock saw it as a debt of honor which was now paid in full. After this strange compassionate night of ceasefire, the war on Mycroft would continue.

“I think I’ll ring them and see what our current total is. As strong as the program turned out to be, I imagine there will be more donations over the next few days. We’ve capitalized well on being the charity of the hour.”

Mycroft stepped into the kitchen and counted ten before he dialed the number. Speaking with someone outside the charged room where Sherlock lay, he took comfort in professionalism. The
number was a happy surprise. When he stepped back in and gave the total, Greg whistled in awe. John did the same when he returned a moment later in one of his obligatory and overwrought jumpers.

John and Greg lapsed into talk of football, Sherlock dozed, and Mycroft watched the three of them. During all the lonely years, he had imagined scenes such as this one. An evening with friends was a more recurrent fantasy than anything sexual that he ever invented and certainly less attainable. Now that he was in this warm room about to share a meal, he didn’t feel any sense of achievement. All of the pain and guilt and unworthiness were still in place. Rory and Morris were his friends, and they had paid the highest price for being close to him. Tuppy was living out Mycroft’s betrayal somewhere in the city at present while his protégé sat happy with friends and family around him.

The village beckoned, but it seemed wrong to escape what would have been a happy, comfortable time for anyone normal. Adding to his other emotions was the self critical voice which upbraided him for being so ungrateful for the good thing he’d found in Greg and the burgeoning friendship with John, and the voice continued to lecture him about being so neurotic that he couldn’t settle down like any sane person would but continued to analyze the situation. And why couldn’t he take Sherlock’s offering of the music instead of bracing himself for the attack that might come later? Had his life really been so terrible that he was constantly on guard? He had it so easy compared to the homeless that he should be happy every single moment. Greg and John knew how to live in the present, taking each day as it came, brave and steady. Sherlock never worried about what people thought. Sherlock strode through life knocking pillars out of his way, and—

Greg had glanced over, checking in with an adorable tilt of his head. Mycroft smiled with the intent to be reassuring, his lip sticking to his teeth. Greg came over immediately, sitting on the arm of his husband’s chair and rubbing his shoulders. Mycroft was saved from the comfort and embarrassment by Art’s arrival.

“I had them put the soup in my thermos for Mr. Sherlock. When you’ve been ill, you’ve got to have things boiling hot; well, I do anyway. I had the heat on in the car full blast so the rest should suit as well.”

“Stay and eat with us?” John asked, patting Sherlock awake.

“Thank you but no. I’ve got my own bit down in the car and a movie on my Ipod that’s just to the best part.”

As Mycroft and Greg spread the contents of the bag on the coffee table, John went to the kitchen and returned with an Asian soup bowl and spoon in an intricate floral design. He poured half the soup from the thermos into it and then recapped the thermos tightly. Sherlock curled his long, pretty fingers around the bowl and seemed to go into a meditative state as he sipped at the soup. He was as beautiful and delicate as the flowers painted on the bowl, and Mycroft’s heart came up into his throat, fortunately preventing him from speaking those words aloud.

Once Sherlock was seen to with twin glasses of water and ginger ale and his own carton of rice, John gave himself up to his serving of ribs in plum sauce with nearly sexual sounds of ecstasy. Mycroft picked at his moo goo gai pan, continuing to watch the play called A Quiet Evening with Friends. He loved them, all three, and the feelings were so large and strange that he couldn’t seem to do ordinary things like eat and drink and talk.

Sadness shot through him, and he felt as if his cheeks had been slapped. It was wrong, horribly wrong and he felt so ashamed of himself. Why couldn’t he be like other people and be happy? He had a life anyone would envy, wealth and power and love. A gorgeous husband, friends, an all consuming hobby. This evening his brother had shown his gratitude by composing a brilliant
piece of music and performing it in front of the city’s best citizens. His husband had showered him with gifts and attention for an entire week. He had the most sweet and loving mother-in-law that anybody could wish for and a bright witty staff. Even so, Mycroft Holmes was a bloody ingrate.

Sherlock was in a room with him, eating a meal with him, and not sniping. There had been no comments about his weight or his food choices. In fact, there had been none of that since the stabbing. Sherlock had been a difficult patient, stroppy and uncooperative and sometimes lashing out at John, but he had left his brother alone.

This was it, what Mycroft had waited for. But it wasn’t enough. This civility was worse than active hatred. The sneering and the verbal attacks meant that Sherlock still cared, that perhaps he was fighting against kinder feelings that lingered for poor old ‘Mycoff.’ These half measures hurt like turning back fifty yards from the summit. Mycroft wanted hugs and shared memories and inside jokes, but he was always going to be the one who told Sherlock that his father was dead. Some things were unforgivable.

Sherlock had fulfilled the obligation for the blood with the evening’s performance. The score had been evened, the courtesy would fade over time, and the insults would resume. John would scold and Greg would threaten, but it would only drive the disdain deeper. Mycroft glanced up to find all eyes on him, or rather his carton of food. His hand was making stabbing motions with the chopsticks and from the looks of the remains, had been for some time.

“It’s dead, Mycroft. Let it rest in peace.” John winked at him.

Mycroft put the carton on the coffee table and wiped his hands on the paper napkin. He waited for some crack about himself and food, but Sherlock was spooning the last of his soup from the pretty bowl, completely absorbed in the steam. Greg tipped up his bottle of lager to drain the last drop and began gathering up the detritus of their takeaway feast, and Mycroft took the empty thermos to rinse out for Art. Greg got the whole mess into the kitchen trash and lifted the bag out, twirling it to tie it off. He whispered, “Alright, love? Making any progress on Michael’s dilemma?”

Greg had thought he was in the village when he’d gone quiet. A nice excuse. “Not yet. It’s sticky.”

“You’ll have some time in the car tomorrow. I’ll be quiet as a mouse, focused on the drive. We should leave now, yeah? Sherlock must be exhausted from being so nice.”

They went back into the other room, where Sherlock was blinking owlishly as John checked his forehead for fever. “It’s just the steam from the soup, John. I’m fine.”

“You will be.” John kissed his cheek.

Greg put his arm around Mycroft while his other hand swung the bag of trash slightly. “We’ll be off now. It’s a long hard road to the inlaws.”

“Gigi is absolutely lovely.”

“And my dad is conspicuous for lack of mention.”

“Your dad has been far kinder since the trip to Italy. We’ll find a topic of conversation we can both embrace one of these days.”

“Anyway, an early morning and a long drive after a week of very trying celebrations. John, I’ve enjoyed the footie chat.”

“I’ll see you out.”
John looked over at Sherlock for permission before getting off the couch. He reached for the trash.

“No, I’ve got it. No sense in you having to get your socks on.”

John’s toes curled slightly at the reference to their bareness.

Greg blew out a breath and then stuck out a hand. “Sherlock, hope tomorrow is pain free.”

Sherlock shook his hand. “Greg, it’s time for me to have cases again now that my time as a composer is through.”

“If you are going to make music as fine as this evening’s, you’d better keep at it.”

Sherlock actually blushed at the compliment. “Still, if I don’t get some challenge soon, I’m not responsible.”

“He’s probably ready, Greg, but if he’s not, I am.” John patted his husband’s shoulder.

Mycroft could see Sherlock leaning into the touch. He was focused on the way John’s fingers knew how to caress with just the right amount of pressure so he missed the first movement. Then Sherlock’s hand was out. “Mycroft, thank you for the benefit. It was exactly what I wanted.”

“You were right about it being successful. I’m pleased.” And Mycroft shook his brother’s hand, desperate that it go on the proper amount of time for Sherlock’s comfort. He resisted the urge to rub his thumb across the thin fingers.

Then they were down the stairs and in the hall and the night of truce was over far too soon. John hugged Greg and then turned to Mycroft, and when Mycroft had a little trouble letting go, John was too much of a gentleman to mention it.

“Go on now,” Greg said at the door. “Get back to him. He’ll crumple now that we’ve gone.”

When John closed the door, Mycroft stood on the stoop like a dolt, still back in the chair upstairs, watching his brother’s happiness.

Greg held out his hand for the thermos. “Here, I’ll give that to Art after I chuck this in the bin.”

It was only two steps from the flat door to the car but long enough for the wind to slice across his neck. He sunk into the seat, chills running up and down his back, but he tried to hide the shivers from Greg as well as a weariness so profound that he wasn’t sure he would be able to move when they reached home.

He wanted the release of weeping and called up a memory of a time when his nanny had a migraine and his mother had a garden party and he had been exiled to the kitchen where Cook had let him make his own little biscuits from dough with darling little cutters. When they came out of the oven, she put them on the cooling rack before him but warned him not to touch. She went to get his milk, and he had to touch them. They were so pretty from the egg that she had brushed on them, the prettiest thing he had ever made. It took awhile before the heat became pain.

Then she was snatching his finger back and spreading it with butter. He whimpered and when she didn’t scold him for it as Nanny did or tell him that he got what he deserved for disobeying, the tears spilled over at her kindness. “There now, luv,” she’d said, “It’s my fault. They was too tempting for you as I should have known.”

She picked him up and rested him against her ample bosom, his legs sneaking around until she moved them to wrap around her. Something about being hugged to a warm soft body for the first
time triggered him to weep, sobbing his heart out into her apron as she rubbed his back and hummed to him as if there wasn’t dinner to prepare. When he was empty, she had kissed his scorched finger and held him on her lap, feeding him bites of biscuit.

He would pay any amount of money to be able to cry on Greg’s shoulder in that way, but it was another thing that was never going to happen. While he was rubbing at his dry, sore eyes, Greg climbed in beside him, and the car eased forward.

“We’ll be able to claim our coats later?” Greg asked, rubbing his hands together before reaching to the other seat to get the blanket Sherlock had used.

Mycroft nodded, afraid that speaking would spill out ungrateful words.

Greg pulled the blanket over them both. “You’ve been awfully quiet, love. What’s wrong?”

If he said he was tired, Greg would feel guilty about the week of festivities. If he said he was sad, he would show Greg what a malcontent he was. “The takeaway was a little rich.”

Greg reached in the compartment between his legs and got out the bottle of Maalox tablets. “Might as well put these in my car for the trip. Mum’s food will be delicious and absolutely unhealthy.”

Mycroft shook one out. He wouldn’t be able to manage his usual dosage around the lump in his throat.

“Now, I’ll ask you again. What’s wrong?”

Guilt, grief, shame, unworthiness, fear, and longing sat heavier in his stomach than the greasy takeaway. “I can’t talk about it.”

“If you can talk about it, you won’t need the chalk pills.”

Greg was right, but it was all swirling around his head and the danger of saying something hurtful loomed large. “I will tell you, but not tonight, please? I need to sort things in my mind first. I need to think.”

“Can you do that in my arms?”

Mycroft scooted closer and Greg tucked the blanket tighter around him before pulling him in. Greg kissed his hair several times while his thumb rubbed along the back of Mycroft’s neck. While weeping was not an option, he could rest his head on a strong shoulder and draw comfort.

“Don’t overthink, love. Sometimes we make things too complicated.”

Suddenly Mycroft knew how to help Michael over the hump. He gasped in surprise because it really was simple. “You’ve done it, Greg. I know what’s next for Michael.”

“That’s me, accidentally brilliant.”

“Hush, you don’t let me talk that way.”

“But you really believe bad things about yourself. I on the other hand have self esteem that is far too high.”

Mycroft’s mind was working at the dialogue for the village scene, and he lost the thread of what they were talking about.
“Writing in your head?”

“Mmm, yes, it’s coming in waves.”

“I’ll pipe down then. To the village.”

Greg sat there in silent support, rubbing Mycroft’s back until they reached home. Art stopped them with a question. “May I make a suggestion, Mr. Holmes?”

“Of course.”

“You both look knackered. I wish you’d let me drive you tomorrow. I got very fond of the Lestrades on our trip to Italy, and it would be nice to see them again. Ginny will give me tea and then I can go on to my sister’s. She’ll be glad of a visit.”

“If it’s something you truly want, Art, I’ll see that you’re well compensated. Gigi has been wanting to have the long black car in front of her house. You won’t mind being a passenger instead of a driver, will you, Greg?”

“Not at all. It’s decent of you, Art, to give up your weekend after so much over time this week.”

“Glad to do it for both of you. Glad to have the work. See you bright and early then.”

Mycroft turned to Greg. “Would you mind if I made some notes about the scene before I come to bed?”

“Go on. I’ll leave a note for Morris and maybe he can make us a breakfast takeaway. Mum will be so surprised if we get there early.”

Mycroft kissed Greg lightly on the lips, already more in the village than his own body. The glow of the laptop became the glow of lamplight, and Graham was in the doorway of the vicar’s bedroom. Michael’s deterioration from internal turmoil had become obvious outwardly after several weeks of prayer and too much fasting.

"Michael, I know it’s awkward, but if I can’t be your friend any longer, I am still your doctor and responsible for your health the same as any other villager. You’re pale and drawn, and I can’t help but wonder if you are hurting yourself again.”

“And my word won’t do.” Michael was resigned.

“I’ll stand here in the doorway, no touching. The work of a minute. Then you can get on with your evening.”

Michael turned his back and began unbuttoning his shirt. Graham’s heart pounded and his mouth was dry and tasted metallic. As Michael removed his shirt and then his vest, the weight loss was revealed as far worse than Graham had feared. Ribs protruded and some muscle had been eroded, but there were no cuts or burns.

With a voice that grated, Graham said, “And your trousers.”

Michael’s movements were jerky with anger or embarrassment. With a swish the trousers were around Michael’s ankles and a blush crept across the parts of him not hidden by thick red hair.

“If you can pull the legs of your pants up, I’ll be able to see your thighs.”

There were a few scars but no new wounds. “And now your bum, just turn and pull them down. I
won’t make you strip completely.”

Michael’s hands shook and the blush turned deep red, blotchy and pervasive as he showed pale white skin unmarred by new wounds.

Graham struggled for the correct words. “I’m very glad you aren’t injuring yourself, but your weight is of grave concern. Starving yourself is just a different form of self punishment. I’ll wager you’ve lost two stone when you couldn’t spare a pound. My god, man, you don’t eat or sleep and keep on with helping the villagers as if you’re well.”

“I have to keep busy or I’ll go mad.”

“If I could take it back, I would. I never intended to tell you. It burst out of me in a weak moment and you are paying the price. Seems I’ll have to leave the village so that you can have some peace.”

“No!”

“I won’t watch you die of starvation. It’s probably what I deserve but I can’t do it.”

“If I have a little more time, I’ll find a way through. I need time to think and to pray and it will get better, you’ll see.”

“It’s amazing you’ve made it this far. Are you eating anything at all?”

“I don’t mean to deprive myself, Graham, I swear it. I try to eat but I’m not hungry. The food sticks in my throat.” He was so young and small standing in the middle of the room trying to get his trousers back up, his hair mussed with that one curl drooping down over his forehead.

Then Graham’s mind cleared and he spoke as an older, wiser man and not as a spurned lover. “You’re trying to sort out your whole life before you live it, lad. That always comes to madness. ‘Sufficient unto the day is the trouble thereof,’ I think your Bible says.”

“The book of Matthew, chapter six.”

“And somewhere around in the gospels, he also said that the truth will set you free. So what is required of you in this day, this moment, but to walk across this room and speak the truth?”

He saw Michael start to tremble and the vest dropped from his grasp. He saw Michael walking toward him, palms outward, head down. But he never expected the words that came so loudly in spite of the broken voice as if the long weeks of hurt on both sides had never happened, and they were standing on the grass in the moonlight. “I’m in love with you too, Graham.”

Graham didn’t mean to wait; he was not about retribution at all. But he had dreamed about this moment and then felt the dream die inside him. It could not be as simple as it suddenly was. Then he was folding Michael against his chest and wrapping his arms around the boy’s whippet thin body, a body wracked with tremors that shook them both.

He rocked him, patting the bare skin of Michael’s scarred back lightly. He held a treasure so fragile.

Michael’s voice was muffled by his shirt front which diminished the bravado. “I guess I’m going to hell.”

“You’ve had your hell for months now. You’ve paid long enough.”
With a great sigh, Michael surrendered to his feelings completely and sagged against Graham who squeezed him even tighter. “What happens to us now?”

Even in Graham’s arms, he was still worrying.

“You put on your night clothes and dressing gown, and I go build up the fire in your study and cobble together some kind of supper for you.”

“What is required for this hour?”

“That’s right. And I’m requiring you to eat something. I think you’ll find that lump in your throat is gone.”

Graham built a shockingly large fire in the study. There weren’t going to be any half measures for his lad. He pulled the couch close to the blaze. Michael came in, the dressing gown capacious over his wasted frame. Graham tucked him up in a blanket and went to the pantry in search of food.

Mycroft glanced up at the clock and winced that ninety minutes had gone by. He emailed the document to himself and shut the computer down for the night. He probably wouldn’t have any writing time for the remainder of the weekend, but he had left his people in a good place.

Greg lay on the bed fast asleep, naked with a book in one hand and his cock in the other. His reading glasses were askew. Mycroft removed them, put them on the night table, and eased the book away. He wondered what had prompted a wank that Greg was too tired to finish. It was an updated procedural manual. Maybe tomorrow would reveal what could possibly have been arousing in its pages.

He rolled Greg toward the edge so he could get him under the duvet. “Time for sex?” Greg mumbled, his forehead wrinkling when he realized his cock was limp.

“Time for sleep, baby,” Mycroft said, pulling the covers up.

He stood at the foot of the bed and began shedding his formal wear, thinking of poor Michael, stripped bare before Graham, body and soul. The sadness and confusion seeped back in, but Mycroft pushed it away to think more about his village and then about the weekend and traveling to someplace where he was planned for and wanted.

Greg rolled toward him when he got under the covers. His ‘session’ must have carried into his dreams for he grabbed Mycroft’s cock instead of his own and gave it a few pulls before he went into deeper sleep. He drooled a little on Mycroft’s chest until thoughts of Gigi’s hugs took Mycroft to peaceful dreams.

The next morning, they settled back in the plush seats of the car after finishing Morris’ portable breakfast of mini fry up bowls and cinnamon orange scones.

“Can I cuddle with your pressie?” Greg asked, already nuzzling the Fair Isle slipover in heather blues and grays.

“If you tell me what you were wanking to last night in your Yard manual.”

“Nothing. I always get horny when I study.”

“Let’s take a course together.”

“Human sexuality?”
“Cake decorating?”

“Macrame? May the ugliest hobby of all time rest in peace.”

“Indeed.” Mycroft had no idea what macramé was but he knew when Greg’s tone meant he had said something clever.

“So you owe me a bed time story. What happened with Graham and Michael?”

“Graham needed to make sure he wasn’t hurting himself again.”

“So nudity was required. Did Graham cover his naked flesh with kisses until he succumbed?”

“No that would be totally out of character. He told Michael to stop borrowing trouble and live in the moment. What is required of you in this moment?”

“And then Michael covered Graham in kisses?”

“What’s this obsession with kisses? Am I not giving you enough?”

Greg held his lips up in a pout and Mycroft kissed them, ruffling Greg’s wild hair to new heights.

“Michael confessed his love.”

“So all is well in the village? Happily ever after?”

“For now.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“I’ve got pages of connecting material that I skipped over last night to get to the declaration scene so we can leave them happy for quite awhile.”

“You don’t sound all that happy about writing the connecting stuff.”

“No but it has to be done or it’s perils of Pauline with them falling from one tragedy to the next.”

“Write what you want. It’s a bloody hobby.”

“Yes, but I want to do it properly.”

“It’s your birthday, love. Write what you want.”

Then Greg nuzzled further into Mycroft’s slipover until he wondered if he should remove it and let Greg have his way with it. But soon Greg was heavy with sleep and did not stir when Mycroft took out his Ipad. Thankful for his ability to type rapidly one handed with either hand, not for masturbatory reasons but because of various sprains and breaks over the years, Mycroft began to type the remaining bits of the scene. Graham feeding Michael and then cuddling him in front of the fire.

Michael’s head lay heavy on Graham’s shoulder until finally Graham moved him to a pillow on his lap. He stayed awake all night long, thankful to finally have his boy in his arms. Michael’s hell was over, and Graham’s heaven had begun.

When the clock struck five, he eased himself out from under Michael’s sweet body, heavy with sleep.
“Graham, did you stay the night?”

“I needed to make sure you finally rested.”

“Like a stone.”

“You’ve got awhile longer before Mother comes over to start your breakfast. I’ll build up the fire before I go.”

Graham stirred the coals and added wood until the room was toasty. Michael was already dozing. Graham kissed his forehead. “Sleep well, sweetheart,” he whispered.

Out in the brisk air, his lungs contracted painfully and he hurried toward home. With his mind on how beautiful Michael’s flushed face had been in sleep, he was startled out of his wits by a figure stepping from the shadows of the hedge.

“Hello, Graham,” Sherman Lock said with a sneer.

Graham had borne the use of his Christian name as one of the lesser evils of disrespect from the village brat. Truth be told, he’d been insufferable since his advances to Graham had been gently rebuffed.

“Is the vicar ill?”

“Yes, he’s overdone again, working too hard for the village and not eating or sleeping properly.”

“I’m sure your presence the whole night through was a great comfort to him, Graham.”

Mycroft shivered at what his own fingers had typed. He did not want to hurt his people even a little, but he had carried the story around far too long to deviate from his outline. He was trying to write something true, and real life seldom came with a sky that rained sweets and biscuits.

But if there was ever a happy place, it was the Lestrades, and Mycroft couldn’t wait to have a hug and a kiss from Gigi and to catch up on all the news of her friends. This visit, he had some good things to share as well.

GRACE

Mycroft’s every sense was enveloped in delight. Gigi’s soft, warm jumper and the firm hug that pressed him against her pillowy body. Her powdery scent mixed with the smell of baking and something savory and promising. Her voice husky with tears of surprise, saying his name over and over, and her sparkling smile so like Greg’s.

Both of her boys got great smacking kisses and after she had hugged Art too for bringing them home, they settled around the kitchen table for a cuppa but she couldn’t stop patting Mycroft, her eyes shining. “I didn’t think I could bear to wait another hour, but then I didn’t have to. I’ve got flannel sheets on because we keep the house cold at night, and I’ve baked some special things.”

Gigi squeezed her Myc’s hand. “So much to talk about, love. It’s been a good week?”

Mycroft nodded, overwhelmed by being wanted and planned for.

“You’re the son I’ve always dreamed of, Mycie.”
“Hey now, I see where that puts me,” but Greg was laughing while he said it and leaned over to kiss Mycroft’s cheek.

It was nearly too much love, and Mycroft had that feeling again of not knowing how to be when he had everything he had dreamed of. He very much wanted to climb into Gigi’s lap and have her feed him bits of biscuit. Perhaps he could scorch his fingers.

Art was eager to be on his way so they unloaded the luggage and packages. Mycroft had bought the biggest fanciest box of chocolates he could find as well as a huge seasonal bouquet of autumn flowers, a fruit basket, and a case of artisanal cheeses. Morris had sent a cake and a casserole. “He thinks I can’t feed you proper.”

“No, he said this was a recipe you wanted and he couldn’t remember the right proportions while you were in Italy so he’s experimented with it and written it down for you.”

“He could have just emailed.”

Mycroft grinned, actually grinned without his face feeling stiff or his teeth sticking to his lip. Gigi had become a monster emailer after he sent her the Ipad. She could be at the kitchen table and chat with her friends over a cup and look up gossip about the royals, recipes, and emails from Mycroft with a swipe of her finger. She had knitted a cozy for it to take the shine off the new, but he didn’t mind as long as he got the chain letters and cautionary forwards and long chatty emails about her day. He knew her friends better than he knew his own staff. Still they rang each other every weekend, but that was nothing to being in person and getting hugs and little pats on his arm and gushing compliments.

The house quickly divided into two camps. At the enormous lunch of shepherd’s pie, Morris’ casserole, and a huge green salad with home baked croutons, Rich and Greg talked over his latest case and Myc and Gigi talked over Mabel Clevenger’s latest hair color. After a piece of birthday cake large enough to render Mycroft bilious from overindulgence, he and Gigi puttered about the kitchen, looking at all of the food that he had brought and she had prepared, planning their next meal even though he could barely move. They companionably washed dishes, taking forever because they both talked with their hands. The men as Mycroft called them too, had disappeared to the lounge to watch footie.

“Fine by me, I can have you all to myself. Now tell, from the beginning, I know there have been pressies every day, but Greg didn’t have time to itemize.”

She hung up the tea towel and poured herself a fresh cup before settling at the scrubbed table, propped on her elbows and ready for a long chat.

“This slipover is Greg’s favorite present for me. He likes it for cuddles. That’s today’s.”

“One of today’s,” Gigi said, trying to be subtle and failing charmingly.

“Last night was a picture of Greg in formal wear. Lovely, I’ll get you a copy.”

“The girls will be pea green with envy. I’m not even biased to say that he’s the handsomest of all the boys on the street, and now I’ve got another pretty son, well they hate me and I can’t be bothered.”

Mycroft blushed like a girl and pulled the conversation back to gift inventory. He omitted the portfolio of boudoir photos that had come with the formal portrait. The poses Greg had pulled were still the stuff of dripping dreams. Firelight and bear skin rug and strategically placed fruit and crawling across the floor to straddle a chair and unbuttoned jeans sans pants and a not so
strategically placed book and reading glasses and a provocative duo with Bruce the bear, making a
guest appearance. They were spicy, sweet, sexy and searing by turns. Knowing Greg’s hidden
shyness about nudity outside the bedroom, Mycroft was touched by the effort.

“You don’t have to tell me the really naughty bits, love. Just the high points.”

Mycroft had been daydreaming again. Gigi refreshed his tea. “Let’s see, the party was a present
from Greg and Morris. A swanky affair but I told you how we ended the night with family supper
in the kitchen. Greg was my rock that night; I hadn’t entertained in years.”

“It’s your turn to go around to their houses now; drink up their fine wines and eat their cheese.”

“I suppose so. We had dinner with our musician friends, and so jazz was the theme of the evening
and we ate and danced at a jazz club and Greg got me this huge documentary series about jazz for
us to watch in the long winter evenings.”

“Oh that will be nice if Greggie can keep his mind on the program and not maul you like a cat
among pigeons.”

Mycroft resigned himself to being ruddy for the entire visit. Gigi was such a mix of naïve and
sweet and saucy and horny that he never knew what might come flying out of that pert little
mouth.

“Well then, armfuls of flowers on Monday, a grouping for my office and one for our bedroom.
Peaches and creams and deep oranges and burgundys.”

“Your colors.”

“Yes, that’s what he said, but I look in the mirror and see paste and carrots.”

“Oh Mycie, you have no earthly clue how dashing you are, mysterious and aloof, but then when
that smile breaks through, it melts me. I’ve got to hug you again.”

He reached his arms up and she squeezed him tight. “Welcome home, love.”

There was nothing he could slip past the huge lump in his throat which he attributed to acid reflux.

“And now you shall have your gift from me if I can pry our wayward husbands away from the
telly.”

Greg had regressed and it was only his graying hair that separated him from any slouching
seventeen year old as he lay on the swaybacked sofa while Rich sat in his man throne, a bit listed
to one side for periodic emissions.

“Come away a minute, Greggie. I can’t wait any longer to give Mycie his present.”

Greg gave a heavy sigh and lunged off the sofa. “Alright then, Mum.”

“Morris overnighted it and even though the wrappings were so pretty, I had to open it and look at
it.”

“You’ll be telling him before he gets it unwrapped.”

Gigi went to the closet and Rich came out to switch on the kettle. “Copper’s tea, Greg?”

“Yeah, it will save me cleaning my teeth.”
Gigi returned with a large rectangular box, the sort that a coat might come in. Mycroft hated opening presents, hated the expectation of having a particular reaction. He feared some kind of homemade item of clothing, a cardigan or dressing gown in garish colors. Still, if Morris had sent it, then he might have aided Gigi in the choosing although Morris knitted too.

Mycroft’s hands shook as he carefully loosened the paper. Gigi allowed this for all of ninety seconds before she started ripping it for him. “I’ve waited months, love. You’ve got to get on with it.”

The white box that was clearly a garment box was taped on all four sides, but after loosening three sides and taking a careful breath, Mycroft opened the box to reveal Greg’s quilt. “I don’t understand, Gigi. This is Greg’s.”

“He asked my permission. He wants you to have it.”

“Greg? This is your special heirloom. You can’t give it away.”

Greg was beaming. “I’m not giving it away. It’s still in the family. You appreciate it as a treasure.”

“Every Lestrade baby gets a quilt as a welcome to this family. You are the biggest of the babies we’ve welcomed, but the biggest joy as well.”

“Morris took it to an archivist and had all of the seams checked and the whole thing cleaned.”

“It’s better than new, Greggie. They did a fine job. Morris said they took a photo of it as an example of home arts.”

Mycroft let the talk float around him as he stroked his favorite squares. Greg had wrapped him in this quilt often when they were in the study and watching telly, but Mycroft had never let him use it casually because it was irreplaceable. “Thank you, Gigi and Greggie. I mean, Greg.”

Greg wrapped an arm around his shoulders and kissed the top of his head. “I wanted my baby to have a special blanket.”

It was not an easy thing for Greg to show affection in front of his father, and so the words meant a great deal to Mycroft, almost as much as the quilt. Rich left the room, and Mycroft’s lunch knocked against his navel.

Then Rich returned with a wrapped gift the same size as the one Mycroft had just opened. “This is the one that I’m excited about,” he said, putting the box on the table in front of Greg.

Greg looked at both his mother and father before tearing off the paper. “Greggie don’t hesitate when he’s after something,” Rich said with a wink.

In the box was another quilt of the same style. “You gave up yours for your husband. I wanted you to have your own again, love,” Gigi said.

“Help me hold it up, Myc,” Rich said, removing the quilt from the box.

Greg’s eyes were huge when Rich and Mycroft each took a corner, Mycroft’s side a few inches higher.

“Morris helped me the most with the fabrics but he also put me in touch with Lady Holmes’ housekeeper who sent several things. She wrote down for me what they were in case Mycie had forgotten.”
Then squares began to jump out at Mycroft. Swatches from the drapes in the library, the tapestry from the dining room chairs, the tea towels that Cook used, his school tie. Greg’s quilt was made from pieces of Mycroft’s life.

“Look, Mycroft, it’s that shirt I love and here’s a knitted one like your scarf. That’s Morris’ doings. Now you’ve got my life and I’ve got yours.” Then Greg’s voice broke and he was crying in front of his dad, and Mycroft felt anxiety cut sharply through his delight in the gift.

But it was alright because Richard Lestrade was snuffling a bit. “She sat here at the table every night for hours. When you get our age, the eyes and the hands are the first things to go. But she never whinged about it, not once.”

Mycroft was left holding the quilt alone because Greg was hugging his dad, and it did not end quickly with three sharp pats. Then both men went over to kiss Gigi, and she had to hug each of them as Mycroft folded the quilt over his arm and continued looking at the squares. But then he was surrounded by Lestrades, arms around him and kisses on both cheeks.

“Let’s spread it out on the table so we can look. I made a chart of it for when you get it home, but I’d like to show you.”

Rich made the tarry brew the thickness of treacle called copper’s tea, and Mycroft endeared himself by asking for a cup. Greg was still wiping at his eyes when they found a long narrow piece that was Mycroft’s christening gown and another with wee ducks on it. “This was a receiving blanket you came home from hospital in.”

“The nursery was Beatrix Potter themed. Jemima Puddleduck, I think her duck was called.”

“Yes, but the ones on this flannel are just your standard ducks for baby.”

Greg pulled him into another hug. “You were such a dear little thing with your red curls and plump cheeks.”

Rich had wandered back to the telly, but they could hear him blowing his nose over the sounds of footie.

Gigi whispered, “He helped me cut and pin sometimes but he’ll deny it if you ask. He’s right proud of it and knows which bits are his.”

“This is the best surprise ever, Mummy. You and Morris are a dangerous pair.”

“We had us a time in Italy, that’s for certain. Oh, here’s the fabric from the cushions at the villa on the outdoor furniture.”

Again Mycroft was transported to private thoughts of long, slow fucks in the steamy afternoon. He sighed and then looked up to find Greg and Gigi staring at him with the same knowing look. He blushed, the tally mounting of times he was going to be embarrassed during the visit.

Then Gigi was whispering, “Your dad wants to take you both down to his local. He’ll be offhand about it and you do the same, but it’s important to him.”

“But you’ll be on your own, Mum.”

“Never you mind that. I’ll make our supper while you’re gone and check my email and have some chocolate. Mycie has me set up with plenty of lovely treats. Now, you both go in the lounge and watch a bit of footie and he’ll ask. He’s been planning it for days. Bragging about his boy down there at the old coot’s club.”
Mycroft followed Greg into the lounge and lowered himself to the sofa, feeling like his arse rested on the floor. After several minutes of three men staring at a screen, Rich asked, “Fancy a pint, Greg?”

“Sure, Dad.”

“Myc, you’re welcome if you can tear yourself away from my wife.”

Greg’s shout of laughter ameliorated Mycroft’s terror. They put on coats and went out to the Lestrade’s car. Greg climbed in back, wedging himself in and leaving Mycroft to the seat of fear. But they did not talk in the car; a cone of silence had lowered. Rich stared straight ahead and drove slightly below the posted speed. It was the ride that would not end.

At the pub, there was a similar dearth of words in the beginning. Rich said, “You remember Greg and this is his partner Myc.”

Rich ordered three pints without consulting his guests. Mycroft dutifully drank his down, keeping pace with Greg. When no inquisition was forthcoming, he began to relax. It was the standard local with all the amenities and dubious décor. Mycroft was not working so he didn’t have to be watching everything on multiple levels. His time with Greg’s team stood him in good stead. When the stories began, he was genuinely interested.

Now that he was a writer, he liked hearing other people’s stories, and speech patterns were important for developing his writer’s ear. Here was another slice of life. He found again that the quickest way to be liked was to listen carefully and asks questions to prove his interest. These were men that had worked together and drank together for years. A new audience was rare. The wry understatement was Mycroft’s favorite form of humor and these old coppers and workmen were replete with underplaying.

Soon Mycroft didn’t have to monitor or edit himself at all, and he couldn’t have spoken or even misspoke if he wanted to. They were clamoring to tell him tales of woe, romance, and adventure. Old cases and stories of mates that were gone and legendary perpetrators. Mycroft tucked into his second pint which one of the men wanted to buy him. He got patted on the back when he choked on a pretzel, and he was welcomed back to the table with chorus of his name when he visited the Gents.

Finally Greg put in an oar. “You’ve just told the best writer in the country your stories, mates. I hope you don’t mind seeing bits of it in a novel in the next year or two.”

“Don’t take the piss with your elders, boy,” Stumpy Edwards said.

“Myc, you crafty bastard. Are you wearing a wire?” Harold Bryant ran a hand down Mycroft’s chest under Greg’s watchful eye.

“Nothing published yet. Not to worry.” Mycroft was blushing for the millionth time and glad of the dim pub lighting.

“What are you writing about?” Clint Stinson wanted to know.

“Turn of the century village life. A new vicar comes to the parish and stirs things up.”

“Turn of the century. You’ll have to come back and interview Stump over there. He lived it.”

“You were shaving before I was born, ya daft prick.”

“Daft but still able and wishing you the same.”
“You and the horse you rode in on.”

Then Harold belched violently enough to bring on a coughing jag. This seemed to be a common occurrence and prompted Rich to check his watch. “Best get home to your mum, Greg. She’ll have your tea ready.”

“I’m still full from lunch. I don’t know where I’ll put it.”

“How about in that third leg of yours?”

“You dirty old man.”

“According to Rich, the Lestrades are blessed beyond measure.”

“Didn’t we use the same changing rooms for years? He does not lie.”

“Get your man out in the air, Greg. He looks a bit flushed.”

A round of hand shaking and then Mycroft was out in the brisk air and glad of it. Not a word was spoken on the long ride home, but he ran back over the compliments he had received.

“Bring your man back any time, Greg. He appreciates a good story.”

“You’re a decent chap, listening to an old man’s ramblings.”

“Next time you visit, you can tell us one of your stories.”

Once they pulled up in front of the house, the spell was broken and Greg and his dad talked again. Mycroft would have to ask Greg later why there was a code and cone of silence in the car.

Gigi had prepared another large spread in buffet style, and the word ‘trough’ came to Mycroft’s mind. But because it was all on the sideboard for them to pick and choose, he was able to serve himself small amounts of each dish and keep his intake at a comfortable level.

Greg had been discreet at the pub so when they sat down with their full plates, Greg reached for Mycroft’s hand and gave it three squeezes. After answering with four, Mycroft felt himself unwind. He had survived the majority of the day without offending anyone or getting an emergency summons from the ministry.

Another slice of birthday cake for afters tipped him over into uncomfortably full but he couldn’t resist the buttercream frosting. He helped his mum-in-law clean up, and this time Greg stayed in the kitchen and helped too. It was companionable and safe. A rustling of newspaper in the other room let Mycroft know that Rich was nearby and content.

When the kitchen was clean, Mycroft was invited to look at Rich’s sizable collection of holiday photos while Greg talked to his mum and they looked over the quilt again. He tried to imagine Mummy doing any of those things and smiled to himself. This was a world that Mummy would never be a part of, and so it was a better world than any he had encountered before.

It wasn’t quite ten when Greg’s parents began bedtime rituals, checking doors and turning out lights. “You boys can stay up as long as you like.”

“I doubt it, Mum. We’ve had a busy week and little sleep.”

“You won’t wake us. You know how Dad snores.”
“And you don’t, Ginny? I dreamed I worked in a lumberyard the other night.”

Soon Greg and Mycroft were in the guest room, which consisted of a standard bed, a chest of drawers and one tiny night table with lamp. They had to take turns unpacking their overnight cases and Greg went to the loo to change into his pajamas.

When Greg came back in a vest and sleep pants looking dishy, Mycroft asked the burning question. “Why don’t you and your dad talk in the car?”

“What?”

“It was total silence as if the car was bugged or something.”

Greg giggled, then he lay on the bed and guffawed.

“Hush, you’ll wake them.”

Greg was up and out of the room. “Hey, Dad. My wants to know why we don’t talk in the car.”

Rich was up and blinking owlishly in vest, sagging boxers, and black socks to nearly his knees. Gigi appeared a second later, hair wrapped in a scarf and a voluminous plaid nightgown buttoned to her chin.

“When Greggie was small, it was his mum and our two girls in the car with us. We couldn’t get a word in. By the time he was old enough to talk, he’d got out of the habit. I think he was six when he says to me, ‘Girls talk. Men ride.’ And that’s how we’ve done it all these years.”

“I do not talk all the time in the car, Richard.”

“No, sometimes you snore.”

“I do not.”

“You ask Art when he comes back tomorrow who snored all the way to that vineyard in Italy.”

Richard got a plaid elbow in his gut, and Greg led Mycroft back to the guest room. Greg climbed in on the new flannel sheets, a big pattern of blue cabbage roses. “Best get in, love. Dad will have the heat cranked down and in an hour, you really would be the Iceman.”

Mycroft slipped in, glad he had worn his silk pajamas since his flannel ones would have glued him to the bed. Flannel on flannel, an effective detention. Greg’s hand quested beneath the silk. “Not on the new sheets, Greggie. Have some self control.”

Then he rolled over to face his husband. “Thank you for giving me my quilt. I’m so glad that you got a new one. Were you surprised?”

“Completely.”

“I like that you got a present after a week of giving them.”

“You’re my best present, My. I was so proud of you at the pub today. I never thought Dad would want to take us there, but you did so well.”

They snogged awhile, enjoying kissing and touching that led nowhere but sleep. Soon Greg had drifted off, and Mycroft was left alone. After an hour of churning thoughts and trying to sync his breathing to Greg’s snores, Mycroft gave up. Feeling in the dark for his dressing gown, he got the belt tangled up which inevitably led to wrapping his toes around the leg of the bed. Doubled over
in pain, he became aware of an icy draft sneaking down the back of his neck and the V neck of the dressing gown and pajamas.

Mycroft recalled the elderly relatives of his youth who had kept their homes hotter than the Holmes conservatory; moss grew in their loo and his memories of them were wiggly, wavering as they did in the waves of heat. Not so for the Lestrades. He and Greg had agreed on a cool bedroom for sleeping and they kept it brisk but this was at least fifteen degrees below that. He actually felt his balls go into hiding, and he feared his nipples would poke holes in the thin silk. He had forgot to pack slippers.

Nevertheless, he escaped the tiny room. If he had to lay in silence another minute, his mind would go. He crept one tentative and shivering step at a time, wincing at every creak of the ancient wood. When he reached the lounge, he felt a huge sense of accomplishment, but turned on the lamp only to have the bulb blow out. The other one proved only a shade brighter than a birthday candle. Still it allowed him to find a blanket on the back of the sofa. His hopes were shortlived as it was a lacy pattern full of holes and worn thin by use. It was also the smallest of throws so that he could choose one half of his body to be covered.

He searched for something quiet to do to take his mind off of frostbite. He would not care to watch his hands and feet turn black. Rich’s newspaper and a sewing magazine were the only offerings. He read them both cover to cover including the advertisements, cursing his speed reading skills. Using his watch, he alternated the blanket on his head, his shoulders, and his legs at ten minute intervals. Once he was finished reading, he also put his hands in his armpits to warm them. He couldn’t feel his nose anymore, and his chattering teeth had bit his tongue several times.

The bracing cold had him more awake than ever, but he might have to go back to bed while he could still walk on numbed feet. His mind raced over the week and the village and the sadness that seemed to grow. Being with Greg’s family highlighted how distant his own family was. He had lost so much time protecting himself through isolation. Greg was getting him during his declining years.

The need to weep stole over him again. He knew he was being maudlin and ridiculous, but when he tried to go to the village or relive the happy bits of the week, his mind wouldn’t settle. For once, he had packed light and so the mild sleep aid that Greg had made him get from his doctor, the book that he was very engrossed in, and his Ipod were all at home. Then an inspiration. Where had they left the quilts?

He knew that they had not taken them to their room. They were not on the table since they had eaten the evening meal there. If only they weren’t in a closet. He doubted he would ever feel so free as to open closets in this home where he was welcome. His tingling feet took him to the kitchen and then the pantry where he found both boxes on the washing machine. He was opening his ticket to warmth when a light blinded him and he jumped.

“Mycie? Sweetheart, what are you doing?”

“I wanted my quilt.”

“Of course you did, love. Having trouble sleeping in a strange bed?”

He nodded, shame warming his cheeks. “My mind is racing. So much happened this week.”

Gigi came over to hug him and tutted. “Your hands are like ice. Come on now. I’ll make you some nice herbal tea with a splash of milk while you warm up under your new blanket.”

She led him to the sofa and tucked both quilts around him.
“But Greg should use his first.”

“Greg’s upstairs dead to the world and his husband’s distress. You cuddle under it with a clear conscience. I’m going to get you a pair of Rich’s socks. I had a load in when you came up the drive this morning.”

He was getting warm. The knitted throw was around his head like a turban and the weight of two blankets was enough. She bustled back in and lifted a corner of the blanket to put the socks on him and he let her. It was wrong and decadent, and he didn’t give a damn. She had a thick dressing gown over plaid nightgown, a hand knitted hat and slippers that looked like fur lined galoshes. She was alright.

She had turned on the radio in the kitchen the same way Morris might, and it was night music, gentle classical. He thought of Sherlock and hoped that the day had been kinder to his beleaguered body. He should have called, and if no reply, called John. The rules were all askew. Sherlock might want the inquiry even if he was hateful about it, yet Mycroft felt overwhelmed by the risk. He wished they were brothers like in other families and with Sherlock being a night owl, he could have called him for company and laughed about his predicament.

Gigi came with tea, a mug in each hand and a biscuit hanging out of her mouth. “Here my poor baby. Sip on this while you tell me all your troubles.”

He had no intention of telling her anything, but after two sips, he was unburdening himself as he had never done but to Greg. The kind brown eyes were so like Greg’s that it wasn’t so big of a departure, and she made all the right sympathetic murmurs as he explained about Sherlock and the wonderful gift of the composition and performance and the unsettled feeling afterwards of wanting closeness but being afraid to receive it.

“So there I was the way I’d always dreamed of, with my brother and my mates, accepted and welcome, but I couldn’t take it in. They were all smiles and chat, and I sat there as if it was a movie I was watching. It didn’t seem real.”

“That must have been maddening.”

“It was, but mostly I was sad because what’s the use of being loved if I can’t take it in.”

“You soak up Greggie’s love.”

“I do now but not in the beginning.”

“That’s understandable from what Greggie’s told me and what I know of your mother. She wasn’t the cuddly sort.”

He snorted. “She’s not on board with anything that musses her hair or make up.”

“It’s a wonder you were ever born.”

He ignored this dig and the visuals that came with it. “If I could only relax and join in, let things happen. But I sit there stiff and clenched like I’m waiting for the dentist.”

“You are being too hard on yourself, love. Anything new takes getting used to.”

“Greg will think I’m ungrateful. He worked so hard on my birthday week and I’ve been an ungrateful wretch about it.”

“Greg knows better than anybody how hard you’ve tried. There’s no right or wrong reaction.
There’s your feelings, and he’ll understand.”

Mycroft blew out a breath and felt the knot in his neck loosen. “I’ve got to do better for his sake, Gigi. I want to.”

“Take it slow. You’re a starving man these many years. Don’t try to eat steak and kidney pie the first day. Have a little toast and some plain rice for starters.”

“You are very wise.”

“You are the only one that thinks so.” She took his empty cup and went back to the kitchen, switching off the light as she returned. “Why don’t you go back up and wake Greggie? Tell him what you’re feeling and have a cuddle.”

“He needs his rest.”

“And so do you.”

“I’m warm and drowsy now. I think I’ll stay here.”

“Then stretch out and have a lie down, my love.”

She helped him scoot down until he was full length, bending his knees slightly so his feet wouldn’t hang over. Tucking the quilts around him, she patted his shoulder. Then squeezing herself onto the edge of the sofa, she brushed his hair back and kissed his forehead. He kept his eyes closed, trying to memorize what a mother’s kiss felt like.

The next thing he knew, she was walking back through. “Did you forget something?”

She chuckled. “It’s three hours gone by and time for a cuppa before Mass.”

He felt grubby and shy but loved enough to chance an overture. “Would you fancy an escort?”

“You’d come with me?”

“If there’s time for me to get dressed?”

“There’s time for you to shower, Myc. I’ll make us some scones, and we can have a wee bite before we’re off.”

She went to the kitchen and he could unbend himself without worry of gaping trousers or sneaking farts. It was still dark out but he felt emboldened to turn on lights and to get what he needed for a hot shower. Greg rolled over, sleep having wiped away his age, and Mycroft was again struck with how young Greg was in his childhood home. “What are you doing? Look at the time.”

“Gigi has invited me to Mass.”

“Better you than me,” Greg said, pulling the blanket over his head to block out the light.

The pipes creaked but provided a glorious torrent of piping hot water. Hot water. Pipes. Mycroft was pleased with his own pun. He put on the clothes he had worn for his first date with Greg, knowing he looked well in blue. He had happy memories of the jumper and suit coat. His hair he left damp and unshellacked; the makeup stayed in his dopp kit. Gigi’s love would shield him from judgment about his freckles.

Gigi clapped her hands with delight. “Oh my fine, pretty lad. They shall choke with envy.”
Gigi clapped her hands with delight. "Oh my fine, pretty lad. They shall choke with envy."

They ate the warm scones in companionable silence, and then with giant leatherette handbag over her arm, Gigi led him to the car. The church was not far, and she used the time to tell him about the parish. “And there’s nothing to it really, but I’ll have my prayer book for you. If the new young priest is in charge, we’ll have it all on the screen anyway. Monkey see, monkey do. I’m just so pleased to have a man with me. It’s been years.”

He did the basic courtesies, holding doors open and helping her with her coat. But she didn’t expect it so each social grace was met with effusive thanks. She got him a visitor’s kit of a thin pamphlet of prayers and a plastic rosary. He was introduced to enough white heads that he felt like a shepherd in training.

One of his missions had required a working knowledge of Catholicism and he was surprised how much came back to him. He found the rituals immensely comforting like a meditation. After a time, he began repeating the mantra that Greg had made for him. “I’ve paid long enough. I am forgiven.”

While he knew that he would never be the sort to attend church regularly (it wasn’t even feasible in his job), he took comfort in it and the touch of Gigi’s hand on his arm. He felt closer to his characters; he was in Michael’s world. The thought of interviewing an elderly vicar that might have had experiences similar to Michael’s was a new and happy item on his wish list. By the end of the service, he felt clean and inspired.

The frank admiration and open jealousy of Gigi’s friends as she held court was gratifying and healed some of his memories of malicious aunts at family gatherings. He was prince for a day, and with little effort, he had put some magic in his adopted mother’s world.

They came home to find Greg and his dad in their footie watching positions, the Sunday paper between them, the house filled with the smell of lethal strength coffee. “My good son will help me with the lunch,” Gigi said, patting Greg’s foot to take the sting out of her teasing.

Even though it was all in a joking way, Mycroft enjoyed being the favorite for a change. The adult side of himself knew that Greg needed to spend this time with his dad as unfortunately, there might not be many more chances. Rich would likely go before Gigi and then she would have all of their support and attention. But for today, he was wanted and chosen. He had pleased her, something he had yet to accomplish with his own mother.

She put a full apron on him and had him peel potatoes and carrots and set the table with the good china. There was infinite praise for his small efforts, and he basked in it. The roast had gone in right before they left for Mass and the slow cooking had filled the kitchen with wonderful smells. He noted his responses for a later village chapter where Mrs. Lester might make a roast.

Once the vegetables were all cooking in their little pots, Gigi shooed him into the lounge. “Go see your man for a bit. There’s only a little left and it’s a one woman job.”

Mycroft stood uncertainly in the doorway but Greg lifted his legs in invitation. Mycroft sunk down into the couch, putting Greg’s legs in his lap, cupping the feet that seemed cold to him. He warmed them with his hands, rubbing his thumbs deep into the soles before he realized that this might be too intimate for Rich. But the older man had eyes only for the telly.

Greg’s eyes were closed in enjoyment, and Mycroft was proud that he could make him feel good. After an entire week that had focused on Mycroft, he was eager to make the next week about pampering Greg. He was also ready for some time where the two of them could be quiet with each other. It seemed like they hadn’t had time to putter or chat aimlessly in months.

Greg sighed and moved his feet away, tucking them under Mycroft’s thigh.
“Shall I get you some socks?”

“I’ll put some on before lunch. I called John this morning.”

Mycroft was surprised by the small tinge of jealousy that still existed even when he knew without doubt that Greg was all his and John would never love anyone but Sherlock. “Is he alright?”

“Yes, he slept all day yesterday and from the sound of things, he’s going to carp all day today. I told John that we would schedule another meal with them this week. I hope that’s okay?”

“Of course, well done.” Mycroft would have another chance to work at his relaxing. He would also get to see quickly if Sherlock would return to old patterns. “We’ll have the full results of the event by Wednesday. That might be a nice reason to celebrate.”

“Depending on what comes through the pipe tomorrow, I might have the time to scare up some cold cases for Sherlock. He’ll bury his nose in a folder and be quite content while the grownups have a nice meal. Come on up and help me find some socks. You might lend me one of your special pair.”

But when they got to their little room, the first thing Greg did was wrap his arms tight around his husband, burying his face in the blue jumper. They stood awhile, swaying. “You didn’t come back to bed last night, love. Are you alright?”

“Couldn’t sleep in a strange place, but then your mum gave me tea. I think she laced it with a mild sedative and I was knocked out on the sofa.”

“Babies, puppies, and weary coppers all find their rest when she’s around so I’m not surprised.”

“I slept under your quilt as well as mine. I hope you don’t care. It was yours to use first, but I was so cold.”

“I know. The girls and I have tried all we know to get him to leave the furnace at a consistent temperature, but he can’t resist the few pounds he saves each month turning it down at night. It’s like a polar expedition.”

At that, Gigi called up the stairs that lunch was ready.

“In the car this afternoon, we’ll make some time to talk, love. We’ve spent all this time together, but I feel like we haven’t connected much.”

“That’s true. We’ll have a quiet week this week if we can.”

Greg reached up and stroked Mycroft’s cheek. “You look so beautiful in your blue with your hair all wild. Give us a kiss.”

Mycroft wanted to keep on kissing and to take Greg right there in his childhood home, but he was actually hungry enough for his stomach to rumble. After the massive portions yesterday, he hadn’t planned to eat for several days. He sat Greg on the bed and put his best cashmere socks on his pretty feet.

Lunch was good plain food, meat and vegetables perfectly seasoned. They finished Mycroft’s birthday cake for dessert and lingered at the table over tea. Rich was uncharacteristically talkative and told a charming story about Greg’s first bicycle. Mycroft asked how Rich’s friend Stumpy got his name, and that story was raucous and a bit dirty. They all laughed because Rich was laughing. Mycroft had an in joke now with his father in law, and he’d made memories to review with Gigi later.
Again, Greg and Rich wandered back to the telly while Mycroft and Gigi washed the lunch dishes. She also packed the hamper that Morris had sent with leftovers. “I know that Morris was taking the day to help Tuppy search for a flat. He won’t have had time to cook and won’t know when you’ll get there. There’s some of his casserole and my shepherd’s pie. No, don’t fuss. There’s three meals for Rich and me and we’ll grow tired of it. A little bit of roast for sandwiches and a dish of the peas and potatoes and carrots altogether. Oh and three scones from our private breakfast as well as two pieces of the cake Morris sent. As if I couldn’t bake a cake, but it is a fine one and Rich and I will enjoy the last of it.”

Art knocked at the kitchen door and was invited in for tea and a biscuit. That quickly, their visit was coming to a close. Mycroft knew that they had to come back regularly. He needed them far more than they needed him, and he didn’t want to waste anymore time. They packed their overnight bags while Art talked with his friends. Mycroft felt shaky about leaving as if he’d found a treasure that he was abandoning unguarded.

He wanted to slow things down, to change his mind and stay a little longer. He wanted to cry like a baby about saying goodbye, and his eyes and throat hurt because he couldn’t. Gigi would never know how much he cared. It was all trapped inside him. With all of them carrying something as they walked out to the car, loading was the work of a minute. Then it was all over but the hugging.

The Lestrades shook hands with Art, Gigi presenting him with his own little basket of personalized takeaway. Then he tactfully withdrew to check under the bonnet. Rich hugged his son tight and hard and then surprised Mycroft by hugging him too. The three slaps to his back were familiar code but hard enough to rattle his teeth, but when Mycroft looked over at his father in law, he saw blinking eyes and a clenched jaw. Rich joined Art under the bonnet after a few swift kicks to the front tire.

Gigi was weeping openly, but her voice was firm. “You’ll come back soon now that you know the way. Mycie, you’ll have to bring footie pajamas and a hat next time, and I’ll show you where we keep the hot water bottle. Greggie, take good care of our boy.”

Greg held his mum for a long time, swaying with her as the autumn wind ruffled their fierce gray hair. Then she took his face in her hands and kissed him hard on both cheeks. Then it was Mycroft’s turn and he thought he couldn’t stand to be the only one not in tears. Her tears were all over his face as she pressed her cheek to his and whispered, “You talk it out with Greggie now. He’ll help you through.”

But when they got in the car, window rolled down in spite of the chill to watch for as long as they could, it was Greg that needed to talk. His jaw shook with the effort to hold the tears in. “Every time we say goodbye, I wonder how many more visits we have. They’re in their eighties, My, and we’ve been lucky so far about their health but god, I don’t know how I would bear it if I lost them.”

Mycroftheld him silently because the reality of the situation was too stark for platitudes. Why was the worst parent young and in perfect health while the good ones were destined to go within the next decade? There was no justice that Mummy was going to live forever; by the time they were rid of her evil spell, they would be too old to enjoy a harpy free existence.

Eyes burning with unshed tears, Mycroft tried to keep them open as he made the promises that he could. “They will have the absolute best care, love, so that they can live as long as possible. And we’ll give them good vacations and healthy food and whatever your dad’s pride can manage like a programmable thermostat.”
“You make Mum so happy always, but Dad was right proud to show you off yesterday. And my sisters are going to love you when Mummy is willing to share you.”

“I wondered why the whole family wasn’t there.”

“She thought it might be too intimidating, and I really do think she wanted time alone with you. You make her feel important and needed.”

“She is.”

“You look knackered. Why don’t you have a lie down? I fell asleep on you last time.”

“I’m alright,” Mycroft said, and he thought he was being a good listener but soon Greg’s voice was going up and down in volume and Gigi was wrapping the quilt around him again and Bruce was clumsily patting at his hair.

He slept peacefully for a few minutes before Bruce started up again, shaking him and pulling off the quilt and “We’re home, sweetheart. Art needs the car.”

Mycroft stumbled out of the car to his own kitchen door. Art was pulling away. “But what about our packages?”

“We unloaded before we woke you.”

“I should put away the perishables.”

“Also done before we woke you.” Greg switched on the kettle.

Mycroft sat at the kitchen table, the light piercing after the dim interior of the limo. He’d had just enough sleep to feel heavy and rough, his eyelids full of sand.

“We’ll make it an early night, love. Supper on a tray in bed, a little quiet reading or telly.”

“Sounds marvelous.”

“Let’s have our tea up there. I’ve got one more present for you and I’ve saved the best for last.”

If it had been anything but a birthday gift, Mycroft would have refused. He didn’t even want tea. He wanted to be naked between his own sheets and to sleep without interruption for at least twelve hours. But he followed Greg up the stairs and sat in the overstuffed chair by the window. He sighed in relief when the package was small. No careful opening this time. Wanting to get it over, he tore off the wrapping and opened the lid to find a picture frame. His mind stuttered. He was seeing but not comprehending.

In the picture was a strawberry blond boy, shy and serious eyes looking straight out of time. In his small hand was a little rabbit. He traced the image as if he could feel the fur. The little button in Hop’s ear was there plain as day. “Where did you get this?”

“In one of the few photo albums Lady Holmes took the time to make for you.”

“He was a fine rabbit, Greg. My best friend. Then when they took him from me and I was crying for him, Father came in and said, ‘What’s all this fuss over a mangy toy? You don’t need it anymore, a great big boy like you. You were done with him anyway, weren’t you, Mycroft?’”

The lump in his throat was choking him and the words came out in a strangled whisper. “What would you say to that little boy if you were his father?”
Greg was quiet for a long time until Mycroft could hear his heartbeat pounding. “Sorry, Greg, that was a stupid thing to ask. Never mind.”

“Hush, love.” Greg knelt before him and put the picture on the little table. Then he tipped Mycroft’s face up and tearful brown eyes met weary blue. “Daddy is so very sorry about Hop. He would have never let her do that to the little fellow. I promise you that I’ve fixed it so she will never hurt little boys or little rabbits again. You are being brave, but it’s alright to cry for him. He was a good friend.”

Greg kissed him on the forehead and got up, his knees creaking. Mycroft wanted more but he was already mortified at asking for what he did get. His eyes hurt so bad that he kept them closed. Then Greg was slipping a second box in his hands. “I know we can’t replace him, but maybe we can think of this as honoring his memory.”

When Mycroft sat frozen, Greg tore off the wrapping and removed the lid. Mycroft’s fingers touched soft fur, but it was when his thumb brushed across the cold of a metal button in a tiny rabbit ear that the terrible noise started. It was some sort of air raid siren, penetrating his head like a migraine, shrill and frightening. It was so loud that his heart jerked in his chest and he thought he might throw up. He needed Greg to turn it off. Or where was Morris who usually managed such things?

The pitch was all over the place so it couldn’t be tuned out, and it seemed to be escalating. He couldn’t breathe. Greg was saying things, shaking him by the shoulders, shouting instructions but he couldn’t hear, couldn’t think. He didn’t want to drop his resurrected friend in the panic, but Hop had shrunk, he was tiny now, fitting easily in Mycroft’s big fingers.

Finally, Greg knelt up and held him, cupping his head and as his face pressed into Greg’s shoulder and the terrible sound muffled, he realized that he was making it. Then his air was gone and he might have blacked out for just a second. He came back with a great choking gasp, shaking all over. Each breath tore at his throat until the sobs came, strange thick coughs, as loud as the keening. He fought to hold them in because they hurt his chest and head, but the dam had burst and he did not stop until his nose was completely blocked and the tears and snot had filled his mouth with bitter salt.

Greg was wiping Mycroft’s upper lip with his thumb, the rough pad a relief in all the slickness of mucus. Mycroft panted, his nose stuffed up and his throat thick with phlegm. He wanted to apologize for such a terrible outburst, an egregious response to an amazing gift.

But Greg began to apologize. “I am so sorry, baby. I thought it would be happy reunion, but it was too much. Mum warned me and I should have listened.”

Mycroft couldn’t seem to form words. Part of him was with Greg, feeling empty and clean from the release of weeping, another one of his wishes fulfilled in a short span. But part of him was also back in that little room, still weak from being terribly ill, and knowing that because he had slept, there was no one to protect Hop when the nanny came for him. He remembered how empty his hands had felt and how the rubbing of that little button in Hop’s ear had been his best comfort.

Greg was wiping away the tears that kept running down his face and tickling as they dripped off his chin. “You did it, love. The glacier has melted. I’m so proud of you. I’ll get some tissues and a flannel.”

Mycroft leaned back in the chair, too exhausted to do anything but try to breathe and hang onto his rabbit friend. His fingers stroked at the little button and it still brought comfort.

Greg held a steaming hot flannel to Mycroft’s nose and mouth until the blockage loosened. Then
he helped Mycroft to fill several tissues. After those were disposed of, Greg put the cooling gel eye mask over Mycroft’s burning eyes. He might have dozed, shaken by the intensity of his outburst.

Greg was moving about the room, and Mycroft realized how much trust was there that he was basically blindfolded and didn’t even wonder what Greg was doing. It was something for his good.

“Fancy a hot bath, love? I think that early bed time needs to be even earlier.”

“Yes, please.” Those were the first words he had spoken and they felt strange on his swollen tongue.

“Let’s get you undressed right here in the comfy chair. The bath is already drawn so you can step right into it.”

Greg undressed him. Mycroft wasn’t even able to help by lifting his arms or hips. Greg did it all.

“Mask on or off?”

“Off for now. I might need it to sleep.”

Greg removed the mask and helped his husband to stand on legs that shook and gave way.

“I can carry you.”

“No, but I’ll need to hang on.”

He was amused that Greg had stripped off before asking about the bath so it was Greg’s naked body that he leaned against. In the bath, the mirrors had not fully steamed up and he caught a glimpse of his bright red, blotched face and slitted, swollen eyes. “Good god, I look a fright!”

Greg kissed his patchy cheek. “It’s years of grief pouring out because you trust me and I think it’s beautiful.”

“I never thought I’d cry again.”

“But you did when you were ready. In you go, love. I’ll be right behind.”

Mycroft sunk into the scalding water. It was the sea salt soak that Greg favored when he had overdone a workout. He thought of the ocean at the villa, a time of peace and safety. Greg put the mask back in the mini fridge and lit a candle on the vanity before turning off the lights. Then he was sliding in behind Mycroft and wrapping his arms around an aching chest.

Mycroft let himself enjoy it for a full minute before he began confessing. He didn’t want Greg harboring a traitor and resenting it later. “I betrayed him, Greg, twice.”

Greg had been kissing the back of his neck where the hair curled in the steam. “What? Who did you betray?”

“I betrayed Hop twice. Once when I fell asleep so Nanny could steal him, and then when Father asked me why I was crying over a mangy old toy, I laughed and said of course not, it was just that I was so happy Father was home from his expedition.”

“Oh, love, you were just a baby. You had to survive.”

“But he was my friend. I should have defended his memory.”
“To a bully and a narcissist. What good would that have done? You did the best you could for a tiny, lost boy with no one in his corner.”

“That was the last time I cried until tonight.” Then he was crying again, quieter but just as wrenching. He turned in the water and buried his head in Greg’s shoulder and clung to his chest. He lay there with the tears running down, salt mixing with salt until Greg had to turn on the jets to reheat the water.

When he finally stopped, he didn’t even know if he was done. He knew that something had changed but his mind was scrubbed clean of thought. He was able to process simple commands as Greg ordered him to stay put. Then Greg was helping him to stand and use the towel bar to keep himself upright while Greg put him in his toweling dressing gown.

After drying him off, Greg dressed him in pajamas and he didn’t question it. He felt so raw and exposed that he was glad of the coverage. The bed had never felt so good. In spite of being thoroughly cooked by the bath, he still wanted the weight of all the covers.

“Will you be alright while I put on my own pajamas and find us something to eat?”

“My quilt?”

“Of course, love.”

“And Hop.”

He gripped them both firmly when Greg brought them. No one was going to take them away from him. When he next opened his eyes, there was a tray in front of him on the bed.

“Can’t, Greg. Sorry.”

“Shh, you’ll be ill if you don’t, and I’m going to feed you.”

Halfway through the meal, he closed his eyes so that the nudge of the spoon to his lips was his cue to open and chew. He wasn’t sure what he ate. It was warm and mild. Then there were pills and water which he took obediently.

When he next stirred, eyes still closed, Greg was holding him, stroking his hair. “You’re safe, and Hop’s safe. I’ve got you both.”

Mycroft curled Greg’s thick fingers around Hop. Greg would keep watch. “Thank you,” he said as sleep took him.
Greg was trying to fuck his husband but it just wasn’t on. He had kissed his way down, nuzzling and sucking from nipples to navel with My’s cock getting a thorough seeing to, but the response had been lukewarm, half harded (a pun Greg took no joy in). Now My’s always eager hole failed to open to Greg’s fingers.

The week after his birthday had been a very rough one for My who was shaken by his breakdown. Greg had encouraged him to stay home the following day, and he looked ill enough to merit the excuse. He looked progressively worse as nightmares haunted their bed each night; his light make up techniques did nothing to cover the dark circles under his eyes and the pinched lines around his mouth.

A huge case had come through early in the week so Greg had been out all of Tuesday night and had worked long hours the rest of the week, coming home in time for a reheated dinner and a few minutes of catching up before they both fell into an exhausted sleep. My cried now when he woke from the night terrors, but he didn’t want to talk about them. Greg would hold him in the dark, and one night, they had to sleep with the light on.

Finally it was Friday and the easy, quiet weekend they had promised themselves was not going to happen. Saturday evening was the dinner they had promised Sherlock and John. Greg knew his chances were limited. He wanted to help My unwind by the escape of sex, and he was fine with doing all of the work as long as My was shagged out enough at the end to get some proper sleep.

He had started innocently enough on the study couch with the jazz documentary series that My had got for his birthday. The narrator’s smooth voice and the complicated history that resembled a college lecture was too difficult for tired minds to follow. As with anything involving study, Greg became horny. He would have resisted, but he truly felt that reconnecting their bodies would ease My’s mind.

Greg sighed and withdrew his fingers. He pulled My’s pants and trousers back up and held out his shirt.

“I’m sorry, Greg. Just give me a minute and I’ll comply. It was lovely, really. Please continue.”

Greg slid the sleeve up My’s arm. “Did anyone tell you that you are a terrible liar in bed? You can say no, love, and you don’t need a reason.”

“I do want to be close to you. Shall I give you a blow job?”

“Because you are so disinterested that you can’t get it up enough to fuck me?”
“You’re angry, and you wonder why I don’t say no.”

“I’m angry at myself because I am apparently still someone so untrustworthy that you would let me rape you to avoid a confrontation.”

Greg turned off the telly and left the room. He went straight to the second floor powder room and wanked into the toilet quickly and mechanically. Back in the study, My was huddled on the couch, arms around his folded legs. “Greg, please. I don’t want you to be angry.”

“The one thing in this bloody house that I get to choose is how the hell I feel. So if I’m angry, I’m bloody well going to be angry whether you want it or not.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to invalidate your feelings. I was trying to explain why I wasn’t hard. I do want to be with you tonight, Greg, and it shouldn’t matter if I’ve got an erection. I can enjoy your body and be close with you whether I come or not.”

“I don’t even think you were present. I might as well get out the fisting kit and have a go with the onyx one.”

Greg stripped off his unbuttoned shirt and dropped his trousers right in the middle of the floor. “Since you find some other reality more pleasant than my company, I thought I’d sleep down here tonight.”

My got up and walked across the room, stopping in the doorway with his back turned. “No sense in your giving up our bed. I’ll sleep in the guest room for the hour or so that I’m not having nightmares. Good night, Greg.”

Greg’s anger lasted about long enough for My to go through his nightly rituals. He wanted to apologize straightaway, but he was so tired that he feared getting riled again. The ugly truth of it was that he felt helpless against My’s pain. For months, he had dreamed of My being able to access his emotions. He had been convinced that if My could cry, it would bring him the release that Greg always got from it. Instead, it seemed to be a bottomless well of grief, the whole forty years worth bubbling up dank and toxic.

He was worried for My’s sanity and his job. A therapist was out of the question. Fuck all if Greg hadn’t lanced an infected heart with a symbol of My’s pain. If he had known that a little antique rabbit that he had paid an insane amount of money for was going to destroy the last shreds of My’s dignity, he would have pitched it in the bin like the first one.

Meanwhile, Greg’s new quilt wasn’t quite enough to keep him warm, and his own breath was keeping him awake since they’d had one of Morris’ pizzas for dinner, heavy on the onion and garlic. He got up to clean his teeth and check on My. Maybe if he hugged him and promised they would talk the next morning, they would both feel better. He was at the top of the stairs when he heard the whimpering, and then the defiant voice, high and young, “I’m the man. I am the man of this house.”

This had been a recurring theme since the beginning, but it had grown in frequency and volume the more that My confided in Greg. He tried to wake him, but it was taking longer each time because he was so weary. “Come on, love. Come back to me. I’m right here.”

My struggled, lashing out in his sleep, but Greg had learned to stay out of the way of flailing arms. Whatever was in the dreams, and Greg had some fair guesses, there was violence involved and My had thrown some good punches while his breathing was as ragged as a marathon runner’s. “Get out of my house. Get out now.”
Greg pushed away from the heavy blows colliding with invisible intruders and turned on every light in the room and the en suite. Then he ran cold water over a flannel and laid it across My’s forehead. He used his copper’s voice, “Mycroft, you are dreaming. Wake up now!”

“Greg? Is it really you?”

“Yes, it’s your dick of a husband.”

“But where are we?”

“In the guest room.”

“Come away, love. Let’s get you tucked in your own bed.”

My trailed after Greg and crawled under the duvet, but he was shivering and confused. He made himself very small, curling into the fetal position. “I’ll be alright now, Greg. Sorry to disturb.”

Greg turned on all the lights before climbing in and wrapping himself around his terrified husband. “I know you don’t want to, and I’m no expert, but I think you’re going to have to talk about your nightmares. It’s the same one over and over, and if nothing else, it would help me to know what you’re seeing.”

When a long silence did not loosen My’s tongue, Greg tried questions. “Who is in the house, love? Who are you fighting?”

My let out a gusty sigh. “Black hooded figures. Grim reaper types with red glowing eyes. I’ve never seen their faces if they have any.”

“Sounds like jawas.” Greg pushed up the sleeve of My’s pajama top to rub his arm.

“What?”

“Little people that looked like evil monks. They were in Star Wars.”

“These aren’t little. Their hoods scrape the ceiling.”

“How old are you in the dream?” Greg was pleased that his continuing education credit seminars for working with victims had finally paid off.

“Usually nine. Sometimes younger. But Sherlock is always a baby, and Mummy is still weak from having him. She wasn’t right for months after.”

“Post partum depression?”

“Possibly. It was never addressed. Father didn’t believe in such nonsense. He went off to his next expedition and left me in charge.”

“He what?!?”

“I was the man of the house. Mummy was ill, and we’d had a massive turnover of staff. It fell to me to look after things.”

“Sweetheart, you were just a little boy. What kind of man puts that responsibility on a child?”

My had tensed back up at the anger in Greg’s tone. Greg kissed the back of his neck. “Sorry, love. I keep thinking we’ll get to the bottom of all the bloody things he did to you, but it’s a very deep well.”
“Looking back, I know it was not real. He was at a loss for something to say, a parting bit of wisdom, but I took it to heart. That was my fault, you see, taking it so earnestly.”

“Yes, you were too eager of a victim.” The seminar had definitely discouraged sarcasm, but the chirpy people teaching it had never encountered the most fucked up parenting in history via Lord Bloody Holmes.

“I was precocious, and I did take much of the pressure off Mummy.”

“Was she really sick, My? Or was it dramaitis? Because she’s had several episodes of ill health that magically disappear when she gets her way.”

“No, she was thin and pale and cried for hours, and there was no one to help her.”

“Weren’t you in school?”

“I studied at home with a tutor for two terms. I hated school anyway.”

“So your father skipped off to look at plants, leaving a dangerously ill wife, a newborn infant, and a wee boy?”

“I was old enough to know how things should be done.”

“Oh, love. I’m not even old enough to carry the weight of a fully functioning country house and a depressed and difficult woman, let alone a baby.”

“Sherlock had a nurse so all I had to do was monitor her care of him. She sometimes didn’t hear him cry so I picked up the slack. He was such an angry little thing and his face would go all purple, but there were certain touches that comforted him.”

“Sherlock got comforted. Well, that’s something.” Greg’s arms moved automatically to hold My, squeezing firmly as if to put all the years of missed comfort into him at one go.

“I’m making it sound worse than it is.”

“No, you’re downplaying it as you always do. People don’t have nightmares over things that were easy.”

“I’m too sensitive.”

“Shh, you survived in an impossible situation, and no one, not even you, gets to judge that little boy.”

“I was quite tall.”

“Ask Mum next time you call if nine years old is a little boy. Does she know about the nightmares?”

“No, they are my greatest weakness, and someday I’ll overcome it. I don’t want anybody to know.”

Greg spent some time cuddling his husband, touch being better than words when a situation was deep and chronically painful. But finally he had to give in to his need to provide solutions. “I know you are the man of the house in your work, but have you considered that here at home, you aren’t the only man anymore?”
“My name is on the deed.”

This simple fact hurt Greg, not having a place of his own, still a kept man in theory, the little woman, but it wasn’t about him at present. “Morris and I, we live here too and your cracking security team always beneath us. You aren’t alone anymore. Why don’t you let us drive for awhile?”

My squirmed and moved apart from Greg’s grasp. “In the dreams, I am always alone. Sometimes I scream for help, but no matter who I save, there’s another one of you, bleeding and staring with lifeless eyes. It’s on me, Greg, always.”

“It takes practice to let go after so many years, but I know you can do it. Let me take care of you, baby. Give all of it to me.”

My’s whole body went rigid and then he shoved Greg away and was out the door. Out of reflex, Greg was up and out, seconds behind him in time to see My stumble on the stairs at the landing. “Mycroft, stop this instant!”

My sunk to the steps, deflated. Then Greg was on the step above him, pressed against his back with his chin hooked over My’s taut shoulder. Resistance vibrated through his slender frame, and Greg wondered if this would be a whole weekend of emotional push and pull instead of the fucking kind.

Greg let the silence grow, My’s ragged breaths the only sound in the crisp air of the stairwell. Under dim light, he watched My grip a baluster until it creaked under the strain. Finally My pulled away to bury his face in his hands. His voice was high and rough when he spoke. “I’m a laughingstock at the ministry now. Did you know that?”

Greg considered how often My attributed judgment to people who were barely aware of his presence or amply intimidated by the mask of the Iceman. He needed more information.

“You pushed and pushed for me to let go and so I have. Now when I watch the news in my office, I come to after the broadcast to find my waistcoat damp with tears. Crying over images of war and dead children. Ridiculous.”

“It’s a big change.” If My was crying at work, they might be laughing at him. Now Greg was just as worried. Unchecked emotion in international espionage was a liability.

“I look in the mirror and I disgust myself in a myriad of new ways. I was so relieved when you wanted me tonight because I’m nothing like the man you married.”

“It’s only been a week. You’ll get your balance back in time.”

“After I’ve lost my position and your respect.”

“You are very brave. You will always have my respect.” Greg wrapped his arms around My again, sheltering him from a world he didn’t have armor for anymore.

As he rested his cheek against My’s back, he realized his love was crying quietly into his hands. The outward expression of My’s emotion was still hard for him to cope with, all that pain leaking out after so many stoic months. They would have to sort out how much was healthy release and how much was another form of self punishment.

After a few minutes of murmured comfort, Greg spoke into the chilled air. “You are so hard on yourself. You’ve got forty years of grief stored up, and you have to give yourself some grace. It will get better. I promise.”
My slumped over on Greg then, chest heaving as he tried to compose himself. Greg rubbed slow circles on his back. “Easy, baby. Deep breaths.”

Finally My was quiet, completely spent. Greg kissed the back of his neck. “Let’s finish this under the duvet, yeah?”

They climbed the stairs slowly as the grandfather clock chimed only once. “There’s really no sense in going to bed now,” My sighed. “I’ve got to be up at four to catch my flight.”

“When did this happen?”

“Anthea emailed you while I was still in the meeting. I told you last night.”

“Were my eyes open? Did I say anything?”

“You said, ‘My plans are shot to hell.’ And then you growled and grabbed my cock, but you fell asleep in midstroke.”

“I think I must have been asleep for all of that. Can’t you postpone it?”

“Unfortunately, it’s an invitation that we’ve been hoping for a long time. And high holy days are not like cricket matches or garden parties; they are irrevocably on specific dates.”

“We’ll set the alarm and have some quiet rest then. You can at least give your eyes a break.”

My limped slowly to his side of the bed and plopped down. He began reaming out his stuffy nose with tissues while Greg went to the bureau and got My’s favorite socks.

He knelt in front of My and took off the backless slippers to smooth the socks over narrow, icy feet. My curled his toes and sighed, taking the other sock from Greg and putting it on with agitated jerks of his hands.

“I thought you liked when I put your socks on.”

“I do, far too much.”

He checked the alarm and then stood to throw off his dressing gown and clamber into bed, his back to Greg. He was hanging off the bed as he used to when they were first married, but Greg was not so easily put off after months in the marital trenches.

Pasting himself to My’s back, he slid his hand under the pajama top and rubbed a tense, furry stomach. “Tell me the rest of it, love. The thing underneath all of it that’s making your belly hurt.”

When the silence stretched on and My didn’t break but vibrated with tension, Greg rolled over and put out all of the lights with the remote, even the little night light that always burned. Then he put his hand under My’s top to rub his back. “It doesn’t count in the dark, baby.”

“The word ‘baby,’ there’s the crux of it.”

Greg kept rubbing, working out knots that made My grunt. He had no clue what the issue was with the word unless it was more regret about tears, but he was going to wait this one out.

“When I …last week when I opened my last present…” Greg prompted.

So they were going the long way round. “Last week when you finally allowed yourself some tears —“ Greg prompted.
My seemed mildly relieved for the help. “Yes, that. Well, you were very supportive. Very comforting.”

“I tried to be.”

“I was in shock and lost. You had to bathe me and dress me and hand feed me.”

“I like taking care of you.” What was the problem with any of that? He’d done it before when My was injured, with little angst on My’s part.

“I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Greg was truly puzzled now and so he moved his hand to My’s neck, the most troublesome spot and worked his thumb into the granite muscles, warming them.

My groaned when the knot gave way. “I felt like a child when you had to take care of me and Hop was there and my blanket. I hadn’t had that sort of care since I was small, maybe never.”

“Nannies are a poor substitute, but sweetheart, why are you upset about enjoying my attention? It’s my job to look after you.”

“You’re my husband, not my father.”

Now they were in the thick of it at the worst possible time, both exhausted with a time limit before My’s flight. “You never had a father, My. You had a man who impregnated your mother, but you never had a daddy.”

My turned over to bury his face in Greg’s chest. His breathing was rapid and shallow. Greg prayed that there wouldn’t be a panic attack. Some of the hurts were even deeper than the ones that had brought the tears. At the cellular level, at the very core of himself, My had never been wanted, never been loved until his marriage. This was a deficit they could not fill up in their natural lifetime.

“But I don’t want you to be my daddy. I’ve seen the websites, Greg. It’s aberrant.”

Greg smiled. “I left normal behind at eleven years old when I looked at Lanny West’s wee cock in the Gents.”

“I don’t want to wear a nappy.” Greg could feel all of the tension he had massaged out coming back into My’s body, the muscles growing hard under his hand.

“Do you think I want you to wear a nappy?” How had life stopped and left him in this conversation? He was so far over his head that he had to look up to see the Titanic.

“No, I’m just saying that out right. No nappies, no dummies, no calling you ‘daddy.’”

“Agreed. What do you want?” Alright then, safer ground. Let My define his needs. My’s cheek was molten where it pressed against Greg’s chest.

“Do you think you could do the other things though?”

“Which other things?” He was making My work for it but good god, he truly was not following.

“The bath and the pajamas and the feeding.”

“Absolutely.” When in doubt, just say yes.
My’s agitation reduced by half. “And you won’t be disgusted with me?”

“No at all.” Greg was trying to picture it, and it didn’t seem that different from when My had a headache.

“Because we don’t have to if you are at all uncomfortable.”

Ah, the apologizing and the back pedaling, familiar ground. “Taking care of you is my favorite thing.”

They were almost home, My’s body sagging against Greg, but one fist was still clenched tight. Greg cupped his hand over it and straightened out the fingers one at a time and then held My’s palm over his heart. “You are allowed to ask for things. You are allowed to try things, and if something doesn’t work, you are allowed to change your mind.”

“What do you think this won’t work?”

Greg held back the weary, put upon sigh that begged to come out. “We don’t know that yet, do we? You’ve asked, and we’ll try. That’s all you need to know right now.”

The fist was clenched again, catching a bit of Greg’s chest hair as it closed tightly. “I tried to stop thinking about it. I’m so ashamed.”

Then a few hot tears dripped onto Greg’s chest. “Oh, love, there can’t be any shame between us. We’ve done it all. We crossed out of normal gay sex the first time we fucked on camera.”

Completely wrong thing to say. Greg winced as My pulled back, but he was going to finish this endless meandering before the alarm went off or die trying. He thought awhile, dug deep, and gave it another go. “Since your very first migraine when I gave you your pills and a Coke, you have been my baby. When I call you that, I mean that you are mine to take care of, to protect and comfort. It’s the most natural thing in the world.”

And My was peeled off the ceiling and back on the bed beside him. “You’ve had a terrible shock and your whole world has changed. If you need extra comfort, tailor made, it’s completely understandable, and I will provide it for you with great joy.”

“You will get something out of it too?”

“I already have. I’m so proud of you for asking, but now, my sweet boy, it is 2 a.m. and we both need a little rest or heads will roll tomorrow.”

My nuzzled against his chest, his cheek at a normal temperature. He bent one leg to rest it across Greg’s, and when his foot rubbed Greg’s calf, Greg was thankful for the socks. An unfortunately placed icy foot could have undone all the work they had achieved if Greg screamed in surprise.

The alarm was a shock that started a cramp in Greg’s calf, but he squeezed his toes until it subsided. My had rolled over and hit the snooze, then got up anyway, his ironclad will at work. Greg had gentler plans for him however and ushered him to the shower bench, wet his skin, and rubbed him down rapidly with exfoliating shower gel until he glowed. After a quick rinse with the detachable shower head and an equally rapid shampoo for My, Greg knelt before his blinking husband and asked, “Fastest blow job on record?”

When My nodded, Greg dumped a puddle of conditioner on the shower bench for lube and wasted no time in engulfing a half hard, pretty pink cock. He rolled his tongue until My was fully hard and then bobbed his head vigorously while sucking until his ears rang. He slicked his other
hand with the conditioner and wriggled his middle finger inside My’s hole, the grunt a positive sign. Then he stroked under My’s balls in the sweet spot. He regretted his lack of a stopwatch because My came in seconds.

A quick rinse of the involved areas and Mycroft Holmes was ready to save the world through diplomacy. There was time to make tea while My styled his hair and dressed in one of his older suits; the newer one for the state affair was safely stowed on the plane by Anthea along with more styling products and make up. Greg tried to get My to eat something, but his stomach was agitated and he sipped carefully at the tea.

They had ten minutes to spare. Greg slipped on his weekend jeans and a vest, the soft driving moccasins that were like walking on baby kittens, and his warmest dressing gown since they were going down to the garage. In the harsh fluorescent light of the garage, My’s pale skin and bruised eyes were shocking. He would look ill at the event but for the careful makeup techniques that his people were skilled in.

He turned damp eyes to Greg’s, his weariness and vulnerability cutting Greg to the bone. They hadn’t even scratched the surface with their pillow talk in the night. The pain was going to be with them for a long time. Greg shoved his own worry down deep and reached up to pull My’s head to his shoulder. “You only have to wear your Iceman mask for a little while, love. Then you’ll come home to me and I will take care of you.”

My sighed from the depths of himself. “We have dinner with John and Sherlock tonight.”

“Fuck, I haven’t been paying attention at all.” Greg squeezed tighter as My tensed. “No, it’s still alright. I won’t let him hurt you, and we’ll beg off early. John will understand, and I don’t give a damn if Sherlock does or not.”

“It’s always something. I don’t know if I can bear it.”

This was a disturbingly candid admission from the king of the stoics. “We’ll manage, and we’ve got tomorrow for me to give you my undivided attention.”

Art announced his presence with throat clearing, but Greg took the time to give My a slow, gentle kiss and to wipe away a stray tear. Then My squared his shoulders and tilted his head, and Greg’s husband disappeared entirely. Greg shivered and pulled his dressing gown tighter, stepping back as the Iceman entered his limo.

Greg’s memory turned back to early in their marriage when he had felt like the trophy wife, the little woman, and even the mistress. In his slippers and dressing gown, he was feeling a bit like a housewife minus the curlers and giant leatherette purse. He had seen his man off to the wars, Morris would manage the ironing and the shopping so he went upstairs, stripped naked, and slept for three hours because if one of them was somewhat rested, the risk of a row was greatly reduced. He was still early to the Yard for a Saturday and completed all the work that he could do on his own.

The remaining time was spent sheepishly visiting a specialty shop that he knew of only through his connections in vice. The well lighted, well stocked displays were surprisingly pastel and normal looking, a giant nursery store. With nappies and dummies not an option, he bought little Peter Rabbit dishes in honor of Hop. A bowl and mug and a matching ceramic spoon. He got baby oil, powder, and lotion, sniffing each deeply with a sigh. They also carried nursery tales on dvd, and he bought one of *Teletubbies* because the laughing baby on the package was hard to resist. He also got *Wind in the Willows* and the accompanying story book.

He was almost out the door when he spied the footie pajamas display. The all in ones were thick
and warm but soft too. The royal blue one would make My’s eyes sparkle, and the penguins on it were very happy and silly, dancing about and sliding down snow covered hills. The all in one seemed to loosen Greg’s resolve and he bought two adult sized bottles. He thought of the old fashioned word ‘yearning’ and turned the feeling over a bit before putting it far back in his mind and closing the door. They were past the age for babies, and My was as much child as Greg could manage. Maybe they would get a pet in a few years.

When My came home thirty minutes before the dinner, he looked completely spent. Greg didn’t even know where to begin to help him. “I need a cold shower and a hot, black coffee; then I’ll be fine.”

Greg wondered how often My had pushed himself to exhaustion before his marriage and guessed that it was often. My was pulling on comfortable trousers when Morris rang them that their guests had arrived. “You stay up here a little longer, baby. I’ll get them started on drinks and attempt small talk. I want you to have a minute to gather your thoughts.”

Small talk was going to be very small because Greg intended to deliver a brief and pointed threat disguised as a lecture. Morris had put them in the library and Greg shook hands with both of them before tackling the subject head on, staring pointedly at his brother in law. “You were very kind the night of your concert so this might not need to be said, but I’m going to err on the side of caution. He’s had a very bad week, and I won’t have him hurt.”

“He can’t be hurt, Lestrade. I’ll be polite but it’s not necessary.” Sherlock had spit out the word ‘polite’ as if it was lemon juice.

“It is necessary because I tell you it is. One snarking word, one cross eyed look and I will hit you so hard in the stomach that you’ll be back in the A and E.”

“Greg, you wouldn’t really…”

“John, I am protecting my husband, something that I think you can relate to. You have a gun that we both pretend does not exist for just such a purpose. If you can’t control your dog, I will muzzle him. Now then, what can I get you gents to drink?”

When My came down, pale and quiet, John was chatting about his day at the surgery, a polite little story about a boy who had stuck sweets in his ear. Greg hoped My wouldn’t do that thing where he treated friendly conversation as interview and got the other person talking about himself. It was a very classy defense mechanism but it wasn’t going to advance his friendship with John at all, and Greg needed reinforcements.

It was one of Sherlock’s hungry nights and so Morris’ excellent cassoulet laden with succulent sausage, duck, and goose stopped up the man’s mouth for the first half of the dinner. He was still too thin and in spite of Greg’s being on guard, he was pleased to see Sherlock tuck in at his table. Greg brought out the case files even before coffee and an apple cranberry cobbler were served. The huge dining room table was convenient for placing the photos and other paperwork in various patterns. My and John relaxed, sipping at second cups of the rick dark coffee. John kept adding more of the heavy cream and sighed happily with each decadent sip. Greg watched My’s shoulders come down from around his ears; he was unwinding.

As Sherlock skimmed through notes at lightning speed, muttering to himself, Greg eavesdropped on My and John’s conversation. He caught a mention of Star Wars.

“Greg and I were talking about it the other night. I’m not sure that I’ve ever seen it, but I’ve been having dreams about these monk like fellows with glowing eyes.”
“Oh god, the jawas. It was months before Mum and Dad let me go to the cinema after that one. Nightmares for days and I never could wear hooded tops after that.”

“Something about them not having faces.”

“In Afghanistan, you could sometimes see animals in the darkness, their eyes glowing.” John shivered. “If you’re having trouble sleeping, Mycroft, I could prescribe a very mild sleeping pill. Just for the nights you are at risk or to ensure peaceful sleep on the weekend.”

“Thank you, but my doctor gave me something. I still keep hoping that I can overcome it without pills. I have to believe that dependence on pills is genetic.”

“It is and apparently so are nightmares.”

“John.” Sherlock’s tone was cautionary.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, love, and I haven’t gone into any particulars. But if either of you would drop a bit of Holmes pride, you might be able to help each other.”

My and Sherlock’s eyes met as Greg and John watched. There was a slow, mutual smile and then the response in unison, “Never.”

John shrugged. Greg sighed and turned his attention back to the case that Sherlock seemed on the verge of solving. He tried not to think about how many hours the Yard had spent on it in the time before Sherlock.

It was obvious to everyone around the table except Sherlock that he was far from full recovery from the stabbing. Three cases in and his energy flagged and his skin grayed. For all of the times that Greg had wanted Sherlock to get a comeuppance, he still felt nauseous to see the man struggle. John walked over and put an arm around his husband’s waist. “I’m afraid I’m going to ruin your fun, love, but I’m so knackered from the surgery today. Would you take me home?”

Greg watched Sherlock stop immediately and gather up the papers in an order that had meaning for him. Morris, listening at doors again, came in with a large, heavy basket of home cooked take away. Art had the car waiting. Coats were retrieved at the foyer. John hugged both hosts, and Sherlock deigned to shake hands, but his worried eyes never left John’s face. Sherlock carried the basket and kept a firm hand under John’s elbow as they walked down the steps to the car.

Greg put an arm around My’s waist as they both watched the couple settle themselves in the limo, and even though the tinted windows prevented sight inside or outside, they waited until the car was around the corner before getting out of the cold, damp air.

“John has the soul of a diplomat,” My said, “Sherlock got to save face and feel useful. We got an early evening after all.”

“I’m glad we didn’t cancel. They need us, but now it’s time for me to take care of my baby.”

My ducked his head with adorable shyness as they went upstairs together. Greg didn’t want him worrying or feeling uncomfortable, but the tentativeness was irresistible. It helped Greg to think of that on the rare occasions when the Iceman peeked through at home. He couldn’t wait to share the things that he’d bought.

“You’ve already had a shower so no bath tonight, but I thought you might like a massage. Just a gentle one with pants on.”

Greg spread thick bath sheets over the duvet and microwaved a bowl of water to put the baby oil in. While the oil warmed, he undressed My, putting his clothes away and having him lie on the
bath sheets. He dimmed the lights and put on soft classical music, wishing he had bought a cd of lullabies.

Since the goal wasn’t arousal, Greg took time on My’s back and shoulders and arms. The smell of the oil and the silkiness of it soothed Greg too. By the time he moved to My’s calves, they were both at peace. My seemed to be moving in and out of a light sleep, but if Greg stopped, he made greedy little noises.

He groaned as Greg worked his thumbs deep. “I stood for most of the day, and when I wasn’t standing, I was climbing stairs.”

The muscle spasmed under Greg’s fingers, and he had to patiently work at the tension, moving it down the calf and out through the sole of My’s foot, unclenching the long, white toes. “I’m so proud of you for talking to John about your nightmares. That was very brave.”

“I didn’t mean to. It just popped out.”

“If there’s any one that would understand, it’s John. He still has night terrors sometimes. You’ve got friends, My, more than you know.”

Finally, My’s body was limp with relaxation, and Greg got the all in one, putting My’s legs in first while he lay there. Then one arm at a time, with a bit of challenge in getting all limbs bent into place with the baby oil making things slippery. There were attached mitts for My’s big hands so he would be truly dependent on Greg.

“What am I wearing?” My rolled over onto his back and looked down at himself, his thick chest hair and slight erection at odds with the smiling penguins.

“I know you said no nappies, but this is just another kind of pajamas. Warm and soft. If you hate them, I’ll take them off, but you look very sweet.”

My held his hands up to stare at the mitts, turning his palms toward his face. But he didn’t argue or safe word.

Greg put a hand between My’s chest fur and the zip and pulled it up. When My was fully zipped, he kissed him on the forehead. “I thought I’d give you some milk and a story or a lullaby, and then we’ll go to bed.”

But the adult sized bottle, similar to a sports water bottle, did not fit in the tiny bedroom microwave and it seemed important to Greg that the milk be warm since it was skim and not that special in any other way. Greg put in the video of Wind in the Willows, My’s eyes widening as he glanced at the screen. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart. I need to warm your milk down in the kitchen.”

Greg tiptoed down the stairs, hoping Morris was through cleaning up and would be in bed since the bottle would be difficult to explain. He heard voices and although he didn’t mean to eavesdrop, he did need to know who it was and how long they might be. If Morris had a friend over, Greg might keep the milk for some other time or warm the bottle in a bowl of hot water like the baby oil.

He eased open the swinging door to see Tuppy run his finger down Morris’ scarred cheek. “My beautiful, dashing lad. Can’t you let me in even a little?”

“I want to, Tuppy, I swear it. I am trying.”

“There now, I know you are. It’s not a race. I shouldn’t have pushed you.”
Then Tuppy brushed his lips across Morris' cheek, gentle as a whisper and was out the kitchen door with barely a sound. Morris locked the door and keyed the alarm; then he leaned against the wall with his head in his hands. Greg could see that he was shaking, and he wondered why something as nice as love had to be so terrifying. Morris finally stumbled away to his quarters, and Greg popped the milk in, finding some vanilla for it while it heated.

He tested it on his arm, wanting it good and hot so that by the time he got upstairs, it would be just right. Back in their bedroom, he found My engrossed in the video, propped up on pillows. “This is lovely. I think I had the book when I was small, but I wasn’t allowed much television.”

“This one came long after we were kids. But Sherlock might have seen it.”

“Sherlock would never sit still for something like this. He was a boy shaped kite.”

The credits rolled signaling the end of the episode and Greg turned off the player. “Now then, since I can’t rock you to sleep, I’ll hold you and feed you. But first, I need to get comfy too.”

He had kicked off his shoes for the massage but now he stripped to his vest and pants and went to the closet for a pair of soft flannel pajama bottoms. Then he climbed on the bed and slid his arm under My’s shoulders, fitting his husband’s head into the crook of his arm. My’s eyes kept widening and Greg hoped it was good surprise that he was seeing.

“That stop animation was very clever in its time, but they look a bit like taxidermy.”

“I never thought. I hope you won’t have bad dreams.”

“I think not,” My said, snuggling against Greg.

Then he closed his eyes for a minute and Greg was thankful because it all seemed a bit awkward now. But he brushed the curls back from My’s forehead and put the nipple to his lips. My sucked slowly, his eyes fluttering. There was something about that sound and the motion as My pulled on the nipple. Greg felt powerful and protective. He was providing for his husband, and it was an amazing feeling. Because he hadn’t bought any lullabies, he sang his own.

The first song that came to his mind was Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Waters.” Sometimes, the lyrics to a song would feel like promises to him, another kind of vows that he wanted to make to My. As he sang, My’s eyes crinkled as he tried to smile around the nipple in his mouth. Greg thought that there was no one else in the world who had cuddled My this way. He hadn’t taken My’s virginity, but he was definitely the first to cherish him.

After he had finished the song, he said, “Whenever you are worried or sad, I want to be the one who brings you peace and comfort. I think this is what I was put on the planet to do.”

He wiped My’s lips of milk and kissed his forehead. He was just as drowsy and slipped under the duvet to snuggle into the thick blue fleece. He was awakened abruptly sometime later by My fleeing the bed. “What’s wrong, love?”

My was jerking at the zip of his pajamas. “I’m boiling in this bloody thing, my bladder is the size of a football, and I can’t get down my fucking zip because I’m wearing mittens. You should have put me in a nappy after all.”

It is difficult to be indignant while wearing a blue fleece all in one but My nearly managed it.

In his foggy state, the quickest solution Greg could manage was to unzip the fly himself and pull
My’s cock out. He held it as a steady stream continued for quite some time. “Are you going to overflow the bowl, love?”

“Milk always makes me piss like a race horse. Perhaps I should have mentioned that.”

“So much for a peaceful night’s rest.”

“You meant well.”

When My’s cock was finally empty, Greg stripped him out of the baby penguins. “You’re soaked, My. Do you need a shower?”

“I’ll just towel off. I’m fresh as a daisy with all this baby oil.”

“You sure do smell sweet.” Greg began buffing My’s damp skin with a towel.

“I used to steal the baby oil out of the nursery and wank with it. The smell still gets me hard.”

“Something else you might have mentioned earlier.”

“Case in point,” My said, waggling his cock a bit as Greg dried his back.

“If you hadn’t had such a long day, I’d suggest a little oil and wank but you need your rest.”

“I’m still having nightmares, Greg. I think you are going to have to fuck the angst out of me.”

“Now?”

“No time like the present.”

Greg tilted My’s face to the light and searched his eyes. He didn’t want another rejection.

“This is what we both need, and we can sleep tomorrow. Help me get over, love. Please?”

Greg got the bath sheets from the massage and put them back on the bed, arranging My on his hands and knees. Then he liberally applied the baby oil to My’s cock and balls before sliding oil slicked thumbs into My’s cleft. He rubbed over the pretty pink pucker until My was wagging his ass like a happy dog. One thick thumb slipped in.

“Good enough, Greg. Take me.”

“None of that. Last time you were sore for days. You can have it rough without being too bruised to sit.”

Greg swirled his thumb around, feeling an answering throb in his own ass. He worked in and out, the muscles giving way for him. When he worked his other thumb in and pushed out and around, My’s arms and legs sagged. “Just like that, Greg. Bloody hell.”

The smell of the nursery was nearly overpowering, heavy and sweet. Greg was sure there was some moral code against it, but he eased his dripping cock into his husband on a flood of it. They were having one of those nights where being together after an absence made everything extra special. He got the angle just right; My’s ass was like silk around him.

Watching his own cock disappear inside his husband, he felt experimental and took his still oily thumbs and slid them in on either side of his cock. The extra stretching triggered something in My and he spurted for nearly as long as he had pissed, grunting and thrusting his hips forward. Fortunately for Greg he also clenched tightly around cock and thumbs and Greg came hard
enough that he whited out.

They used the huge towels to clean themselves and then crawled a second time under the duvet as afterglow pulled them down into heavy sleep. Greg woke the next morning to find that he hadn’t removed his vest before ploughing into My. He felt pleasantly slutty about it.

My blinked muzzily, his eyes still puffy and circled in violet. One night was not going to fix weeks of sleep deprivation. “I’d rather sleep than eat.”

“You have to eat, but I’ll bring it to you. Then we’ll have a proper lie in, a duvet day if you like.”

“No need. I’ll be up in a minute,” My said, rolling over and snoring lightly.

Greg dressed in fresh pajamas and trotted down to the kitchen, still smug from the extraordinary rogering he had given his sweet husband in the night. He pushed open the swinging door into the kitchen, his slippered feet quiet on the tiles. Morris turned, screamed, and dropped a plate on the floor.

“I’m so sorry, mate. I didn’t mean to terrify you.”

“No, it’s me, Greg. My mind is elsewhere.”

“With Tuppy.”

“How did you--? I thought we had been careful.” Morris knelt to pick up the bits of china, but it looked as if his legs couldn’t hold him just then anyway.

“You have been careful. I came down to the kitchen last night for something and overheard. I’m sorry for that too.”

“No, I’m glad. If I don’t talk to someone, I’ll be smashing more than plates on this floor.”

“He seems quite taken with you. Why is that a bad thing?” Greg brought the kitchen trash over for Morris to put the pieces in.

“I’m drowning in it. Not ready at all, and he’s miles ahead of me.”

“I remember that feeling. My was always two steps ahead. Fell first, proposed when we had barely dated. It’s frightening.”

“He says he’s in love with me, prepared to go the distance.”

“Tuppy seems to be a decent bloke. If he cares for you, he’ll slow down or even wait.”

“I don’t want to hurt him. Forced retirement has been a terrible blow.”

Morris checked in the oven, stirred something on the stove, and then took the carafe to pour a large mug of coffee. Greg pulled out a kitchen chair and sat at the table as Morris handed him the mug with just the right amount of milk and sugar.

“If it’s not too much bother, I think My could use a lie in. Thought I might take breakfast up to him?”

“Of course. It’s all nearly done. You could go on ahead and I’ll bring it in about twenty minutes.”

“Best not. He’s dead to the world and starkers.”
“I have seen all of that before. Used to take him his tea in the bath.”

“As you wish, but I’ll stay and help. Smells great.”

“I cooked for escape this morning so it’s a feast. Two quiche, ham and cheese or spinach and bacon, baked porridge with apples, pears, and raisins, banana walnut scones with clotted cream, and a wheel of Brie crusted with almonds. Coffee of course, and I can tuck in a bottle of sparkling cider.”

“That’s a two man job to carry. We won’t be needing lunch then.”

“Oh.”

“You can’t cook your troubles away forever, Morris.”

Morris sighed deeply as he fetched a huge tray from the pantry and began loading it with dishes. “I do have feelings for him. I just don’t know how far they go. It’s only been ten days we’ve been reacquainted. I haven’t dated anyone since Rory and I’m not the same man as I was then.”

“Here’s what My and I have been working on. You are allowed to try things, and you are allowed to say no to things that don’t work for you. He’s an adult, mate. He can cope with rejection.”

“I wouldn’t reject him.”

“Well, there you are.”

Morris’ face transformed with a shy smile. “He thinks I’m beautiful. I would be the young, wild one this time.”

“You are the beautiful, wild one and speaking of, I need to get back to mine.”

Morris took the huge tray and Greg only had to manage the bottle of cider, the thermos of coffee, and the little tray table they used for meals in bed. He peeked in to make sure My was still under the covers and then ushered Morris in to put the big tray in the seating area by the window.

My slept on while Greg walked Morris back to the top of the stairs. “I’m going to call Tuppy now since I have the afternoon free.”

“Take the day. We’ll manage. You survived Sherlock and Lady Holmes. I think you can survive falling in love again.”

Morris gripped the banister. “I think I already fell.”

“I didn’t want to say so, but I think you are right. Welcome to it.” Greg reached out a hand to shake, but Morris surprised him with a trembling hug before turning to feel his way down the steps.

Back in their room, Greg pulled open the drapes on gray late morning light. He ran a flannel under the tap until it was almost too hot to touch, and then went to My. “Come on, sweetheart. Time for breakfast, and then we’ll sleep the rest of the day away.”

My stirred, a blissed out smile on his face. “I was dreaming about Bruce again.”

“That bear has a lot to answer for.”

“It was the baby oil, you see. Smelled sweet. He was licking my nipples.”
My’s nipples were indeed hard and his cock probably was as well, but his stomach growled and Greg intended to prevent hunger headaches before engaging in pleasure. He wiped My’s hands and face with the hot flannel. “Sit back and I’ll bring you a plate.”

Greg only filled one plate with the savory quiches and cheese and the warm fluffy scones. Then he dished up one bowl of the oatmeal. The coffee and cider he put on the nightstand and climbed in beside My who had propped himself on the pillows. “Savory or sweet?” Greg asked.

When My responded ‘savory,’ Greg fed him a bite of the salty ham quiche. “Bloody hell.”

Greg grinned at the rare swearing from his pretty husband. “I know. Morris outdid himself. He was cooking away a problem.”

My managed his own scone, spreading it liberally with clotted cream. “He must solve it immediately for our health’s sake.”

Greg tried a bite of the spinach quiche, rolling his eyes at the morsel of heaven, then feeding some to My. “He and Tuppy are sorting it out as we speak.”

“Tuppy?”

“The all powerful Holmes didn’t see what was right under his nose.” Greg popped a spoonful of oatmeal into My’s mouth before he could protest.

There was a pause as they both enjoyed the warm sweet porridge. “With a meal this grand, I almost hate to see his issues resolved.”

My offered Greg the scone, then ran a finger across Greg’s lips when some of the cream dripped.

“He’s frightened out of his wits. Remember those days?”

“With disturbing clarity.”

“We muddled through.”

Greg sliced two velvety slabs of Brie which went surprisingly well with the fruity oatmeal. There was a cathedral hush of appreciation for the breakfast followed by the pop of the cork as Greg opened the cider. He got My his own glass so they could toast each other.

“To baby oil, breakfasts, and bed.”

Their glasses clinked and they drank deeply, the bubbles tickling their tongues.

My held up his glass for more, and then returned the toast. “To my beautiful husband who makes every day a honeymoon.”

Greg felt shy. “Well, not every day.”

“Our worst day together is still happier than my best day before I met you.”

“My, you silver tongued devil. Forever the diplomat.”

They kissed almost to the point of abandoning the food for a fuck, but it was too damn good to waste. They ate themselves logy. Greg had just enough energy to remove the tray from the bed and pop the leftovers in the tiny fridge. Then he stripped off his very gratuitous clothing and climbed back under the duvet. They lay on their sides for a round of pillow talk.
“Have I redeemed myself for the all in one yet?”

“You paid that debt with last night’s magnificent fuck.” My kissed Greg’s thumb.

“Even without the sleeper and the bottle, you are always going to be my baby.”

“I liked it very much when you sang to me.”

“I love feeding you and watching over you.”

“After our lie down, maybe we could watch some more *Wind in the Willows*?”

“You really liked it? You aren’t just being kind?”

“I’m your furry friend to the end.”

“You are definitely furry.” Greg ran a worshipping hand down My’s chest.

“Is there wind in your willow?” My caressed Greg’s sleepy cock only to have Greg express wind most decidedly.

“You did ask, love.”

“I did and now my plans of giving you an after breakfast blow job are dashed to bits.”

Greg thought of the plate shattering on the kitchen floor. “I am so lucky to have you and that we’re over the worst of the adjustments. I’m not sure I’d want to be where it’s all brand new.”

“We are settling in, I suppose.”

My leaned over for a kiss. “You really did fuck the angst out of me, sweetheart. I’m happy. Can you believe it?”

“I can because you make me happy. We are sickening.”

“I shall get a special dispensation from the Queen to be as cloying and twee as we see fit.”

Greg fell on My’s neck with nips and slurpy kisses. “Enough talk. My breakfast has settled and one of us is about to get a blowjob.”

“Which?”

“Me.” My obligingly went into the dangerous territory under the duvet, and a while later, Greg returned the favor, My’s cock taking a shine to the application of clotted cream. They slept until the twilight of winter’s afternoon, warm and safe and happy.
Chapter Summary

As My continues to think that small boys are capable of being surrogate parents and estate managers, Greg gets them a babysitting gig so that his husband can see just how vulnerable little boys are. After an intense night of babysitting, Greg rewards My with a matinee of mirror sex captured on film.

Word Count c. 12,340

The tribe has spoken; no more infantilism although there will be references to the failure of the experiment.

Warning: This chapter contains another attempt at fisting with some painful results.

Luke Allen Tillotson, we do not waste food!” Luke’s older sister smacked him full across the face, and it echoed in the close confines of the limo.

Greg and My had their hands full doing something that they had never imagined for themselves … babysitting. When My had continued to maintain that five years old was mature enough to bear the loss of a friend without crying and that nine years old was responsible enough to run a household, Greg had asked Rich Tillotson, Walt’s assistant, if they could babysit, knowing in Rich’s huge brood there had to be children of the appropriate age. If My could see how small and vulnerable little boys actually were, he might begin to forgive himself for being human and stop the self punishment that was still his default mindset.

After a quick tour of the wee Tillotson flat, My and Greg had looked at the meager tins laid out for the children’s supper and herded all comers including baby Hannah into the limo for a trip to McDonald’s. Matthew, age nine and Mark just turned six had clambered into the front, and Art had not questioned it as long as they promised to keep on their safety belts.

Eleven year old Ruthie had made two things very clear before climbing into the back with a ladylike poise. She was nearly twelve and she preferred the name ‘Kyla.’ Not having seen her in over a year, Greg was a bit uncomfortable with how a chubby tomboy that he used to bounce on his knee had become a curvy and knowing pre teen with a new and disturbing crush on Mr. Greg.

Baby Hannah proved a welcome buffer. Six months was a wiggling armful of fussing baby not at all happy with a bottle in place of her mummy’s breast. Little Luke age five, who seldom spoke since three older siblings did it for him, surprised them all by announcing in a piping voice that “I sit by Mr. MyCot.”

Greg watched, not sure who to dote on more, as a pale freckled hand lifted a little rump onto the plush seat of the limo. Master Luke’s feet were straight out on the deep seat, his little heels not reaching the edge.

All had gone well for most of the adventure. The Tillotson’s were raucous, hungry children, but they were polite and grateful for the treat. My ordered double what he thought they might need, consulting with Art via intercom with a great deal of ‘assistance.’ Art’s two co-pilots were very excited about their pilot’s skillful maneuvering of the vehicle through the drive up window.
Greg knew that My had been Sherlock’s most invested parent, but he would never have guessed at how clever and patient My would be with children. He watched as My retrieved a slim attaché case, “Here’s your very own tray table, Luke, just like on the airplane.”

Luke had been pleased with how the case rested on his lap and gave him a private dining area. There was quiet munching for awhile. Even Ruthie’s/Kyla’s pre-teen sulk was lightened by her lady like salad and fruit walnut cup. My took a tentative bite of the double cheeseburger he was feeding to Greg and rolled his eyes in pleasure. “How can something that tastes so right be so wrong?”

It was while they were heating Hannah’s bottle in the large cup of hot water My had ordered for tea that Luke spilled his milk in the case and in his flustered embarrassment dumped the whole lot on the floor. Ruthie aged by twenty years on the spot and knelt before Luke scolding in a harsh voice. “What would Mum say? His fine posh case ruined because you were careless. You’ll eat every bite of mush you’ve made. Luke Allen Tillotson, we do not waste food!”

Then she smacked him, and even baby Hannah stopped her fussing at the ugly echo. They could hear traffic sounds for the first time and the happy chatter of Matthew and Mark on the intercom.

Luke sat up straight, his cheek going white and then red. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes blinked rapidly, but no tears fell.

Ruthie said through gritted teeth. “No sniveling or I’ll give you something to cry about.”

My and Greg had watched this exchange with horror, not just for Luke but for an eleven year old who had to grow up too soon. “That’s enough, Ruthie,” Greg said intentionally using the name she hated.

Luke was reaching for his milk soaked sandwich, his head hanging down.

“No, love,” My said. “We’ll get you another.”


“I shall take it home to my dog.” My pressed the intercom. “Art, we had an accident and need another Happy Meal, please.”

Shouts of joy were heard with Art’s cheerful acknowledgment. “Two chuffed young men will be happy for another tour.”

Then My shut the case with its controversial contents and stowed it back under the seats. “Come here, little man,” he said, pulling Luke up to straddle his lap.

Looking directly into the grief stricken face, he said, “You are allowed to make mistakes. I know it was an accident.”

Luke hung his head, the tears brought closer by empathy. Greg watched My’s long fingers brush across the angry red mark, “That must have really hurt.”

“Not as much as sometimes.” Luke would not look up.

My and Greg exchanged a look of agreement that they would be investigating the household further. If someone was hitting the children, even if it were an older sibling, then something was amiss with this family. But for now, Luke needed safety and comfort.
“Do you know what I do when I get hurt? Even if it’s just my feelings?”

The blond ringlets shook, and Luke crept further into ‘Mr. MyCot’s’ lap.

“I cry and then I feel better.”

“Crying is for babies.” Luke had his first show of spirit, gazing at baby Hannah with disdain.

“Well then, I must be a very big baby.” My winked at Greg.

Luke put his arms around My’s neck, but it took some reassuring whispers before he let go, sobbing out the injustice into his friend’s new jumper. My rubbed circles on the small back.

Greg watched, knowing that except for the lighter curls, he was seeing My comfort a young Sherlock. He ached for the ginger haired boy that hadn’t got the comfort that he so generously gave.

Ruthie was biting her lip and picking at a loose thread on her jeans; Greg hated her for bullying her brother, but she had been recruited as the little mother, her parents’ choices forcing her to maturity for chores but not rewards.

Greg fished in his pocket for his mobile. “I’ll trade you this for Hannah’s bottle.”

He saw excitement in her face for a second, but unlimited mobile with internet privileges must have seemed too good to be true. Still she tested the milk expertly on her forearm and handled the bottle over. Greg completed the swap.

Soon Ruthie was happily texting her friends, lost in giggles and talk of boys, Luke trumpeted into My’s large cotton handkerchief and then laid his head back down content. Little Hannah had resigned herself to doing without a human nipple and was making up for lost time. Greg looked down at her chubby cheeks, her strawberry blond curls so like My’s must have been.

A pain pierced him on the left side of his chest, not a heart attack, but a heart ache. The sharp yearning he had felt when buying baby things for My returned, but it could never be. It was a prayer he did not dare pray.

He was going to stay in this moment no matter how much it pinched him later. There was no question that they had the means to support a child, and My even had the funds to pay surrogates so that they could have biological children, but to start so late when both of them were in their forties was just not fair. Their child would miss out on grandparents and the boundless energy that younger parents had as well as the stigma of Sherlock being their youngest living relative outside the immediate family.

It was unfair to make that choice for an innocent child, and just as questionable for Michelle Tillotson to pop out baby after baby so that each was pushed from the nursery way too soon.

And yet when My raised his cheek from where it rested on that small curly head, something deep inside Greg fluttered. My’s face was glowing, all the worry of the past week gone. Whether they had children of their own or not, they could still have children in their lives. It would be something that they could enjoy together. Greg had hope. He was also pleased that they could continue to discover new things about each other as their first year together was drawing to a close.

The new meal was procured for little Luke as well as additional servings for the hungry copilots in the front. My ordered his own cheeseburger, stating that he would run the calories off getting three little monkeys in bed.
My kept Luke on his lap and helped him with his sandwich and drink, holding whatever was not in use. Ruthie had been smiling for long moments, chuckling to herself as her thumbs flew over the buttons of Greg’s phone, which would never be quite the same.

Back at the cramped flat, Greg changed Baby Hannah, the foul smell of a breast milk poo bringing back memories of his niece and nephews’ babyhood. My shepherded the three boys into the bath, discouraging dawdling by timing them with the stop watch feature on his Tissot Gent’s watch which was also and fortunately waterproof.

The flat was drafty, the cement block walls communicating cold and damp so Ruthie pointed to fleece all in ones hung on colorful hooks on the wall, each boy’s name written on the tag with a laundry pen. “Should have brought mine and we’d have a chorus,” My said with a wink.

Greg blushed. He wondered if without the sleeper, My might have got what he needed from their little experiment. But he had been more intentional about cuddles and sometimes taking the lead in household decisions, and My was seemingly content. The nightmares were back to the normal level of two to three per week, and Greg was better able to comfort, knowing their content.

Hannah’s plump bottom fit neatly into Greg’s hand so that he could use the other to pat her back or direct a wayward boy toward the hair dryer. Soon three rosy cheeked lads had curls or spikes and were tucked away, begging for bedtime stories. Their library was limited, something Greg knew that My would remedy on the sly. In the mean time, foregoing a vast anthology of grim Bible stories, My told a very scary tale of a boy who was required to dress in smart clothes every day and eat vegetables at every meal including breakfast. His fun time was limited to historical biographies and piano lessons, and if he ever got dirty or loud, he would be spanked and sent to bed without his tea.

“That little boy is in this very room,” My said suddenly and all three boys yelled, enjoying every minute of their shivers.

Greg’s heart clutched a bit because the more he learned of My’s childhood, the angrier he became and the more he admired his husband’s survival skills.

Almost indiscernibly, My was slowing down the pace to help the boys unwind. He told about adventures and things he had seen, moving from exciting to quiet like a little dog barking at him from a houseboat on the Seine or a man in Finland who kept his reindeer in the house. Then as the two youngest fell asleep, he talked quietly to Matthew, asking him a few questions about school and then recited Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” as bloodthirsty and grim a tale as any boy could want.

My’s clout and Matt’s tolerance for poetry were vastly improved by My’s toys and accessories, the limo, the posh watch, and unlimited money for food. The rhythm of the lines as My’s voice grew softer and softer soon had even a nine year old dozing, his hand curled beneath his cheek. My tucked the blanket firmly around each one and turned out the bedside lamp, leaving on the string of fairy lights tacked to the wall.

Ruthie was curled in a corner of the lounge since it was also her bedroom. She would be allowed to stay up until her parents returned. Greg and My paused in the galley kitchen long enough to exchange a kiss. “I love you, sweetheart,” Greg needed to say.

“Love you too. The fact that you are amazing with babies is extremely appealing and if I can stay awake, I plan to reward you thoroughly and specifically for this wonderful evening. Now, stop hogging her.”

My’s huge hands cradled Hannah who sighed in her sleep. He took her to the rocker and settled
in, holding her in his arms for awhile and then over his shoulder where she draped herself contentedly.

When Ruthie cast a predatory eye at Greg and sidled closer, he went to the kitchen and began deep cleaning, wiping down the counters, sweeping the floor, scouring the sink. Then he did the same in the loo until everything sparkled. He had been blissfully blind to how rough Rich Tillotson had it and he could understand why the man always volunteered to see Walt home. It gave him a good Christian excuse for staying away from his overflowing flat a little longer.

As Greg came out of the loo, rolling his sleeves back down, a small figure in yellow fleece passed him. “Luke? Little mate? What do you need?”

Luke would not be denied. He trotted straight into the living room and climbed into My’s lap. “Greg, would you take the baby, please?”

Greg fetched Hannah and My shifted Luke up into her spot on his shoulder and rocked as he rubbed and patted the little fellow’s back. Luke wound the fingers of one hand into My’s jumper and the thumb of his other hand went in his mouth.

“Mum doesn’t want him sucking his thumb,” Ruthie announced.

“You’re mum will have to cope,” My said and Greg grinned at the frostiness of his tone. But the Iceman was no match for a preteen, and he received an eye roll and a flounce from young ‘‘Kyla.’

Ruthie’s mates signed off one by one for bedtime, and soon she was fast asleep, the sweet little girl that had toddled after Mr. ‘Strad’ the way Luke was now worshiping Mycroft. Greg slid the mobile from her grasp and put a quilt over her where she huddled in the chair. His knees creaked as he bent to do so, Hannah resting comfortably in one arm. Luke was sprawled across My’s lap, arms and legs everywhere, mouth hanging open.

My and Greg had maintained silence, some sort of tacit agreement to stay in the moment, but when Greg settled on the couch with one last bottle for Hannah, My again said quietly, “I love you.”

Then he fell into thought. Greg wondered if he had gone to the village. He also wondered if Rich and Michelle were having some much needed grown up time in the suite he had reserved for them. He had even offered to keep the children overnight at the flat or the townhouse, but Michelle did not want to leave the baby for so long since Hannah had very little experience with bottles. Greg was determined that they would try again to give the couple a full night’s rest. He was sure Morris and Tuppy would help and John might even come over at least for part of the night. They could close off the rooms with antiques and get a baby gate for the stairs and John could do wellness check ups on the sly.

There was the grate of a key in the lock, and Greg’s dreams were postponed. Michelle held out her arms for the baby and even though Hannah was obviously working on the bottle, she slid the child into her gaping blouse to nurse. Greg realized that baby Hannah was not the one with separation anxiety.

My blushed furiously at being in the presence of a breast so lightly contained and hurried to put Luke in his bed. Rich got his wife a bath towel and draped it over her. “Sorry about that, Greg. Not everyone is as open as Michelle.”

Greg changed the subject while making focused eye contact with Rich. “Were you able to relax?”

But Michelle answered in soft breathy tones. “We surely did. It was a lovely room and the perfect
place to tell Rich that we’re going to be blessed again.”

“Blessed?”

“We have another little bundle on the way. A special present for little Hannah’s first birthday.”

Chills of shock ran down Greg’s spine at the wide doll eyes of Michelle as she sentenced the family to more crowding and more poverty. He watched the desperation cross Rich’s face followed by bleak resignation. He reached out a hand as if a lifeline and Rich took it, holding onto it rather than shaking it.

My came from the boys’ room, straightening his jumper and Greg whose hand was being crushed looked to him for help. “Michelle has just told me that there’s going to be another baby.”

“Good lord,” My muttered with a shiver.

“Yes, we thank the good Lord for giving us these precious treasures.”

Greg had never wanted to smack a woman so much in all his life maybe even more than he had wanted to bludgeon his mother in law. “They are precious treasures and we’d like to have more time with them when you can spare them.”

“I really appreciate the intention, Mr. Lestrade, but Rich wasn’t honest with me about your situation. I really can’t in good conscience expose my children to your lifestyle. I’m not judging you understand, but I’ve got to be careful about what they see. We all must set an example for little minds.”

Greg thought he might vomit. He had experienced very little direct prejudice lately and hearing it in the wispy voice of a nursing mother made it more disgusting. All he could do was stare, hoping she would have the good grace to backpedal or blush.

“I’ll pray for you both that you would see the error of your ways and find strength in God to walk a healthier path. And when that happens, you’ll be welcome to babysit any time. Separately of course.”

“Of course. And I shall pray for you that God guide you raising these children to be tolerant and compassionate in an ugly world. Now my husband is very tired as yours is after receiving such a shock. We’ll leave you to it.” With that parting shot, the Iceman ushered Greg out of the flat.

Rich came after them. “Greg, I’m sorry. She really does appreciate all that you did, and if it were up to me, you could see the kids any time. God knows I need the rest.”

“You are the breadwinner. You must have some say.”

Rich shook his head. “The price is too high. She had the two miscarriages after Luke and now she’s convinced that she’s got to replace the two we lost. It might be post partum depression but she won’t take the pills while breastfeeding and she won’t wean her. I’ve given up to keep the peace and —”

His face contorted but somehow he managed to keep the tears in. “And I’ve told you way too much. I’m sorry. Sorry for all of it.”

“It’s alright, mate. We’ll find other ways to help. And you come to me. We’ll have a pint or lunch or even if you need a nap, you can use my office.”

“Thanks, Greg. You’re a diamond. Microphone, you be good to him now.” Rich grinned but it
was strained.

My walked quickly to the stairs and said when Greg caught up with him, “He’ll hate his weakness in the morning. Best to get away before he spills anymore.”

Greg’s cheeks burned with anger and shame as they climbed in the limo. “I’m sorry, My, that I took you into such a situation. I had no idea. I mean I knew she was devout, but she was never so judgmental before.”

“You were never married and happy before.” My lifted Greg’s hand and kissed the wedding ring there.

“What if one of the boys is gay? Dad had his struggles with it, but I always knew I was loved. Before anything else, I was his son. And you know Mum.” Greg scrubbed his hands over his face and then tugged at his hair, trying to get the ugly words out of his brain.

“We were both lucky in that regard. Mummy’s only regret was that a lack of grandchildren meant less people to control.”

“Your dad was a right dick about it all.”

“And he died before he could do much damage on that score.”

Greg questioned the truth of that statement, but was glad to hear My mentioning his father with less fear and trembling. They might be able to bury Lord Holmes after all.

“She shouldn’t be near children at all, let alone be a mother.”

“We’ll watch over them, Greg. She can’t stop love.”

My smoothed down Greg’s ruffled hair. “It doesn’t change what a wonderful time I had tonight.”

Greg remembered the purpose of the evening. “So you can forgive me for all the work when it was supposed to be date night.”

“It was something novel and all consuming and sweet and funny. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Very surprising and creative choice. I have no idea how to top it.”

“You just wait until tomorrow. It is another adventure in creativity. But that’s all you are getting out of me.”

But the conversation faltered as Greg’s anger at Michelle still hummed through him. He turned over all sorts of hateful responses now that it was too late. It had hurt and for the first time since My had been missing on the black ops mission, Greg felt scared and unsafe. He wanted comfort and reassurance but there was none. He wondered if My had fallen asleep in the dark of the moving car until he said, “They were so small.”

Greg reminded himself that this realization had been the goal of the evening not whatever he was feeling. “Yes, they are. Small and easily wounded.”

“Luke is little more than a baby. I couldn’t have been that young.”

“But you were, love. Being a little taller, they expected more out of you than you were ready for.”

“I think I must have been more intelligent.”

“That doesn’t mean that you were emotionally ready for what was heaped on you.”
“Then the way Ruthie and Matthew had to help with the little ones. I suppose that’s what it was like for Sherlock, the bullying and the picking. I wasn’t a very good surrogate father.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but again, you were a boy raising a baby without any encouragement or support from the adults around you. Nobody is that good of a parent the first time round and you were so young.”

“That’s why you volunteered us, wasn’t it?”

“You can see right through me. The world’s only consulting husband.” Greg didn’t even try to keep secrets much anymore although he did hope that the following day’s activities held some surprise.

My struggled through the problem. “I didn’t really have a chance, did I?”

“No, nor anybody in your corner.”

“Until you.”

Then My put his hand palm up on the seat and Greg took it. He continued to turn over Michelle’s ugly words, and My was likely still punishing himself for being a bad nine year old dad to an infant. But they were together and for a little while, the world could do nothing else to hurt them.

At home, they left coats in the foyer and slowly climbed the stairs. My dragged himself up, step by step using the hand rail. Greg pulled him in for a hug, and then in the dim light of the staircase, he tried to smooth the wrinkles from My’s forehead. “We can think tomorrow. Let’s leave all the shite behind us with our coats.”

My nodded and they moved faster to the bedroom where Greg turned on the small gas fire. He began making cocoa in their little microwave even if Morris said it was an abomination to heat milk in such a way. When he looked up, My was in his vest and pants, his dark socks sagging on thin, white legs. Greg rushed to catch up, soon in his own vest and pants.

My was cleaning his teeth when an enormous yawn split his face. Greg was doing his evening ball scratching, but stopped to rest his forehead between My’s shoulder blades. Domestic bliss, a Saturday night safely navigated and nothing but the duvet required their attention for some hours. He wrapped his arms around My’s middle, making sure to lift the vest enough to get his hand on some belly fur. These daily rituals were one of the best parts of being married.

He had waited a long time to have someone in his bed every night, for the passion and for the routine. “Go on, love. I’ll bring you your cocoa in a minute.”

My was already under the duvet when Greg brought the two steaming cups. This had been one of their nods to the empty spaces My’s heart still had from not being nurtured as a child. It wasn’t a bottle and no nappy was required, but the smell of warm milk and a friend to share it with were popular comforts for the time being. Greg had his favorite childhood drink out of the cat piss novelty mug that Morris had given him on his birthday and if My chose to drink his out of the Peter Rabbit mug, whose bloody concern was it anyway?

They were both naked and frequently shagged after their bedtime treat. Anybody that could fuck like My did had nothing to worry about as far as his masculinity was concerned. But the extra work of five lively children and the continued emotional toll of probing so deeply without the help of a therapist had worn My down. Greg slipped the small cup from his hands, and My slumped over against the pillows. He was fast asleep in the time it took Greg to extinguish the gas flames and the lights with the remote. Considering the amount of times Greg wanted to make My come
the next day, skipping a night seemed prudent. He sunk with relief into the pillow and tried to follow his own advice to leave worries downstairs.

The next morning involved a late, leisurely breakfast eaten in the breakfast nook, the gray drizzle offset by a wealth of candles and bright dishes. Many grins and winks were exchanged between Greg and Morris until My protested. “What is going on?”

“I have a date planned, sweetheart, and it starts with a matinee. A ballet of sorts. We’ll just have time for a soak before we go.”

“The tub is already prepared,” Morris said, clearing their plates while he bit back another boyish grin.

Greg knew that any time he and My were away meant play time for Morris and Tuppy in the big house. Their romance was picking up speed, but Morris didn’t seem to be worried about it any longer.

They sunk into a steaming bath that smelt of citrus and sage, but Greg put off My’s wandering hands with the caution that they would have to be there on time to fully enjoy the experience. He knew that My could come more than once in a day, but he wasn’t sure about himself. His cock was much improved but not infallible.

After the bath, Greg said, “Pick out my clothes, love. Whatever is appropriate for an afternoon event. I’ve some business in here.”

Greg hoped My would assume intestinal business, but Greg had a bigger challenge in mind for his own ass. He wasn’t sure of all the course of what they might get up to, but he wanted options that hadn’t been tried in awhile. So he prepared himself as best he could and with surprising My as his highest goal, he got the largest plug they had ever used inside himself. More time was spent in getting his erection to manageable proportions before he needed to dress.

All went as planned with more winks and nudges from Morris and Art, who was happily settled to wait on them in the car with movies and an ample lunch prepared by Morris. The shabby chic area that Art had been directed to seemed plausible enough for ballet, filled with shopworn studios and coffee houses. Industrial redeemed by paint and fabric. Since parking at the front was not allowed, My seemed unsuspecting of anything as they walked a few doors down and entered the empty building.

“Not much of a crowd,” he said but followed Greg willingly into the empty lift.

It was only when Greg took keys from his pocket that My tilted his head and widened his eyes.

“Ballet for two,” Greg said and gestured him into the large, echoing dance studio.

Their steps clicked on the shiny surface as they walked to the middle of the mirror lined expanse, full length mirrors on three walls. Greg flipped on all the lights since even a fourth wall of floor to ceiling windows could not dispel the winter gray funk.

“Ours for the day, for the dance. Anthea provided us with a videographer who’s very discreet. She’s been vetted for a variety of projects, personal and professional.”

My was puzzled but willing and took Greg’s hand when offered. Greg had prepared everything over the course of the past week so there was a sort of choreography to seating My on a high stool between two freestanding ballet barres. He slipped My’s coat off and whispered in his ear, “It’s Sunday and I plan to worship your body.”
My swallowed, his long throat begging for Greg’s tongue. “We’re actually being filmed.”

“Professional quality with edits and all. Tasteful soundtrack optional.”

“Good god.” My ran a finger under his collar to make room for another gulp.

“You’ll see it all live in the mirrors though.”

“It’s one thing to use the house’s security feed, but this is blatant hedonism.” My loosened his tie.

Greg tilted My’s chin up to kiss him, enjoying being the taller one for a change. “Seems like we haven’t taken a whole day for sex since the villa.”

“I’ve held us back with all my problems.”

“Hush now. We aren’t doing self recrimination today. I’m in charge and I say today is about fucking. Or making love if you’d rather.”

Greg hoped that the babysitting had allowed My to give himself some grace, and that a full day of sexual pampering would get them past the awkwardness of their failed experiment with infantilism. They needed a success and some escapism, but whatever happened, they were together and if they both came, it would be a good day.

So Greg began a slow seduction that he wanted to last a long while depending on the stamina of his zip against a straining cock and his ass against a giant plug. He removed My’s jacket and tie and draped them over the barre, covering a small bag of supplies that he had placed there during his preparations the previous day. Then he unbuttoned My’s shirt cuff and ran his fingers over My’s wrist, enjoying the rapid pulse beating there. When he lifted the wrist to his mouth and licked across the delicate skin, My’s eyes were already glazing over.

He pulled My’s head to his chest and slowly rubbed his back, relishing the feel of his favorite slipover, the blue Fair Isle one he’d got My for his birthday. Another kiss followed, of course. He walked slowly back around the barres to put himself behind My and held his cheek against his husband’s and pointed both their gazes toward the mirror. “Look at us. Not bad, eh? Two blokes that get the job done same as anybody. God, you’re gorgeous.”

My’s cheeks were flushed by the attention and the sweet shyness that nobody but Greg ever saw. After all the things they’d done together, some of them deliciously tawdry, and all of the rows and the pain and the saving the world bits, there was an innocence when he gave himself up to Greg that was devastating in its trust.

Greg took off the slipover, his fingers caressing it in spite of himself. A hitch in My’s breathing was the only sound in the room. Greg’s own breaths were rough and his voice was huskier than ever, a fact that would only enhance My’s enjoyment. Greg rubbed eager hands down My’s shirt front, My’s nipples welcoming him. The studio’s slight chill would keep them pert throughout the proceedings.

He unbuttoned enough to slide the shirt down My’s shoulders so that he could kiss the back of that long nape where the ginger hair came down in a point and only the most vigilant of barbering kept it from curling. He held his lips there until he got the squirming that he was looking for. “Your body is the greatest gift I’ve ever been given,” he whispered into a reddening ear before gently biting the lobe.

His hands went where they needed to be, slipping down inside the open shirt to caress the springy ginger hair. He lightly pinched at sensitive nubs. “Shall we show her these, all pretty and pink?”
Greg walked back around, his footfalls intentionally noisy on the dance floor, building the anticipation before he flicked the rest of the buttons open and spread the edges of the shirt back. He squatted before My who was needing most of his remaining brain cells to stay upright on the stool. The plug made its presence known, but Greg had important work before him. His tongue darted out and teased puffy areolas, licking aside the hair until the pink tip stood out on the background of dark ginger like a rose fallen on rich soil.

Greg was pleased with how romantic he was being. This was high quality stuff he was inventing. Barbara Cartland had nothing on him. He fixed the other side, pleased as he worked to feel My’s cock, hard as iron pipe, straining against his trousers.

He walked back around, his legs and ass a little sore from keeping his steps slow. His fingers slid down My’s arms, taking the shirt off. It fluttered to the floor. He danced his fingers lightly up and down My’s freckled arms, still My’s favorite affectionate gesture. “She’s looking at your chest, baby. Your pink nipples ready for sucking in their nest of fur. But only I get to touch because you’re mine. But anybody can watch. Maybe later, I’ll take you to the window, naked and stretched out. Show the world your pretty cock.”

My cried out, one of the lights buzzing at the noise. Greg soothed him with kisses to his neck. “You need this, need to be seen and I love showing you off. Watch me touch you, love.”

My was redirected to the mirror quite often because his eyes wanted to stay closed when he was feeling good. But Greg was patient as he worked his hands slowly up and down My’s sides, mixing affection with the teasing.

“Our videographer will be impressed with how firm your belly is. You’ve kept yourself toned for me. Got to keep fit for all the fucking we do.” Greg undid My’s fly, his hands shaking with how much he wanted to take My in hand, but he disciplined himself to only slide waistbands down enough to rub My’s belly.

“Greg, please.” My licked his lips and bumped his hips up.

“Begging won’t help. I already know what you need, but I’ll give it to you in my own time. And just so you won’t cheat—”

Greg reached in his bag of supplies and pulled out recreational handcuffs and snapped one cuff to the barre and the other to My’s wrist. He repeated with another set on the other barre. Now My would be able to move but not to touch his own cock. “Your cock is mine, to touch or not. We are taking our time today.”

My pulled at the cuffs; they made a happy jangling as they moved freely over the barre but not enough to get My what he wanted or to let him stop anything he didn’t want that Greg might do. Greg ran his thumb nail lightly down My’s spine all the way past lowered waistbands to the cleft of his tight, sweet ass. He rubbed a little but it wasn’t near My’s hole. “Is this where you need me?”

“God, yes. Need you inside me.” My hunched over, trying to give Greg access to his ass, scooting on the stool to shift his trousers lower.

“Not yet.”

Greg walked slowly around again, watching as My’s chest heaved which only highlighted the toned pecs and the swollen state of his nipples. Greg was in agony himself by now, but somehow he kept focused on the goal of total escape and knelt to remove My’s shoes and socks. “Don’t want to neglect your feet.”
He moved to the side so that My could watch in the mirror as he lifted a foot to suck at toes which were curled with pent up lust. “Do you think you might want your cock sucked like this, baby?”

My made a strangled, wordless noise, and Greg felt triumphant. There was no worry for My today beyond when he might get fucked. Greg worked his tongue in between two of the long flexible toes. “I could go at your slit like this.”

My’s nostrils flared and he again tried to move his ass around to get his trousers off. He couldn’t stand without falling as long as Greg had hold of one foot. His other toe was leaving deep impressions in the tumbling mat that had been placed beneath the stool and barres.

“That’s enough of that then,” Greg said, concerned that My might lose his balance. “I think it’s time to show off those toned legs. Maybe we can get them wrapped around me. Up you go.”

My gripped the barres heavily with his cuffed hands as he needed to stand for his trousers to be tugged down. Greg had to reach up to keep the pants hanging low on his hips. Even so the trousers caught on My’s erection which was an absolute sundial of a hard on.

Making sure My was seated again securely on the stool, he ran his fingers up My’s legs, loving the brush of hair and lean muscle. As he tickled behind My’s knees, an always successful spot, My grunted. Greg loved taking him apart to the point that he made noises instead of words. He stood, thinking that he hadn’t realized what a workout he would get or how sore his ass might be from the constant plug action. His fingers dipped under the hem of My’s boxers, stroking over his thighs, watching My’s cock wiggle.

“Anyone watching would want these sexy legs wrapped around them.”

“Scrawny,” My mumbled, squinching his eyes shut.

“Hush. None of that, Mycroft Holmes.” Greg was angry that self doubt intruded so easily. He put one arm behind My’s shoulders and tipped him backwards until My’s torso was completely supported by Greg’s arm. Then he kissed him, sucking hard on his tongue until My was gasping for air.

“Tell me about your legs, My.”

“Strong?”

“Strong just like you, baby.” Greg rubbed his free hand up and down My’s chest and over his nipples. “And?

“Furry…freckles?”

“Yes, all of those. What else?” Greg was cradling My, willing him to see good things.

“Pink?”

“Yes, sometimes when I rub them or you get all flushed from a good fuck. What else?”

“Pretty like my cock.”

“That’s it, love. Got it in almost one. So pretty. Shall I call the cleaning crew in from downstairs? Have them look at your body?”

My was using Greg’s support to arch his back, trying to get his cock near anything that would give him purchase. “Fuck me while they watch?”
My was almost out of his mind with need to suggest such a thing, but it was part of the fantasy. Greg wondered why he didn’t do this more often. An armful of naked My in broad daylight was just what the doctor ordered. “Let’s unwrap your pretty cock first. It’s getting very tired of fighting your pants.”

My’s eager cock needed very little help to spring free of his sodden pants. Greg wondered if there was any come left in the poor thing. He lifted My enough to work the pants loose from under his ass. Questioning if My could keep himself upright anymore, Greg tried nonetheless, holding My until he could grip the barres again to keep himself on the stool. They weren’t even to the fucking yet and My seemed spent. Best get to the main event. He rummaged in his supply bag for the lube and popped the cap open. “If you want fucked, love, you’ll have to stand a bit.”

My knocked the stool over getting upright. He had his forearms resting on the barres and bent to give Greg better access. The fantasy that he had spun suddenly made Greg feel as possessive as a cave man. He squeezed hard at one peach sweet cheek. “This is my ass. I’m the only one that goes inside here.”

My’s hole was hungry for Greg’s fingers, taking in two easily. He was just that relaxed and Greg thought how he had been made for My’s pleasure. My pressed back, making a noise that might have been ‘more.’

“Watch in the mirror, love. Watch me open you.” Greg took time, one of his favorite things was watching his tanned fingers disappear inside the innocent pink hole. He cupped his free hand around My’s high round cheek and rubbed circles, his skin as swarthy as a gypsy’s against the pale mound.

“Your skin is the softest thing I have ever touched.” Keeping his fingers in, enjoying the feel of My squeezing down on them, Greg watched the mirror for awhile.

“I could let them come in and just touch your skin to see how soft it is. Would you like lots of hands on you, love? Stroking just like this?”

Greg ran his hand down My’s throat, feeling the pulse rapid against his palm and then the soft chest hair and the surprise of the hard nipples, still moist from tonguing. “I’d have to pull them off you, My. Because I’m the only one that gets to suck your nipples and put my fingers inside you. But they could watch me. They could stay until you come all over yourself. Would you like that?”

He slid in a third finger, gently pressing for the spot that he could find so quickly. Who said monogamous sex had to be boring? It was a great comfort to find My’s prostate with such ease and to know what My liked. He stroked along the inner walls, knowing that the calluses from hard work and guitar playing made My tingle inside.

My hung between the barres, head down, but now and then he looked up, shuddering with lust at the picture of them. Watching their private films after the fact was one step removed, but this was in real time, Greg’s fingers inside him while he watched. “Please fuck me. Please? Oh god.”

Greg wiped his hands on a towel in the supply bag, My’s wide stance for balance would make up for their minor height difference. He worked through button, zip, and flies and slid home. The clenching of his own hole pressed the plug where he needed it most for pleasure and least for the slow seeing to that he wanted to give My. But he did it, he paused, letting the feel of My’s sweet ass engulf him, making My stay in the moment.

To get what he needed, My had to stay upright which put him where he needed to be to see himself, naked, spread, and impaled. “Watch me take you, My. See what I see. You are so
beautiful.”

Greg was suddenly close to tears. My’s vulnerability pierced him as sure as his cock was pressed into My’s body. Sex had reached a new level now that My was fully open to him emotionally. He pulled My back against him so that he could only make small thrusts. This wasn’t about gymnastics. It was the joining that mattered.

Greg was breathing heavy now. He gritted his teeth with the effort of keeping his cock slow and steady. The careful slide was killing them both. With his arms trembling on the barres from the strain of his full weight, My arched up and back, getting Greg deep inside him.

They went on that way for some time, teetering on the very edge of climax. Finally, Greg felt the telltale tightening and keeping one arm around My’s waist for his safety, he put his other hand on My’s cock and pumped it once. Then he gripped it as it pulsed, spraying My’s load all over the mirror before he came quick and hard inside My’s still flexing hole.

He lowered My gently to the mat, kneeling behind him and pressing the release on the handcuffs so My’s weary arms could fall to his sides. Greg was soaked in sweat and gasping for air, but My was fucked nearly senseless, sprawled on the mat like an albino fawn, all tangled limbs and freckles.

Greg tried to reach the supply bag for the towel but ended up using My’s boxers for clean up. He was surprised to find that it was still light out. It seemed that he had been seducing My for hours. When he caught his breath, he grabbed the barre to lever them both up and half led, half carried My to the tiny one room flat at the back of the studio.

Morris had dressed it like the stage for a play. There was a small round table with candles ready to be lit and fine china. Greg knew that the picnic waiting would far exceed his request for a few sandwiches and packets of crisps. The futon was completely covered in a brown and luxurious fur rug. Greg couldn’t wait for My to feel it against his bare skin. There was a navy cashmere throw to put over him since even the little flat was quite drafty.

My lowered himself gratefully onto the fur, squirming a bit and wiggling his bottom. Greg put aside thought of the dry cleaning charge and tucked in beside his fucked out husband, pulling the throw over him. My was asleep almost instantly, his forehead totally free of worry lines. Greg had brought him peace.

Greg slept hard for about an hour, one of those deep heavy rests after an intense fuck. He woke to the gray twilight of almost darkness that city life provided. It was enough to get candles lit, not just on the table but at points around the room and in the studio. In the flat, where they would be eating, the candles were unscented, but a few sandalwood and vanilla candles were interspersed with the little votives in the main room. It still reeked of come.

Morris had promised to give both rooms a thorough airing and cleaning the day after. Greg hoped that he and Tuppy would just enjoy themselves. He didn’t know how far they had gone. Mirror sex seemed a bit robust so early, but then again, Morris had been celibate since Rory. He might be game for just about anything, a fact which he and Greg had carefully avoided discussing while setting up the getaway.

When My slept on, Greg curled up beside him again, watching the flickering candlelight play across his face. Finally, it felt creepy to watch such vulnerability while fully clothed himself. My had one fist curled on the pillow and all his paleness and pink skin looked as innocent as a child’s. Greg shucked off his clothes and curled up beside his husband, pulling a corner of the throw over his bare ass, the rug warming the rest of him.
He didn’t sleep but lay there, turning Michelle’s Tillotson’s ignorant words over and over in his mind, breaking his own rule about keeping the day for their pleasure. While he was imagining the good times they could have taking the boys to a football match, My called out his name. His voice was strained enough that Greg thought nightmare at first, but he soon realized that My’s subtle movements were not the discomfort and anxiety of a nightmare. My was humping the rug.

Greg turned on his side and began rubbing My’s back, feeling a bit left out of what sounded like some excellent sex. Just as his hand trailed to the curve of My’s ass, his body stiffened and he let out a familiar cry. His own voice woke him and he came to, confused and groggy. “Greg?”

“What is this place?”

“We are in a ballet studio. Where were you a minute ago?”

My curled on his side to bury his face in the pillow. “In Bruce’s cave again.”

Greg admired the flush that was all over My’s skin, part sex flush and part blushing shyness. “That bear just has to get a leg over.”

“I took you with me and the two of you…”

The next words were muffled in the pillow and when Greg rubbed My’s shoulder to ease the embarrassment, he felt the shiver go through My’s body. “It was a dream, sweetheart. You can’t help your dreams.”

“The two of you shared me. I was stretched so wide but with all the fur and the touching, I didn’t care at all. God, it was lovely.”

“I’d better feed you up while you’re sated because you’ll need another go in an hour.” Greg got up and pulled on his pants and vest since he would be preparing food.

“I’m sorry.”

“Never apologize for having the stamina of a rabbit, My. We both benefit.”

“I took you with me this time. Isn’t that better that you got to be with me? You felt so good inside me.”

Greg sunk down to the mattress and pulled My in for a long kiss, stroking his fingers back and forth across a hardened nipple. “You’re still having aftershocks. I’m glad, baby, so glad. Thanks for inviting me into your dreams.”

“I love you, Greg.”

“I never get tired of hearing you say it. Now rest under the covers until I get our picnic ready.”

Greg began putting the food on the table and it was a bloody buffet. Even after they ate their fill, enough would be left for Morris, Tuppy, and half of Sherlock’s homeless network. There was crusty onion dill bread for the chicken salad heavy with green olives, several kinds of cheese, a gigantic spinach salad with country bacon in an apple cider vinaigrette, fresh pears and pomegranates, a pasta salad with tomato and basil, several packets of crisps (the gourmet sort that had won Greg’s heart), and a cinnamon plum tart. The cooler contained bottles of lager, diet Coke, and Orangina. Another box contained thermoses of steaming carrot soup and coffee.
My came to the table in his pants and his unbuttoned shirt, which highlighted the glory of his chest. He fell to in a way that he seldom allowed himself and Greg felt victorious. There was limited small talk, just food held out to each other and happy smiles. But as they had slices of tart with the good strong coffee, My asked, “So how did you find this place?”

“I met a dance instructor on one of my cases and this is his space. He’s on tour with his troupe for the month and was glad of the rent. Anthea vetted everyone involved and hired the necessary security.”

“For once, I hadn’t even thought about security. And our film maker?”

“Here for the day. Morris made his own arrangements with her and Anthea and I don’t care to know.”

My reached across for Greg’s hand, his fingers warm. His thumb rubbed across Greg’s palm in a way that made Greg’s cock feel ready for the unusual second round. “You made the villa here for me in the city.”

He lifted Greg’s hand and kissed it, rubbing the rough fingers across his lips afterwards. They were as alone as they ever could be and the candlelight made it all feel even more forbidden. Still, Greg was mindful of respecting the space and his friends’ needs. He stood to begin tidying up, putting what they hadn’t used back in containers. “Finish your coffee, love,” he said when My moved to help him.

Finally, all was sorted and Greg reached for My’s empty cup. But My snaked out a finger and in one smooth pull, put Greg’s pants around his ankles and My’s mouth around his cock. He put his hands on My’s shoulders to steady himself as coffee warmed lips caressed him. My moaned around him as his fingers cupped Greg’s cheeks and found the plug. He worked it expertly until Greg was in danger of tumbling into My’s lap, knees too weak to stand.

“Wait, please?”

My stopped immediately, eyes questioning. Greg had to breathe for a little while before he could explain himself. “I wanted you inside me. I mean your hand.”

“Greg, we haven’t been working up to it.” My’s face took on the familiar anxious look, his teeth worrying his bottom lip.

Greg kissed him to keep him from drawing blood on his lip as his erection quickly collapsed to manageable proportions at My’s fear. “Let’s just see what happens. I know you would never hurt me. You’re more careful than most doctors.”

“Supplies?”

“Enough lube to coat the Gherkin. Gloves and towels and a flask of scotch should your courage fail.”

“You seem to have thought of everything.”

My still looked worried, his posture was tense and guarded, the exact opposite of what Greg wanted for them, but he felt that he had made a plan for the day and he wanted to finish something. So many times, they had ringing mobiles or the alarm clock interrupt them. Greg wanted this, wanted to give My a kind of virginity. He was back to thinking that this was something they could share that they had never shared with anybody else.

He took My’s hand and My let himself be led, walking slowly as if to an execution. “Greg? Are
you sure you want this filmed?"

“You know I do. You look amazingly hot with that shirt framing your pretty chest and your hair all mussed.” Greg pulled off his vest and tossed it on the mat while My moved the barres aside.

Turning on the harsh overhead lights, Greg went and stood in front of the huge windows, letting the city see how much he wanted his husband. The street was empty but his dick surged with the idea of being on display. He missed being naked for long periods of time as they had been at the villa. He also missed the sun; it was cold by the window.

My had placed towels over the gym mat and was examining the supplies as if it were to be a medical procedure instead of a loving act. Greg sat down cross legged where he knelt. “Beware the Silent Duck who is not so silent.”

Greg put his hand in fisting position with his thumb tucked inside his fingers and quacked, flapping the thumb so it did look like a duck. My laughed and it was alright again. “You’ll stop me if you feel any discomfort? You know your safeword?”

Greg nodded, wanting to page through the licensing agreement and get to the main event. He helped My get the gloves on and then spread the lube all over his hand, enjoying the sensation of the smooth gloves and the thick, rich lube that made the squelching sound that meant entry and pleasure.

My would be in charge now; all Greg had to do was relax and take it. My positioned him so that the action would be captured by the camera; Greg couldn’t see what was happening very well, but they would have it on film forever. The first two fingers slipped in easily. My was careful but Greg had been thoroughly stretched by the plug. He felt the third one but it wasn’t even pressure or discomfort. He was thankful yet again for how long My’s fingers were and how they stroked him deep. There was a pause while My moved the three fingers all around, massaging the inner walls but avoiding Greg’s prostate.

Then My stroked behind Greg’s balls with his ungloved hand and it seemed to Greg like his whole body was straining to be completely filled. The fourth finger moved in and he was full in the way that he liked, a similar feeling to My’s cock. But they had been this far before with fingers or plugs or dildos. Greg wanted a challenge, wanted My so far inside him that they both stopped thinking of anything else. He wanted to drive the worry and the bad memories out of My by offering up his body.

My eased his fingers in and out slowly. This was nothing new. “I can take it, My. Get on in there.”

He could actually feel the worry lines popping out on My’s forehead and the hesitation communicated itself through My’s fingertips. It was a bad place to feel someone’s anxiety. “You can always pull out if it’s too much, but I need you. Get on with it.”

My’s ungloved hand closed around his cock, stroking him so slowly that he thought he might scream, and then with only a “Here we go,” My’s thumb pressed in and it was more, his inner walls being stretched to the limit.

He was on the very edge and he wanted to come with My all the way inside. “More, please. Oh god, it’s good. More.”

My twisted first and Greg was groaning while a bit of drool seeped out onto the towel below. Then there was steady pressure, slow and bearable, before a stretching so wide that he didn’t think he could stand it and then My had to be in because Greg could feel the hand all the way up in his
chest, and it was too much, too tight, too big, too hot, too wide.

“Breathe, love. You’re tensing up.” My was rubbing his lower back, pressing gently around his tailbone.

All the caressing in the world wasn’t going to help him now. He breathed as instructed, but the feeling of it being all wrong was growing. He had been right about only one thing; a hand inside him blocked out all other thought including what his safe word was. Then a pain shot through him so sharp that his vision greyed. “Safeword,” he screamed, praying My would understand.

His breathing was ragged and echoing in the studio that now seemed cold and damp as a tomb. “Get out. I can’t bear it.”

He gritted his teeth until his jaw popped and the pain went on while My said things that made no sense. It was the kind of pain that made him think he might shit himself. He could feel that he was clamped tight around My’s hand and wondered if he would break the poor man’s wrist. There wasn’t enough air and the sweat broke out on his forehead. “Please?”

He needed to move but he was afraid to move. He needed to breathe because things were getting far away but not in a sexy breathplay sort of way. He wanted My out even if it tore him to shreds.

“Listen to me, baby. Your muscles are in spasm. I’ve got to wait until they relax or I could tear you open.”

“Tear me open, but get the hell out.”

“You don’t really mean that. Now breathe with me. We’ll count. One, deep breath in, hold it. Now breathe out. Well done.”

Who was this calm and confident person with his hand up Greg’s bunghole? Bloody hell. Clever and powerful but gentle too. Stroking him in places that did begin to help. There was an easing just enough that maybe in a week or so, My would be able to retrieve his pruny and withered hand like a fucking monkey’s paw.

“Now, love. I’m going to try, but I’ll stop if you say. You are in control. You can say stop or go or wait.”

Greg didn’t even care that he was whimpering. “It hurts so fucking bad.”

“I know it does, and I’m so sorry, but once I’m out, we’ll get you sorted. Now then, I’ll move just a bit on the count of three.”

Greg’s mind flitted hysterically to the Monty Python scene of the Holy Hand Grenade. “Three shall be the number thou shalt counteth.”

Then the pain was back full force and Greg felt hot tears run down but he was afraid to lift his hand to wipe them away. He clawed at the mat looking for something to hang onto and finally found the barre and gripped it until it creaked. The stabbing, tearing, wrenching pain was like earache, a pain deep inside where you couldn’t cradle the injured part or put heat or ice on it.

“There now, I’m out and I’ll just check for bleeding.”

“The hell you say. Get away from me.” Greg noticed that his voice was high as a girl’s.

The throbbing had begun. His ass was trying to clench around something no longer there and the skin felt burned raw. He would never let My fuck him again if that was even possible in the vast
cave that was his anus now, and he wasn’t sure that having a shit was an option anymore. It might just fall out of him without warning and what a bitch that would be to wear diapers for the rest of his life and never know when he would suddenly be sitting in his own filth.

He felt shame, more hot tears pouring down his sizzling cheeks. Not only was he not as sophisticated as all of My’s other partners, but he was a big girl’s blouse and it was every bit of it on film. Mostly he wanted to be held but he thought if My touched him, he might shatter. Definitely even the gentle pressure of a hug would allow all of his intestines to slither out of the massive tunnel carved by My’s giant hand of pain.

He didn’t know how to arrange himself. If he curled in the fetal position like he wanted to, his ass would hang out, but if he clutched at his ass to protect it, he didn’t have any way to hide his face or protect his permanently flaccid cock. My solved the problem for him by bringing the throw. Even the gentle movement of the lightweight fabric drifting down over his body started a fresh round of spasms. “Don’t touch me, okay?”

Still after that warning, Greg reached out again for something to hang onto and a pillow was there. It felt cool against his cheek and he bit down hard on it, My’s favorite Egyptian cotton was smooth against his tongue. With his body covered and his face buried, he was able to bypass the embarrassment and just feel the pain. The overhead lights went out, putting the place in semi darkness, only a few of the candles still burning. It helped.

My’s stocking feet made little noise on the floor, but he cleared his throat or sniffed to let Greg know that he was nearby but not close enough to touch. Greg needed that reassurance. Several minutes had gone by, yet he still didn’t feel like he could survive any part of his body being touched or even the breath of someone near him. Vomiting was considered and eliminated since the straining and heaving might injure something worse.

Time passed and he thought of Morris and Tuppy waiting to have their own paradise. He wanted to be magically transported to his own bed, to trade places with them and be back at the townhouse. As he had done with all of his injuries in the line of duty, he went deep inside himself and took the pain in, making it his new normal. He listened to his own breathing go from ragged to steady. “How long?”

“How long?”

“About twenty very long and terrifying minutes. Is the pain any less?”

“I don’t need to scream anymore.”

“That’s something. You’ve got to be examined, Greg. I think we should go to A and E.”

“No!” He had been the copper summoned for those sorts of cases for awhile, and he wouldn’t be gawked and snickered at.

“Then it’s John or my private physician.”

“God, no.” John up his ass; they would never be able to look each other in the eye after that.

“Then it has to be me, love. One quick look and we’ll go from there.”

How about if no one ever touched him again? He could lie on the floor and they could dance around him. “Could I have some water first?”

“Of course.” Greg rested while My rumbled about in the supplies in the flat. It would take all of his remaining strength to let My go back in, and he really might have to spend the night in the studio if he wasn’t bleeding.
My returned. “I thought a bit of lager might not be amiss, and I always carry a packet of paracetamol in my wallet. When we get home, I have something much better.”

Greg got himself propped on one elbow very slowly, panting all over again as the throbbing increased. He could feel the cool lager running down his throat and into his stomach as if he were empty. The hollow man who lived in a studio. Admission price £15.30. Children under 4 free.

He sank back onto the pillow and slowly pulled the throw off himself. But the invasion didn’t happen right away. My rubbed his back for awhile before snapping on a fresh glove. “Just one finger this time, love. You’ll be alright.”

It hurt when My pulled his cheeks apart so he braced for the intrusion, but he was so stretched that it didn’t make things any worse. My was very gentle as he moved around the inside walls, his other hand keeping Greg spread. He didn’t say cheerful things or apologize, but got on with it and Greg was thankful. When he had pulled out, he dabbed at Greg’s opening with a soft cloth. “I’ll just go to the loo and check for blood on the gloves and wash my hands. Can’t be sure in the candlelight. Will you be alright on your own?”

“I’m fine,” Greg said out of habit even though quite the opposite.

“Doesn’t appear to be any blood, and a little bit is normal.”

My’s calm helped him to be calm as if men got torn asunder every day. Greg had been drawn and quartered and lived to tell about it. He thought he might have a future now that the throbbing had reduced from a pounding to a pulse. He was able to roll over and watch My walk across the studio to the flat beyond, but his eyes closed before he had watched very long. Exhaustion was overtaking the pain.

My was patting his shoulder. “Let’s get you home before you stiffen up.”

“I’ll never get hard again.”

“I mean your muscles, love. Come on. I’ve got your clothes, but if you can’t manage those, your coat is long and it’s just a step to the car.”

They started with the shirt and it was tricky since Greg didn’t want to sit upright, but they managed. My did most of the work on the trousers as well, sliding them under. Greg was thankful that he had dressed nicely instead of wearing his tight weekend jeans for My. The thought of denim up his crack sent another shudder through him. He drifted while My put on his socks and shoes for him. Life seemed brand new now that he had nearly died of pain.

“Now I’ll just lever you up, and you grab the barre to steady yourself. We’ve got all the time in the world for you to shuffle to the car.”

My’s physical strength always surprised him; he lifted the mostly dead weight without a grunt and Greg was standing, dizzy and weak but closer to home. If he kept himself slightly bowlegged and made short, slow steps, he was able to walk. My stayed close and Greg leaned heavily on him as they locked the door.

Art had the building and car doors open and Greg barely registered the cold before he was tucked in the limo, lying on the seat with a blanket over him. All the way home, My sat cross legged on the floor and petted Greg’s hair while telling him comforting nonsense like ‘nearly there’ or ‘you’re being so brave.’

They camped out in the library, the stairs too much of a challenge. The soft leather of the deep couch surrounded Greg, and he felt safe. But the pain was like a migraine in his ass, the sharp
stabs and the dull pounding still there even though screened by the curtain of paracetamol. My was again on the floor by his side since he didn’t want any movement on the couch but his own.

Greg gave himself up to more petting, My’s long fingers scratching along his scalp in a rhythm that distracted from the random clenching of his gaping hole. “No work for you tomorrow, baby. Just a lie in and a sitz bath.”

“No sitting,” he mumbled but maybe by morning soaking his wounds would appeal.

“You can watch crap telly and have your meals on a tray, and I shall have a huge vase of flowers sent up and any films you’d like to see or a massage if you’d rather.”

Greg groaned, thinking of a certain massage in Italy that had got very internal. “No, but thank you.”

“Does it still hurt very much?”

“Not so bad now that I’m still,” Greg lied.

“I’ll get you some of my favorite pills from the last time I was Sergei. Can you manage while I run upstairs?”

He nodded. Time alone would help because he needed to survey the damage. He wiggled and clenched and bore down, hissing and grunting as the muscle complained. It was like a bad sprain inside him, sharp and nauseating but not anything permanent. The fact that he was already tolerating more movement was a good sign. He would recover.

My had been strong and wise about it all. Greg didn’t realize how much he needed caretaking until he got some. He tried to think back to the last time he had felt the weight of responsibility for My off his shoulders. The villa. God that was months ago. The guilt washed over him because he knew My was trying his best.

Then he returned with the pills, and Greg propped himself on one elbow to take them. My had been crying. A bone deep weariness stole over Greg as he asked, “What’s wrong, baby?”

“I can’t bear that I caused you pain.”

“Again, it’s not your fault. I asked for it. I pushed you.”

More tears ran down My’s cheeks. Greg wished for just one day where My didn’t punish himself for something, but it always cycled back. “I put you in pyjamas hotter than hell and fed you milk until your bladder almost exploded. Some mild pain at my back door, it’s all fine. Part of the adventure.”

“Will you really be alright?”

Greg stifled a sigh. It wasn’t a question about his well being at all, but My’s need for reassurance. “I will, love, I promise. Come make it better with a kiss.”

My kissed him gently, his lips trembling. “I am sorry, Greg.”

Now Greg was stroking My’s hair. “I know you are, baby. Why don’t you do a little writing? I’m going to rest, but I like having you nearby.”

When My was settled with his laptop, Greg reminded himself sternly that it was time to have a talk. He was drained past empty, and My had said that he wanted to know, that he could learn.
There would be further guilt and self flagellation from My, but Greg didn’t want to let it go so far that he exploded again.

Time enough for that in the morning. He let the medication take him down.
Chapter Summary

Two friendships end for Greg.

Chapter Notes

Word Count: c.9500
This chapter contains a scene of graphic workplace violence including character death and suicide.
I will include a summary at the beginning of the next chapter and there may be flashbacks as we go forward, but I will try to keep them more vague.

Ghislaine, you kept my vision alive when I couldn't. You are still the reason that I write and all of these words are for you.

Jess, your support campaign was the final push I needed to persevere. Thanks to readers who commented for the first time here and through tumblr, letting me know that my story was not forgotten. Barawen, nearlyalmostlover, and warnerbrosmoriarity. Your comments helped more than you know. Always listen to Jess, kids.

Thank you to my brother who overcame his squick of slash to help me with the technical aspects with the guns and such.

Greg shoved aside several stacks of paperwork on his desk to pinpoint the source of the jangling, wincing as the movement sent twinges through his still tender arse. Two days had made it bearable to sit with an inflatable plastic pillow, but the main discomfort was caused by some disbelieving snickers regarding his cover story. A groin pull while stretching was actually quite close to the truth, but apparently even the word ‘groin’ sent colleagues into snorts and giggles as if transported back to puberty and school changing rooms.

Why was somebody ringing him at his desk anyway? They mostly used his mobile now. And so he growled, “Lestrade. What is it?”

“Walt Shetterly. You’d best come down here, Greg.”

“Can it wait? I was out yesterday and am three days behind from it.”

“No, there’s money missing from an evidence box, and the possibilities for how that happened aren’t good and involve a mutual friend.”

“I’ll be right there.”
Greg made his way down the long corridors and two lifts to reach the evidence area in the subbasement. Walt’s domain was a small office marked “Archives” and his tedious role was to maintain inventory of cold cases and to put bar codes on all of the old evidence bags. He and Rich also were slowly sending DNA evidence from cases within the past twenty years to the lab for entry in the national database. It was thankless and tiresome work, but Greg had helped Rich get into it because of his computer prowess and patience with the elderly. He really hoped that old age was a factor in some kind of mistake because if Rich had taken the money, the repercussions would be swift and severe for the young officer.

But as Walt carefully and reluctantly laid out the facts, Greg knew that they were both moving through the stages of grief. Denial that their friend Rich could have done something completely against who they thought he was and so there was anger and sadness at the betrayal. Greg kept thinking of the little family that he had fallen in love with, the rambunctious stair step boys and the sweet, warm weight of baby Hannah’s bum in his hand.

“I’ve counted and recounted it, Greg. No one else has had this box out in the past month; the dust on the top proves that. The sign in sheet doesn’t have any record of another copper being in it. I haven’t been in it. It’s not a huge amount but 200 pounds is 200 pounds. I don’t understand.”

“The babies keep coming, I guess. Let’s get the forms and do this right. I never thought to be filling out a grievance procedure on Rich.”

“He’s always been a hard worker and careful. Lad, I’m shocked.”

Walt popped another antacid tablet from the roll in his shirt pocket as he had been doing since Greg came down to his office. “I’m right sick over it. My sandwich is sitting just here.” He pounded a fist against his sternum.

“It’s not your fault.” Greg patted the older man on the shoulder. “You’ve been a patient teacher and role model, Walt. This is about desperation. We’ll help him. Best look at it this way, we need to confront it before he’s in any deeper.”

They had to move quickly while Rich was home for lunch. After they had both counted the money in the box, they had no choice but to begin going through security footage. They ran the cameras at double speed while both filled out the complex and exacting paperwork. The incriminating scene was found far sooner than either of them wanted to discover it. The man’s movements were furtive as he eased the box from the metal shelves, took the money from the plastic evidence bag, and pocketed it.

“I hoped we were wrong.”

“Thanks for coming to me with it first. I’ll call the Internal Affairs office for the next steps. Even though it’s hard, don’t let on until I get the protocol and go ahead from them.”

“Sure enough. I’m not eager.”

Walt wiped sweat from his face, and Greg noted that he was a bit green around the gills. “Would you like to leave for the day? I can get someone down here temporarily or find somewhere else for Rich to be.”

“No, I want to be with him for this last.”

“You’ll need a replacement sooner rather than later, I fear. Be thinking about what you need.”

“I don’t even know. Might be time for me to go.”
Walt had stood to shake Greg’s hand and now sat down heavily in his desk chair.

“Let’s take this a step at a time, mate. I don’t even know what the penalties are. If there’s any way that it can be paid back, I’ll take care of that.”

“But it’s evidence tampering as well. Layer upon layer of mess he’s made.”

There wasn’t anything else to be said and yet Greg lingered, worried for both men as well as for Rich’s kids. Michelle wouldn’t be an easy woman to confess to either. He shuddered at the thought of her Kewpie doll face taking in lying and stealing. Walt would have a tough time adjusting to someone else. They were a team of two in the larger club of the evidence division. Their meticulous tasks isolated them in the huge cave of stacks where it might be months before anyone needed the items under their purview.

“I wish you would reconsider going home, Walt. You’ll have to keep schtum all afternoon while I file these forms. No one upstairs will respond until morning.”

“If I’m going to worry, I’d rather do it among friends.”

Greg looked out Walt’s office door to the towering metal stacks and kept his mouth shut at the irony. “You’ve got a dreadful big secret to keep. I wouldn’t be that good of an actor.”

“Would be worse to chew on it at home.”

Greg nodded in agreement and started to gather up the papers when Rich walked into the room fifteen minutes early. It took all Greg’s will power not to flinch.

“What’s all this? You never come down here, mate.” Rich put out his hand and Greg shook it while feeling like Jesus or Judas.

“I’m trying to convince Walt to go home for the afternoon. He’s not feeling well.”

Rich put a hand on Walt’s shoulder. “Alright, Walt?”

“Just curry for lunch. Nothing worth wasting a sick day.”

Greg folded the forms over and moved toward the door. “I’ll leave you to talk some sense into him, Rich. And you,” he said, pointing at Walt, “I will look in on tomorrow morning.”

But Rich was no idiot. Greg was only two steps out the door when he heard Rich saying, “Why is that box out? Hold on, that’s me on your monitor.”

“Greg was helping me with this cold case. I think he’s going to have Sherlock look at it.” Walt was a terrible liar in the best of times but he really seemed to be having an off day.

A terrible weariness stole over Greg as it had the night of the fisting. He was in a situation that he wasn’t sure he had the strength for. His legs were heavy as he walked back to his fate, and his stomach roiled. Walt was going to have to share his chalk candy.

As he stood in the doorway, Walt looked to him in uncharacteristic panic. Rich tapped the keyboard and the footage of his theft played for all of them. “So you’ve caught me. What happens now?”

Greg imagined it all turning out fine. Rich, relieved to be held accountable, would undergo a disciplinary hearing and be assigned some administrative leave. A routine psych eval would reveal the extreme stress that he was under. He would agree to have the missing funds docked from his
pay and perhaps a demotion, but he wouldn’t lose his job.

“I turn in some paperwork for an internal investigation. You’ll likely have a disciplinary hearing in a few days. Walt and I will testify to the strain that you’ve been under as a young dad, and we’ll hope for the best.”

“That all sounds very tidy, but we all know that I’m fucked. Plenty of honest men can’t find work these days.”

“If it comes to that, I’ll help you find something else, but let’s get more information before we go to the worst case scenario.”

Rich laughed and a shiver of fear ran down Greg’s back. “I’ve been in the worst case scenario for years. But you didn’t have a clue until the other night, did you? Good old Rich and his footie team. You saw what you wanted to see and now the truth is out, you’re still fishing for pretty endings.”

Greg chose silence. Best to let Rich vent as much as possible. He was far more volatile than Greg had realized.

Rich couldn’t abide the quiet. “I planned to pay it back.”

Walt spoke for the first time. “Of course, you did, lad. There’s not a question in my mind that this was a one time thing.”

Rich squirmed and Greg suddenly knew as kindly Walt could not that it wasn’t Rich’s first time. But accusations were right out. Deactivate, de-escalate, debrief. “You’ve got a lot of responsibilities, mate. I think anybody could understand that.”

“Got that in one. You saw how it was the other night. I’m drowning, Greg. The babies and the bills, they keep coming, and I can’t breathe. I’m a failure at work and a failure at home.”

“Those kids don’t care about titles. You are their daddy.”

“Maybe I used to be, but when they come to me all mewling in a great big clump, and it’s all about what they want that other kids have, I’ve smacked the whine right out of their mouths.”

Greg couldn’t hide his shock at that, yet he knew it to be true based on Ruthie’s ready use of a slap.

“You minded them. You know they’re being damaged. Better off without me.”

“No kid is better off without a dad.”

“Better off with memories than a prison visit on Saturdays.”

“Here now, let’s have no talk like that.” Walt’s voice was odd, an imitation of his usual hale and hardy self.

“If I could have had some time to myself, but Michelle was always there and the kids never get enough of me. It’s not just my money but my time. And the bloody church activities in any spare moment.”

Rich leaned against the wall and ran his fingers through his hair, and Greg had a bit of hope. “What if we get you that help now? Let us do more for you. The department has resources.”
“Michelle would never allow it. She’s still furious that I let you in the flat. That’s why I had to go home for lunch. That and the morning sickness. What the bloody hell am I going to do when the next one comes? We’ll have to hang them on hooks at night to sleep.”

“We’ll all work together to find answers that Michelle can accept. We can start right now so that a plan is in place.”

“The department won’t come through after they sack me.”

“You don’t know that. It will be hard for awhile but you’ll get through this.”

“If I had a rich and powerful fag for a husband, I could.”

Greg recoiled inside, knowing that his face couldn’t show the shock and hurt. All this time he had thought them friends and it had been a lie. Greg searched for the next right thing to say because this wasn’t about his pain, but about Rich’s pain. The anger was masking shame, guilt, depression, fear. What?

The training classes and his past experience with talking people down meant nothing because this was Rich, his bloody ex-friend who had driven him across town to reunite with a husband that he had thought dead and all the time, in Rich’s head must have been a chorus of “Hope he is dead, the dirty faggot.”

“We just want to help you, lad.” Walt reached a hand out and drew it back as Rich’s face twisted in anger.

“I think you’ve helped quite enough, old man. I thought you might hide my crime away like you did Sherlock’s. But you thought I didn’t know about that. How many of his drug busts have you covered up?”

Greg wanted Rich to work through the rage but he didn’t want Walt hurt. “We’re getting off task. Rich, why don’t you and I go upstairs and push the paperwork through? Waiting is probably the worst of it. We’ve got all afternoon to get things sorted. And I’m willing to go with you to talk to Michelle.”

“Yes, we can tell her that your ungodly influence caused my fall.”

“If that helps, I’m willing.”

There was a long pause before Rich seemed resigned to Greg’s suggestion. He patted Walt’s shoulder. “I’ll get out of your hair now.

Greg gripped Walt’s other shoulder. “Do as I asked now and go home, Walt. You don’t look well.”

He motioned Rich to go first out of the office and they moved toward the elevator, but as Greg pushed the button for the lift, Rich turned sharply, moving through the floor-to-ceiling stacks of boxed and catalogued evidence. Things all around were in sharp focus like digital photos, little snaps of time as Greg heard Rich’s footsteps, running toward something. Then he knew, the locker for confiscated weapons, placed as far back from the entrance as possible.

Greg’s heart sped up; whatever happened next, they wouldn’t leave this place the same. He wanted to be back in his office, sitting on the stupid plastic pillow doing mindless paperwork, and he wanted to call My and ask about dinner. It was his last thought before he compartmentalized into Detective Inspector, concerned supervisor, supportive friend. He shouted for Walt and then ran.
By the time he wound his way through the obstacle course of shelves and boxes, Rich had already opened the locker and obtained a Walther PPK. Rich’s eyes were wild as he slammed the clip home and hit the slide release; Greg thought of feral dogs. The small room with the metal walls was Rich’s territory and he was guarding it for a last stand.

Walt was an old hand at talking down jumpers. He would rally soon from the shock, and he and Greg could tag team Rich out of this desperation. “I wanted time to get my head on straight and I never got it. We went off the rails somewhere, Greg. I didn’t see it coming. My wife’s a child hoarder and I ought to be on the telly for it.”

Rich rubbed at the hatchwork on the grip. His hands were shaking, and Greg wanted to take one step away. My’s face swam up before him again, and he apologized to his husband before choosing the risk. “Rich, we will find a way out. As long as you are alive, we can make a better way.”

“I’ve been over all of that in my mind for months. The best way I can provide for my family is to die so Michelle can get help. At least if I’m dead, there won’t be any more babies.”

Walt’s labored breathing echoed as he caught up to them. Greg waited for him to speak but he was only a calming presence at Greg’s back. They were rusty as a team.

“Clearly, if it’s come to thoughts of suicide, help is available. You can get time to think and somebody to listen. Somebody smarter than I am. We can go right now and in an hour, you’ll be somewhere that you can really rest.”

“Therapists are on Michelle’s bad list too. Don’t you think I would have tried that if I could? Stop making me go over all this again. I need to get on task. I know what I need to do.”

“It feels like the right thing now because we’ve let you down. I haven’t been the friend that I should be lately and I’m very sorry. But I promise, if you give us another chance, we’ll come through. Get some rest before you do anything permanent. Rich, you know this. You’ve exhausted and likely hungry and maybe even sick with a fever. Let’s leave here.”

Rich was shaking his head, his thumb moving harder and harder against the grip as if he were trying to rub it smooth. “No, we’re going with my plan. Not yours. I’d rather be dead than locked up. You’ve got me as either a criminal or crazy. You make death sound good.”

“You don’t have to be locked up. Come home with me. Sleep in the guest room tonight. Then see how you feel in the morning.”

Walt hadn’t spoken, and when Greg turned to him, he was gray and soaked in sweat. He was fumbling in his pocket for something, but before he could find it, he clutched at his chest and slid heavily down the wall.

“He’s having a heart attack. Help me, Rich. Ring upstairs for the medics.”

He knelt in front of Walt and felt an eerie stillness in the room. “He’s not breathing. You’ll have to help me do CPR. Rich?”

Greg tore Walt’s shirt open, felt for his sternum through the paper thin vest, and began chest compressions. He counted out loud trying to fill the silence and maintain a connection with Rich. “Do you need my mobile?”

He held it out behind him but there was no answer or hand grasping it. “Come kneel beside me. I’m not losing either of you today. However you feel about me, I know you care about Walt.”
As he bent over Walt’s face to listen for breath sounds, shot after shot rang into the room, each more muffled as sharp pains pierced into the core of his head and then there was nothing but the sound of his own breathing and the smell of the powder. He needed to turn around and see, perhaps wrestle the gun away from Rich, but all he could think about was going home to My. He kept on with the CPR, cursing how long it had been since his last review course. There was a song he was supposed to sing to help keep count and ….

“Rich, what is that song? The disco one. Help me count. I’ll need you to take over in a bit. Ring the paramedics first.”

From far away as if another room, one last shot. Then his back and head were covered with a warm, thick liquid. It tickled as it oozed over his scalp and down his face. He was thankful to have both hands on Walt’s chest so that he didn’t have to reach up and know that it was blood. Maybe Rich had shot open a packet of bank money and it was the dye pellets. Maybe he had vomited.

“Rich, help me count. You could breathe for him. I can’t hear his breath. Come on.”

He should turn around now and see. What if Rich had hurt himself but he wasn’t dead? If Rich was still breathing, he would be the priority, wouldn’t he? He couldn’t remember the protocol. There wasn’t enough breath in him for Walt, but he puffed into the still lips anyway. All he could hear was his own panicked wheezing as he counted out loud.

Somebody would hear the shots; somebody would come. His hands were cramping and he felt a crunch in Walt’s chest. He’d broken a rib from pressing too hard. They would laugh about it at the pub after he was out of hospital. How Greg had nearly killed him saving him. And Walt would shout with laughter and say, “Not so funny, lad. That rib is still paining me.”

But long minutes had passed and nobody was coming. It was lunch time and most of the staff disappeared. What if nobody came? He kept doing compressions with one hand and fumbled for his mobile with the other hand. Why hadn’t he called for help when Walt first went down? Rich hadn’t so it was his role to do so. He was forgetting all his fucking training and rabbiting around like a damn cadet.

He keyed in the number but he couldn’t hear so he had to watch the screen to see if someone answered. He might be talking to voice mail, he might be talking to the wrong person. He didn’t know if he was shouting or whispering. “I need medics to Sub Basement 3, recovered weapons vault. Two men down.”

His voice broke as he said it. Three men went in but only one would come out. He didn’t disconnect the call because having the possibility of someone on the line with him was better than being alone in a metal crypt. It had to be his imagination that Walt was growing colder under his hands. How long had it been? Didn’t matter. You kept up CPR until someone came. The rib he had broken seemed to be poking at his palm, but he was growing numb except for the cramps in his fingers.

He breathed at intervals as he’d been taught, the intimacy of pressing his lips against Walt’s was something he had never anticipated during the training. A Judas kiss, a goodbye kiss that passed the copper of blood and the sulfur of gun powder to Walt’s lips. Underneath the vest now covered with drops of blood, the pasty chest stayed still.

Then as more time passed, he wasn’t sure if bringing Walt back would be the right thing. There was chance of brain damage after a certain time. He couldn’t remember how long and hadn’t looked at his watch when the man had collapsed. Walt wanted to go home to Betty. He wasn’t maudlin about it but as the years had passed, he spoke more and more about the things they would
do together once he got there. Greg hadn’t made sense of it until he had got married himself.

Counting compressions and losing his mind. There was nothing but this room and his hands on the clammy skin and the blood, stiffening the fabric of his shirt, sticking it to his back. No one was ever going to come. He would have to give up when his fingers cramped into little balls and they would call him a quitter. Homicide was his division, not rescue and he created what was familiar by letting two men die.

Above the smell of warm, coppery blood came the fishy tang of urine. Had he wet himself in fear? No, there was a dark stain spreading on Walt’s trousers. Oh god, oh god. That had to be a bad sign. He hadn’t really thought Walt would die. People had heart attacks all the time now and lived to tell about it. He didn’t mean to ruin Walt’s chances by considering the possibility of death. He meant for them to comfort each other as the last two people to see Rich alive.

He still hadn’t turned around. Maybe Rich needed him and if Walt had messed himself, he was the lost cause. Maybe Rich could be saved. But he couldn’t turn around, he couldn’t look. If he didn’t look, Rich might still be alive. He might have a non fatal injury and be calling for Greg.

He yelled when a hand squeezed his shoulder, hoping against hope that it was Rich, but the man was a stranger who had come into the vault. He kept pushing on Walt’s chest because that’s what he had to do, but another man was pulling his hands away and starting the pushing and now there was nothing for him to do. They had medical things like the little white suitcase that would bring people back. He couldn’t think of the proper name but he recognized it. The machine would do what Greg couldn’t. Walt would be okay.

But after what seemed a very short while to have a life in the balance, they stopped CPR and put away the machine that was like science fiction and had zapped Walt making him flop like a fish. The elderly man’s chest was exposed where they were peeling off the electrodes, and Greg wanted them to cover him up. Finally, an orange shock blanket was placed over him. Greg curled in on himself, pulling his knees to his chest and resting his forehead on them.

Because they had not gone to Rich for more than a few seconds, Greg knew what he didn’t want to face. Five kids and a unborn baby had just lost their dad because Inspector Lestrade was a bloody failure at de-escalation. Maybe he could just grab a syringe from the open box of medical supplies and get an air bubble in a vein, make it three for three. There had to be a spot under a shelf somewhere that he could crawl away to die.

By the time he roused himself to slip away, the paramedics were checking him over. Pulse, heart rate, blood pressure. Questions on a little pad once they determined how fucked his hearing was. Pupils tested with the fucking light that made him blink and his eyes water. He wanted them to wrap him in a blanket and carry him away from the scene. Hospital didn’t seem such a bad place. No choices there. Someone else would tell you when to eat, sleep, shit, and piss. He needed that. Rich had needed that.

Anderson showed up with his little kit, looking like a fucking vulture. It was Christmas morning for the wanker; a crime scene in his own garden, the dirty prick. It didn’t matter that it was standard procedure; Greg felt violated and like it was disrespect to the dead to be pruned in this way while they lay near him.

He was being subjected to a living autopsy. Anderson went over him with tweezers like some sort of monkey on a grooming mission. He held up bits of tissue that he had picked out of Greg’s hair and examined them under a magnifying glass, and Greg wanted to pop the thing right into Anderson’s great pointed beak. His eyes burned and he let them close, imagining the creature comforts he would receive at home.
Finally a tap on his shoulder meant that he could change position; his body was heavy as if he had been swimming. His knees popped as he stood, and it was strange not to hear it. Anderson had written on a little notepad.

*We’ll need your clothes.*

Greg knew that Anderson would have a wank later to the extreme power he was feeling right now over his superior. None of that mattered though because there was no way in hell he was going to leave Walt there like some ordinary body, but while his eyes had been closed, they had zipped Walt up. The bag looked so fucking small to have such a larger than life character in it. Greg knew that even if he could hear, the silence would be terrible without Walt’s strident voice and loud guffaw.

Flashbulbs drew his eyes to the opposite corner, but a whole team was swarming over Rich’s body. Greg was part of the crime scene. There was nothing he could do for Rich, and he wouldn’t be allowed to tell Michelle or the children since he was the one responsible for their loved one’s death. He leaned heavily against the wall as the weight of the loss washed over him, but there wasn’t going to be time for reflection. Miles of things to do before he could think, something he didn’t want to do anyway.

With a forced smile that looked like rictus, Anderson handed him one of the blue jumpsuits that were tissue thin and walked with him to the gents. He pointed at a paper bag, and Greg nodded. Even though he was allowed the ‘luxury’ of being in the stall alone, he still felt that Anderson was looking him up and down, noting his flaccid penis and the bit of sag that every midlife bloke got in spite of daily work outs. He felt like a murder suspect yet also felt guilty that he got special treatment compared to prisoners.

The coveralls provided minimal coverage. His cock swung free as he bent to pick up the bag of clothing—a favorite shirt, the new belt that My had bought him in Italy, his most comfortable shoes for work. Nothing but loss even if he wouldn’t have been able to bear the sight of them again.

They took the lift up from the sub basement. Greg started to breathe better as the numbers climbed. Still trapped but no longer in an underground tomb. Swaying with the movement of the car, he had to grip the rail that ran around the walls.

After a steady stream of conversation which Greg nodded to but could not decipher, Anderson left him alone in the changing room, but it was no longer a safe or familiar place. He was caught in contradictory needs. He wanted to be left alone but he was afraid to be. The world wasn’t right anymore. He wanted the blood off himself, but he didn’t want to be exposed in the shower stalls. Then when he had summoned his shreds of courage and got under the spray, he didn’t want to close his eyes for fear of someone sneaking up on him. It was an enclosed space where anyone with a gun could come at him.

But if he kept his eyes open, the water burned in them. Then, when he looked down to shield his eyes, he had to see the bits of blood and bone circling the drain. Missing breakfast and lunch meant being denied the release of vomiting. He could only gag and dry heave. He rinsed his mouth and the water tasted of blood and gunpowder. It must be what everybody’s breath reeked of in hell. Sulfur toothpaste on a barbwire brush left a bloody trail every morning of another day in hell.

The water ran clear but he could still feel sticky bits in his hair after shampooing twice. He wanted My there to check for him. His arms and legs were weak and shaky, and My would hold him steady. Without his hearing, he couldn’t ring My for reassurance, and he didn’t know if anyone else would be able to get through. His mobile was evidence and any other number would be
suspect at the ministry. They would have to call Morris who would relay the information to Anthea unless it was already on the television news. God, what a time the press would have with him now.

He put on the Yard issue T-shirt and track suit since his work out gear was shorts, lifting his legs into the bottoms one at a time like a paraplegic. He was thankful that he had clean pants in his gym bag, but he was afraid to comb his hair for what he might find on the dark teeth of the comb. Finger combing was right out as well so his hair was certainly on end. They would see how dirty he was, how untidy, and they would whisper things that he could not hear.

One of the pricks from Internal Affairs came into the changing room, looking like an executioner. Greg was carted off to the debriefing. He would be grilled instead of Rich. They shouted at him in the beginning, but as they began to understand how deaf he really was, they wrote the questions on paper. The questions went on and on; the same ones reworded or sometimes verbatim but asked by someone else as if they weren’t listening to each other.

Then he had to repeat the whole narrative himself start to finish. All that long time, he could only hear his own voice, growing hoarser and softer, a sign of his weakness and failure. When he felt that he might scream, they gave him pen and paper and had him write out the bloody thing. His fingers cramped around the pen and shook so that his writing was spidery as an old person’s with lots of cross outs and blots.

Interrogation would never be the same for him again. If they let him keep his job, he was always going to remember the bare room, hard chairs, and endless questions while his heart was tearing itself open at the double loss. His mind wavered under the onslaught to where he sometimes felt that he must have shot Rich himself. Unending torment. He would never see My again.

When it was finally over, they walked him back to his own division and the stares began. Those that didn’t stare looked away as if they couldn’t bear the sight of him. He didn’t know what was going to happen next, but he didn’t want to ask in front of everyone. Still, he couldn’t spend hours on a bench like a lost child, waiting for someone to collect him.

Here was his team, his friends he’d thought, but no one offered him tea or asked after him or even got him pen and paper so he could communicate. Finally Sally came in with his mug but it was a lost effort since the tea tasted of blood. He tried to sniff it but smelled sulfur instead of the peppery goodness of cheap Earl Grey. “What happens now?” he asked her, an echo of Rich’s words a mere two hours ago he realized by his desk clock.

The mystery of his fate was solved when Chief Superintendent Sullivan walked in. Whenever he looked at Greg, he had a perpetual sneer as if smelling ancient fish. Sullivan was homophobic beyond all reason and smiled when he handed him an official looking memo. Greg couldn’t make sense out of it. Finally, with jerky, angry movements, his superior grabbed a note pad and scratched a few words. “Get what you need from your office. You’re on administrative leave for at least six weeks.”

Clearing his office was one more hurdle between him and home and My. Sullivan took a chair and watched while Greg sat at his desk, opening and closing drawers. Sally had already brought in the little plant from her desk. Sullivan had no love for women in the work force either, but he was enjoying Greg’s down fall.

Greg needed out of this place of death and failure even if he had to walk home. There was the small framed photo from their wedding which fit in his palm, nothing else really mattered. He cupped it in his hands and stared down at his own toothy grin, wondering if he would be able to smile sometime in the distant future, and if a fellow who let two officers die, would be allowed to smile. A shadow came across the frame and he looked into the somber face of his husband.
Seeing My was the only thing that had gone right the whole bloody day. He was as shiny as a magazine model and far more toff and powerful than any of the blokes trying to toss Greg’s career in the skip. My held out Greg’s coat for him. Greg saw Anderson say something from the doorway, but My stared him down and he retreated to his desk. The chief would not be so easy.

He needn’t have worried. My’s face was stony, his mouth set in a grim line. Greg could feel the anger and even though the words were beyond his hearing, he could see them hit their target until Sullivan was making placating motions. Then My’s hand was in the middle of Greg’s back, propelling him forward. Greg felt lost as if he were leaving with a stranger to some unknown destination. His heart began to race again.

But when they were in the lift, My pulled him close, and Greg was glad of the wiry strength of long arms that wrapped around his waist and shoulders, gripping him tight. He was pushed into the corner where nothing could touch him. With his head pressed against My’s chest, he could feel the rumble of words. It didn’t matter what they were. He imagined what he needed to hear as he felt the rush of an exhale against his hair. Thank God, you’re safe, baby.

To signal him that the lift doors had opened, My gave him an extra squeeze and three pats on the shoulder. They broke apart and walked to the waiting car. Once inside, Greg willed himself to relax. He was safe in the back of the limo, but his body remained clenched.

My had his Ipad and was tapping away. This was easier than a clumsy pad of paper. He could read the type which My had set thoughtfully larger than standard. Greg’s eyes still hurt from the shower, and he didn’t have his reading glasses.

I’ve got an appointment with a specialist about your hearing.

“Now?” Greg wanted to go home.

I know you want to go home, love, but we need to make certain that we’ve done all we can today. Early intervention.

Greg shored himself up yet again. My made him sip some juice and eat a few crisps from a packet. Everybody was trying to make him eat as if he might starve from missing lunch which happened at least twice a week anyway. They didn’t understand that everything he put in his mouth tasted of blood. He gagged and My put the crisps away immediately.

At the specialist’s office, he felt self conscious and unworthy. It was posh, all gleaming cherry wood and leather with marble floors while he was in a track suit and T shirt under his raincoat. There were probes that tickled and suction that itched and made the room spin. There were head phones and fiddling with dials, and he worked out from movement and body language that there were tones he was supposed to hear but didn’t. My was back to being Iceman so he didn’t like to ask what the doctor was saying.

Then My was nodding and gave Greg a slight smile. More tapping on the Ipad.

The damage is likely temporary and should resolve itself in 2-3 days. Rest in quiet surroundings and retest next week.

Greg was thankful that My had been stern with him. On his own, Greg would rather avoid the doctor and hope for the best. It would have been an extra thing to worry about when the whole fucking world had gone pear shaped. The doctor shook hands with My, and belatedly held out a hand to Greg who now felt like My’s poor and dimwitted relation. Still, not wanting to seem churlish, he shook it and then walked quickly out of the place, not waiting for My.
The lift, however, proved a challenge. Without My’s arms around him, he didn’t think he could cope with the small metal room. He jumped and cried out when a hand gripped his shoulder. My moved to stand in front of him, and Greg could read the apology in his eyes. And in spite of being in a building where one consultation might cost more than Greg earned in a year, My took Greg’s hand and kissed his wedding band. He mouthed the word ‘home’ and Greg sagged against him as the public part of his ordeal was nearly over.

When no one else stepped in the lift, Greg leaned heavily on My, resting his head on his shoulder. He was embarrassed at how much of his weight My had to support as they walked to the waiting limo. There had been way too much of Greg leaning on My in the past week with the fisting on Sunday. Greg was the caregiver and the reversal didn’t sit well with him.

He didn’t sleep in the car or lose consciousness, but he wasn’t there either. When My patted his arm, he jerked, his whole body on high alert. It was just another message typed on the Ipad. They were getting simpler which was good.

Bed, bath, or food?

“Bath.” He wanted to tell My that he could still feel the blood all over him, but it was too long of a sentence.

Shivering in the autumn air, he pulled his coat tighter as they got out of the car and walked into the house. Getting that far was a major accomplishment, but he had so much farther to go to get to the safety of their bedroom. The steps were miles upward and he was aware of every one. His arms hung from his sides as if they might fall off because his shoulders ached enough that something was terribly wrong with them. His hands ached as he used them to pull himself upward, the cramps in his fingers lingering. He pulled up one leg and then the other and on the landing, he stepped up as if there was another stair and nearly tumbled backward. After that My kept a hand on his waistband, tugging him upward.

His knees hurt, but he wasn’t sure why. And his mouth was so dry that he had to reach up and pry his lips off his teeth which started a facial tic deep in his left cheek. He wanted to sit down on the steps and dig all of the bad memories out of his brain and take off the top layer of skin so that nothing of what had happened would go with him and corrupt their bedroom. Still he needed the sanctuary of it too badly to not keep climbing.

Finally he was in the en suite sitting on the closed lid of the toilet trying to get ready for his bath, but his clothes were a puzzle. He couldn’t seem to get his arm out of the shirt. My was bustling about, sprinkling things into what Greg assumed was hot water going into the tub. Way too much of his information about the world came from sounds. Giving up on the shirt, he bent to untie his trainers and almost pitched forward. My caught him at that point and stripped him easily.

He took My’s hand. “Boiling hot water. I’m radioactive.”

But when he was in the tub and the scalding water made him feel that he was being sterilized, he couldn’t get beyond holding the bar of soap. It slipped out of his hands and he was slow and clumsy, trying to fish it from the water.

My removed a few layers of clothing until he was in his crisp, white shirt and braces, rolled up his sleeves and knelt at the edge of the tub. Greg wanted My with him in the water, holding him, but he didn’t want to be anymore fucking needy than he already was. He closed his eyes, his stomach churning at the images that were etched there, but he didn’t want to see the water turn red with blood.

“Get my hair again? It was full of…there was splatter…”
My patted him and pressed a flannel to his face. It would keep out the shampoo and blindfold him from any new horrors. My’s manicured nails scritched fiercely all over his scalp, and there was lots of rinsing with the shower attachment. Greg’s pulse pounded in his temples from the heat of the bath and the fear, but the crash off the adrenaline was putting him in a trance.

Removing the flannel in spite of Greg’s unusually strong grip on it, My kissed his forehead. He was able to drag his eyes open and look at My. There was sadness in the pretty blue eyes, but they didn’t look frightened. God knows one of them had to keep a clear head.

Greg gritted his teeth and looked down at the water. Soapy but not pink, nothing floating but soothing herbs, the stuff that was supposed to bring sleep but made Greg feel like he was in a tea pot. “I need my skin taken off,” he said, his words slurred.

My nodded and walked over to the drawers under the sink, rummaging around, Greg again assumed, not able to hear the noise. Pushing Greg forward, chest to knees, My scrubbed his back with a hard bristled brush, and it was just on the edge of pain. Greg needed the discomfort to know that the numbness might not be permanent. He was standing outside himself now, making calm observations. Dissociation, he identified the feeling. Common after trauma. His body was a machine that carried his mind, and there was a little man inside his head that drove his body like construction workers drove cranes, high up in a small seat removed from the massive power and drama.

He was looking down too and watching himself continue functioning, far beyond his limits. He could feel the physical pain but it did not touch him. His arse, not yet recovered from the fisting, throbbed where the scalding water and the hard glaze of the tub assaulted it. Various strains and cramps reported in, but it was all just information. He jotted down the messages, but they didn’t touch the little crane operator. Supervisors weren’t in that day and the girl that answered the phones had stepped out for a bite.

My was walking over to the towel warming rack, and Greg wanted to grab his arm and keep him there. Leaving the tub meant doing something else and he was used to the tub. It was a good place; nothing bad had happened there. Besides, he didn’t know if he could stand or not.

My held a hand out and levered him up. This had happened before, but what was new was My standing there like a human guard rail so that Greg could lift first one leg and then the other over the side.

It must have been obvious that nudity was a challenge for him after the going over he’d had at the Yard. A dressing gown was on him immediately, and My dried the bits that weren’t covered by the long thick fabric and rumpled his hair with the towel.

He brought a metal bowl and Greg’s toothbrush with the paste on it so that Greg wouldn’t have to stand at the sink. Lowering himself to his perch on the toilet lid, Greg brushed tentatively at first and then scrubbed with the brush as hard as he could stand it. The minty flavor did little to disguise the taste of Rich’s blood in his mouth. My put paste on the brush a second time, his eyes full of empathy. Greg didn’t care to think about how My understood the taste of blood.

Raw and ruddy from the bath, Greg was led to the bed where the covers were already turned back. The day would be over soon even if it wasn’t quite dark outside yet. Little shivers of panic went through him when My stepped away, and Greg’s eyes roamed frantically until he realized that My was getting clean pants for him. He took off the dressing gown and pulled the pants up; Greg was thankful for the help. Once his husband’s privates were safely tucked away, My plumped the pillows and motioned for him to sit back against the headboard. Then the trusty Ipad was back.

_You’ll have to eat something or you’ll be ill._
He shook his head. The coppery taste was still there with occasional waves of sulfur. Any food would surely come straight back up.

_We have to try. You don’t need a migraine on top of everything else._

Greg nodded; he was too tired to fight whatever was done to him. If his eating would please My, he would eat even if he puked after. It was getting harder to keep My in focus. He closed first one eye and then the other, watching My’s position in the room change. Then it was easier to keep both eyes closed. He woke to soft kisses on his forehead. “How long?”

My typed. _You slept for about ten minutes. Just long enough for Morris to bring our dinner._

My lifted the lids on the warming plates and steam wafted upward, but all Greg could smell was blood. The chicken and rice casserole was harmless enough with its colorful peas and carrots, but all Greg could see was Walt sliding down the wall and then his bare, saggy skinned chest like raw chicken as they pulled the blanket up.

Images that he hadn’t registered were there between his eyes and the steaming bowl of food too. There had been a puddle of blood all around Rich. Greg had looked back, hadn’t he? Finally, when it wouldn’t do anyone any good, he had looked back. Rich’s shoes were facing the door and the soles were worn so thin that his Yard issue black sock showed through a coin sized hole in the bottom of one. People suffering all around him and Greg had been wrapped up in wedded bliss, a kept man with no money worries, not a care in the world really while his mates scrabbled for food and walked about with holes in their shoes.

Closing his eyes didn’t help. It was a movie playing all the time. He couldn’t stop seeing it. The bed dipped as My scooted in beside him, stroking his cheek as he put a small spoonful of the casserole against Greg’s lips. The rice was soft and the chicken tender and juicy. Greg barely chewed before swallowing. Closing his eyes, he let the nudge of the spoon prompt him and he took whatever My gave him, all of it tasting the same. The cup was to his lips and he drank something cool that might have been water, lager, wine, or milk. Copper and sulfur to him.

His head dipped lower and lower, so heavy that he thought it might fall off. Then My was sliding the extra pillow out and pulling Greg down on the bed, tucking the blanket over his shoulder. His hand reached out for My, and he got kisses in his palm. “Kiss,” he said.

My’s lips were on his and then he jerked away, not wanting the taste of blood on My’s mouth too. He wanted to ask My to keep touching him because with his eyes closed and his ears gone, he was floating in space. The words were too big but it was no matter. My would never leave him when he was so lost.

_He wasn’t sure why he was back at the Yard, but he heard My’s voice from a distance. Walt was calling for him from deep in the maze of shelves. “You’d better come back here, Greg. Microphone’s in trouble.”_

_He was running toward the gun locker, but his knees ached so that he could barely move, and by the time he got there, My was putting the gun to his head. Greg screamed his name at the top of his lungs, hoping to distract My long enough to get to him, but his voice was weak, chest aching from trying to push out that one word. My’s eyes went dark with pain; he said something Greg couldn’t hear and then pulled the trigger._

_Strong arms held him back, but he had to get to My’s body. He fought as for his own life although it was far too late. On leaden legs, he staggered toward the corpse, feeling the drops of blood run down his face. “God help me, God help me. My!”_
His knees exploded as he hit the floor, but he wasn’t close enough to lift My into his lap. They had moved the body, and he crawled toward it, still screaming My’s name although it was muffled. Arms were around him again, holding him in place. “Get the fuck off me.”

But there was no point in struggling. His life was over as much as My’s. His ragged sobs tore at his throat and chest. Someone was stroking his hair, but it wasn’t My. Would never be My again.

His breathing slowed as the gentle hands kept moving over him, rubbing his back and brushing his blood soaked hair back. His eyelids were terribly heavy and as long as his eyes were closed, he didn’t have to face the shattered remains of his lover and his life. He lay in the embrace, gathering his strength.

A hand lightly patted his face, and he knew what it wanted. He was to open his eyes and see the horror. All day, coworkers turned strangers had been making him do things. What was one more?

He ratcheted his eyes open one lash at a time, blinking the burning tears out. Morris’ face loomed over him, far closer than it had ever been.

“What are we going to do, mate? He’s gone. His blood’s all over me.”

Morris swiped his fingers across Greg’s cheek. Greg winced at the intimacy and gore of it, but Morris held up fingers that were damp but clean. He traced a finger down his own cheek, miming a tear.

Then where was My? Greg looked around for him. “Where have you taken him?”

Glancing around, he saw that his nightmare had brought him all the way to the top of the stairs. He might have fallen down them if not for Morris. Two of My’s minions were standing there, and Greg was suddenly aware of being almost naked, his boxers rucked up in his struggles. The pity in their eyes was too much. Greg rolled away from Morris’ lap and puked up his dinner all over the priceless area rug. He got up on hands and knees when another wave took him. He might also have shat himself. He wasn’t able to hear the farts as he choked, and his pants were wet with sweat.

Then a familiar hand was on his back and an arm underneath him as he heaved. He needed to move away from his own pile of sick if he was going to ever stop puking, but he couldn’t get his legs underneath himself. Pawed by strangers again, he was hauled upright. My’s suitcoat was placed over his shoulders when it was all too late. He would be covered for those few steps to the bedroom.

Why was My fully dressed? Where had he been? Greg clung to him like the frightened child that he was. The world all arse over teakettle and My in his waistcoat and crisp shirt. Once they had staggered to the bedroom, Greg tore at My’s clothes. He couldn’t hear the ping of the buttons but he felt the fabric give way under his ineffectual rage until he could reach My’s chest.

His cheek was against chest hair and the warm skin underneath, and in that safe place, the last of his reserves crumbled and he sobbed in full consciousness for all the loss. Wails that terrified him because he wasn’t sure that he could stop, but he needed the noise inside the lonely silence of his head. Tears and snot tangled in the nest of hair, and he rubbed his nose and lips across it, tasting the salt. His belly and heart empty, he stood panting against My, having no clue what to do next.

My led him to the bed and got him under the duvet. He was shivering with cold now although his face felt feverish. Taking off his torn shirt, My had Greg blow his nose on it. Morris brought a glass of water and a cold damp flannel. They tried to get Greg to take some pills, but he gagged on them.
Finally after a worried exchange with My, Morris left. Greg watched through heavy eyes as My shucked the rest of his clothes and climbed under too, pulling Greg down to the one place that made sense. Greg nuzzled into the warmth and scent of his husband. My ran his fingers through Greg’s damp hair over and over, and the rhythm of it, along with the faint beat of My’s heart, a vibration under his cheek, began to calm him.

When the rumbles of My’s voice came through, Greg put in the words that he wanted to hear. “I’ll never leave you again, baby. I’m going to take care of you. You’re safe now.”

But in the back of his mind, the question pounded, “Why did My leave me alone with my nightmares?”
Head Pounding

Chapter Summary

Word Count: c.10, 300

Warnings: This chapter contains a scene of Greg not wanting to have sex but giving in without telling My that he doesn't want to.


In this chapter, Greg gets through Walt's funeral and a few days after.

For a little while the next morning, Greg thought he’d had an extra long and detailed nightmare, but when he couldn’t hear My’s gentle snoring and shuffling about in the bed, he knew that the losses were real. They rested on his chest as he lay on his back trying to gather strength for the day.

My caressed his face and left little kisses along his jaw before sliding a mobile into Greg’s hand that was identical to the one that Anderson had confiscated. There was already a text from My:

*Breakfast in bed or downstairs?*

He replied verbally even though the sound of his raspy voice in his own head made him cringe. “Downstairs. I’m deaf not ill.”

Breakfast tasted of coins and matches; he choked down enough to satisfy his nursermaids. After breakfast, another simple choice put them up in his study rather than back to bed or in the library. A football match could be followed without the sound.

My made call after call while Greg watched his face to try and guess who was on the other end. The Iceman spoke most of the time. It was strange to have him there in Greg’s study with a diary and fancy pen in hand. After scribbling notes at the end of each contact, My would give him some affection, a pat or a kiss on the forehead. He felt like a small child being appeased, but to his shame, he needed the attention. Panic was two blinks away.

Weary and sore and needy, he couldn’t address the anger lurking that My had abandoned him when his need was greatest and was spending this day as well on ministry machinations. It was petty and ridiculous but he wanted his husband’s full attention. His imagination couldn’t craft a situation dire enough to have all of My when last night hadn’t been enough to keep him at his husband’s side.

Over and over, Greg rehearsed the events of the shooting, trying different words or phrases, calling for back up sooner, secretly texting for help with his fingers moving over his mobile in his pocket. He tried this after finding that the new mobile was programmed identically to his old one. My had time for that sort of minutiae but none to sit and watch over him when he was vulnerable.
He tried again to focus on rewriting the previous day, being more forceful about sending Walt home so that Rich would have come back to work alone for the afternoon and have the peace he needed. He looked at several websites for dealing with a suicidal person and saw where he might have phrased things better. He imagined not calling for Walt knowing that the man would have died in his office alone but Rich might have been saved.

Shame boiled in his stomach and his face grew hot as he imagined all of his team and the whole Yard beyond second guessing him the morning after, seeing all of his mistakes. He saw Sally sitting at his desk, her feet up, drinking from his mug that said, “World’s Best Boss,” Anderson on the desk facing her, rubbing her calf, a sneer of triumph on his face.

The roaring of his own blood pounding in his ears became whispers as the story grew, his failure becoming even larger in the telling. How the Yard loved its gossip. The gloating face of Chief Sullivan kept saying, “We don’t employ stupid idiots here.”

He began to think of other jobs he might get so late in his life, but there wasn’t anything else that he knew how to do. Perhaps Sherlock would let him help with the legwork on some of the more boring cases. Since he was used to being berated, it would be familiar.

When his head smacked the back of the couch, he saw that the match had gone on without him for several minutes. My motioned to a pillow on his lap, and Greg scooted down to rest his head there. Long fingers combed through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. He slept in fits and starts, his own breath too loud in the space between his throbbing ears.

There was a strange Sunday kind of calm for a week day, and each time he woke, he kept feeling that there was something he should be doing, something he had forgotten. My’s petting turned to patting, and the cool metal of his new mobile slipped into his hand, giving him a shiver.

*You’re Walt’s executor?*

Greg sat up, heart pounding, all the soothing touch wasted as the tension ripped through his body. “Shit yeah. Eulogy and all.”

My was still on the mobile.

*Mortuary called the Yard.*

“Get the number. The card is in my wallet and I’ll never get it back from evidence.”

Greg realized that Walt was who he would go to for retrieving his wallet, and now that resource was gone for good, not even Rich to carry on as second generation. More worrisome was the thought that it might be moot if they didn’t take him back, administrative leave stretching on indefinitely, his queries being put off politely until he gave up.

My was asking questions and then nodding. He looked relieved.

*Funeral preplanned.*

That got him out of coffin shopping, but he still had to write a eulogy. Fuck. How was he going to speak at a funeral when he couldn’t even hear? And how could he go about writing a tribute to a man that he had killed by proxy. Fucking hell.

“I want them to see something pretty on my last day, Greg. Close the lid on me and give them one of your smiles. I’ll be with Betty by then and my hands all over her. Tell them a few jokes. You know the kind I like and if you can without too big a lie, say I was a hard worker and a team
player.”
My rung off.

_The Yard will send a dress uniform over to the mortuary with his badge, but we’ll have to go by his flat for his medals and clean pants._

“And let his landlord know. We’ll have to pack up his things. There isn’t anybody else to do it. Always thought Rich and I would have that together.”

_Let’s see him safely at rest and then we’ll look after his things._

Greg didn’t even want to leave his study for the rest of the house. How was he going to drive over to Walt’s flat? Still, this was something that he could do for Walt, an action when he had been in his head all morning. At first, My offered to go on his own, but he was understanding when Greg needed to go. My had a plan and Greg let himself be managed. It was far easier to feel safe in the back of the limo, a little portable flat with minibar and the most comfortable sofa ever.

He wanted to stay in that car forever, but the driver was efficient. Greg managed the few steps into the building with My’s hand at his back. My flashing identification and retrieving a key from the landlord. All that was required of Greg was a small wave and the man was smiling and nodding in recognition, shaking Greg’s hand and saying awkward bits that Greg just nodded at which seemed adequate by the man’s retreat behind his own door.

As they entered Walt’s small home, Greg turned off his mind to the monk like quality of a life lived alone as evidenced by the single bowl and mug in the sink, a man’s last meal. This is what it looked like when your partner died. One toothbrush, one dressing gown, half the bed slept in, half the closet, half the sofa. He shuddered and kept to the task at hand.

Walt’s flat was as well organized as his archives so they quickly found what was needed, and My’s people did the running about, delivering Walt’s last pair of pants to their final resting place.

Greg felt guilty at how simple it was and the fact that My had to help him with it. He was of no bloody use to anyone, and he was letting Walt down again by not doing it by himself. Still he was exhausted by the time they reached home. Morris had a lunch waiting which Greg pushed around on his plate, eating a bite if My raised an eyebrow but mostly trying to keep the bile in check.

When My finished, Morris brought in a dessert and said something which My passed on textually as “Comfort food.”

It was pumpkin rice pudding with raisins, warm and fragrant. Greg couldn’t sit through anymore chances that he might gag. One public vomiting was enough. “I’m going to get on that eulogy.”

_Sweetheart, you have time. Just rest today._

“It will only get harder the longer I wait.”

_There’s the autopsy and investigation to complete before they can proceed with preparing the body. The funeral is some days away._

“Then why the hurry to get his underwear?” Greg sighed. The world seemed to be kicking him while he was down and although he thoroughly deserved it, he wished for a little more thought from My. A eulogy would be simple compared to seeing Walt’s solitary confinement in the wee flat.

My stood up and hugged Greg. He let himself lean for a minute but he felt if he was weak now that he would never be strong again. Resentment was growing. He gave the three pats of release
and marched upstairs to his study like a scolded schoolboy about to do his lessons. Checking his email, he saw that My had already forwarded him three links on how to write a eulogy. He viewed all of them for far too long, procrastinating, overwhelmed and defeated before he ever began.

He typed “Walt Shetterly was a good man” and stared at that for thirty minutes while the images of the previous day ran like a horror movie over the words and blinking cursor. Finally, a bit more “He was funny and a patient teacher. It wasn’t easy to step down from more active duty to the archives, but he did it to stay at the Yard, the second greatest love of his life.”

He sighed. It was the kind of shite that you heard at funerals, true and earnest and deadly dull. But how the fuck else to go on?

“His wife Betty died far too soon of breast cancer, and he spent most of his remaining years getting ready to rejoin her.”

Scratching at his head was a habit he used to do in school to help him think, scrubbing through the brush of his hair until it stood on end. But he could hear the scratching as if a small rat was perched up there, and that was no help at all.

“Bloody fucking hell.”

Were they cutting into Walt’s body at the morgue now? What was happening to Michelle and the children as they prepared to say goodbye to Rich? Would her pastor help? Did the church have money set aside for such things? It would be a closed casket. The little ones would not understand quite what had happened and would wait for daddy to come home.

Rich had taken the tedious work of assistant archivist when Michelle became terrified that he would be injured or killed at active duty. That would have been preferable to this end. Her beliefs would condemn him to a fate in hell for suicide. Greg now knew that Rich’s daily life had been hell. Some friend Greg had turned out to be, some kind of leader who lets a former member of his team make such a mess that suicide became a viable option.

Burying his face in his hands, he tried to catalog all of the times that he had seen Rich in the past year, looking for the clues. He had seen and not observed. Sherlock would have a field day with that. Rich had always looked tired and harried, but all his coworkers had chalked that up to the little ones even teased him about it. Had he been furtive or sly any of those times? His mind skittered from one event to the next, and he couldn’t focus. He should check his diary and the big desk blotter calendar that he doodled on. All the year’s pages would be tucked underneath and might jog his memory. But all he had brought from the office was the little wedding picture.

And there was the eulogy and as soon as he got his hearing back, additional debriefing and likely mandatory sessions with the Yard’s therapist. Gil Hoffman would have a hard on from digging through Greg’s brain again. He searched through the desk for scratch paper and found his journal with Paris on the cover, flipping through to see all of his careful notes and plans for making his marriage better.

He hadn’t got very far on that. The reference books were all there too, markers in exactly the place he’d left them several months ago. Winter was coming on again, his second with My, and they were in the middle of another emotional apocalypse. “Shit.”

Put that on the list too, but he would have the time wouldn’t he while in exile. The other drawers yielded a packet of crisps, a dried up biro, vacation snaps that didn’t turn out, and a large jar of lube that he couldn’t get open. The very idea of sex had him shoving that in the bottom drawer with the marriage manuals.
Finally as he scooted his chair out, he checked the lap drawer and found a diary My had given when he had the study decorated for Greg. It was leather, of course, monogrammed, and having never been out of the drawer or even the gift box, it still smelled of new shoes and tony shops. He started marking down every time that he had seen Rich, working backward from the previous day. For a little while, it kept Rich alive to remember but the number of meetings was far too few. They used to go out for a pint or grab a sandwich regularly, and Greg had kept the boys now and then for an afternoon on the weekend. That was before he married My.

Pretending it would help with the eulogy, Greg recorded the times that he had seen Walt the past year, and it was again such a pittance compared to the previous year. All of his friendships had suffered then for the sake of a marriage that was still floundering. He had left them all behind and poured himself into the bottomless well of My’s need, and his absence had killed them.

The diary went back in the box, back in the drawer where it would stay in the desk with his other failures. He wasn’t a finisher after all. Sherlock had to come in and clean up his cases, My fixed god knows how many of his other work challenges, and Morris kept house for him. He wasn’t even that good at fucking so he sucked at being a kept man. A kept man who sucked at fucking and sucking. He turned back to the computer, determined to finish one thing in his life. The dark paneling of the study became fascinating, faces and other shapes appearing in a part of the room he had never looked at so closely.

Suddenly there was a hand on his shoulder and he screamed like a woman, high and sharp. His knee slammed into the desk. “Jesus fucking Christ! Don’t fucking grab me like that.”

He rolled the chair back and got around the desk, not able to look at My. My who tamed countries and monarchs and sheiks and went on suicide rescue missions without a gun and could kill a man with a pencil in seconds, watching his husband the cowardly lion. Great.

My gestured toward Greg’s mobile which was face down on the desk and then texted. Greg could feel the vibrations where his palm rested on the desk top. He gritted his teeth to stop his chin wobbling and looked at the screen.

_I’m sorry, love. You looked right at me._

“Oh, I was lost in thought. I’m still bloody deaf! You’ve got to warn me before you grab hold.” He could hear how close to tears he was over his heart pounding in his ears.

_I did ring you from downstairs._

Greg saw that the recent call indicator showed two missed calls. Then he threw it across the room where it knocked over a lamp. Walking down the hall, he shut himself in the loo and sat on the toilet. Finally his breathing slowed and the shaking stopped. But when he found himself alone in a small room, the terror began all over again.

Movement caught his eye and he curled in on himself, edging toward the wall. But it was a piece of paper, flapping a bit in the air current from the heating vent.

“When you’re ready, come to the library. I have something to show you.”

He was fucked either way. The small space and solitude scared him and the fear made him ashamed. Facing My after screaming was also a shame fest. Calling up memories of My’s nightmares and social anxiety, he slunk off to the library.

The table had technology all over it, laptops and cameras and a scanner. The big screen was pulled down. My smiled shyly and walked over to give Greg a hug. He didn’t feel anything when
My touched him, but perhaps relief that they were moving past his humiliation.

Another mobile was handed to him, identical to the last. They must have been purchased in bulk. It was as if his tantrum had never happened.

*Hungry? Thirsty?*

“Neither.”

My accepted this although he pointed hopefully to the credenza where a whole lot of silver trays were arranged. Greg couldn’t be arsed to chew; his head ached. He wanted to crawl in a hole, but it was easier to follow someone with a plan. My pulled him down into the deep soft couch. Into the couch because My sat back first and put Greg between his grasshopper legs. The ottoman was there making a chaise of sorts. When the cool leather made him shiver, My produced the quilt that his mum had made and pulled it over them both.

A blanket fort, just like he and Georgie used to make on rainy days. The long shadows of afternoon light were gentle. The rest of the world was somewhere conducting business. My had changed into softer clothes, a cashmere jumper and cords. He was pettable. With the soft knit against his cheek, Greg snuggled in with a sigh for a movie he wouldn’t be able to hear.

But it was a slide show. There were images all mixed together and coming quickly. Greg’s mum and dad in Italy, looking tanned and happy. A baby duck waddling after its mummy. Morris making breakfast in his striped apron. One of their wedding photos, where My was gazing adoringly at him, oblivious to anything else. Horses running in a field. An ocean sunrise at the villa.

It stretched on and on, holding his attention, pushing back the ugly images that crowded his mind. When he drifted and his heavy eyelids fell shut, the bad crowded in, but he could blink awake and see a litter of kittens suckling at their mum.

There were even some funny ones. Morris wearing a colander as a hat while gesturing with a wooden spoon. Art kissing the bonnet of Greg’s car. His mum sneezing into a tea cozy then examining the result with disgust. A selfie that My had taken of his own hard cock.

Hundreds of pictures. He drifted away on the tidal wave of their life, one hand twisted in My’s jumper, while My rubbed his back. The nap was dreamless. He woke sweaty and spent but peaceful from the hard work of rest.

The room was darker but he thought it wasn’t night yet. My was still holding him, and he felt safe in the nest My had made. A nest, a fort, a sanctuary. Not waking up alone. Warmth and softness. Pretty pictures. He might get through this.

“Thank you,” he said looking up at My.

My bent to kiss him, a gentle brush of cool lips across his more fevered ones. Walt’s lips under his, cooling and slack, the garlic from his lunch wafting up before the smell of blood and urine crowded it out. Greg shuddered and pulled away.

My looked puzzled but cooperative as Greg scrambled out from under the quilt and off the couch. He went to the window and pressed his forehead against the glass. This was his life now, a series of embarrassments. There wasn’t going to be a normal anymore.

The flash of the slide show in the window steadied him. He watched the images in the reflection on the window until his breathing slowed. When he turned back toward the room, he saw that Morris had brought in fresh tea and a few more dishes to add to the groaning credenza. My fed
him by hand on all the wee sandwiches and cakes, and he took it because of his shame at rejecting My’s kiss. Nothing tasted good. It was a pantomime of a meal although the heat of the tea cup in his hand was nice and he had been thirsty.

Pictures of his childhood were in the mix now. Georgie in her tomboy years so that they looked like stairstep boys. Bicycles and t-shirts stained from iced lollies and birthday cakes and Christmas jumpers and lost baby teeth and those terrible photos that mothers take when a child is sick with chicken pox or flu. Baby Greggie in the tub. Toddler Greggie eating his first porridge on his own and smearing it all over his face and hair.

That little baby had no idea he was going to be a failure, to grow up to let his friends die. He blinked the tears back because he didn’t deserve the release. It was time to get back to work on Walt’s tribute. As he put aside his empty cup and stood to leave the comfort behind, My texted.

*He told you what to say. Hear his voice and take dictation.*

That was no bloody help at all. My’s whole life and career hadn’t just been shot to fucking hell. He would have speech writers if need be, a whole team of researchers at his disposal, and a professional editor for the polished final draft. At the same time, Greg didn’t want anybody else doing it because Walt had asked him. He climbed the stairs to his study; this time locking the door. No more Halloween frights.

He read his one accomplishment for the day. “Walt Shetterly was a good man.”

Walt could have resented that the green kid he had to tote around with him had eventually turned out to be his boss, but he had seen it as the greatest trick in the world, lucky and fine. Not having kids of his own made it easy for him to compliment Greg in a way that his own father hadn’t back then. It had shored him up during the awkward years when Rich Lestrade had grieved for the dreams he had of grandchildren, three generations of coppers, the Lestrade men.

Thirty more minutes had past. Greg felt the weight of the day in his body as the physical toll from the tragedy manifested. His fingers ached where he had tried to be so careful not to break ribs when pressing on Walt’s chest. His back and shoulders ached from the same and from hunching over the laptop. His knees throbbed from slamming to the floor multiple times, but he would get down on them now for one perfect sentence.

He lay his head down on the desk to block all of it out. “Help me. God help me,” an echo of all he had begged for as Walt died under his hands.

“You’ll know what to say, boy. Silver fox and silver tongued devil. Always have been a charmer and good with words. You’ve been to these doings before. Make them laugh, make them cry, tell them something that will make them get their shit together.”

He typed in Walt’s favorite joke and then another. Their most embarrassing moment at a crime scene. Walt getting used to his deaf aid. The rookie prank that backfired on him. Walt’s laugh, somewhere between horse and mad man. And his first meeting with My, “Microphone.” The momentum of a volume of words on the page carried him into discussing Betty, who was a dim memory to all but Walt.

There was a shape to it. He knew he was coming down to the last page and his cramped fingers flew over the keys. Typing the last sentence was almost orgasmic; he had done it.

Panting with the effort, he emailed the bloody thing to himself for back up, and then increased the font to one he could see without reading glasses from a lectern. He hit ‘print’ and glanced around, watching the pages churn out, covered in the fierce black marks of his words.
His face was wet, and his eyes burned from the tears he hadn’t been aware of. All the soreness and muscle fatigue had increased. The light was on in My’s study across the hall, but he went upstairs without a word, pissing a little in the en suite, most of his body’s moisture had seeped out of his bloody eyes. Served him right for being such a ponce. The prescription bottle sat by the sink. They had wanted him to take them last night. He took three, enough to knock him out but perhaps not enough to shit himself.

My’s personal physician was apparently not bound by the same codes as an ordinary man’s doctor. Greg had barely got his kit off when waves of bliss rolled over him. He felt for the bed which seemed miles below him. He was alone in the bed again; My likely on his mobile to fucking Macau, but the loneliness and anger were once removed.

He was nuzzling the softest sheets in the universe and My could go fuck himself. Didn’t he always? A picture of My in full Iceman armor, grim and determined, trousers lowered, one leg hiked up on the desk while he systematically ground Big Purple into himself like a pencil into a sharpener. Greg was laughing delightedly at this when he fell asleep.

The days did progress. Greg did as he was told. A follow up visit to the audiologist. Follow up questions by the inquiry board. A meeting at the mortuary regarding cremation. Painfully earnest email from Walt’s priest. Painfully absent email, calls, or texts from his team. My interpreting Ginny’s daily calls. Three forced meals per day, chewing coin flavored cardboard and sulfur scented pellets. Chemically enhanced sleep that My sometimes woke him from as he was screaming but could not hear himself doing so. One especially bad one where he needed to keep screaming for awhile even with My holding him.

Through all of the waking hours in between, My was constantly on his mobile to persons unknown. Greg resented this to an obsessive degree but couldn’t confront him about it because if My so much as went to the loo, Greg was waiting at the door after. He couldn’t bear to be alone but couldn’t breathe when anyone was about. After a tentative hug early on, Morris had steered clear. There had been no Tuppy sightings. Greg stayed in his lair and glowered at the world and his partner but clung like a howler monkey when ever My moved. Greg’s cowardice was sickening but in keeping with a man who let his friends die.

They had scheduled the funeral as late as they dared, not sure if Greg could manage public speaking when he couldn’t hear reactions from his listeners. However, on the third day after the tragedy, Greg’s ears popped in with a roar right on schedule. Sound was sharp as needles, and he felt for new born babies. The service would happen on time.

Too soon he was putting on his uniform with all its spit and polish. Morris hadn’t been allowed to touch it. Greg had seen to its care before and after the many somber occasions that required it, and this day would be no exception. My had hovered in his dressing gown, trying to be helpful until Greg had excused himself to the guest room to finish.

“I’m sorry, love, but if you give me sympathy, I’ll break down and I’ve got the whole day to get through besides meeting with my team after. Let me put on my game face for now. I’ll need you more when the night comes.”

As he fastened each button and buckle, he pressed his feelings down. One last check for fingerprints on all the shiny bits and he was down to the garage, determined to go it alone. Driving helped even though he felt shaky about being behind the wheel, not having driven since it happened. The car proved to be a welcome cocoon where nothing was required of him from others except signaling his turns and obeying traffic laws. He regretted what driving did to the sharp crease of his trousers, but he couldn’t have imagined sitting in the limo like a small wealthy child being driven to school.
Once at the church, the momentum of the service carried him forward. The young priest Matt Forster was calm and polite; funerals a part of his routine in the small and decaying parish. He attempted a bit of small talk in the anteroom but knew to back away when Greg’s answers were curt.

There was organ music of the standard sort, hymns Greg assumed, and the sickly smell of flowers, not much in season that time of year. Father Forster had put him first in the program. “It’s not an easy thing and I thought you might like to have it over straight away.”

He didn’t know if it was better or not when he was standing before a crowd much smaller than the one Walt had planned for with legs numb to the point that he had to make sure they were on the floor. He spread his pages out on the lectern and immediately wished that he had made the font even larger. The letters moved around like ants. Someone coughed. The silence had grown to squirming awkwardness as he fumbled.

He had to do this for Walt, to have one success for the old man after failing him to the point of death. His hands shook; people were seeing his ineptitude directly above the body of the man he was trying to honor. But My’s face loomed before him full of pride, flanked by Morris’ and Tuppy’s looks of positive anticipation.

“Walt called my husband “Microphone” which was a bastardization of Mycroft Holmes.” Not where he had planned to start at all, but My’s reassuring nod and grin were what he needed.

“Perhaps you’ve all heard that story but Walt never let repetition stop him as those of us know who heard the story of the banana and the sex worker each Thursday at our local.”

Finally, other people were nodding and smiling.

“So I give you the story of Walt’s first meeting with his friend Microphone.”

Greg read through his anecdotes after that barely catching himself from re-reading the one about Microphone which had come much later in the draft. He almost enjoyed seeing people’s agreement with his memories and the tension dissolving at his words. There had been such a long while since he’d shared the old stories.

In his Iceman suit, My was smiling the easy, open private smile that was just for Greg. But it was time to get on with it and say the things that Walt had asked him to. Down to the last two pages and however badly it went, he was nearly there.

“Some bits of Walt’s life were not so funny. The cancer that took Betty the same year that he was removed from active duty. Losing his hearing even if he used a squealing deaf aid to cut short many a long winded presentation at staff meeting. I’ve learned recently how isolating that deafness can be, yet I suppose he kept listening for that one voice that he’s hearing now with perfect clarity.”

His own voice went wobbly at that, and he waited it out. There would be no tears in the uniform even though some older folks were snuffling into handkerchiefs and My’s eyes were suspiciously glittery. Tuppy put an arm around Morris, patting his shoulder.

“Well then, he said I should make you laugh, cry, and then give you a thought to carry. I can only hope you learn from my experience. This year of my life has certainly been a cautionary tale for all to see. I assumed that I had more time with the people that I cared about. I got busy and took people for granted. Nothing new or profound, but like Walt’s stories, it needs to be repeated. Don’t wait to say the important words. Don’t wait for life to settle down before getting together because it won’t. Listen to the old stories. Find things to laugh about. Ring each other often; not
just texts. You will want to hear their voice when it’s too late. Give gifts and compliments as if it’s the last day. It might be. You don’t have a minute to lose. Thank you, Walt.”

Greg’s voice seemed to hover above the rows of empty seats behind the huddled group. In his mind, he hadn’t got past delivering the speech, and now he couldn’t remember what to do next.

The young priest’s hand was on his shoulder, squeezing strength into him. “Thank you, Detective Inspector.”
With the lectern as coverage, the priest turned him and pointed to his seat. He took it eagerly; his legs starting to shake now it was all over.

“You’ve received an excellent homily from one of your own,” Father Forster said. “Much of what I planned to say has been covered far more eloquently by Detective Inspector Lestrade. I’ll be brief.”

Greg felt relieved that it hadn’t been a total wash. He focused on a stained glass window above the balcony, staring hard and then closing his eyes to see the design in negative. The lilt of a young voice made him think of My’s village and the young vicar Michael. He focused on tone rather than words and was comforted by the sincerity and his memories of the sweet couple that My had created.

With a final hymn, appropriately somber, the service was over. Greg was disappointed that the Yard team sent as pall bearers didn’t seem to have the same snap and polish as in past years. Walt had been cheated, and Greg felt the guilt of failure wash over himself again. He should have seen to it personally.

He also missed the graveside service which cremation rendered obsolete. In a few days, he and My would go to the mausoleum and place Walt’s ashes beside Betty’s in the tiny opening, affixing an additional plaque.
Once Walt was loaded back onto the hearse for his ride to the crematorium, Greg looked around for his team and any of the old guard that might like to join him. Fred Wheeler and Bob Drake were walking toward the wee car park but paused as he called after them.

Fred was as loud and feisty as ever, not thwarted at all by surroundings or occasion. “Greg, you old bastard, you did him proud. Say the same things at mine if you will.”

Handshakes all around, Greg hanging on a little longer than his old idols. “Are you coming for a pint with us? My team and any others you see to round up. You remember the little place near the Yard? The name changes every few years, but it still smells of sick and piss.”

Bob turned fully to Greg who was shocked to notice how rheumy his eyes were. God, he had failed in a short time. “I’m pleased to be asked, mate, but we’ve got just time enough to get to another one.”

“We lost someone else?”

“Not to worry. Trevor Kenyon was long before your time. Died in his sleep Friday at the rest home. Hadn’t known who he was or where he was for years, but it’s right to say farewell.”

Greg felt abandoned. Even the old duffers had plans.

Fred took his hand again and patted it. “You ring us next week and we’ll have lunch. Catch up with a good old chin wag, but make today’s about your team. They don’t need the likes of us slowing things down, eh?”

Greg nodded and hurried back toward the rapidly dispersing crowd. Sally was already in her car
and passed him as he walked away from the car park. He waved frantically and found himself leaning down toward her window. “If you get there before I do, will you get us a table? How many do you think we’ll need? Ring anybody else that might like to stop by. It’s all on me.”

Sally squirmed in her seat. “The thing is, Greg, we did all that the night it happened and the one after. We’ve talked it all through, and lots of the new ones don’t even know Walt.”

“But he came to the pub same as the rest.”

“If you were there. But you haven’t been around that much, Rich either what with the kids to watch and his wife disapproving of the drink.”

“So there’s not to be anyone to raise a glass to him then?”

“Greg, please don’t get that look. We did have a round and talk about him, about both of them, but you can’t expect us to call it up again just for you. Since you got married, you don’t come ‘round and there’s nothing wrong about it. If I had a nice husband, I’d disappear to.”

Cars had backed up behind her and with a shrug, she was gone. The disposal unit, as they used to call it so easily, had gone probably to the other funeral. Since Greg had spoken often to My the past few days about how he needed to be alone with his team, My, Morris and Tuppy had all gone on. The priest was tidying up at the front when he looked in, but there was no one else to be found. In the car park, his was the only car left.

If he had thought to get the name of the church, he would have gone to the next funeral so as not to go home and show his shame that his team did not want him. He drove for a long time, past the Yard and even Baker Street, but eventually he was low on petrol and getting weary. No need to put others at risk on the road because he didn’t have a friend left in the world. They tended to die off from being near him, didn’t they?

He sat in the car for awhile after he backed it in the garage. But eventually, he had to go in because My deserved to know that his husband was an even bigger failure, abandoned by friends and already replaced at work. The kitchen door swung open at his approach, and the warm air scented with cooking and baking smells surrounded him.

He stepped away from My’s open arms. “Not in the uniform. Let me change first.”

And he hurried up the back steps, the radio unnaturally loud now that the talking had stopped. My and Morris and Tuppy would all know soon enough that they were Greg’s only friends and had better get away for their own protection.

When My came in, Greg was standing in his vest and pants and dark socks, the other uniform, the one old men wore under their Sunday best or after a funeral. He took his time with getting fingerprints off the shiny buttons, belt, and insignia and making sure that all seams and things were straight even if it would be going to the cleaners at the Yard. They might not let him have it back and he wanted to take the best care of it one last time.

Greg searched for the words to tell My that his own team had rejected him because he hadn’t spent enough time with them. It was crucial that My not blame himself in any way even though their marriage had been the main reason Greg had faded from the scene. In the end, he couldn’t say it because of the huge lump in his throat. He hung the garment bag in the closet to face the trip to the Yard another day.

My was standing, waiting with a terrible patience as Greg selected civilian clothes. “Come have some dinner, love. Morris made even more comfort food and we’ll have it in the kitchen together.
Tuppy is staying.”

Greg nodded. Why not have an almost stranger see his downfall? He wanted to beg for a reprieve, to crawl under the duvet and have his dinner sent up on a tray, but that was for heroes. Instead, he gritted his teeth and said, “I’m going to get very drunk tonight, and if you love me, you’ll spare me the lectures.”

“Greg, you can have as much as you want to drink in a minute. That’s not what I’m after.”

My’s long arms went all the way around him and one hand reached up into his hair to cradle his aching head toward a bony shoulder.

“No. I can’t.”

“Let me have it, baby. I’ve got you.”

He sagged into it, trying with all his heart to receive the comfort. It felt like another play where his role was unclear.

“My beautiful boy. I was so proud of you today. How handsome you looked in your uniform, how wonderful your speech was. They were hanging on your every word. Did you see?”

“No, I couldn’t look at anything.”

“That’s alright. You were very brave, sweetheart. So brave. But you don’t have to be now. You’re home. Let go.”

My was saying all the right things and his hands were gentle and soothing, rubbing circles on Greg’s back while he held him up. It didn’t do a damn bit of good. Greg felt like shit and there was no chance of it getting better. Mycroft Holmes had run against something he couldn’t fix. The Iceman and all his glass horses had shattered.

Greg gave his husband three pats on the back and stood up straight. “I need that drink now.”

The day after the funeral, Greg took medicinal doses of alcohol every four to six hours. Huge sloppy tumblers, working his way through My’s wet bar moving to the more exotic sweet drinks, sherries and fruit liquers and crème de menthe when the hard stuff was gone. Morris would raise an eyebrow and clean around him, following his progress from bed to couch to bed.

He had tried to have his regular breakfast with My, but it seemed a lot of effort to put on clothes for twenty minutes of sipping coffee and mangling a piece of toast. His appetite was gone and the whole concept of family breakfast had been for Greg’s benefit anyway. My could breakfast at his club or have tea at his desk the way he had preferred before Greg had a tantrum about shared meals and morning goodbyes.

My sat on the edge of the bed on Friday morning. “I don’t like to leave you, love.” A gentle hand rubbed Greg’s shoulder. “What do you have planned for today?”

“I think I’ll have a lie in, then a nap, then later a lie down.”

“I don’t like to leave you, love.” A gentle hand rubbed Greg’s shoulder. “What do you have planned for today?”

“I think I’ll have a lie in, then a nap, then later a lie down.”

“I’m glad you’re getting some rest.” Kiss on the forehead. “Sleep well, and I’ll see you tonight.”

Greg hadn’t got out of bed that Friday at all. He had lost track of the last time he had showered or cleaned his teeth. He could smell himself and his sour smell had permeated the sheets since he hadn’t allowed Morris to change them. The weekend meant that My would be home for two days to notice with sharp eyes how much Greg had been drinking. They would be together constantly
with My attempting conversations and wholesome activities and force feedings.

Alcohol was so much more effective on an empty stomach, and the dizziness of fasting took his mind off his anxiety. He could float for hours on waves of low blood sugar. But My would make him eat, pleading with him, his eyes sad and blood shot like a hound’s from the lack of sleep.

Greg pulled the duvet over his head as the shadows got long in the room. His heart was pounding, synced to the tick of the clock. It was a horror film with slow, heavy footsteps coming up the stairs, the bed giving as someone sat on the edge, the corner of the duvet peeled back to a singing voice, “Where’s my husband? Where did he go?”

Bloody peekaboo. Greg was livid but My misread the signs. “Those are the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen, poor baby. Budge over.”

Then My was in his space, infiltrating the Kingdom of Duvet. Suit and watch fob and handmade shoes, all crowding Greg, too close, too intimate, too much pressure. He felt his anger simmering as he clung to My, desperately needing the hug that smothered him. It was a hug full of expectations that he could not fulfill, and the whole day’s worth of sleep didn’t stop the weariness that flowed over him.

My stayed quiet for awhile, breathing slowly, sinking into the cuddle and Greg began to hope, but then he patted Greg’s back and said, “Let’s have a bath.”

“Because I stink.”

“No, because I’ve been cold all day and I want to be somewhere warm and quiet with my husband and naked, if you please, because these trousers are binding me in the crotch. I must speak to my tailor. Apparently he’s decided to change my inside leg measurement without telling my body.”

Greg felt like a bath would lead to sex. They hadn’t tried since the unfortunate fisting incident, and he felt his arse slam shut at the thought of even the mildest foreplay. But his brain was too dulled by fasting and drink to come up with any ready excuses. Silence was taken as compliance.

“I’ll get things ready.”

Greg exited the bed, noting that his pants were sodden in some spots and crunchy in others. There was fuzz on his teeth, and a crust in his navel. He prayed that this would be a deterrent, but My was a horny bastard even at death’s door. It would take more than body odor to put him off.

He was so dehydrated that he didn’t even have to piss. Sitting on the toilet lid, he watched My putter about, shedding his kit while lighting candles and throwing vast quantities of something into the running bath. The ocean waves cd played on the house stereo. Jars, tubes, and bottles were placed in the wide shelf behind the tub along with a stack of flannels and towels, the ones Greg favored with a rough weave that could take the hide off a rhino. Soon the stench of his own body was competing with ocean smells and sandalwood.

“Come on, love. It can finish filling as we soak. You get in first. I’m right behind you.”

After chucking his offensive pants in the bin, Greg sunk into the tub, the water thick with salt granules and hot enough to boil pasta. He was certainly limp as a noodle, just add olive oil.

My slid in behind him and wrapped arms around him to pull him back against his chest. This was better than expected. Greg could get his comfort without eye contact or kissing, and My was in a thinking mood. He nuzzled Greg’s hair before resting his cheek on top of the oily tangled mess.
The longer they sat in silence, the safer Greg felt. He started to let go, content in the nest of My’s arms and legs. The auto shut off cut the water when the tub filled to capacity, and Greg’s legs floated up to the surface until he was truly held by his husband’s care. They lay listening to the waves, bodies warmed by the simulated ocean.

They truly had nowhere to be, and Greg’s mind was empty of cases. He pretended they were at the villa, a far away time when he had been happy instead of perpetually weary. He wanted to turn around into the comfort of My’s chest, but he knew that would incite arousal. Sighing, he stayed put, his body undulating with the water.

“May I wash your hair?”

Greg nodded. Soon his itchy scalp was soothed by a minty shampoo, as cool as the water was hot. My dug his nails in, seeming to know exactly where Greg needed scratched. How did he know how to do this so that not only Greg’s head but his neck and shoulders seemed better. And he remembered to give Greg the flannel to put over his eyes so the shampoo didn’t get in during the rinse.

“I could do your back if you like.”

Even if he had to pay the piper later, Greg was willing to have his filthy body made clean. My was very, very good with his mad scientist collection of potions. The scrub smelled of ginger and went on innocently enough but then began to heat up until it was nearly painful before subsiding into a shivery cool that felt like extreme clean. With consuming thoroughness, My worked the concoction in everywhere. It was like hundreds of leprechauns with brooms sweeping across his back. He leaned forward to let My get it down as far as he could.

“We can do your arse later. Mine gets chapped in winter no matter how careful I am.”

“That’s quite a saucy bit of trivia.”

“Sherlock’s giant rump used to get all flaky and sore too. The Holmes have very delicate skin.”

“I wonder if John rubs things on Sherlock’s arse.”

“That is a mental picture I do not care for. Arms, please.”

My worked the scrub from arm pits to finger tips, paying extra attention to Greg’s fingers and palms. “Why have we not done more of this? I love pampering you. Let’s make a weekend of it.”

Greg got a facial, another brand of minty coolness against his fevered cheeks. While the mask did its magic, My spread scrub up and down Greg’s legs and reaching his feet, began to knead the perpetual sore spots in Greg’s heels. He even knew to work the pinky toe that always rubbed against the seam of Greg’s heavy work shoes.

As Greg began to float in the salty water, he held onto the rail of the tub. The part of him most decidedly relaxed was his cock which flopped in the water with no will of its own, waving to My in a mocking salute but as My turned him in the water in order to reach his ass, it didn’t much matter if he was hard or not.

“This is industrial strength. You’ll have to get a new ID made; your skin is that new.”

Greg snuggled into the thick towel placed at the head of the tub, presenting his upthrust arse to My for scrubbing. They had bathed and showered together before and My had introduced him to an infinite parade of bath products, but this was near the top of the list. He wriggled with pleasure.
“Be still, my dear. You do not want to use this one internally. Talk about the eternal flame.”

“Do you remember where the sand used to get when we were at the villa?”

“And yet, I wish we were there now.”

Those memories seemed like something out of a movie. Greg was confident of his job then; sure of his friends. Game for any sexual experiment My wanted; sleeping without guilt or shame. Feeling clear about his future and eager to continue building his marriage. Naïve, innocent, stupid.

My rinsed away the scrub, the water now resembling a bog. “Best get out before you get anymore corrugated.”

Greg let himself be led with a growing anxiety. The mint mask was pulled off his face, his skin left shiny and pink. He definitely looked better, but My was a bit too thorough in drying the twig and berries and the towel wrapped around his waist was brief. He narrowly avoided a kiss, turning his head at the last minute to get a slurpy one on his chin. The baking heat of the bath had not warmed those lips any.

If he were going to have to have sex, Greg needed to stall for as long as he could. “Let’s have some green tea to flush the toxins and rehydrate.”

Too much daytime telly. Good god. But My was pleased that Greg was volunteering to drink something that didn’t come from the liquor cabinet. He busied himself with the little kettle and all the trappings of Holmes tea making which was painstaking and wearisome compared to the Lestrade way of throwing a few bags in the mug and never taking them out. Tea, paint thinner, floor stripper, it was all the same to a down on his luck copper.

Greg sighed and placed all of his hope in distracting My from sex, but he knew the look. My never complimented Greg on his body or appearance, but he sure as hell looked him over just before mounting him.

My put the steaming mug in his hand. “I thought we would go with the theme of the evening. Ginger mint. I’ve been to the place they grow these leaves. I’ll take you some time.”

False, pretentious, forced. Greg sighed again. “I’d like that, love. Maybe when all this is over.”

My reached for his own mug and his towel slipped. He didn’t bother replacing it. “I’m feeling much better. I hope you are too.”

If I don’t want this, I don’t want this. God, help me.

But apparently he had used up all his tickets because My tipped Greg’s head up and kissed him deeply, tongue swirling down toward Greg’s uvula until he gagged on it, a little bit of ginger and mint repeating in his mouth.

My pulled away. “Are we going to talk about it? I think we must.”

Greg wasn’t ready for this conversation. He had been clean for a full five minutes. He wanted a drink and bed in short order, nothing else. But the pleasure of the bath was fading fast. His face was numb, no longer fresh and tingly from the mask but heavy like after a dentist’s visit. “I kissed a dead man. Walt was already dead when I did CPR, and I keep feeling his lips and his bad breath and how still he was.”
He started to gag again, breathing slowly to stop the vomit which would be nothing but bile from his empty stomach. Much later than he should have he whispered, “Sorry.”

“I promise that the flashbacks will fade with time. Am I allowed to kiss you? Not on the lips but other places?”

“That’s not fair to you. Having it all one way.” One way like it is when I gave you all of my attention for months and I can’t get yours for even a day unless you want to fuck me.

Greg was afraid of the rage that was getting bigger and bigger, but he also welcomed the strength it brought. Anger was a big feeling and he needed something inside to prop him up.

“As long as I can still kiss you and touch you, it’s fair. Let me make you feel good, baby, please.” My was kissing his forehead, his cheeks, behind his ears. “You’ll sleep better. Let’s take the edge off.”

“Walt’s not even cold. Wouldn’t be right.” Greg wanted to give in and have a scrap of normal, but they had gone wrong before the shooting, somewhere so far back Greg couldn’t get hold of it, he had started feeling empty.

“Walt would be the first man to understand about needs. He was a randy sort.” My’s hand snaked inside Greg’s dressing gown to rub his nipple.

“You didn’t know him.” Another flash of anger went through Greg. Walt was his, not My’s. Now was the time to say no, to put My’s hand away and leave the room.

“I know most of his stories were off color, delightfully so. Sex is a celebration of life, Greg. You are allowed to get on with your life. You said so yourself at the funeral.”

The dressing gown slid down his shoulder as My’s hand moved in larger circles over his chest; My’s lips moved down his neck. He could say that he was hungry, and they would have dinner. Which lie was more difficult? The one where he pushed food around on his plate and chewed and chewed without tasting anything but blood. Which would take longer? If they fucked, maybe My would sleep.

Greg grasped My’s cock, hard and ready. “You’re right, love. I know you are. Will you take me over?”

He got the lube from the nightstand and greased My’s cock, My hissing at the rough, quick handling. In future, praying was futile it seemed, but he sent out hopes and wishes that he would be able to fake an orgasm. My was the smartest man in the world, but a great deal of his brain power would be diverted. Greg climbed onto the bed and got on his hands and knees.

“I thought we might look at each other.” Nevertheless, My was already rubbing Greg’s hole with the lube.

“We’re both tired. We’ll do all the bells and whistles another night, eh?” Greg bore down as he was breached, there was the shadow of pleasure there, a sense memory, but mostly he just ached.

“Alright, baby? Healed up from the fisting?”

“It’s fine, My. Keep going.”

My’s breathing was ragged as he continued; he was making every effort to be careful. He rubbed Greg’s thigh; he paused to kiss Greg’s back, but finally it was time for the inevitable. Three
fingers slid out and My’s cock slid in. Greg bit his lip. It hurt, it actually hurt. He was a virgin again.

“Alright?”

“Fuck me.” He was glad that a raspy voice was his norm.

He made what he hoped were his usual noises and let his body be carried by the momentum of My’s thrusts. When My’s hand strayed low, Greg put it on his tit, holding it there until My began to squeeze. Greg counted thrusts and gazed sideways at the alarm clock on the nightstand, timing the whole bloody performance. He put his hand around his pitiful half hard dick and when he couldn’t stand it any longer, he gave out a quavering moan that sounded more like an old man getting an enema. He jerked and shook a little for good measure and got the towel around his cock as soon as possible.

“Come for me, love;” he said, getting down on his elbows to help the angle.

Two more thrusts and My was done. When he pulled away, it was as if he had skinned Greg from the inside out. There was no orgasm to soothe the feeling. He made a show of wiping off the non-existent come and then helping My with his. He’d had an extra intense release since they hadn’t been together in so long. Two days in a row was a drought for My.

“Good for you?”

“Yes, it was good.” Greg helped him under the covers. “Just rest, sweetheart.”

My was quickly asleep, head flung back and mouth open. Poor dumb bastard, he thought he’d done something wonderful. Greg limped into the en suite and cleaned himself out. He had never minded before but now it was an unbearable chore. His hands shook and he ached enough to take four paracetamol and consider something stronger. His stomach churned and in spite of the earlier bath, he felt filthy.

He stared at himself in the mirror and he didn’t look any different. The damage was done and none of it showed. “This is your future, old man. This is what you do for a roof over your head.”

When had life stopped and left him here with no plans and no hope? The rage welled up, but he refused it. My hadn’t raped him because he had Greg’s consent. The pain was Greg’s own fault because he lied to My, and it was nothing to the pain Michelle and the children were in. He shoved his finger down his throat and threw up the tablets. He deserved the hurt and he would take it.

Greg went back in the bedroom and climbed under the duvet. He curled up on the edge of the bed and waited for sleep to come with all its terrors.
Greg wasn’t even sure he had slept after getting into bed beside a blissfully oblivious Mycroft in his post coital haze. The blue numbers of the alarm clock were hazy as he panted quietly, trying to hold back his husband’s name. In the nightmare, My had yet again ended his life before Greg could stop him and this time, Greg wasn’t performing CPR on Walt but on his own father.

He squinted again and the numbers came into focus. 10:06. Too late to call home without scaring them. His mum would call him, or more likely My, if anything was wrong. My was breathing, wasn’t he? Greg eased over to face the center of the bed and listened carefully. His hearing was still rough around the edges, and in his dreams he was always deaf. There was no sound but his own wheezes. He put his hand inches above My’s mouth to feel puffs of air.

“What’s wrong, love?

Greg yipped in surprise, his already shuddering heart kicking up a notch. “Nothing. I’m sorry I woke you.”

My stretched and snuggled deeper into the feather bed Morris had put on top of the mattress the first cold night of autumn. Exhausted from a week of catnaps between his husband’s night terrors, My was falling back to sleep.

Even with his arse still throbbing from appeasement sex, Greg needed his husband. “My?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you.” But what Greg really meant was “I’m afraid.”

“Love you too, baby. Come here, please.”

My held up his arm and Greg dipped under to rest his head on My’s chest. He hated himself for the weakness but the long night stretched before him. He was too heartsick to bear dark thoughts alone. “Walt turned into my dad in this one. Do you think it’s a premonition?”

“Absolutely not. Your dad is healthy as a horse. You know that when you’re not tired and sad.” My’s hand made circles on Greg’s back.

He was going to have to get a new move. The circles weren’t working anymore. My always felt comforted when Greg cuddled him. It wasn’t fair. If he was going to be this weak, he wanted to cry, but his eyes just got damp and stung.
“I’m so sorry, Greg, so very sorry that you have to go through this.”

“I want my life back.”

“You’ll get there.”

“I won’t and please don’t insult me with platitudes.”

“I’m sorry for that too.” My sighed heavily, Greg’s head rising and falling with the breath. “Let’s remedy what we can. What time is it?”

“A little past ten. Why?”

“Your mum’s been staying up later since Morris taught her how to chat. I can email her and if she’s online, she’ll ring us. Then we’ll know that they are both well.”

Greg sat up and rubbed his fingers through his mint scented hair. “God, am I so far gone that I’ve got to have my mummy tuck me in at night even by email?”

But My was already tapping away on his mobile. Twenty minutes later, Ginny Lestrade had not replied. They had passed the time with tea and biscuits and checking crap telly but My was getting visibly more weary. “I’m sorry, love. She must have gone on to bed. We’ll ring her first thing.”

Greg nodded and slid back into the bed until My started snoring; then he snuck out of the room and went to his study, closing the door. Greg had put pyjama bottoms on while they waited, but that was as much clothing as he dared without giving away his conflict about touch. Now his bare feet were icy and his nipples ached with the cold. He wrapped his quilt around himself and found a pair of socks he had shoved under the couch cushion the day before, pleased to have tricked Morris.

After doing another futile search of the telly, he fetched his laptop and began checking even more websites about suicide. Suddenly, nausea rolled over him. What was in the news? Surely a tragedy of this magnitude would have been in all the papers and the tabloids would have plenty to say about his failure. God, he must have been drinking more than he thought to have this nastiness only occur to him now. He started with his own name but found only a few old blurbs about past cases and his one round of international espionage and intrigue that had led to the sudden marriage of the Iceman and the Copper.

Quotes about serial killers and a string of suicides and guarded press releases about a kidnapping and one ridiculous interview regarding Sherlock but nothing about a senior officer killing two of his men via negligence. He searched Walt’s name and found a very nice obituary although the photo was years old and a bit ridiculous, clearly a photo of him and Betty that had been cropped. But why would a man who lived on his own have a portrait taken? No cause of death was listed. Then with his hands shaking so badly that he had to retype it three times, he put in Rich’s name. Nothing but the standard death notice list, Walt’s a few names above. No announcement of a memorial service or burial, no obituary. He tried more key words, typing more quickly. Suicide, shooting, Yard tragedy, officer at fault. Had My fixed his computer with some sort of child lock? He went through all the settings and preferences that he knew, but was afraid in his agitation that he might harm it.

He crept over to My’s study and tried to get in to his laptop but the password was beyond him. There were no new chapters of My’s novel on the printer stand, and he felt a twinge of guilt that all of My’s writing time had been taken up with Greg’s cowardice. Things were going to be better; Greg would be braver tomorrow.
Two hours had past but first light was an eternity away. He went to the kitchen and used the house computer where Morris did his ordering of groceries and cleaning supplies. The pass word was helpfully jotted down on a sticky note under the keyboard. “Got it in one, Greg,” he whispered with a small satisfaction as he continued his pursuit of the truth about himself.

He tried all of the same key words and phrases as well as ‘administrative leave.’ Then swallowing a bit of bile, he typed in ‘husband/partner of Mycroft Holmes.’ There was a small wedding announcement that he had never seen before. No photo for security reasons, the small typed lines probably a large enough risk, but My had allowed it, wanted the public to know that they were husband and husband.

Morris kept the recycling bin for newspaper in the laundry room under the sink. If there was ever a leak, the paper would absorb it until the plumber arrived. Greg sat on the laundry room floor, the cold tile seeping through fleece to his tender arse, and sorted through the huge stack. My read several papers each day at breakfast in a variety of languages and it took some time to get to the bottom. The papers dated back to two days before The Day. Greg didn’t know what to call it, tragedy? Was it still a tragedy when he had caused it with his bungling? Colossal error? End of the world?

He had another head slapping moment. Of course, My’s staff could fake a newspaper. They could produce any sort of articles and headlines. All they would have to do was remove one story. Sighing, he went back through the foreign press, looking for photos of himself or My, searching each bit of print for their names. His hands were black when he was through, and he carefully shrugged off the quilt not wanting to soil it with newsprint.

As he was scrubbing with the harsh bar of laundry soap, he glanced around the room and saw another example of his idiocy. There was a folding rack on the dryer and his favorite jumper lay there, a stretched out green cable that had somehow escaped the decimation of most of his pre-marital wardrobe. He warmed it in the dryer for a few minutes, not long enough to shrink it although that sort of care was years too late. Warm and fragrant and full of good memories, the jumper made him feel almost normal.

Tomorrow he would risk leaving his best pal, the duvet and go by the library for an uncorrupted terminal or even microfilm. Mycroft couldn’t fix the outside world, not all of it anyway. With a plan in place, Greg thought he could return to his study and begin looking for work. His resume’ needed seeing to. He hadn’t updated it since the first week with Sullivan as chief when he had fantasized about quitting. Sherlock had happened along, high and brilliant and near starvation, and there had been no thought of abandoning the job which meant cutting off Sherlock’s only means of staying sober until John.

He switched off the light and was about to walk through the kitchen when he heard footsteps. He was glad of the dark green jumper which helped him blend into the shadows.

“Some night you’ll come back to mine,” Tuppy was saying.

“I want to, love. But they need me now. Poor lost boys.”

“This poor lost boy wants to wake up beside you.”

“You did.”

“Sweetheart, I’m talking about fucking all night with no thought of the time. We can watch the sun come up and you can make me eggs wearing nothing but a tea towel over your chafed cock.”

“If we fuck all night and watch the dawn, you wouldn’t be waking up to me.”
“Don’t be smart.” A body was backed up against the wall Greg was leaning on and he jumped back at the thud, his socks sliding silently on the tiles. There were kissing noises and a groan that nearly got Greg started up. His face grew hot when a zip was pulled down.

“Let’s go back for one more. I can take you quick and you can give them a fry up.”

Morris laughed but it was nearly unrecognizable, husky with lust. “You are insatiable.”

“Only for you. I surprise myself sometimes. It’s love, pretty lad. A year ago, I couldn’t be bothered.”

“I love you too but I have to be able to walk if I’m going to serve.”

“It’s the weekend. After all the trouble and the drink, they’ll have a lie in.”

“If you get in my bed again, I’ll not get you out. You’d be trapped there. I imagine they’ll be in for the day with the rain.”

“Then let me do you right here.”

“With your knee acting up from the damp? Tups, it’s not on. You go along home now. I’ll ring you after breakfast.”

“Marry me?”

“Don’t start that.”

“I’m going to keep asking. I love you.”

“I love you more and my patience proves it. Now get away.”

For a full ten minutes, Greg had not thought about his own problems at all. He sunk to the floor hugging himself as he heard more kisses and finally the snick of the kitchen door. Tuppy’s feet crunched on the gravel as he walked back to the garage past the door of the laundry. They were like he and My had been in the early days, desperate with heat and need. After his brief and happy first marriage, Morris had been isolated for years and now he was worshipped. It was only a matter of time before My was a best man. Greg needed to make sure that nothing of his own loss and failure dampened a happy time for the couple.

He was thinking about wedding gifts and toasts when the overhead light went on and Morris shrieked. “Holy fucking god, Greg, what the bloody hell?”

Morris’ hair stood straight on end and Greg wasn’t sure if it was from fear, fondling, or fucking. His lips were kiss swollen to the point that he appeared to be wearing berry juice lipstick. On the floor, Greg’s eye level was unfortunate although the big scare of finding someone skulking in the laundry room was alleviating that particular poking hazard.

“I was looking for my jumper.”

“And you’ve found it. That doesn’t explain why your face is filthy. Have you been cleaning out the chimney?”

Greg rubbed a hand over his cheek, feeling the stubble that My had stubbornly left even though it created problems with the mask. Caught-- as if Morris could be fooled anyway. “I was going through the papers. I wanted to see what had been said.”
“Not one bloody word. Your man called in every favor he had and kept it quiet. That prick Sullivan tried himself to the limit but he’s no match for the Queen’s favorite. Nearly got himself sacked trying to hurt you.”

“Why didn’t My tell me?”

“You didn’t ask, I’ll wager.” Morris handed Greg a towel and tried to get his own appearance in check, smoothing down his wild man of Borneo hairdo. “He had a time of it. Hundreds of calls he had to make himself. Not the sort of thing you can ask of staff. I’d have done if I’d had the connections. Could even put on a posh accent when needs must, but he wanted to do it himself.”

“That’s where he’s been?”

“Yes, once you got your hearing back, he couldn’t do it in front of you. The tabloids were the worst of it and don’t think that won’t be a problem for years.”

Greg looked at the dirt on the towel and felt embarrassed. He had been miles out of line. Poor My. “He must have needed to go out the night it happened? I couldn’t understand why he left me.”

“That’s another matter. You don’t just cancel a Skype appointment with Kim Jong-un, particularly with all that mess with AirAsia so soon after the last one and that bloody movie the States stirred him up with. Months Myc’s been working on setting up that chat and had to hand it over to that weasel Lowery who botched it as he always does which is why he’ll stay an underling, thank you very much.”

Morris drew breath after this diatribe and handed Greg a wet wipe and pointed at a spot on his chin. “Myc had to get his diplomatic kit on and go down to his study to make a formal apology. Their etiquette makes us look like beasts, the protocol is crippling. He nearly made it through the whole dance, but as he was saying goodbye with the extra apologies and a whole lot of scraping no one should ever have inflicted upon them, you began to scream. At least that chubby little prick knows it was the truth and no excuse.”

“So it was about work after all.” Greg deflated, glad of the floor holding him up.

“Fifteen minutes, you were alone. People would have died, Greg, and now he’s got to undo the damage Lowery did. Back to square one anyway. I know you’re hurting and I’m quite worried about you, but have a care for Myc.”

Morris reached for the towel and chucked it in the sink. “It’s an hour until breakfast unless your man has a lie in which he should do. I’ll make something that can hold and if you are both able to sleep quietly, I’ll throw out the charred remains and make a fine lunch. Why don’t you go up and see if you can rest?”

“I doubt it but I do need to process all you’ve said.”

“Was I right telling you?” Morris was suddenly sheepish. “I’ve broken all my personal rules about confidentiality not to mention most of the butler hand book.”

“I’m glad you told me. It was the right thing to do.” They walked into the kitchen. Morris put out a hand and Greg shook it. “I’ll not tell My about this. Maybe he’ll tell me himself. I won’t tell him about Tuppy dry humping you against this wall either.”

Greg smiled as he climbed the stairs, Morris’ blush a pretty thing to see. His job search could wait while he cuddled with My. He didn’t deserve cuddles, but My certainly did. Part of him wanted to confess how petty he’d been, but the anger was fading and My would be devastated to find out how much Greg had doubted him. Greg would get over himself and make a nice day for My.
The morning light shown across the bed, and My’s face was drawn, even the slackness of sleep couldn’t hide the violet circles under his eyes that he had been hiding with makeup. While Greg watched, My frowned, his head twisting back and forth on the pillow. “Greg, Greg please.”

His voice was getting louder and more panicked, his breathing ragged. It was easier for Greg to crawl in beside him. “Come on, baby. Wake up for me. It’s your turn for a nightmare but that’s all it is.”

My sat up with a gasp, coughing as he choked on his own spit. Greg knelt beside him in the middle of the bed and pulled him close. He patted his back like he would a small child’s after a choking spell. “There now. You’ll be fine.”

My rested his head on Greg’s shoulder for a minute before gently pulling away. “I’m sorry. That’s the last thing you need right now.”

“You’re allowed equal time.”

Greg thought about offering a cuddle but in spite of a frightening dream, My had morning wood and all of Morris’ and Tuppy’s antics and an explanation for My’s abandonment hadn’t restored Greg’s libido enough. His arse was still very sore as well. He was saved by the buzz of My’s mobile.

My grinned. “Gigi. She replied by email so she wouldn’t interrupt a slow weekend shag. Why don’t you ring her, love, and ask about your dad. I’ll get dressed and we’ll have breakfast. I think we fucked our way past dinner last night.”

Greg dutifully called his mum. It took all of the positive energy that Morris had restored to him to put on a brave front for her. After asking about his dad, he had nothing to say and let Gigi carry the conversation which was not so much different from any other time. My rescued him once he was dressed and painted a glowing if censored picture of the previous evening. “He’s on the mend. We’re going to be fine. And now, m’lady, must ring off and feed my great hulk of a husband before he floats away. We skipped dinner last night for reasons I must not divulge.”

Fortified by a huge breakfast (Morris apparently sublimating his thwarted needs into his cooking), Greg asked if they could spend a rainy day with books. He felt ashamed at how My’s face lit up at the prospect of an outing. Greg enjoyed the treat of being a passenger as My skillfully wove through traffic and came to a halt suspiciously close to the building. A diplomatic hang tag hooked on the mirror and they were on the spot when the doors opened at the London Library. They found a huge table in an unpopular corner near Russian history and culture.

As much as Greg believed Morris, he wanted to see for himself. With a librarian’s help, he checked back editions all the way to the current day with the same results as he’d had at home. My had protected him as well as Rich and his survivors. Michelle would have to be faced nonetheless. But this day was for My, and Greg returned to their table from the stacks.

My was typing slowly, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth. They weren’t much for public displays of affection, having both watched it in others while lonely, but they appeared to have the entire area to themselves. Greg stood behind My and slid his arms down the front of his jumper, bending forward to nuzzle the baby soft ginger hair. My had left off the product for his weekend look; he smelled of chai and sandalwood. My took one of Greg’s hands and kissed it.

Greg couldn’t betray Morris’ confidence regarding the slip so he couldn’t say thank you but in the end it didn’t matter. My was painfully grateful for the affection and didn’t question it. The rain picked up, lashing the window; the sky darkened and they needed the green shaded table lamps.
Greg spent over an hour updating his resume’ and compiling another one that was based on skills rather than work history and would do for the present until he saw what sorts of jobs were out there. He would also need a cover letter, but he stood up to stretch first, feeling encouraged by his productivity.

Mirroring his movements, My pushed his chair out from the table and bent his torso into a backwards ‘C’ displaying his belly when his jumper crept up. Greg felt a flash of wanting to run his hands across it, caressing the thick trail of ginger that led to happy memories of better days. My’s jeans were losing their brand new look and would be soft if Greg reached down to palm My’s cock.

But he was saved from sending mixed signals by My getting up from the table, “Gents and then the stacks, love,” he whispered into Greg’s ear and then kissed it.

The cover letter took a long bout of painful labored spurts of typing and then angry punchings of the delete key. In the end, it was only a template until he could find a specific job to apply for. My had a stack of shopworn volumes, the pages blond and soft between the mended covers. His huge hands cradled one gently; his long finger turned a page and he looked up to grin at Greg.

“Coffee?”

“God, yes.” Greg had never wanted a beverage more. He had his chilled hands wrapped around a huge dish of latte at Foyle’s in record time. It wasn’t their same corner since the shop had been forced to move and modernize. But his rumpled husband was beside him, lifting a cranberry orange scone to Greg’s lips for a taste. My’s lips were warmed by his espresso, and Greg was able to manage a soft kiss, a brush of lips.

My whimpered and for a heart flickering moment, Greg feared that it would turn into more, but My looked in Greg’s eyes and then kissed his cheek and pulled away. He settled back into the book he had started in the library, and Greg was free to sip his drink and start another job search. With half a latte left, he knew the truth. His skills were outdated and he wasn’t suited for any job but copper. There were a few security guard openings, but they were entry level and required a knowledge of computers that was beyond Greg. If he couldn’t understand the terms in the advert, then he surely wouldn’t pass an interview. It wasn’t about shoe leather anymore but being able to sit for hours over a terminal. Greg loved his telly, but this seemed once removed from any real life action.

He clicked over to Foyle’s in house catalog and looked for career aids. Self help books had done so much for his marriage—not. Consulting the store map, he went off to see if a book could get his life out of the skip. For the first time in years, he knew that he couldn’t buy any book that caught his fancy. He would look them over and then go back to the library to borrow them later when My wasn’t with him. There would come a reckoning when My didn’t want to be chained to a failure, and all that Greg did in the coming weeks needed to focus on getting ready to be out on his ear.

For this moment, they were still together and perhaps in this new shop, they could make new memories. My was a pretty picture with his horn rimmed glassed perched on his nose, the old book in his hands so strange among the new and shiny ones, his long legs propped up on a chair, his jumper looking like the proper place to hide from the world. His smile was for Greg only, full of love and hope. Maybe they could get past this mess after all.

Greg worked hard, taking copious notes since he wouldn’t be able to buy. He learned that his problem was not unique which left him feeling relieved and cheated at the same time. People were no longer loyal to an employer that made no promise of being loyal to them. The Yard that had been his home and family would sack him without a second thought, not personal, just business. A younger man would be cheaper and more biddable.
He took quizzes and filled out check lists and wrote a mission statement, resisting his true mission which was to not get anybody else killed. He jotted down other books from the bibliographies in the back of each. None of the information was specific to aging coppers but he felt as if he’d achieved something and for that day at least, he could be worthy of My. He’d put in nearly a full day of job search; that was work no matter what anybody else said.

Finally, his neck and back protested. When he sat up straight, his bladder did as well. My had switched to a different big dull book while Greg had been busy. His hair was mussed and his reading glasses a little crooked. “Gents, love,” Greg said, patting My’s leg and then squeezing because the denim truly was starting to get soft. Morris must have been beating them on rocks in the laundry.

When he came back from the loo, all of his books were in a shopping bag and My was pocketing the receipt. “My, you can’t do that. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

He sat back down, deflated. His debt to My was higher than he could ever repay, and it would goad them both during the inevitable divorce.

My scooted his chair beside Greg’s and put an arm around Greg to pull him close. “Anything for you, sweetheart. Anything that interests you or helps you pass the time, I’ll buy it. No questions asked.”

“What about a parrot?”

My’s look of horror and disgust took the edge off the moment. Greg nearly laughed. “I don’t want a parrot, love. Just something silly that popped in my head. Always afraid they would take off a finger or carry some exotic disease.”

“Or be dead on the floor of the cage.”

“Resting and pining for the fjords.”

My still hadn’t got used to being part of the in club, and he always glowed when he got the joke. Greg wanted to go home and cuddle, maybe put on Python and have dinner in the kitchen with Morris, odd bits he might pull out of the freezer. Tuppy could come over. The crowds had been manageable with the weather and out of the way spots, but now he wanted safety. “Thank you for my books, love. Could we go home now?”

“No, I have planned a date for us.”

Greg’s heart sunk and all his hopeful feelings of getting back to safety and normalcy lay in a puddle at his feet. Why now when My had never planned dates for them in the past? Was the goal to pack the weekend so full that he wouldn’t have time to think? He had already pushed himself to the limit. But My looked infernally smug, and Greg let himself be led.

The traffic was horrible and My concentrated on defensive maneuvers, determined to keep their outing a surprise. Pizza Express. All of My’s creativity was reserved for The Village apparently because there they were walking into the same garlic scented air with the placard reading that Mojo and Brass were playing. The rain had stopped enough for people to venture out and the place was crowded, walking difficult between the tables with servers winding around carrying the large trays of pizza.

He wanted to take My’s hand and follow behind him like a small child. Anything could happen here and the tables would not provide enough protection from gunfire. He was panting and sweaty by the time they reached their table, reserved for them apparently. They were in the corner to the
left of the stage with the kitchen door close by. My motioned him in so he was wedged between the wall and My with a good side view of the stage. It would be interesting to see the instruments from that angle and if a gunman should appear, he could drop to the floor and crawl through the kitchen. My put an arm around him and patted his shoulder. “Surprised?”

“That was about all he had to say for quite some time. He nodded and pasted on a smile as My ordered for them. Using his mobile as cover, he flipped through nonexistent emails and checked for discrepancies in the duplication procedure of My’s people. His high score was gone on a few games but it was otherwise identical. He scanned the crowd for possible terrorists and serial killers, a parlor trick he had once enjoyed. He managed to tinker with it until the food came, wishing he had brought a book in although he felt like he had read until his eyes bled.

My seemed content in the silence, petting him discreetly now and then. The food came as a relief and the overpowering smell of garlic and yeast cancelled out the blood and gunpowder smell that was still haunting most of his meals. They had breakfasted early and had only scones for lunch and without his tumbler of liquor as a meal, Greg realized he was hungry. He attacked the pizza with sincere relish with the side benefit that a full mouth did not have to talk.

He even managed more than his share of the banoffee pie slice that My ordered for dessert. They were sipping coffee when the band appeared. They got a wave or head tilt from each member, and Greg slid down in his chair as the crowd’s eyes turned to them. Their table was not so private now but seemed to be a part of the stage and performance. Greg felt exposed.

Initially the music soothed him as they started out gently, easy riffs, warming up their lips and fingers and the drowsy, pizza logged audience. By the end of the first piece, he knew that he was going to need the loo long before the set break. Eating rich food all day after a liquid diet for some time was not his wisest choice. But how to get to the gents without disturbing the gig, offending his friends, and humiliating himself, he hadn’t a clue.

His body contained the full run of socially disastrous ailments. Noxious gas of the variety that he didn’t dare let out safety valve farts for fear of brown surprises and ruining his favorite jeans forever. His mouth and throat were Vesuvius or he’d become a dragon. His stomach cramps moved up and down, keeping time with Brass’s fingering on the trumpet, and his repeating burps, caught behind his hand, were in sync with the rhythm section.

As the music increased tempo, so did his anxiety. He truly didn’t want to embarrass My or his friends but he also felt quite reluctant to expose himself to the crowd. He hadn’t been around this many people since before it happened. Of course, My would empathize and accompany him to the gents but how would that look? He would feel like a dimwitted child or a coward, but it would probably look like they were off to the races for a back alley blow job between songs. He was fucked no matter what he did.

To make matters worse, My scooted his chair closer and put his arm along the back of Greg’s. All exits blocked, all hope lost. Greg tried to focus on the music, mind over matter. He developed a sweat mustache for his efforts. When he thought he was past his limits, his eye began to throb with the tell tale warning that a migraine was on its way. The lights got brighter, the music louder and sharper.

My pressed his lips to Greg’s ear. “Alright, love?”

Greg nodded, unwilling to ruin the evening. My seemed quite content, his hand patting Greg in time with the music. Little hammers tapped behind Greg’s right eye, trying to drive his eyeball from the socket. A belch brought up a little vomit into his mouth and he struggled to swallow it, taking a sip from the dregs of his glass.
Then Brass began a run, a full display of his talents on trumpet, his small body focused on producing higher and higher notes. The final blast shoved an ice pick through Greg’s eyes and an even sharper pain into his ears. As he closed his eyes to keep them in the sockets, his equilibrium was lost. He fell through the table into the center of the earth, spinning with no anchor. Gripping the table, he panted, his hearing gone again as it had been right after the shooting. The note seemed to go on and on as he hung over the edge of the abyss, not sure where he was or if he could hang on.

The dizziness was like the Tilt a Whirl at the carnival; he was going to lose his dinner. When the notes finally stopped, he squinted through swollen eyes as the room spun around him. Vomit percolated in his throat and his arse clenched in ineffectual warning. He had to get out immediately; My was an obstacle.

He shoved his chair back from the table and it fell, clattering loudly in the silence between songs. My was pushing up but Greg needed past him and there was no time for explanations. He used his whole body to squeeze past My, whose legs got tangled in the chair. Greg heard him fall but couldn’t go back.

Out through the first door that presented itself, he was in the kitchen, sliding on the damp floor in his soft shoes. “Exit?” he shouted and several hands gestured him past fiery grills and molten lakes of steaming dishwater and the stench of dirty plates. His ears were still off as was his balance and he careened into the door frame as the cold air told him he was on track. He clapped his hand over his mouth but once he was free of the building, the sick would have its way and he puked like a drunk just past the entrance where the staff on break were smoking.

“What the fuck?” he heard as he stumbled several steps away, looking for a hiding place.

He had to find darkness; light was cutting into his eyes, and he cried out, the sound piercing through him. Finally, he made it past head lights and throbbing music from another club and open doorways to a back alley where he fell to his knees in a puddle and sicked up every last bit of his stomach. The wet chill of the puddle competed with the piping hot deluge from his arse and he slumped to the ground, letting it happen, beyond redemption.

Every gag and retch had gone through his eyes until he was afraid to touch his face in case his eyeballs were swinging like dice on his cheeks. He needed to catch his breath but the smell of it was gagging him as he breathed heavily and the puffs of air were like tiny evil clouds of stink. His damp clothes stuck to him and the mess in his pants quickly cooled in the frigid air. Where was My?

As his breath came back, he was aware of not being alone. Strong hands gripped him under the armpits and he was hauled up dripping, his toes just touching the ground. “My?” But he knew it wasn’t. His heart began to pound. Two of them and he was weak as a kitten.

“Sir, if you would please come with us.”

It was alright then. Fellow officers. “I’m not drunk. I’m ill. Detective Inspector Lestrade or I once was.”

They continued walking, adjusting their pace to his weak kneed staggering. “I’ve still got my warrant card if you’d let me get out my wallet.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir.”

Moriarity’s goons, oh god. Greg resisted with all he had, knowing that he was incapable of running but not wanting to trot along like a lamb to slaughter. He flopped in their grip for a pathetic amount of time, kicking out and not making contact. Then he did the whole body-going-
limp trick, but all that got him was another knee full of puddles and the slow creep of the mess in his pants down toward his knees.

“We’re with Mr. Holmes. His security detail.”

“How do I know that?” Greg sicked up a small amount that went down the front of his jumper, a string of mucus hanging from his lip. His hands were not free to wipe at but he had nothing to clean himself with anyway.

“The code word is Hop.”

Greg walked stiff legged between them to what seemed to be an unmarked door where they keyed in a long series of numbers. It was of course, an abandoned warehouse, lit by hanging construction lights that plucked at Greg’s eyes so that he tugged an arm free to hold over his face as they walked him further into the brightness like a sun.

“Your husband is over here, Mr. Lestrade.”

My was on a gurney in a hospital gown where uniformed people seemed to be going over every inch of him. “It’s alright, Greg. They said you’d been ill and they need to make sure we weren’t poisoned.”

Then his own cloud of people was around him, tugging his clothes off, exposing his lack of control. “Don’t.” He pushed hands away that were tugging down his trousers and pants.

“We need samples and every second counts.” A woman’s voice and Greg tried to cover his cock but other hands were sliding the gown into place. He was turned face down and lifted onto the gurney while touch assaulted him everywhere. Some pawing through his hair like a monkey after lice, others scraping away the shit from his thighs and buttocks, the gown a mere formality, he was still naked and being viewed by a swarm.

The whimpers slipped through his clenched teeth as he shivered from the chilly air and the violation. His arm was pulled away from his body and turned awkwardly. A tourniquet pulled sharply, pinching skin and hair and he felt the sting of the needle and even though he couldn’t see it, he was fucking terrified. My’s voice came from across the room, “it’s alright, love. They’ll test the blood sample right here straight away.”

“Let’s go home, My, please. Call off your lapdogs.”

“It will be over soon, baby. They are quick.”

Why did everything have to be a bloody circus? “The food was too rich, that’s all. Please stop.”

But they were combing over his back and spreading out his toes, looking into his armpits with lights so bright that he could feel the heat. Some instrument was in his ear and it hurt as if the sound had again carved away the skin there. He would not cry in front of them; he’d spare himself that final humiliation. He ground his teeth as gloved hands pulled his arse cheeks apart and something he hoped was a swab probed deep. Why did they need to go in there when they had abundant samples smeared all down his legs?

They talked about him as if he weren’t there. “Let’s check the front now. Somebody get his vitals. Wait, he’s gagging. Sit him up so he doesn’t aspirate. Get an emesis basin.”

Greg dry heaved into the plastic kidney shaped bowl they stuck against his chin but nothing came up.
“A current sample would have given us a timeline.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” He breathed shakily through his nose when they put the thermometer under his tongue and then clamped his teeth hard on the plastic as the gown was pulled down and hands combed through his chest hair and even pinched his nipples. They were all over his legs too so he couldn’t brace himself against one thing because it was all going at once. They discussed his bad leg, pressing deep into the skin until it twinged. The thermometer was removed at the same time as his gown and eager fingers pulled aside his limp cock and lifted his balls to shine the fucking light into his soul. How the hell would a terrorist get to his nuts and bolts at a bloody pizza place? His pubic hair got a thorough seeing to, not since puberty had it been examined with such care.

Finally, they seemed satisfied and helped him to sit up, tying the gown back in place which seemed silly now that they’d been at all his bits with a microscope. He hung his head but someone tilted it up and then his eyelid was pulled back and a scream tore through his pounding head as the light seared away the last of his control. They got the current sample they wanted, all down the front of his gown. They also achieved total humiliation as he started to sob.

Then after a faint buzz of conversation, another needle stick. They also blind folded him which helped the eye pain but put him in a claustrophobic meltdown. As he begged for mercy, My’s cologne was in his migraine fueled, super powered nostrils. “Just the decontamination wash now, Greg. Steady on.”

Tepid water shot all over him at fire hose pressure. He felt his organs shift as the unrelenting stream pulsed against him. Someone scrubbed at his skin with steel wool. But the needle stick was having its way with him and by the time they administered the enema, he was beyond resistance.

After the power wash, they were given scrubs and plastic sandals and little bags with their wallets, keys, and mobiles. Greg felt as if he had been granted parole. The scrubs were stiff and scratchy with that new smell, the sharp crease left by the packaging, hitting him in all the wrong places. “I want my clothes. They’re my favorites.”

He sounded like a petulant child but maybe after being fondled by a vast crowd, he was entitled. “I want my clothes and I want to go home.”

His words were slurring and his knees buckled when he slid off the gurney. “Careful, sir,” said a giant twat and guided his hand to the table to balance him.

He flipped up the left side of his blindfold, wondering if he looked like a pirate. “What did you give me? Aren’t you supposed to drug me before the rape?”

“And on that note,” My said, ushering him away from the area through a door into a loading bay where the car had been parked. He kept an arm around Greg and once he had lowered himself into the seat, My buckled him in and handed him a plastic pail.

My drove in silence, stealing glances at Greg whenever traffic permitted. Greg felt more than saw them as he rested his hot forehead against the cold window. His temple throbbed against the glass and when the turn signals were engaged, beat out of sync with them. “Was that the date you had planned?”

My let out a shout of surprised laughter that cut through the haze and hurt Greg’s head considerably. “Sorry, baby. That wasn’t much fun.”

“They touched my naughty parts. Tomorrow I shall be very ashamed.” Greg gagged and then tried to vomit but couldn’t anymore. “Was that heroin? We can’t tell Sherlock.”
“It’s not authorized for use in our country yet but it’s not quite illegal. Did it help the pain any?”

“Still hurts like bloody hell but I can’t be arsed to care.”

Greg was floating somewhere north of the car. Pressure built in his chest, growing with each mile. “Roll down the window, My. I have to do it.”

My touched the button and the icy air sent shivers all through Greg’s damp hair and body. He stuck his head up into it nonetheless and let it all gush out of him. “Wo0000000! I’m going to do that once more. Wo0000000!”

Then he came back inside the car and tried to smooth down his hair and found something foreign sticking straight out of his head. It seemed to be either a giant bow or some type of ears.

“It’s the blindfold, sweetheart. You can take it off if you like.”

“Do I amuse you?” Greg said, having just enough sense left to know he was playacting the silliness a bit. It felt good to have My snicker, and it felt good to not be responsible for anything he said or did.

“You know that you’re being funny, I think.”

“A little.” Greg paused to press his head against the window again; he could feel every single hair on his head, and each one seemed to be like a tiny wire of pain connected to a central kettle drum. “Do you think they were aliens, My? They probed my arse.”

“They were actually the ministry’s finest experts in biological warfare and forensics. Germ terrorism and living autopsies.”

“And I accused them of raping me? A bit not good.”

“I’ll smooth it over with a fruit basket.”

“In my defense, they did scrape shit off my ass. Fucking scat men.”

“Your shit will be looked at by the nation’s best poison control specialist.”

“Do you think he’ll find any corn?” He laughed so hard no sound came out but the strain of it put him to gagging again. “Oh god that hurts. Help me, My.”

“You might be beyond it. Nearly there, love.”

“Don’t tell Morris that I let other men wank me.”

“Your secret is as safe as your own prattling mouth allows.”

Greg sat up very straight. “Wait a minute. Did they probe you too?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Did you get hard?”

“Like steel pipe.”

“Is their film of it?”

My sighed as he pulled into the garage. “That hadn’t occurred to me but I imagine so.”
“Let’s watch it when I stop seeing double.”

“It’s a date, my love.”

Once home, they struggled as the wind went straight through the thin starched cotton of their uniforms and played with their bare toes. The eddy at the kitchen door was always particularly brutal and Greg gasped as they pushed past it into warmth and light.

Tuppy and Morris broke apart with flushed faces. “Back early, I see.”

“Greg is ill,” Mycroft said, putting his hand on Greg’s back to nudge him toward the stairs.

“I shit myself,” Greg announced.

Tuppy’s broad nose twitched and Morris’ scar throbbed against his pale cheek.

“It’s okay. They scraped it off and hosed out my arse. I don’t think there’s any left.”

“Poison control?” Tuppy asked My.

“The highest level.”

“Good lord, what a night you’ve had.”

“We’ll be going up.”

“And trying to stitch together your tattered honor, you poor sods.”

“It was necessary.”

“They were after my cock.”

“Tuppy knows the procedure, love. Off you go.”

My’s arm was strong against Greg’s waist as they staggered up the steps. The stairs seemed to give like a bouncy castle but My’s steps were firm. Finally safe in their bedroom in the dim glow of a night light, My sat Greg on the bed and went for a glass of water. “Tiny sips, love. You’ll be dehydrated. I’m going to get us some pyjamas without creases.”

Greg stuck his tongue in the water to see if he could lap it like a kitty. It dribbled down his chin. That wasn’t on at all. He took a big swallow and felt the cold of it run down his throat all the way to his stomach. He began to shiver, but My was there just in time with fleece pyjamas. He pulled off Greg’s ministry issue top. Greg pointed to his chest. “Listen.”

My pressed his ear to Greg’s bare chest where his heart skittered like a frightened rabbit. “My heart is hopping,” Greg said, thinking of frightened rabbits led to Hop.

“It’s the caffeine. The injection was made for field agents to be able to continue with assignments even through ghastly headaches.”

“But it still hurts and I’m all silly. How would they ever manage?”

“You had it on an empty stomach. And Morris switched us to decaf weeks ago. You’ll be more sensitive now.”

“Morris is tricky.”
My took the water glass and then wrestled Greg into the pyjama top. “He’s very sneaky about making us healthier.”

“I’m not so healthy right now.” Even with the warm top on, Greg was still cold.

“Give it time, Greg. You’re alright.” My pulled off the plastic shoes and took down the scrub trousers.

Greg whimpered. “They touched my cock, My.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned that.”

“Only you can touch my cock. But not at the moment please.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” My pulled the bottoms up as far as they would go. “Lift your hips, soldier.”

Greg tried but ended up leaning over My’s shoulder as if to be fireman carried. My got the trousers in place.

“What do I need pants?”

“We’ll make do without. I want to keep things simple while you’re impaired.”

“No nappies. Even if I did shit myself.”

“No nappies, I promise.”

“My feet are cold.” Greg held a foot up to show My and pitched over backwards onto the bed, the thud making his head pound again.

My rubbed Greg’s feet kissing the sole of each before putting socks on him. His mobile rang, shoving the sound right through Greg’s eye. “That will be the lab results. Under the covers, baby, while I speak with them.”

Greg climbed obediently under the duvet which welcomed him with a hug. He nuzzled against it as My’s voice lost all its gentleness. The Iceman spoke on the mobile. Greg couldn’t make sense of the clipped questions that My was asking. Greg tried to close his eyes and rest but they kept popping open. What good was a relaxant cut with caffeine?

The duvet was puffy and white and made him think of snow. He remembered a winter holiday, one of the few where his dad was with them for days. They had gone to where the snow was, and he and Georgie had played in it every day until they were blue with cold. He began moving his arms back and forth above his head and spreading his legs wide and then snapping them back together so that his ankle bones clacked when they met.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Making sheet angels.”

My sat on the edge of the bed, his own pyjamas, Greg’s favorite pair, now in place. He began rubbing Greg’s head very lightly right where the pain sat. “You have developed a severe allergy to aged cheeses.”

“But we ate all sorts of cheese in Greece. I’ve never had trouble.”

“The tests were very clear. I’ve already told Morris to remove all of it from the house especially
the feta.”

“But I love the feta.” Greg clawed his way upright. “I can’t give it up. Not feta or fettuccine or fetlocks or fetivals.”

“Could you perhaps mean feStivals?”

“Yeah, those.”

My was chuckling. “We can still go to most festivals. But perhaps not feta festivals or Greek ones. When did we start going to festivals?”

“I always meant to, but I’ve been busy.”

My smoothed his hair back and kissed him on the forehead. “Time for bed. Do you need the loo first?”

“No, they stole all my piss.”

“I would imagine you are drained dry.” My walked around and climbed in on his side.

Greg sighed and flopped back onto his pillow, instantly regretting the thump.

“I can’t sleep, My. I’m so tired but the coffee is very loud.”

“Do you want telly? Or maybe a movie?” My switched on the giant screen, and Greg winced, pulling the duvet over his head to block out the blue light.

“No, it hurts my eyes.” He wanted his mum in the worst way. He thought of the migraines of his childhood, starting from the time he had grown short hairs. His mum would sit on a straight chair beside the bed and speak into the darkness in a sweet voice for hours so that he would not be alone with his pain. She would tell stories from her girlhood and then move to grocery lists and recipes and bits of hymns and finally the rosary, naming all the saints. Her voice would carry him until he could stand again. “Would you read to me, please?”

“I would need a light for that too.”

“You could blindfold me again.”

“What would you like me to read?”

“Doesn’t matter. I won’t understand it.”

“I hardly think you want anything on my nightstand.”

Greg thought of the library, and My’s long fingers holding the book worn soft with age. “I want that book you got at the library today.”

“War and Peace in the original Russian?”

“Yes, that.”

“It’s down in the car.”

“Morris will fetch it.”

“I think Morris is quite busy at present.”
“You would go. If you loved me.”

My sighed. “Do you know how much I love you? I’ll go get it and you’ll likely be fast asleep by the time I return.”

“Won’t be. The ants will keep me awake.”

“What ants?”

“The ones having a picnic in my hair.”

My scritched at Greg’s head and then threw back the covers. “No ants.”

“Put a coat on. It’s cold out there.”

“Yes, love. Brilliant of you to remind me.”

Greg was beginning to get warm when the urge hit. He tried to walk to the loo but the floor heaved up and tripped him. He crawled the long cold way, hoping that nothing would leak. When he crouched over the bowl, not a drop trickled out. The aliens had done their work. He sat and nothing came out the other end either which was good news but scary. What if he never went again?

He needed to hide somewhere that they wouldn’t steal his piss anymore. He crawled to the closet and tugged at My’s thick dressing gown turning it into a pillow. His side of the closet had far less shoes than the Iceman’s so that there was space beneath the hanging clothes. He tucked himself under there, the dark hiding him and soothing his sore eyes.

“What on earth? Come away from there, sweetheart.”

“Are they out there?”

“The ants?”

“No, the piss stealers. The aliens.”

“Not a one.” My led him back to bed and made him drink some more water and put the blindfold securely in place before turning on the reading lamp. “Now then, are you sitting comfortably? Shall I begin?”

With those familiar words, My began to read. Greg could not understand the language, but My was doing all of the voices and Greg snuggled in, listening to deep, growly voices and high frightened ones and the posh story teller in between all of them. He wanted contact with My to reassure himself that amongst all of the voices coming out of this person, one of them was still his husband. He reached out, patting the bed until he found My’s hand and gripped it.

This was a very satisfactory result until My said in his own voice, “I need to turn the page, love.”

“I don’t speak Russian.”

“You know very well that I said that in the Queen’s English.”

“I shall lick your finger for you.”

Greg lifted My’s hand to his lips, stretching his tongue out far to moisten the tip for page turning and tasting the delicious flavor that was My. Then My gently pulled his hand away and turned the
page. Greg could hear him smoothing down the next bit of the story, but once it was arranged just so, My put his hand back and Greg decided that he wanted to taste all of the fingers.

In spite of being washed pruney by the poison squad, My’s skin was faintly salty. Greg ran his tongue over the pads to see if he could feel finger prints. He licked down one finger to the springy hairs on My’s knuckles and then to the cool round of the wedding band which he kissed. He flicked his tongue at the webbing between My’s thumb and index finger and then bit at it. He put My’s palm over his face and smelled it. Even after being sanitized, My smelled of chai tea and ginger biscuits. God, he was tasty.

“Are you listening at all?”

“Yes, sir.”

My slipped his hand free to turn another page, but he didn’t wipe it off on the sheet and this pleased Greg. He didn’t have to start over. He took My’s cursing finger all the way down his throat and then gagged on it.

“Steady on, love. Best stick to licking and kissing.”

Under the velvety dark of the blindfold, Greg’s eyes were getting heavy. He put the back of My’s hand against his lips, kissing it three times for ‘I love you’ and then floating away on the tide of My’s voice.
Fight and Flight

Chapter Summary

Greg has a discouraging day while trying to get on with his life.

Chapter Notes

c. 10, 200 words

For a special lady on her special day

Greg woke to total darkness and didn’t know where he was, but he was holding someone’s hand. “My?”

“Yes, love?”

“I’ve gone blind.”

“Blindfolded. Take it off.”

Greg reached up and removed the blindfold to see that My was sitting up in the bed, his head resting awkwardly against the headboard. ‘You held my hand all night?’

“You held mine. Seemed quite taken with it.”

“Aren’t you uncomfortable?”

“Numb to the shoulder and a full bladder but glad to be of service.”

Greg let go of My’s tortured hand and steadied him as he slid off the bed without his usual sense of balance. He lay for awhile listening to the reassuring sounds of My’s morning routine. No prostrate trouble for My yet. He wandered into the en suite and fiddled with the lotions and potions. When it was his turn, he couldn’t go.

“You’ll be catching up on fluids all day, I’d wager. How is your head?”

“Less like a knife to the eye, more like a dull pencil.”

“Anymore ants?”

Greg scrubbed his hands through his hair which felt greasy. “No ants. I want a shower but I don’t want the memories of that hosing we got.”

“Some people pay for that sort of thing.”

“I could also pay to be whipped or belittled but I don’t really fancy it.”
“What about a very quick, very hot bath?”

Greg sat on the edge of their indoor pond and turned on the tap, wincing as his arse made contact with the hard, cold edge of the tub. “Was I as ridiculous as all that?”

“You were adorable. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you that playful. I’m tempted to keep a vial of it on hand.”

“I told everybody that I shit myself.”

My came over and sprinkled Dead Sea salts in the water until it was milky. “It’s no different from being drunk, Greg. The piss aliens are bound by doctor-patient confidentiality, and we certainly have enough dirt on Morris and Tuppy to even the score. But I think they were charmed. In you go.”

Greg obediently climbed in the water and My scooted in behind him. The water was scorching and the salt made him buoyant; it smelled of holidays and the villa.

“Shall I wash your hair?”

“Yes, maybe the salt water will cut some of this grease.”

“You worked up quite a sweat being ill. We’ll have a duvet day today with lots of pampering. I want to take care of my baby.”

Greg wanted that, wanted to stop the shampoo and curl himself into My for a cuddle. He wanted to bury his still aching head against My’s chest and be held until the water grew cold. But My had said it was to be a very quick bath so he sat still while his hair was degreased. The hot water poured from a cup was soothing to his head and seemed to loosen some of the tight muscles in his neck and shoulders. He dipped a flannel in the stewpot of a bath and pressed the steaming cloth to his face, pretending they were in Italy where he had been strong and clever.

More of the previous evening was coming back to him. Greg lowered the flannel back into the water. “You won’t have trouble at work because of me?”

My’s answer was too slow. “No. You were ill. Nobody takes well to the probing.”

“Why were they so aggressive?” Greg had wanted My to wrap him up and bring him home and wash him; not some stranger in a beekeeper’s suit, poking at him like he was a specimen, an elephant in the zoo having his thick hide scraped.

“They were aggressive, or some might say thorough, because we recently lost three agents to poison. Off duty, going about their normal routine, and somewhere on the tube an accidental brush past a stranger leading to a tiny pin prick, not found until the autopsy.”

“Bloody hell.”

“From their perspective, they were trying to save your life.”

“Your life.”

“One and the same.”

“You are being very sweet to me.”

Suddenly My’s arms were tight around him, squeezing at ribs sore from all the puking. “I would
do anything for you, love, give all I have to see you happy. Ask me and I’ll make it happen.”

Greg knew the offer was about power and things when what he wanted was intangible. Love and companionship were all he had ever needed and after the shooting, all he wanted was to feel safe. My couldn’t do that anymore. “I’d like an omelet for breakfast.”

“Is that all?”

“Maybe some toast first and I could lick the butter off your fingers. A little plum jam perhaps.”

“My fingers will be pruny, won’t they?”

“Plums not prunes.”

They dressed quickly in jumpers and jeans, Greg still lamenting the loss of his favorites but My assured him that they would be returned to him, more quickly now since no poison was involved. A thoroughly shagged Morris gamely made omelets, pleased to see Greg with an appetite.

The cold and rain kept them in. My started a fire in Greg’s study and put the quilt over him. Greg lay his head on My’s shoulder and exhaled. My kissed his hair as music began, low enough to talk over or nap if they wanted to.

He rubbed his face in My’s cashmere jumper and worked a bit of it between his fingers like a baby might play with its blanket. My smelled of his usual spices but also of wood smoke. Greg felt empty even after the huge breakfast, completely washed out from days of struggle with the headache only the capper on a month of suck. The urge to weep welled up in him; the violation of the poison squad made him feel more vulnerable than ever. His head still throbbed dully, his eyes burned, and he hurt all over from straining and falling. He was a little dizzy and thought that Brass, with the best of intentions, might have re-injured his ears. There was a bit of an ocean sound in the silence.

My kissed his hair again. “You’re going to be fine, my love. We’ll cuddle all day today and then tomorrow, you can rejoin the human race.”

Greg felt fear drench his back in spite of the quilt. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you need to get out among people.”

“Like you did before you met me?”

“Like I should have done. I don’t want you isolated, baby; it leads to no end of heartache. You could come to the ministry with me if you like.”

“So you can mind me like a daft child? Give me paper and crayons to draw something while you conduct business and have your secretary ply me with cookies when I get stroppy.” Greg threw the quilt off and left the room, getting as far as the top of the stairs, not really wanting to have a row.

My was in the doorway of the study, his forehead corrugated with worry. “Greg, that’s not what I meant at all. I want you as close as I can have you but we do have to get on with things.”

“You’ve managed that just fine.”

“Come back by the fire, love, and we’ll plan something small. One thing a day until you’re feeling stronger.”
“Because I’m too fucking weak and stupid to do that on my own.”

“Because I love you and if you don’t start leaving the house, there may come a time when you can’t.”

“Oh I will fucking leave the house alright, and I may not come back.” He bolted down the stairs, cheeks hot with shame.

There was no safe place ever again. My was prodding him because he hadn’t measured up, and now he’d have to start over from square one to prove himself and earn his husband’s love and it fucking hurt. He stormed through the kitchen where Tuppy was making circles on Morris’ ass while he washed up. “I meant to leave tomorrow anyway,” he growled at them.

It was in the garage he realized that his wallet, keys, and mobile were on the nightstand in the plastic bag they had brought home from the pissants. He was without a coat or proper shoes. Fleece lined slippers warmed his feet, but his ankles were instantly chilled, and his fingers burned with the cold. He pounded on the roof of the car in helpless rage.

He had only enough sense not to march out into the rain. The garage was cold but dry and kept at a constant temperature for a car’s best performance if not a human’s. A few tears leaked out but he was furious was all. Hadn’t he been saddled with My and his problems for months? When did Greg get to have a melt down? Who took care of Greg? He was always having to shore himself up, and it was bloody unfair. Good God, what did it take for a man to have some peace?

With his last scrap of strength, he shoved out the notion that he didn’t deserve peace since he had stolen Michelle’s and even Rich’s if he believed in hell. Hell was now, living on a dying planet. Hell was the struggle of daily life, not the eternal lie down.

After pacing awhile and hurting his toe from kicking a tire, he wiped his nose on his sleeve. If he had to ‘get on with it’ and prove himself, best to start immediately. Small things. He would get out his guitar again. He would learn Italian in case they ever went back to the villa. They wouldn’t because My would divorce him before warm weather but Greg could pretend. He would go and apologize to Michelle and take every last drop of her homophobic venom. He owed her a rant. And he would try and make things right with Walt post mortem by having lunch with Fred Wheeler and Bob Drake.

Then maybe My would love him again and be proud of him, if he ever had been. Greg would do all of those things as soon as he summoned the courage to humble himself and walk back in the house.

God, it was cold. All of the cars were locked, of course, even his own, but he tried each door and the boots nonetheless. The garage was clean and tidy as Morris’ kitchen and he spent some time looking through cupboards at gleaming wrenches and cans of oil. Finally in a tall wardrobe in the back, he found car covers and pulled one over himself using a fitted corner as a hood.

Without his watch, he didn’t know how long he sat there on the floor, huddled between the wardrobe and the tool chest. He did know that he was there long enough to get past rage and fear and go to the white place where he didn’t think anymore. When footsteps sounded on the concrete, he didn’t run. There was nowhere to go.

My smiled but it wasn’t mocking. “You look like a demented monk in that hood.”

“I’m a bloody idiot is what I am and please don’t gloat.”

“Come here, Rasputin.” My stretched out his hand and pulled Greg up.
Greg stood there on numbed feet, the memory of the tantrum reddening his bloodless cheeks. “I’m sorry, My.”

My nodded but didn’t move or speak. The silence lingered until it was awkward and Greg wanted to fill it, but he was sad and so fucking weary. My was the writer and orator; he could do the talking for awhile. Instead of the reprimand that Greg needed for penance, My lifted the makeshift hood off Greg’s head, smoothing the fabric against Greg’s back.

“Now I feel like a bride.”

“May I kiss the bride?”

“Sure, make me your woman.”

But My wasn’t being silly. He brushed Greg’s hair off his forehead where the fringe had been mussed by the hood. His lips pressed firmly to the middle of Greg’s forehead and stayed there. About the time that Greg began to squirm at the tenderness, My pulled him close and held him, Greg fitting into him and the warmth he provided. One arm was tight against Greg’s waist and the other cradling his head so that he could hear My’s heartbeat, steady through the jumper. Then My was tilting him back and Greg let it happen, his head in the crook of My’s arm, his knees bent so that My towered over him.

My kissed the bridge of Greg’s nose until his eyes fell shut and then My’s lips brushed Greg’s eyelashes until he turned his head away, raising a weak hand to rub at them. It had tickled and his eyes were still sore. He tried to pull away from the intimacy that was more powerful than a cock up his arse. He wanted to hide.

My wouldn’t let him. Warm lips pressed to his forehead again and seared into his mind. He could hear footfalls as My walked around in his thoughts, seeing the cowardice and petty snarks. Closing his eyes didn’t help; My kissed his eyelids, lingering until Greg couldn’t bear it. My let him turn his head but one wiry arm was still around his waist and he had forgot that My was physically strong.

Long fingers turned Greg’s chin and hot slow kisses trailed all the way down his jaw with little kitten licks rasping at the stubble. Lips pressed behind his ear in that one spot that made his belly turn over, fear mixed with the lust. He didn’t want to be violated anymore, not by anybody. He had lost his power in little bits throughout the marriage but that day at the Yard, the last of it had gone in a firestorm. There was nothing left to fight My off with; Greg would be taken for the third time in two days and his role as someone’s whore would be thoroughly cemented.

My kissed his cheeks just below his eyes and the tip of his nose and Greg fought, but it was hard to keep himself apart when his chin was being licked, long slow licks that warmed him.

“Greg, let go,” My said as if it was that easy to be emotionally castrated.

His teeth ground together but the place where the muscle vibrated with tension was being brushed by soft lips and his feet were cold and his head hurt. My was warmth and shelter and Greg let his arm fall until it hung down and My was holding him up. Finally when he surrendered, his husband’s lips were against his. Tiny chaste kisses to the corners of his mouth. He tried to deepen the kiss.

“No, not yet.” My pressed a finger to Greg’s lips which he tried to suck on. “I said not yet.”

There was the edge of command. Not the Iceman but the My who had been in charge in the distant beginning. He had taken Greg to his bed, mastered him, bathed him, and fed him. He had
marched across a room to claim Greg in front of God and everybody. He had proposed without apology or hesitation.

*Please, My. Be that man I thought I married. Be strong for me.* My had said he would give anything and Greg finally knew what he wanted. If My could carry the load for a little while so Greg could rest. Hot tears leaked out of his eyes and rolled down his chilled face into his ears.

My kissed at the corners of his eyes, and Greg felt himself fall the rest of the way. After days of My’s kisses being a frightening thing, they were now his lifeline. He wanted kissed properly so he slipped his tongue out as if he might sneak it toward My.

“Cheeky,” My said but did not give in. He tilted Greg’s head back against his arm and put his mouth on Greg’s Adam’s apple as air began to press out of Greg’s lungs as quickly as the starch in his spine had left. He was eased back until he hit cold metal and was splayed out on the bonnet of the car. My continued to suck and lick, his hand at the back of Greg’s head, turning it as easily as a puppet’s. Greg was lost.

He drew shallow breaths that kept him conscious but gray shimmers filled the air when he could lift his heavy lids. My’s knee pressed between his legs, keeping him from sliding off the smooth surface. He wasn’t cold anymore at all. Perhaps his feet were but he couldn’t feel them. With arms as limp as a doll’s, he couldn’t even brace himself. My truly was holding him.

The tears still ran and tickled into his ears, but he was too weak to rub them away. They had all day and how long had it been since they spent a day snogging with no particular goal. He wasn’t sure if they ever had. They could go up to the study and get in front of the fire again and undress under the quilt. My could make him forget all of it by kissing every inch of him. He wanted it. He needed it.

My lifted one of his hands and put a kiss in his palm. He couldn’t have made a fist to save his life. His stomach had started thrumming and it pulled at the sore muscles but he didn’t care. Then My’s hand was there where the muscles tried to cramp, rubbing slowly on his taut belly, and he cried out because it was right where he needed touched. Then in the midst of the keening, My’s tongue was tangled with his and it was warm and salty and teasing like the kisses they had shared in the very beginning when they didn’t know each other yet. A dance of bold and shy. He didn’t try to urge things on anymore. My was driving and Greg didn’t have a clue where they were going. He did know his cock was headed north, pressing upward against his fly. He didn’t mean to but he rocked a bit against My’s knee.

“Patience, love.”

The kiss went on and on, stealing the small breaths he could take with My’s weight on top of him. His head moved back and forth but My’s hand kept bringing him back until it was all lips and nothing else and he was falling through the car and the garage floor and the ground beneath just from kisses. My circled his belly, each pass a little wider until fingers brushed at his nipples and then downward past his belt to where his cock waited.

He thought of the night before and being stripped in front of strangers, and all of My’s fantasies of being taken while a crowd of peers watched. He wanted My to strip him naked and take him on the car because he wanted My’s mark to erase all the other touches. “Please, My?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.”

“Yes.” Greg was humping My’s leg now as shameless as a randy spaniel. He grunted and thought of a stranger’s hands spreading his cheeks apart and the burn of swabs in his arse and he wanted My’s kisses pressing there. They could have done it in the warehouse. Already naked and clean,
My could have fucked him under the bright lights, showing the whole ministry how he kept his whore in submission.

My’s hand left off the widening circle to take down the zip and work Greg’s cock free. Even the cold air of the garage was no hindrance to the hard length of him. My’s hand was slick and Greg didn’t care how; lube, snot, or axle grease, he wanted the slide of it. My left just enough space between them to work his hand and leaned up to kiss Greg again, his tongue keeping Greg breathless and his cries from a visceral place. He shot all over them both, straining upward and then falling back in a near faint.

Aftershocks coursed through him as he lay there. My’s lips were against his ear. “There now, that’s better.”

He managed to open one bleary eye to see My looking quite smug as he pulled out a handkerchief. Then the gray sparkles took over and Greg gave in to the nothingness. When he came to, My was above him, still holding him. When he pulled My close for a kiss, to prove he retained free will, My’s cock pressed into his leg, piping hot through the denim. “Help me up. There’s something I need to do.” My helped him off the car and he whispered, “This is what I wanted to do to you last night while they watched.”

Greg slid to his knees and got through zip and flies to take out My’s cock. Wanting My felt right again. Walt had always been candid about being a horny old goat. He would forgive Greg for servicing his husband during a time of bereavement. He licked up the shaft and it was the best thing that he had tasted in such a long while. He was able to hit the sweet spot where breathing was natural. Remembering My’s slow torment of him, he waited, savoring the pulse on his tongue.

As he lingered there, he reached his hands back and gripped My’s arse, spreading his cheeks and flexing his fingers into the cleft. The jeans were in the way but it was too bloody cold to be bare. Drool ran out of his mouth, and he took one hand back to steady the pretty thing. He growled at various pitches, to make My squirm. Finally shaking with the strain of holding back, Greg began to move, sliding My into his throat, going as deep as he could.

In and out, the age old rhythm soothing at first, then Greg became aware of the cold, the ache in his knees, the back and forth as his lips pressed to skin, his own grunts and cries echoing as he moved on someone. What if there was a man behind My, pointing a gun at his back? Greg couldn’t see anything where he was between the car and My’s body. Anyone could come in and kill them both.

He was choking on the thick cock as his chest tightened. Gasping, he pulled off and struggled to his feet. There were no intruders but the garage was not a safe place. He needed keys and one of the guns from the secret compartment in the hallway. He ran, leaving My behind stuffing his still swollen cock into his trousers. The rain blinded him and the wind tore at his clothes trying to get him naked. An intruder could be there in the narrow space between the garage and kitchen door, or a sniper could be on the roof waiting for him to exit. He put an arm over his head and burst into the kitchen, grateful when Morris and Tuppy were not there to see his terror as he passed through.

The stairway loomed in the colossal entryway, the skylight providing little cheer in the gray day. There were too many rooms to search and too many variables before he could get to the gun compartment or to his keys in the bedroom above. He was helpless and weak, logy from illness and his orgasm. Where could he hide? Pressing himself against the wall he skirted the foyer, finally recalling the nondescript door of the dreary reception room. He slid inside, closing it behind him. His panic made it hard to do the controlled motions necessary for quiet movement, but he got himself into the little powder room without turning on any lights and after locking the door, he wedged himself under the sink, wrapping his arms around his knees and trying to quiet his
breathing.

Each breath had to be forced out of his chest which had the weight of his knees pressing in. It was like the time he had fallen on his bike and one handle bar had rammed into his chest, knocking the wind out. He had lain there wheezing forever, making terrible sounds that tore at his throat. What if the poison people came again and dragged him away? This time they might take off his skin completely not just his clothes. He clutched at hope. My would find him and bring guns and keep him safe. My would come for him as he always had. When he heard the key in the lock, he still put his arms over his head, ready to be executed.

My knelt in the doorway of the tiny cell. “It’s alright, sweetheart. Come away from there. It looks very uncomfortable.”

He crawled into My’s outstretched arms and wrapped himself ‘round. It took a long time for his breathing to calm so he couldn’t hear My’s reassurances but the gentle rise and fall of a gentle voice was enough. My petted his hair over and over, ruffling it up and then smoothing it down. The Iceman would not tolerate anyone harming his husband. Finally, Greg drew easy breaths that did not scrape his throat or suck at his lungs. Then he could hear My’s heart under his cheek, a heart pounding as fast as his own. My was afraid too.

“No.” He wanted to bury his face in My’s jumper and sob but what good would that do now? He pulled away and leaned against the wall, wiping his face on his sleeve. My’s face was composed but Greg could see the signs, the size of the pupils, the slight flaring of the nostrils. Terror.

That plummy voice, the one used for speeches. “You’re going to be fine, Greg. It was only a panic attack. We’ll bring someone in to treat you. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ll go to the Yard for it. Past time to begin.” Greg used the last of his strength to stand.

“No one will be in today.”

“No but I should make the appointment. The answering service is in at all hours.” He was moving away from the ugly little room where the biggest terror was no longer the unknown.

“Shall I ring them for you?” My stood up slowly, keeping one hand on the wall.

“I’ll see to it, but thanks for offering.” They were being polite like strangers trapped in an elevator. As he climbed the stairs, he could feel the memory of My’s hands in his hair, petting over and over, the movements now revealed as those of a frightened child, clinging to a pet.

The operator was crisp and he appreciated that because it allowed him to be the same. “This is Greg Lestrade. I need to make an appointment with Gil Hoffman for mandatory post trauma counseling.”

“Dr. Hoffman has retired, sir. May I assign you to the next available therapist?”

Greg’s mind raced through the other doctors he had seen whenever he was forced to visit Gil. Dr. Glass was a tiny, nervous man who resembled a ground squirrel. He was always wringing his hands as if he anticipated his patient would turn into a giant acorn. Dr. Small was exceedingly tall and having an affair with the receptionist. Then there was the woman who looked like a librarian and brought her poodle to work with her. He shuddered. Best to take his chances with the unknown.

“Sorry, force of habit. Gil wanted me to meet with his replacement. Funny name but I can’t quite remember it. On the tip of my tongue.”
“Dr. Smith?” She sounded amused.

“No, that other one. He was quite young.”

“Oh, Dr. Panicker.”

“Yes, him. I’ll take his next available.”

“Her next available.”

Greg was caught. He froze.

“We get that mistake all the time. Tedrika is an unusual name and if she’s going to go by Teddy, she’ll have that.”

“It’s quite a cross to bear for you.”

“You have no idea, sir. Nevertheless, could you come in today? She has the afternoon completely free.”

Greg’s heart thudded in his throat. He hadn’t considered bearding the lion quite so soon. But it would get him away from My for awhile and he needed to. “Yes, best to get started straight away.”

He was already bathed and dressed so there was nothing left but to change his shoes. As he bent to pick up a pair, his mind flashed to the hole in Rich’s shoes and the worn out sock protruding from it. He thought he might cry and it would have been a relief, but his eyes just burned and he felt heavy.

“They were able to work me in,” he said as My came to the door of the closet.

“Let me drive you.”

“No, I have to do this myself.” He wanted nothing more than to rest in the car with his eyes closed while My took him there. He would have My’s comfort when he came out of the session, but My’s support was an illusion.

Remnants of the migraine beat in his temples as he walked back to the garage, this time with keys in hand. His muscle memory took over as he drove into work but only when he pressed the lift button for his own floor instead of the mental health unit, did he snap to present.

Panicker was not a good name for a trauma counselor, but she was a pretty girl, all golden with skin the color of PG Tips and cream, her honey colored dreadlocks quivering as if each one had a bell tied on the end. She ruined it by speaking. Her voice was loud and hoarse with vocal fry and he feared that any other patients in the office would know his innermost secrets.

Still like most millennials, she was self absorbed and easily tempted into talking more about herself than her client. Greg mentioned his migraine, hoping to be as superficially truthful as he could. Gil Hoffman would have seen right through the snow job that Greg gave the girl.

“Oh god, I get migraines too. Beastly things lay me low for days.”

Greg crossed his legs and widened his eyes as if he were an utterly fascinated member of a hen party. “What do you do for them?”

He whittled away over a quarter of an hour on that subject. Then he haltingly quoted whole
passages from Walt’s eulogy, described a few of his tamer nightmares, and talked about how stressful the continuing investigation was. She took copious notes, one leg tucked under her like a teenager, occasionally flipping her dreads. He avoided mentioning My since a little flirting might help his case.

Inspired by his recounting of nightmares, she shared about a strange dream she’d had the previous night concerning an elephant shaped balloon hovering over a tiny desk and the small timer dinged, signaling Greg’s freedom. He walked out to the parking garage and got his emergency pack of cigarettes from the boot. He smoked one slowly, lovingly. “Hello, old friend.”

Six of these sessions if he were lucky, eight if he drew the short straw. If she signed his papers, he might have a chance at getting back in. If the investigation vindicated him, if his position wasn’t snapped up by the younger and ever circling vulture Dimmock. Anderson would be pushing Sally to apply for advancement too. Every passing day took him farther from the desk he had thought he hated.

He didn’t want to go home now that he had managed his escape. He rang and scheduled lunch the next day with the old ones. Picking up a paper, he looked at bed sits and drove by some of the buildings, trying to imagine scarfing down a meal of fish and chips and then going into one of the rabbit hutch es for a kip and a tepid shower.

Whether My kicked him out or he chose to leave because he couldn’t stand the pressure, divorce was inevitable. He needed to have a plan. Finally when the weekend’s carousel of events caught up with him and he was too tired to drive safely, he went home. My was waiting, trying to hide his separation anxiety, but Greg could see it. My had prodded Greg to leave and then spent the afternoon pacing the floor, afraid to be alone.

“How did it go?” My asked, his eyes searching Greg’s.

“Too soon to tell.”

“You got the therapist that you wanted?”

Greg thought about how easy it would be to fool her. “Yes.”

“Come have some dinner. Morris made mild things in case you are still nauseated.”

“I had dinner out. Thought I’d have an early night.” My started to follow him upstairs. “You go on and have your dinner, love.”

Greg pretended to be asleep when My came up. He knew he wasn’t fooling his husband, but My didn’t call his bluff. My was simply not up for it and would likely never have the stamina to support a damaged partner. This truth was a rock Greg could stand on and then move forward all alone. In the darkness, measured by My’s slow deep breaths, he compulsively reviewed his to do list for the next day; staying extremely busy would be the key to survival.

When the nightmares woke him at four, he snuck down to the guest room, showered with extra care, and went to his study. He dutifully emailed his mum with a noncommittal update but ignored the chime when she emailed back. Old people got up so early. He pictured the warm kitchen, the kettle on the boil, porridge started, his dad at the table in the tatty dressing gown that gaped open to show his graying boxers. Homesickness took him by surprise but there was no way he could go home now when his life was in tatters. His mum would take one look at him and know how things stood and it would break her.

There were hours to kill before anything would be open. Nothing on the telly but news and he
quickly updated himself on the worst of it. The world was still going to hell in a handbasket as it had been the day before. Guitar practice was cut short when he broke a string. The free Italian language program he found on line soon frustrated him since it started out too simply but he didn’t have enough vocabulary beyond the categories of food and time to test out to the next level. Ten minutes a day and he would be fluent in time for his own funeral.

A walk seemed promising until the sky poured just as he was putting on his coat in the downstairs hall. He went into the library to find something to read but My’s books were far over his head or in other languages. When he did locate an inviting nonfiction about a man who sailed the world alone, his mind skittered in circles every few paragraphs. The library was soothing in the evenings when Morris had a fire going and Greg had a drink in his hand that matched the amber flames, but in the gray predawn, it was a cold place and the leather sofa felt clammy as scenes from the shooting played again in his mind.

Finally, he put the book down and let them come. Walt’s sunken chest, Rich’s worn out shoes, Anderson’s gleeful simian glare, Sullivan’s victorious smirk. The smell of sulfur and urine and blood. Hot blood running down the side of his face, the tepid shower rinsing it away. My’s heart pounding like a trapped animal under Greg’s hand, the tells of My’s pupils blown wide and his nostrils flaring as he combed through Greg’s hair in rising panic. All loss and terror and---

“Holy mother of God, are you planning to play this fucking game of hide and go seek every bloody day?” Morris shouted in his fright.

“I’m sorry, Morris. I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m not a young man, you twat. I might have pissed myself on the rug.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.” Greg thought of his flight from the pizza place and all the bodily fluids he had left in the alley.

“I couldn’t sleep but there’s nowhere to go at this hour.”

“Come have some breakfast then. I’ll make a fry up when my hands stop shaking.”

Greg sat in the kitchen with a coffee and pretended to read the paper while he actually watched Morris cook. Whether he had the appetite for what was being prepared or no, he enjoyed the performance. Morris whisked eggs and chopped potatoes and onions and sliced rounds of sausage with precision and flair.

In record time, Greg had a pretty plate of fry up and tomatoes and a dish of porridge with cranberries and more coffee.

“Himself says you skipped dinner last night and went to bed on an empty stomach.”

“Not hungry.”

“You likely won’t be for awhile but eat something so he’s got one less worry. You owe him that much.”

The rage boiled out of his mouth without warning. “I don’t owe him anything.”

Greg pushed back his chair with a squeal of wood on tile and threw his napkin down. He was pointing a shaking finger at Morris, who stood blinking owl like, the spatula still in hand. “If you want to force feed me, you’d best keep your gob shut.”

“Greg, I didn’t mean anything by it.”
But Greg was out the kitchen door, frigid rain and wind sluicing down his neck into his jumper. This time he had wallet and keys and made his escape. The cheek of it! If anyone was owed something, it was Greg. Hadn’t he rearranged his entire life? He’d given up a flat that he loved as well as the furniture in it. My had kept his home and routine exactly as it had been except now he had an arse to tap whenever he cared to without even having to buy dinner first. Hadn’t Greg given every last ounce of energy to shoring My up during his constant crises? Hadn’t Greg lost the one person forever in his corner when he had taken My home to meet Ginny and Rich? His mum couldn’t say more than two sentences before raving about Mycie. Greg had shared his team too and their pub celebrations. He had helped My and Morris to reconcile and nudged Morris toward the second great love of his life.

He’d given one hundred percent of his body, heart and life and gotten a paltry five percent back. My got an entire week of birthday festivities and Greg got one rainy afternoon and some half baked spontaneous plans. When My’s work had gone horribly wrong, Greg dropped everything to be at his side but now Greg was wandering about the rainy city alone taking care of horrific errands such as the dismantling of his friend’s home. It was bloody unfair and just plain wrong.

At Walt’s building, he pushed aside his repeating thoughts long enough to take the lift up to Walt’s flat but his key no longer worked. This day was one mindfuck after another. By the time, he surprised the landlord who was sweeping the back stairs, his rage was at an eight. “Do you remember me? I’m the executor for Walt Shetterly, and I’ve come to collect his things. I need to get in there.”

“Well check your papers, mate. Walt said I could let the flat as soon as he was toes up. I waited longer than I usually do out of respect for your tragedy.”

He could feel the heat rise from his chest into his cheeks and a far off shrieking like an old fashioned kettle rested in the center of his forehead. “You had no right without asking me first.”

“What would you do with all that old furniture and housewares, eh? You’ve got far more posh things of your own. It’s doing someone some good as it is.”

“Doing your pocket some good, you tosser, renting the flat out furnished.”

The man shrugged. “I’m a businessman. Can’t hate me for turning a profit. Walt was a good tenant and he’ll be missed but in the land of the living, we’ve got to get on.”

Greg wanted to whip out his warrant card and take the prick in. The charge could be sorted out later. But his hand reached into an empty pocket. The landlord took the pause as acceptance. “His personal effects are boxed and in the basement. I saved you that trouble, and I’d be glad to dispose of that lot for you as well, or haul them to the site of your choice.”

“For a nominal fee.”

The man stepped back as if he could sense how badly Greg wanted to choke him to death. “Let’s be civil now. Tragedy or no, he wasn’t long for this world and a few old clothes and books aren’t worth arguing over.”

Nobody is more hated than a man who is right. Greg tried to take deep breaths and ended up sounding like a bull in Pamplona, but eventually calmed enough to let the money grubbing weasel take him down to the boiler room. It didn’t matter if Walt had kept rags and old newspapers, Greg was going to have them and not let anyone profit by them.

Some of it was nearly rags. Like most straight men, Walt had cherished his Y fronts and vests to the point that they were paper thin and yellowed like parchment. There were also boxes of old National Geographics and the Yarder newsletter back issues to before Greg was born. His dad
would enjoy looking through those; Morris and Tuppy might too. Greg lugged those boxes up the steep, damp steps and out into the rain to wedge into the boot of his car.

The boxes of clothing would go to a charity shop. He thought he had seen a notice at Walt’s church about a shop that they ran nearby. The last few boxes were photo albums, crime thrillers, and vinyl albums. Greg would go through these at his leisure in the long night hours. The very last box held a model train set, preserved perfectly in the original box. Based on the clothing of the boy engineer pictured, it must have been Walt’s own when he was a boy.

Greg couldn’t resist opening the main box with the engine, caboose, coal car, and passenger car with little people inside. The level of detail was amazing. Other boxes held neatly stacked lengths of track. There was enough to create a sizable world of locomotive fun decorated with the depot, city buildings, trees, barns, cows, horses, pigs, and specialty cars contained in the other sets. For the first time since the accident, Greg wanted to do something and his interest in the toy was greater than his grief and confusion.

He disciplined himself to wait and packed it up; the sizable box taking up the whole passenger’s seat with its width and topping out a few inches above the head rest. With his head full of ideas for how to set up the entire kit in his study, he was lulled through traffic until he reached the church more quickly than he’d thought. Traveling mid morning on a week day was not nearly the frustration of his typical driving experience.

The church was locked but a small kiosk under the awning held postings for various church activities and an address two streets over for the parish sponsored shop. Recognizing him as the nice young man who had given such a nice speech at Walt’s funeral, the ladies in charge were so grateful for the clothing that he ended up giving them the crime thrillers and some of the record albums as well. A break in the storm allowed him to flip through the collection at the car.

After considering how much his mum hated clutter, he left the National Geographic magazines with the ladies too and the quieter of the pair began putting them on the shelf while he was still chatting although she seemed to be shelving one and reading one at the same time.

Greg helped the other woman wipe rain drops off the boxes with one of Walt’s vests. “So thoughtful of you to carry out his wishes. I’m glad you came today, dear. We have some younger ones working on Thursdays and they don’t appreciate nice things. Can’t be bothered about donations. One in particular doesn’t seem to do anything but read or flirt with the customers. That Meryl,” she said to her companion.

“That Meryl, dear,” echoed the magazine lover, reluctantly putting another yellow magazine on the shelf but interest won out over industry as she picked up a copy featuring a picture of the moon landing.

“I thought I might meet Father Forster when I went by the church.”

“No, he has his Mondays for himself after all he does for us on Sunday. He might have some ideas that strike us as odd but you can’t fault his work ethic. Six days a week, he’s at every activity from prayer breakfasts to ladies teas. He even came by when we were knitting a new altar cloth.”

She took a business card from a basket by the cash box. “I’ll write down the office number for you. If you are like us, Walt left a great void in your life. Father Matt is a good listener. You ring him, dear, and set up an appointment. Grief isn’t supposed to be solitary.”

“Come by the shop anytime, dear. Except Thursdays.”
“Avoid Thursdays,” the other woman said, giving up all pretense of work and sitting on the box to read about the one small step for man.

Greg had just enough time to drive to the local for his early lunch with Fred and Bob. So far his day had been very full and he was relieved. He wondered how My would feel about a model train running from Greg’s study across the hall into My’s. Would Morris let him leave his toys out or would he have to put them away each night or suffer the consequence of going a week without dessert?

Bob Drake was already in his cups when Greg joined them at five past eleven. His eyes were still red and watery and Greg realized that it hadn’t been tears at the funeral but the later stages of alcoholism. Fortunately, the Yarer newsletters proved a welcome distraction and prompted some stories that Greg had not heard before. He found it easier to talk about the distant past in the old building; it was a world that he had not been part of and so he could listen without his heart thudding with dread.

Even with funny stories and pleasant memories unearthed after years of neglect, Greg watched one of his old heroes drink himself incoherent while the other ate more pub grub than Greg and Bob combined. Fred Wheeler’s paunch was like a fourth guest at the table.

While Bob was in the gents, siphoning off a liter of rented alcohol from his longsuffering bladder, Fred patted Greg’s arm. “Don’t judge him too harshly. He’s in early stage dementia and if he didn’t have a fine, strong housekeeper, he’d be in a home by now. She goes along behind him, helping him save face, telling him his name when he forgets. At this point, the pints are medicinal, poor sod.”

They walked out into the bone invading chill of a winter’s day. Greg could sense that this meal had been the high point of their week. “Shall we do this again?”

Bob was in the car head lolling back. Fred again spoke for his friend. “No, not again, Greg. It aggravates him, trying to remember. More than one duty lunch would be unhealthy for you as well. Means the world that you asked and I’ve enjoyed today, but you get on with your life like young folk are meant to.”

“I’d like to be a better correspondent than I have been.”

“Aren’t you kind? But we’re meant to fade out now, lad. That’s the way of things. Walt was a lucky bastard to go quick and early. The lingering uses people up and I won’t do that to you. You pass on that same kindness twenty years from now, hmm?”

Greg stood in the drizzle and watched the car go at the parade speed the elderly favored. Another door had shut on his efforts to survive idleness. Time to move on to the next item on his list, facing Michelle. As he drove toward the Tillotson’s flat, he reviewed all of the ways he had failed that family.

They could have minded the children at least twice a month; My had enjoyed babysitting. Morris would have loved cooking meals for such a large group. Greg could have taken Morris and Walt over there with a meal and the children would have had several adults to give them attention and affection. An opportunity to help several people in need had been squandered on shoring up one damaged man. My had taken all of Greg’s energy for himself. Now it was too late. All that effort and My was still needy and still taking, oblivious to what he had done.

The dreary block of flats looked even more pathetic in the rain and the stench of cigarettes and cat urine while he climbed the stairs did nothing to encourage Greg. He shifted the box with the model locomotive to the other hand as he gripped the railing, then thought better of it as his hand
came away sticky.

He stood in front of the door until he feared he would be identified as a peeper and finally knocked. There was a pause long enough that he had hope of escape but the door slowly opened to Michelle wearing some sort of cape on backwards, a mound under it that Greg finally recognized as a nursing baby.

“Mr. Lestrade, come in. I’ve been expecting you.”

Not the screaming and hurtled accusations he had been expecting but neither was there the welcome of adoring little boys that was his best case scenario. "The other children are at school?"

"Yes. We home school but I enrolled them in a church program two days a week after--"

He sat perched on the edge of the couch while Michelle lowered herself into the rocker, adjustments occurring under the cape like a magician’s tricks behind a handkerchief. “I’m sorry that I didn’t come sooner. I was deaf for a bit and had to see to Walt’s funeral and…”

His voice tapered off. They seemed very weak excuses in light of day. Her wide doll like eyes pinned him to the seat, and he was soon as empty of thought as she appeared. He wondered if she was being sedated but then she wouldn’t be nursing.

“You need forgiveness.”

Surprisingly direct, she was. “Yes, not that I deserve it but I would appreciate making an apology.”

Silence again save for the slurping of baby Hannah behind the magic curtain. Michelle wasn’t going to make it easy. “I didn’t do right by any of you. We could have minded the children and helped with groceries and provided rides to the park or the doctor. I could have taken Rich out now and then just to talk. Walt and I should have brought in lunch sometimes and the three of us had a meal together at our desks. There at the last his shoes were worn through. I could have bought him shoes; it was an easy enough thing to get his size from his uniform record—“

Tears choked him but he swallowed them down. It wasn’t his turn to cry. This was about Michelle and whatever she needed to say to him.

“I forgive you.”

He let out his breath with a loud whoosh and sagged nearly to the floor on the broken springs of the couch. “You don’t have to.”

“As a Christian, I do.”

“That doesn’t justify my neglect.”

“No, it doesn’t.” She was shaking her head, lips pursed. “But your character will be determined by what you do from here forward. Let me put her down and then we’ll look at some scriptures together.”

Greg was frozen to the spot like a toddler in the naughty chair. When she returned sans cape and baby, she motioned him to the kitchen table, presumably the only furniture sturdy enough to support the giant Bible she carried. “I knew you’d come today. I’ve been praying for you. You are carrying a terrible load of guilt.”

He nodded, mouth dry and wished she might offer him some tea or even a glass of water, but she
was busily turning the tissue pages, heavily marked with colored pencil and notes in the margin. She was close enough in the chair beside him that he could smell sour milk and baby powder, the best scent in the world next to puppy breath.

“I forgive you and God forgives you but you must forgive yourself. Don’t you want to be clean again, Mr. Lestrade?”

“It’s Greg.” His voice was shaky and rough.

“You can get past this tragedy, Greg. But you have to confess and believe.”

As she told him the story of the crucifixion, his mind cycled round. He wasn’t a heathen; he’d done his catechism and been confirmed. His mum had seen to it. He’d had a crush on the picture of Jesus with the long curls and on the priest who led a teen Bible study. My’s village story had brought back Greg’s love of the rituals of Catholicism but Michelle was on something else. He tried to focus on her intention rather than her patronizing spiel.

“The only way Rich’s death can make any sense is if you renounce your sinful lifestyle and lead a godly life.” Her voice finally broke and tears clung to her lashes. “I know that you didn’t mean to hurt us but when you are that deep in sin, the effects of it spread out to all the people around you and even some that you don’t know. Sin destroys because it is selfishness. Jesus calls us to join him in self denial. I can pray with you right now, Greg, and you can leave here with a clean slate.”

She had peace and a sense of purpose while he was tormented and lost. Maybe she could grant him absolution. It had worked when he was a kid. “My mum prays for me and she’s said prayers for Rich and for Walt. I can use all the prayers I can get.”

“You’re mum is a Christian?”

He ignored the look of surprise. “Yeah. She’s in mass every chance she gets.”

“I’m afraid that praying to idols won’t be enough. We believe in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

One way to harden Greg’s heart was to criticize his mum. He bit back the retort that Jesus had not saved Rich or Walt. If the poor woman’s religious delusions comforted her, who was he to tear that down? Michelle mistook silence for agreement.

“I’ll pray and you pray along with me. It’s best if you repeat the words aloud but you can also say them in your head.”

She closed her eyes and bowed her head, biting her lip in earnestness. He closed his eyes and tried to get there with her but it wasn’t on.

“God, be merciful to me a sinner.” She paused long enough for him to repeat which he did not. “I confess that I have driven the nails into your hands by my alternative lifestyle.”

Greg pictured My on a cross, long limbs stretched out, face bruised. His earlier resentment washed out of him, leaving him empty.

“I believe that you died to save me and that if I renounce my sins, you will forgive me and take me into your family.”

He and My weren’t a family, not really; they were a couple. Greg longed for the safety of a group to come home to as it was when he was a boy. His mum and dad and sisters all there to comfort him. He hadn’t talked to his sister Georgie in forever, one more person neglected.
“I invite you to live in my heart.”

An image of Jesus in a white robe something like Sherlock’s sheet came to mind. Jesus with his feet up watching the telly in a little flat inside a giant heart.

“I give you charge of my life and thank you for making me clean. Amen.”

He kept his head bowed, worried that his wandering mind would be obvious on his face.

“There now. We’ll have some tea and biscuits to celebrate. I baked this morning.”

He understood then that he hadn’t been fit to drink tea with her until she had brought him into the fold. But he couldn’t take her food and drink when he hadn’t really said the prayer; he wouldn’t lie to her after all the rest. “I appreciate the offer, Michelle, but I’ve got to be getting on.”

He remembered the box. “I was going through Walt’s things this morning and thought your boys might like this model train. There’s lots more of it in the car but I thought I’d ask first.”

She was dewy eyed, face aglow with acceptance. “Let’s look.” She sat back at the table and opened the box, lifting out the cars and examining them. "What a lovely antique! Did you have a set when you were a boy?”

“Yes. My dad and I had hours together——"

“It’s alright, Greg. Other men will come to fill that role for them. Christians have a vast family that stretches all over the world.”

“I could be one of them. I have time right now while I’m on administrative leave.”

“No, you’ve got some work to do first, mister.” She took a pamphlet out of her pocket. “Now, it’s going to be very hard because you’ve had years of going your own way but I think you are brave enough and strong enough to get through it with God’s help.”

Stunned, he took the paper, the cheap ink smearing a bit as he held it. “Gay or God’s Way?” it read in big bright letters and there was a sketch of two men kissing, circled with a line through it and a little devil and flames waiting underneath.

“I know that you think that you love him and our wicked world has convinced you that it’s acceptable but you know in your heart that it’s wrong. You’ll have to get your life straightened out before you can be around children but I know you can.”

She patted his arm as he stood, mouth hanging open. The tract felt dirty in his hand and his pub lunch sat waiting to come up in his gullet. “Maybe the boys can enjoy the train with some other man if I’m not trustworthy.”

Holding the caboose, she pointed at the metal corners of the car. “Too sharp for little hands and this is lead based paint. You keep it for you, Greg. A hobby is a good thing while you are trying to give up addictions. When you get your own place, you can set it up and I’ll bring the boys to look but not touch. Now, do you have a Bible? I can loan you one if you don’t.”

“I do.”

“Is it a Christian Bible? That means no Apocrypha.”

“Yes, it’s your standard issue King James.”
“You’ll really need a study Bible in a more recent translation.”

Anxious for escape, he put the cars back in the box. “I’ll get one at the bookstore straight away.”

‘I have the number of a recovery camp. If you have some time from work, that might be the best way to start changing your thought patterns. And you really should be baptized.’

“I’ll call,” he said, opening the door for himself and fighting the urge to run.

“Welcome to the kingdom, Greg. We’re brother and sister in Christ now,” she called after him as he shoved open the door to the stairs.

He sat in the car for a long time, the rejected gift beside him on the seat. There was nowhere that he had to be until My got home at seven and even then, he was beginning to realize that dinner was not required attendance. He drove for five minutes to get away from the sight of another failure and then stopped the car.

Walking at first, he then began to run and even though his thoughts would not be outpaced, he kept at it until he was soaked to the skin and aching all over. His feet were blistered, and his shoes were ruined. Undeterred, Failure walked alongside him as he returned to the car.
Storms

Chapter Summary

Tension continues to build between Greg and My.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to two special members of the Gatiss Guild that tolerated daily progress reports and answered Brit picks and gave me piles of praise when I fished for it. :)

Thanks to G for being more happy for me than I am for myself.

Greg ran every morning, getting out in the darkest hours as soon as the nightmares woke him. The damp and cold made his bones ache especially the ones that had been broken. The early rising gave him an excuse to go to bed early shortly after dinner. As often as possible, he skipped dinner, saying that he had eaten while he was out. Each day, returning to the house became more difficult.

Every fucking morning when Greg emerged from the shower, My would yawn and stretch, saying, “What are your plans for the day?” as if some glorious diversion might unfold from under the duvet. One of those mornings he was going to say that he was going to the circus or horseback riding, something to break the monotony. But Greg gritted his teeth and took it. He had to put up with the annoying bits because he was still terrified of being alone, and My at his most irritating was company when the nightmares attacked.

The therapist had denied him double sessions, surprising him by knowing the regs about administrative leave. He seemed to be thwarted at every turn. The few times that he’d had mandatory leave before, he had been wounded and spent his time in physical therapy and catching up on paperwork. One thing he had never been was bored. It got so bad one afternoon that he had gone to Foyles and purchased a study Bible. Overwhelmed by the displays in every shape and color since he thought all Bibles were black, he had asked the clerk for one that a very conservative Christian might approve.

Still having trouble with focus, he hadn’t made much progress in reading it. There seemed to be more footnotes than text and even with the newer translation, the names and syntax were strange. He even read the bloody tract that told him he was going to hell for loving My and that they were both abominations responsible for all evil things including AIDS and global warming. He added these guiltys to a growing list.

He had filled out an application for a bedsit and was on a waiting list. If he’d only been quicker, he might have got Walt’s flat but until he knew if he still had a job, he needed to set his sights as low as possible. My had been understanding so far but it was only a matter of time before he reached his limit. Now that Greg was no longer a constant source of support and encouragement, My would quickly jettison the dead weight. It might be a relief really, to only have himself to look after.

Morris was done with him. Between missed meals and the cigarettes, Morris didn’t know where to
focus his judgmental looks first. The ash trays got emptied and there were room sprays and strategic dishes of potpourri. If he left the study door ajar, it would be pulled tight from the hall. Even during the day with My gone and the pressure off, he was spending less time there, going instead to places where he could chain smoke, lighting one off the end of the other. His cough was back in the morning and whatever good running was doing him, it was likely cancelled out by the tar flooding his lungs. The nicotine killed his appetite and dulled his sense of taste so that he could go hours before he felt blood on his tongue.

He had some rituals. Each afternoon he emailed his mum, editing out the ugly bits, and telling her the things she needed to hear. And in spite of the terror ripping through his belly, he parked on a side street and walked by Michelle’s building. So far, there had been no chance meetings but he varied the time and spent a little longer each day in surveillance. he felt he owed it to Rich to watch over his family. The neighborhood was dodgy; he could be a guardian angel, a fallen one, but effective nonetheless.

The weekend came somehow, and Friday night, My slid into bed and wrapped his arms around Greg, nuzzling his neck. “I’ve missed you, love. You’ve been very industrious this week.”

“You wanted me to get on with things.”

“You also need rest, Greg. You’re driving yourself harder than you did when you were working.”

He didn’t answer as My’s hand snaked under his pyjama top. My was working his nipple within ten seconds. Hoping to avoid the inevitable, he worked the hand free and held it, kissing it when My got restless.

“I’ve got a business trip next week for just two days. Come with me? We’ll stay over and make it a mini break.”

“I can’t fly until my ears are fully healed. Do you want me to shit myself in public again?”

“No, of course not. I only wanted to give you a pleasant diversion.”

“I appreciate the thought.” Being polite took enormous energy. My’s hand grew heavy and he lay it down where it soon wormed its way back under his top like a cat after a mouse.

“I could cancel and we could drive somewhere. Cornwall or Scotland, a cold weather holiday. You need a change of scene, sweetheart.”

“I don’t want to miss any therapy sessions. They won’t have me back until I’m through.”

“Perhaps you could reschedule? I’m only suggesting a long weekend, not a month long cruise.”

Greg thought of their honeymoon and the villa holiday. Enforced intimacy with no ready excuses to duck it. Sex three times a day at least, more regularly than meals. It was overwhelming. “Could we talk about it later?”

He rolled over and dislodging My’s hand from its breast quest, grabbed hold of a cock he knew would be rock hard and dripping. My whimpered and Greg made it his goal to get him off as quickly as possible. He called on memories of when they were first married, and My would go at sex like a timed sport with extra points for unnecessary roughness.

When it was over, My groggily slid a hand down to Greg’s crotch where nothing was stirring, not even a trouser mouse. “Return the favor?” he mumbled, a huge yawn cracking his jaw.

“No, love. I’m sore from my run today. Just as soon go right to sleep.”
“Love you,” My said, head flopping back.

Greg didn’t reply. He didn’t feel anything when he said the words so he had stopped saying them and couldn’t even remember the last time they’d had meaning for him. Grabbing a handful of tissues, he wiped up My’s mess, then scrubbed his hands raw in the en suite, and went to his study to watch telly. The bed wasn’t a safe place anymore.

The next morning when he got back from his run, My was in Greg’s study with candles and a fire lit. “I thought we’d have breakfast up here by the fire. Morris will bring a tray as soon as you’ve showered.”

Greg took the longest shower of his life, doing every personal hygiene task he could think of. Brushing his tongue, flossing, trimming toenails, ear hair, and nose hair, swabbing out his navel, plucking eyebrows in the middle to prevent unibrow. Finally, feeling dirtier for the effort, he went down to face his husband.

The breakfast was pretty to look at even if he couldn’t taste it. He could feel My’s nervous energy; something was planned for after the meal which left the quandary of eating food he didn’t want to drag the meal out or getting it over with so he could flee.

“I’ve got something to show you, baby. My people collected footage from CCTV at the Yard over the past few months.”

Greg’s heart started pounding in his throat and what little breakfast he had choked down was very near to coming back up. “I can’t, My. Please don’t do this.”

“Trust me, love. It will make you feel better.” My took Greg’s hand and pulled him down on the couch.

Feeling trapped and overpowered, he forced himself to watch Walt in scene after scene, conveniently dated, sneaking antacids and later pills from his pocket.

My narrated. “Walt was having heart trouble for months, but he didn’t go to the doctor, and he didn’t ask for time off or look after himself properly. He was drinking heavily and eating the wrong foods. It was only a matter of time before he had a heart attack.”

My squeezed Greg’s hand as he stared at the screen, Walt alive again in grainy black and white. The fire seemed to be sucking all of the air out of the room. A trickle of sweat ran in his eyes and stung.

The next scenes were of Rich getting into box after box and secreting one or two bills. These images were shadowy since they were in the area farthest from the camera. “We estimate that Rich had been siphoning money and small high priced items from cold cases almost from the beginning of his assignment to the archives. This was before they had quite such a large family and Michelle was still working part time. I’m sure that finances were an issue even then but he had ample time to seek help from friends, family, or debt counselors.”

My pulled Greg to his side and kissed the top of his head. “None of it was your fault, baby. You can stop blaming yourself. Walt and Rich made poor choices that brought them to that day. You were an innocent victim of fate.”

Greg didn’t recognize his own voice. “What you’ve just shown me is irrefutable proof that even before our marriage, people that I cared about were in trouble and I was oblivious. You’ve removed all doubt about where the blame lies. Jesus, My, don’t help anymore.”

Because he had been doing too much storming out, he stayed put, his cheeks on fire with shame.
as he stared at the design in the carpet until he could see it in negative when he blinked. He sat on his hands so he wouldn’t hit My, but he fantasized about popping that long crooked nose until the blood poured out of it like a tap.

My took the video out of the player. “Maybe when you aren’t so raw, you could watch it with your therapist? I think it might prove helpful to have a professional perspective.”

Greg took the DVD from My and snapped it in half. There would be backup copies, but the destruction was still satisfying. He broke the halves into quarters but couldn’t manage eighths.

My knelt in front of him and worked his fists open to take the pieces away. “Oh no, Greg, you’ve cut yourself.”

Fishing out a handkerchief, My dabbed at the welling blood. “No one is going to benefit from this self flagellation. It needs to stop now.”

In the middle of his rage, Greg felt a small thrill at My’s tone of command. Where was that man when Greg was in mid panic attack? He felt the rebellion drain away. “I know you’re right but I’m not ready yet.”

My kissed him on the forehead. “Grieving and penance are two different acts. Don’t waste time on empty rituals, eh? I’ll get the first aid kit, but you may need stitches.”

He sat quietly through having the wound cleaned. The cut was throbbing, and it felt lovely to experience physical pain that matched the internal pain. There was a satisfying amount of blood on the pile of gauze pads before My was through.

“I want you to take something for pain. It’s Saturday. No gratuitous suffering on the weekend.”

My seemed calm and confident. Greg did as instructed and swallowed the pills. “My? Do you think we could sit here together awhile without arguing or having sex?”

My nodded as he disposed of the trash from treating Greg’s wound. He put the first aid kit out in the hall and then came to sit beside Greg with a few inches between them. They were like two old men waiting for a bus. After several awkward moments of silence, My turned on the telly and clicked through channels until he found a match. My hated football, but he sat watching it. For the first time since the shooting, Greg wasn’t alone but he wasn’t being pushed to do anything either. He sagged back into the couch, propping his feet on the coffee table. My sat ramrod straight with his hands in his lap, but he didn’t talk to Greg or reach for his cock or nipples. He didn’t text anybody, he didn’t give commands or instructions or advice. He just sat there.

If Greg’s good hand had been between them, he would have taken My’s hand in gratitude, but the bandaged hand lay between them and that was alright too. When My got up, Greg wanted to invite him to stay but the pills were doing their work, apparently something far stronger than paracetamol. He noted his responses with a time delay and great distance.

My returned with brown bottles and packets of crisps. He popped the tops and handed one to Greg. When Greg took a swig and sighed at the cold lager rushing down his throat, My clinked his bottle against Greg’s. My opened the crisps without them going everywhere, a feat Greg admired. The packet lay between them, and My ate his share of the cheese and onion treats which were pungent enough to breakthrough to Greg’s cigarette deadened tongue. Greg finally looked over without fear and grinned. My’s smile back was full of hope.

The cautious armistice lasted through dinner. Greg had dozed through two more matches while My worked on his story, the laptop looking like a toy in his long hands. Building on the success of
the lager and crisps, Greg managed to eat enough dinner to satisfy both My and Morris, including chocolate cake. He was in a food coma by the time they climbed the stairs for an early bedtime.

He changed quickly in the closet while My was in the loo and moved sleepily through cleaning his own teeth when it was his turn. Feeling cozy in soft, warm pyjamas, he was startled to find My on the bed in nothing but the tight blue silk pants that had once been Greg’s favorite.

My looked exceedingly naked with a bottle of lotion in his hand. “Could you do my back, love? There’s a spot in the middle that I can’t reach.”

Greg took the bottle automatically but stood there staring as My turned his bare back toward him. “You’ve always managed before, My.”

“It’s worse in winter and there’s a little spot right in the center that always itches.”

Greg took the bottle and squeezed a strip down the middle of My’s back like a skunk stripe. He moved his hand in a quick zig zag motion in five passes, smearing the lotion from shoulders to waist, making sure the entire back was covered. “There now. All done.”

“You still have lotion on your hands. You could do my chest.”

“Stop trying to seduce me. Christ, you’re randy. If you were a dog, I’d have you neutered.” He knew as soon as he heard the angry words that he had gone too far but he couldn’t stop. “Can you keep to your side or do I need to sleep in my study?”

“Sleep where you like. I won’t trouble you with my heinous advances again.”

“Thank you ever so.” It was the set up for a cracking good row, but My was busy rubbing in the lotion, back eloquently turned. Greg noted that there was a small circle of skin in the center where My’s fingers did not reach.

They both lay in smothering silence for nearly an hour. My was the one who eventually stormed out, the effect ruined by his nearly naked state. Greg lay alone in the bed, listening to his heart pound. He was afraid of how much trouble he was in and simultaneously pleased that My had finally got a few licks in. Part of him wanted to find My and stir it up again so they could finish.

On his run the next morning, Greg ruminated on his grievances. His husband had wanted attention and he had behaved like a stroppy child toward him. It was more difficult to be put upon when his lungs were on fire with cold. Running a half mile more than the previous day, he admitted that there was nothing for it but to apologize.

With a limited amount of shops open so early, he went by the Tesco. They didn’t have cards that read ‘I’m sorry I was a dick when you tried to initiate sex.’ He did find one that simply said ‘I’m sorry’ and had a picture of a window looking out on a rainy day with a broken tea cup on the sill. Although the floral arrangements were looking mangy and half hearted, he bought a bouquet of yellow roses.

Summoning his courage with a fortifying cigarette in the garage, Greg slunk into the kitchen where Morris tried to kill him with an eyebrow raise/nostril flare combo. He wandered through the rooms in search of My who was in the shower of the en suite. Thankful for the extra time, he went down to My’s study to wait. The apology or confrontation as the case might be would probably work out better if My were fully dressed.

He sat at My’s imposing desk and fiddled with the antique box of fountain pens and the letter opener fashioned like a tiny sword. Then he checked the printer for the pages My had written about the Village the previous afternoon. At first he didn’t understand what he was holding. It was
a surveillance report but it took a sickening minute before he realized that he was the subject. There was a week’s worth of hourly accounting of his movements including his routines inside the house while My was at work. He was only marginally relieved to find that his actions in the bedroom and bath were not detailed.

My came into the room, hair damp from the shower, his eyes lighting up at the flowers on the desk. Greg took the bouquet and tossed it in the fire place then took a biro from the lap drawer and wrote at the bottom of the last page. “Subject entered the Tesco and purchased twee card and shitty flowers for his controlling and sneaky husband.”

He stood and walked past My, slamming the sheaf of papers against his stomach. “Here, I’ve updated it for you.”

Greg was thankful that he hadn’t joined My in the shower but now he needed one. He felt so exposed that he went into the guest room and locked the door then locked the door of the en suite. Even knowing there were no cameras, he swept the room before removing his running gear. As the hot spray loosened his cold, tight muscles, he started to shake. The cut in his palm stung. Had that been yesterday?

He was most angry at himself for being surprised. My had always been a voyeur and had watched him long before they met while he was looking after Sherlock. The cut on his hand was from destroying a CD full of surveillance at his work place. There had always been implications that he had agents assigned to mind him, but seeing it on paper and knowing that none of his actions had been secret was still a shock. My must know that he had been flat hunting and wasn’t that a shit way for the man to find out his marriage was unraveling. Jesus, what a mess.

He hadn’t thought to bring clean clothes with him into the guest room so he had to rummage through the out of season box Morris had stored there. He had a choice between a tank top and bike shorts and the white gauzy prophet thing My had bought him for the villa. He put on all of it and still felt bare.

My was sitting on the floor in the hallway, long legs stretched across like a gate. The card and flowers were beside him, the roses, not much to start with, were now far worse for wear. He didn’t look up but kept rubbing his thumb across a spot on his thigh; the denim seemed darker there. Greg stood frozen as My’s legs were between him and freedom.

“I’m sorry, Greg. You were right. I was trying to seduce you with lotion. And I violated your privacy in a most unconscionable way. I can see now that the video further traumatized you. Every way that I’ve tried to help has failed.”

He turned his face up to reveal the blotches and swelling of a proper cry. Swiping his hand across his eyes, he wiped it on his jeans’ leg and sniffled loudly. “And I apologize for crying. It’s not meant for sympathy. I’m quite mortified, but I can’t seem to stop.”

Greg leaned back against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor inches from My’s long narrow feet. “It’s not about you.”

“I know that. I know I’m being bloody selfish.” He raised his hands palm up and let them fall.

Greg sighed. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s not about you because I’m the one with a problem that is not your fault. But I do think you’ve got to let me find my own way however painful that is to watch.”

“Can you find your way, love?” My’s eyes were swollen and bloodshot, but the laser blue still penetrated. “I’m not sure your therapist is good enough.”
“I doubt anyone could cure a nervous breakdown with one session. But you tell me, I’m sure you’ve filched a copy of my notes.”

“I considered it, but John told me that I couldn’t.”

“You’ve discussed me with John?”

“Just some medical questions.”

“God, he’ll think I’ve gone round the bend. Wouldn’t a press conference have been easier?”

“You’re drowning and I don’t know how to help you. I’d talk with the Pope if I had to for your good.”

My’s nose was stopped up and Pope sounded like ‘Bope.’ Greg tapped his foot against My’s leg.

“Those flowers were a lost cause at the shop. I’ll get you some better ones.”

Greg wanted a cigarette in the worst way. “Maybe we could have another afternoon like yesterday? A bit less drama, hmm? Maybe cut back on the surprises?”

“I won’t proposition you again, I swear it.”

My had gone to hell and back, learning how to release tears and the emotions that came with them. Greg knew the proper reaction was to be proud, but he felt tired and the day had only started. He gave My a hand up. My was limping from sitting on the floor so they took the stairs slowly. “I have a security detail on you, always have done. Part of the territory for my position. Sherlock and John have them as well. But I’ve asked them to only send a report if someone is in danger and I suppose that includes danger by your own hand. Apparently, your behavior was concerning.”

Greg snorted. “The hell it was.”

“The report must have come while I was in the shower. I hadn’t read it yet.”

“Can you promise me that you won’t?”

“Can you promise me that you are taking proper care of yourself?”

“Well played. I don’t believe in suicide if that helps. I’d rather live out my insanity than take the coward’s way.”

“I’ll hold you to that, and you can start a fire with the report.”

“While I’m playing at Scouts, why don’t you write for a bit? I was looking for Village pages when I found the papers that must not be named.”

“You still like my story?”

“As long as Graham doesn’t turn into a villain. I quite liked being the hero of your tale.”

“You’re my hero in any situation.” My reached out to give a sideways hug but dropped his arm in time, rubbing his hand down his jeans again.

They settled into their rainy day activities, My with his story, Greg with some puttering. While Greg sat at the desk and copied out the conjugation of some Italian verbs for practice when he was away from home, My pecked at the laptop keys, giving the occasional sniffle and pushing up his
reading glasses. Greg sent a longer email to his mum, describing the scene and their industriousness and giving her the obligatory description of the previous night’s dinner. He looked for new places to run, tracing routes on a computer map, and shopped for pubs, museums, bookstores, and theaters where he might pass the time. The pages of his diary were sadly blank, and he was thankful that his old one had been confiscated by Internal Affairs so he wouldn’t have to see the contrast of his to do lists from months past.

He had therapy on Monday. He would call Father Forster on Tuesday and take a few of his older clothes to the charity shop. Wednesday, he would call the mates that he used to play football with. He hadn’t played since last autumn just before his adventures began with My. There was always room for one more and they might be surprised at how much fitter he was. Desperately trying to put down one task per day, he added calling John about going for a pint on Thursday and visiting Molly at the morgue on Friday. My would be gone Thursday through Sunday, and he could have a rest from keeping up appearances but Morris or the shadow men might still give him a report. My had cleverly agreed not to read the one Greg had burned but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t read the others.

Going back and forth between the map and his diary, he marked out areas of exploration each day, moving in wider circles around home and Michelle’s flat. Thinking of her, he got out his new Bible and paged through to where the tract was. Her church’s address was printed on the back page. He would add this sphere to his surveillance regimen as well as the shops closest to the flat on foot and by bus. Wanting to give her a good report, he turned like a school boy to the place he had left off and began reading. He was determined to get through five chapters, the recommended amount in the ‘Reading the Bible in a Year’ section. He was in the middle of Genesis and it was rough sledding; he had to read bits of it several times and the footnotes slowed him to a maddening crawl. By the time he had completed the assignment, the room had grown dark except for the desk lamp and glowing coals of the fire. My wasn’t there.

Part of him wanted to sneak out while the day was going well. He could buy better flowers and spend the evening at a pub with some live music before coming home at bed time. But My had kept his promise to leave Greg unmolested and that seemed to deserve some consideration. He walked quietly into My’s study where the man had his head down on his outstretched arm, red pen in hand. The room was cheerless and chill in contrast to the smoky haven of Greg’s. With My’s head down, Greg could see the thin spot had advanced and more pink scalp was showing. He felt a flood of compassion and slid the red pen out from long fingers as My stirred. “Come on, love. Let’s get you back near a fire.”

“T’m awake,” he said, rubbing his eyes as he barked his shin against the occasional table.

“Nap a little longer. T’m going to read your new pages.”

“It’s all shite and covered with edits.”

“I’ll manage.”

Greg got My’s quilt out of the closet, wincing as it smelled like cigarettes, but he covered My with it anyway as he stretched on the couch. He got My’s slippers off and tucked the quilt more firmly around his feet before building up the fire. There was still ample time before dinner; Sundays seemed to stretch on forever when the whole week had been empty. He pulled the big overstuffed chair near the fire and flipped through the pages to see My’s editing notes, including ‘More here’ in red pen or ‘look up inguinal hernias.’ Then a list of questions at the end. ‘Is there enough foreshadowing? Is Michael too young and weak here? Would a bishop do this? Is Graham becoming a father instead of a lover?’ My was a perfectionist and the work went slowly. Greg’s tragedy had stopped the writing altogether and perhaps it was an encouraging sign that My had taken it up again. Sherman Lock had made a threat at the end of the previous chapter with all the
bitterness of a spurned lover. Greg began to read of the bishop’s inquiry prompted by the poison letter, and the suspenseful separation of the two men with only Graham’s mother as a go between.

Sherman Lock’s revenge had been a letter to the bishop who had come immediately for an inquiry. With the village too small to support an inn, the bishop had stayed at the vicarage, taking one room for himself and the other for his secretary, a wan young man with a jet black forelock. Michael hated the portly bishop who resembled Henry the Eighth, and he hated his sallow companion. Hate was easier than the choking fear which left him nauseated and faint.

He didn’t mind for himself but the bishop was interrogating his people, and it frightened them. For hours, Michael sat in the church with his heart pounding in his throat as each member of the parish was called away from their daily work to make a statement which the vampiric secretary dutifully recorded on a sheaf of creamy paper.

“This is not a court of law,” Bishop Sullivan had explained. “It is an investigation into the character of Michael Hume and his practices as your spiritual leader.”

David Tinsley had come first, having little else to occupy himself. “Who decides if his character passes muster? I thought the good Lord did that.”

“He will face the judgment day, but I will decide if he is suitable for this parish.”

“I can’t speak for naught but myself, but he always treated me square. Brand new he was when I had that infected cut on my leg. Here let me show you.” Tinsley hiked up his pant leg to display a jagged red line that ran down the pasty length of his shin. “Puked like a dog in my yard later, but he sat with me. No, that’s not right. He cleaned, the whole time. Scrubbed up dishes that was furry with mold and swept the kitchen floor of slut’s wool. Good man. He puts feet to his prayers.”

The Bishop dabbed at his nose with a handkerchief. “And how do you find his sermons?”

“I come to church and here they be.”

James Anderson’s mouth pursed in a moue of distaste at the poor grammar, the humor completely beyond him.

“What I meant to say was, are his sermons inspiring?”

“I’m inspired to sleep if it’s a hot day. Never could abide being indoors unless I was asleep or sick. Now can I ask questions of you?”

“I can’t give assurance that I will answer them, but you may ask.”

“What’s he accused of? And who is his accuser?”

“The source of our information is confidential but the concern, not a charge, mind you, but a line of inquiry is into the nature of the relationship between Dr. Graham Lester and your vicar.”

“That will be Sherman Lock’s sick mind come up with something such as that. He sees in others what he is himself. The doctor was nothing but kind to the boy, giving him books to learn and answering his questions. Lock followed the sawbones around like a moonstruck pup. We all seen it.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny my source.”

“You don’t have to. I’m a fair judge of human behavior. He can’t stand it that the doctor didn’t
share his tender feelings. Graham was a boy here same as Sherman is now. He got his schooling and came back here to help. Brought a sweet little wife with him and buried her and a child in that churchyard a year later. You go dig up dirt in a city that’s got some.”

Having said his piece, Tinsley clapped his hat back on and left the church with a rolling limp and without benefit of the Bishop’s blessing or dismissal.

On it went as they combed the parish roster and sent for the members one at a time. Graham came and sat in the back for a few minutes but would not look at Michael. He closed his eyes as the dizziness gathered round him; it would not do to faint now when his manhood was already in question. It was Graham’s village, his life time home. Michael would have to go just when he had been feeling safe and loved.

The questioning dragged on as the Bishop took long breaks for lunch and did not work past five. He was not an early riser either. Michael sat obediently at table with them as Mrs. Lester served with the help of a school girl. All the women of the village counted it an honor to feed the important visitors. He had no place to go and no one to turn to. Anderson was lurking in the shadows at all times and Mrs. Lester could do little more than pat Michael’s hand and try to get him to take some broth or a bit of bread.

He ached with loneliness, the short bit of happiness that he’d shared with Graham made the isolation more painful. The villagers that had seemed to care were now whispering and staring. Mrs. Lester was Graham’s mother, not his. The most ironic bit was that they hadn’t done anything questionable. Graham had hugged him and sometimes put his arm around him; they had clasped hands in farewell. He was on trial for his actions when his heart was where the sin lay.

Punishment would have been a comfort but he had made a promise to Graham that he wouldn’t resort to it. Without the physical labor he had engaged in more and more around the village, his body was complaining of the idleness and needing an outlet. He would have walked through the night, but he was being closely watched and any absence would be interpreted as a tryst.

With both bedrooms and the study appropriated by the unwelcome guests, Michael was assigned to the couch in the parlor. Memories of the night Graham had held him while he slept tormented him in his insomnia. He didn’t dare sleep for fear of crying out from a nightmare and revealing all.

On the evening of the second day, Mrs. Lester patted his shoulder at the end of dinner. “Look to the scriptures for guidance, Vicar. It’s what you’ve taught me to do.”

She handed him a Bible from the kitchen shelf where the accounts were kept. He hadn’t seen it before. She seldom called him Vicar anymore either. After the house was quiet and he had allowed himself a peek at the square of light that was Graham’s bedroom, he paged through the small Bible. A scrap of paper fluttered down with the reference John 16:16. It would have to be from the book of John. A part of the verse had been marked very faintly in pencil. “In a little while and ye shall see not see me; and again a little while, and ye shall see me.”

He lay with the Bible on his chest, his hand resting on the promise. He would see Graham again even if it were only for goodbye.

Another day of testimonies as Michael grew weaker from lack of food or sleep. Paul Collins came as summoned, shirt flapping where he had hastily pulled it on. He scrubbed at his filthy chest with a soiled handkerchief. “What’s all this nonsense, sir? I’ve got crops in the field and I’ll wager that the church is counting on the sale of those crops for my tithe. Storm coming tomorrow and unless you gentleman would care to lend a hand, I’d like to keep this short.”
“Justice cannot be rushed, Mr. Collins.”

“We’ve only so much food to carry us through the winter, Bishop, and you’ve made quite a dent in it so far. Brother Michael, he eats like a bird and works alongside me in the field at least once a week. If I had my druthers, I know which man of the cloth I’d send away and which I’d keep.”

Anderson gave the farmer a dirty look on behalf of his employer. Collins was unimpressed.

“I’ll save us both some time. The Lock boy never told a truth in all his life and here is honest people losing their daily bread over it. His hands are lily white from reading books all day but his soul is black as pitch. What of it if the doctor takes his meals at the vicarage? His mother is cooking there. And why should she go home and make supper when she already made one for Michael? Anything she cooks at home goes in the warmer half the time and dries up because Graham is out delivering babies or calves of an evening or sitting with some sickness, real or imagined. They’s hard workers both and this witch hunt is a mess of nonsense. Who else is an educated man going to talk to but one such as himself?” Collins marched out of the church, stripping his shirt off as he went.

Michael couldn’t hear the defense of himself, only that the inquiry had cost his charges time and money and food. On the second evening, Mrs. Lester nodded at the Bible on the shelf and winked. The wait until the house was quiet stretched interminably. The slip of paper for Joshua 1:9 was at the page where the faint pencil markings underlined the words, “Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed.” He was able to sleep for a few hours. Graham’s brown eyes appeared in his dreams giving him peace.

They finished an hour after lunch on the third day and Michael felt a silver of hope that the end was near whatever it might be. But the young widow Wheeler slipped into the church, a fetching picture in her Sunday best even if she was ‘great with child.’ “Begging your pardon, your honor,” she said, dropping a curtsy. “I wish to say my piece about the vicar.”

“They are a matched team and pull together when any of us in the village are sick or hurt. The doctor mends our body, the vicar mends our soul. We know they will both come to help and if somebody sees wrong in that, it’s a sick mind beyond anybody’s help.”

She was tearing her handkerchief to ribbons with her nerves from the first public speech she had given in her life. “When my Oliver passed—”

“Oliver Wheeler?” Anderson asked, consulting a list.

She nodded, shoulders shaking. “Mr. Lester, he had tears in his eyes when he come to tell me that the poor cow had done a deadly injury to my husband. Knowing it was no use, he could have gone to his bed but he stayed the whole night through. The vicar was there as much as he could be; Fleur Harkins died of consumption the same day.”

“I’ve lost Oliver and I may lose this baby. Please don’t take the only comfort we have; I can’t bear it.”

“There now. If we should find that Reverend Hume is not the right man for this parish, we will find a suitable replacement. Michael, see her out, won’t you?”
“Come along, Katie. Your mother will be worried.” He walked her home, slowing his steps to her waddling pace. Usually, he would have alerted Graham that the girl had been upset so that she could be examined. The whole village saw the coming baby as theirs to watch over.

Back in the sanctuary, the Bishop and Anderson were in shirt sleeves at the large table used for communion. Stacks of paper were everywhere. Anderson had taken copious notes, delighting in every hint of scandal, seeing innuendo in the most innocent of comments. They waved him away, saying they had a report to write.

Mrs. Lester gave him tea and had him shell peas and chop things for the evening meal. “Surely they’ll go on the last train. They’ve done nothing but complain about the primitive conditions. Why would they stay?”

His hands shook and pea pods dropped into the bowl with the shelled ones. “I may be the one going on the last train.”

“Here now, none of that. You’ve made yourself sick with worry again just when you had roses in your cheeks. Come to me.” She held him and whispered, “He misses you so but not much longer.”

How much did she know? He kept his own counsel. After a leisurely dinner, the bishop announced that they would stay one more night and give the results of their findings in the morning. Mrs. Lester rolled her eyes as she cleared the plates. Michael felt it was past his endurance, and there was no Bible verse to cheer him since Mrs. Lester had been sure they would leave. The decision had already been made so he stood at the window, watching until Graham blew out the lamp.

After a sizable breakfast, the bishop called Michael into his own study to give him the verdict. Anderson was not present. “Your villagers are quite loyal, Michael. And innocent as lambs. You’ll have to use more discretion in future.”

“But we haven’t—-”

“Spare me explanations. I can tell by your blushes that you are yet a virgin but as virile as the doctor is, you won’t be for long. Tell him that you must use the utmost discretion because I won’t be able to silence a second accusation.”

“Now, I’d like to interview Sherman privately. We need further statements about the impetus for his letter. He is clearly very troubled.”

“He lost his father at a critical age, and his mother has indulged him terribly.”

“He also suffers from the same affliction as all of the men presently in this vicarage and one delectable doctor. I have need of beauty and intelligence for my personal staff. Anderson will not be content as a mere secretary much longer, and I’d like to have his replacement already in my employ. I will test the Lock boy and if he seems worthy, I shall claim him within the month. His mother will be pleased and you will have less vituperation with which to cope.”

Michael shivered at all that such an offer would entail, but Sherman would be far happier in the city and would make his own choices about how to obtain favor and power. Nearly there. He stood in front of the desk and waited for the Bishop’s dismissal.

“We will have our formal goodbye at the carriage. It’s important for the parish to see goodwill between us. But, Michael, if your doctor should ever tire of you once you are no longer fresh, I could find a place for you on my staff. No need to hide your light under a bushel.” The Bishop reached up to shake Michael’s hand but once they unclasped their hands, the Bishop’s brushed
lightly across the fly of Michael’s trousers. “The country has restored your health in every way. I’ve underestimated the effects of country air. Lovely.”

Sweat ran down his back and he was thankful for an empty stomach as a dry heave could be hidden. Now pardoned, he changed into his oldest clothes and ran to help Collins bring in his crop. As the day passed, he knew that the Bishop was going to take the entire day, getting as many meals as possible. He also knew the man would stay until he had convinced Mrs. Lock to part with her only treasure. They sent word an hour before the last train. The interruption was unwelcome because the clouds were gathering and the last of the field was still standing. “I’ll be back,” he promised Collins and ran through the thickening air to make his goodbyes.

The Bishop had stayed for tea, his substantial lunch insufficient. “Your doctor is with the sweet young woman we met yesterday afternoon. She is in labor.”

“Katie? But it’s too early. She has at least another month.”

“I suppose it was the strain of the inquiry but Mrs. Lester told me that she’s had difficulties from the outset. It’s in God’s hands as are you, Michael. Go and sin no more.” He winked lasciviously and boarded the carriage, the springs sagging with his bulk. Sherman Lock had the audacity to turn and wave as the carriage took him away to a world of depravity.

The last of the wheat was in the wagon just as the rain came, and the wagon was in the barn before the hail. He was soaked to the skin, his shirt transparent, and since he couldn’t get any wetter, he walked to the Wheeler’s. But her mother shooed him away. “There’s naught you can do here, but we would covet your prayers, Vicar.”

He sat in the church without lamp or candles. If they needed him, they would find him. Lightening lit the stained glass now and then. He prayed for Katie until Graham came for him.

“A strapping boy. For all our worry, he’s healthy as can be and early was best or he’d have split her in two.”

They stood in the dark with the altar between them. Michael nodded, not trusting his voice. He thought he might cry out. The Bishop’s words had poisoned his mind, and the Bishop’s touch was still on him.

“Come on home, lad. Mother will be waiting and feed us though it be after midnight.”

As he had done for four days past, he obeyed. Mrs. Lester clucked over him, putting him in one of Graham’s dry shirts although it swam on him. He managed to eat a little and then could tell them. “The inquiry showed no wrongdoing. My assignment remains the same. Sherman Lock may come back to visit, but he won’t make further trouble.”

Graham poured a small glass of brandy for each of them in celebration. It burned Michael’s throat and Mrs. Lester clapped him on the back. “I’ll be going up now. You stay what’s left of the night here, Michael. That storm is not through.”

“Come into the surgery with me. I need to clean my instruments and restock my bag.”

“Can I do anything?”

“Watch the kettle and bring it to me when it boils.”

Michael trudged to the surgery with the boiling water, his legs leaden. He perched on a stool and tried to keep his eyes on Graham’s strong hands as they brought order and prepared the supplies for the next patient. No matter how exhausted he was, Graham had to clean his instruments and
restock his bag. A summons could come at any time, and there was no one else to go.

“What did the bishop really say? You’ve been painfully quiet and haven’t looked me in the eye any time in the past hour.”

He tried to keep his voice even. “He said that we had to be more careful because next time he wouldn’t help us.”

“Michael, I’m too weary to ferret it out of you one sentence at a time.”

He was having to move each word past the great lump in his throat but if Graham needed told quickly, he would do so. “He told me that he had plans for Sherman Lock because his personal staff were all, were all like, like us and that there was a place for me if you ever, that is, if I ever needed a place. But he said he wanted beauty and intelligence around him so I’m not sure where I would fit.”

“Michael, do not put yourself down. So after he told you of his wicked designs on Sherman and propositioned you, what did he do?”

“That was all. I’ve been in the fields with Collins until they came for me. He winked at me as he was getting in the carriage but by then it was nearly over.”

Graham wiped his hands on a towel and brought a lamp close to Michael’s face. He squinted in the bright light as Graham looked on him with a doctor’s keen eye. “Best tell it all. You know what a festering wound does by now.”

“He said that he could tell I was fresh but if after you’d used me up, you no longer wanted me, he would take me and he brushed his hand across my fly and Graham, is it like that with us? Something bawdy, a big joke?”

His voice cracked but he couldn’t stop. “He gave me permission for what I want more than anything in this world but he made it seem dirty and now I can’t stop feeling his hand on me and if I want your hand there, does it make me a pervert? Is my innocence funny to you? Will you get tired of me? Because I’d rather stop now than be alone again. I’ve had four days alone and almost run mad with it and--”

His chest heaved and he shuddered all over, chilled to the bone as Graham led him into the study where shadows hid them from all but each other. Graham hadn’t spoken yet, but he sat on the old swaybacked couch and pulled Michael down onto his lap. “There now, lad. It’s all over. Give it to me.”

At first Michael just panted. The air was heavy with the gathering of another storm, and he couldn’t get his breath. Graham stroked his back until he sunk down into the embrace. Burying his face in Graham’s neck, he sobbed himself hoarse as the tears ran down onto Graham’s chest.

After he was weak and spent, he tried to move away but Graham kept him there easily with an arm about his waist. Graham always had a clean handkerchief which was sorely needed. “Can you listen now?”

“I think so.”

“First of all, if that bloody bastard ever lays a hand on you again, I will reinstate crucifixion as a fitting punishment but I’ll add castration to it. No one has the right to touch you. Secondly, you are not a pervert. I’ve never known anyone with a kinder, purer heart. I will never grow tired of you and for now, your innocence is quite safe because I am mortally exhausted.”
He scrambled off Graham’s lap just as a boom of thunder shook the cottage. The storm had moved closer while he wept. Graham went to the cupboard for blankets and made a pallet on the floor.

“You go on up now.” He reached for Graham’s hand, shyly curling his fingers in the wide palm.

Graham brushed his fringe back and kissed him on the forehead. He had to press his lips to Michael’s ear to be heard above the storm. “I’ll be right here beside my beautiful boy.”

Chaste as children, they fell asleep holding hands as the thunder crashed around them.

He was moved by the village coming together to support their doctor and vicar. But their reunion at the end made him lay the last page on his lap as if it were heavy as lead. Although they had never discussed it, the similarities between the characters and My’s real life were an open secret. The separation was obviously about My feeling shut out of Greg’s life. The reunion he had crafted was far more than Greg felt capable of. If My sobbed on his shoulder when he woke from his nap, Greg would tell him to get some real problems. He didn’t feel capable of being My’s husband let alone his dad and if anyone needed to be crying on laps, it was Greg.

How much of this chapter was expectation? He hadn’t given it to Greg to read, and his list of questions on the last page seemed to be self-aware. If My was emotionally Michael’s age, a university student, what emotional age was Greg? And could they stay married without doing permanent damage? Armchair diagnosis was fraught with risk. Maybe today was not the best day to make decisions.

My rolled over, whimpering and then cautioned in a distressed voice, “Mind the toaster! It’s full of ants!”

Greg took a sip of his drink and waited for the show. His money was on Bruce and the bear of My’s dreams did not disappoint.

“Put the honey on the bread after you’ve toasted it. That’s a good bear. More? Cheeky devil.”

My pumped his hips, wielding his honey dispenser. Greg was thankful they could dry clean the quilt if things played out as he thought they might. Better Bruce than him was his next thought. Send a bear to do a man’s job and why not?

My’s voice got husky. “Care to lick the spout? Mmmm. I thought you would.”

Then the time for words had passed and it was all grunts and gasps. My clutched at the quilt and bit his lip just before he came. He woke himself with a shout of triumph and then peered sheepishly at Greg. “How much of that was aloud?”

“It’s all allowed because I’m not counting liaisons with imaginary bears as adultery.”

“Quite a relief that as it seems to be a regular thing, but I meant how much did you hear? Clearly some context.”

“Bruce the bear had done something untoward to your toaster but he appears to have made amends.”

“All over my pants.”

“Not the first time.”

My sat up and rubbed his face. “How were my pages?”
“Clever, moving, challenging. I can’t live up to Graham’s example, My. Can you forgive me?”

“Graham is as imaginary as Bruce. I’ll take the man I married.” My came over and leaning down, kissed the top of Greg’s head. “Was Michael too weak? Too much drama?”

Greg took a sip of drink to puzzle out his answer. “Michael has been through a very bad time, growing up without parents, and he’s under a great deal of pressure. The visit from his boss and the secrecy aren’t helping. Seems natural he might need a bit of comfort.”

The house phone rang. “That will be Morris with dinner. I’ll just get changed.”

“My? “I think we should have an early bed time tonight. Cuddles only. I’m sorry but that’s all I can manage just now.”

“You have my word as a gentleman that I won’t molest you. Bruce has sated me for now.”

After dinner, they went up to bed. My was clothed from throat to ankle in chaste pyjamas and engrossed in a book. Greg had done his reading for the day. He lay on his side and watched My for a bit but couldn’t seem to get drowsy. “Read to me, My? To help me sleep.”

My’s voice in Russian filled his head as he tried and failed to translate. He made a sleepy wish that his dreams would involve Russian circus bears, honey and orgasms when he dozed off. The nightmare came almost at once.

My lay sprawled on the road in the center of the village; he was naked except for a white cloth wrapped around his waist. His outstretched arms and legs were spindly and covered in scratches. His skin was blue with cold. His chest heaved once and then with a shuddering sigh he lay still.

Graham Lester was to the side consulting with John and Molly who wore white lab coats. “You have far more knowledge than I. What took him?”

“Sleep deprivation,” John said, biting his lip and marking something on a clipboard.

Molly shook her head. “Men always going for the logic. His heart was broken. He didn’t have the emotional stamina to withstand that sort of rejection.”

Graham’s face it up as Michael came toward them, his cassock dragging in the mud. Michael looked at all three of them, tears streaming down his face. “Can’t you save him? He’s only been dead a few minutes. I believe in the power of the resurrection.”

Graham brought Michael’s head down to his shoulder. “There, lad. Don’t look. We’ll clean it up.”

Greg was shouting for them to help, but they couldn’t see him and his voice was very faint. “CPR, you’ve got to do CPR.”

On concrete legs, he tried to run to the body. When he fell, he crawled, kicking at the mud that sucked at his movement. Finally, he was near to his husband. “Help me. Somebody breathe for him.”

“I can’t hear you,” John said.

Greg gasped, his lungs stiff with cold and blew with all his might. My’s chest stayed still as Greg raised up, fumbling his fingers into the correct position. “Please, God. Help me.”

His arms were heavy as he shoved his hands down into the resistant chest. “Careful, you’ll break
John made a checkmark on his clipboard. “Full points for placement of the hands."

Michael had broken away from Graham and was kneeling beside him, his voice high with fear. “Greg, stop. That hurts.”

Greg fought Michael’s hands as they kept him from pressing down on My’s chest. “Help me.”

“Greg, wake up!”

He came to, kneeling over My, his arms locked, his hands pressing hard on My’s sternum. My’s hands were locked around his wrists in an attempt to stop his chest from being crushed. Jerking back, he crawled away to his side of the bed, gasping for breath. “Oh, God. Are you alright, baby? I didn’t hurt you?”

“I’m uninjured. You were thrashing about enough that I had some warning, but I couldn’t tell what you were about until you were on top of me.”

Still unable to get a full breath, Greg swung his legs over the bed. His hair was soaked with sweat, and he pushed it off his forehead with a shaking hand. “I could have killed you.”

My laughed, a thread of hysteria under it. “The grand irony. Death by CPR.”

For all his fits of rage, he didn’t want My dead. Clearly underneath the irritation, he still loved him, and My wasn’t safe in his own bed with Greg around. “I’m going to the guest room.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You had a night terror, but it’s over. No harm done.”

Greg grabbed his pillow and put it between them. “No harm done this time. Next time I might try to strangle you. You can’t be attacked in your own bed.”

My clutched at his hand. “Couples wound each other all the time in bed. A black eye from an arm flung out or a swollen lip. It’s part of sleeping together.”

“Sweetheart, I will not put you at risk.” Greg shoved his feet into his slippers. “We’ll try it for a little while. The nightmares will fade and I’ll come back.”

“No. I won’t have it. Separate bedrooms are the first step toward the end. Soon we’ll be nodding cordially to each other in the hall as if this were some bloody hotel. You are not going anywhere.”

Greg sighed. Nothing was easy anymore. “Come with me, please.”

He took My into the bathroom and turned on the overhead light that mimicked daylight. “Look at yourself, baby. You are white as a sheet except for those purple circles under your eyes. Your work involves preventing world war. I won’t destroy whole countries because I’m afraid of the dark.”

“But I can go on three hours a night indefinitely and have done. Please, Greg. We can find another way.” My’s voice quavered. He was close to tears again.

“You can function but you aren’t at your best, love. I can’t have more deaths on my conscience. I’m hanging on by a thread as it is.”

My grabbed him, hugging to the point of pain. Greg could see himself in the mirror, lines etched deep in his face, bags under his own eyes which were wide with fear. “The fact that you are
crying and clinging to me tells me that this is long overdue.”

“But you’ll be all alone if you have another nightmare.”

“Then we shall both have to be very brave.”

“Is it because I tried to seduce you?” My took a step back, holding Greg’s hand in a shaky, but desperate grip.

“No, I’ll be right down the hall if you have the urge. This is temporary, hmm? A few days for you to get caught up.”

He kissed My on the forehead. “Be a good boy and go back to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

When he got to the guest room, he closed the door and leaned against it with relief and flipped the lock. My would be safe from attack and so would Greg. It was absolutely for the best.

On his run the next day, he reviewed all of the people he had hurt with his behavior. The DVD that My had shown him helped him to categorize more ways that he had failed. Then he itemized the more recent past and how he had hurt his mum by withholding information and Morris by disrespecting the house and the meals, and My in every way possible from making him ashamed of his sex drive to calling him out for being emotionally vulnerable. Until he could keep his emotions more steady, My was better off without him.

He rang the landlord of the bedsits to see where he was on the waiting list. Now that separate bedrooms had been established, it would be simple enough to establish separate residences. Best to end the marriage while he still had love in his heart for My and while My still wanted him. He didn’t want to overstay his welcome and have the Iceman evict him.

The slow thudding dread he used to get when his father was late coming home to punish him began as he got dressed. It was therapy day. If he had to prowl quietly around the house, he would lose his mind. He went to a coffee shop and reviewed the Italian vocabulary and verb cards that he had made the previous afternoon. Then keeping the title covered with his hand, he sheepishly took the Bible out of his shoulder bag and read his chapters. All the poor sods in the Old Testament were doomed same as he was. He wondered if the grim punishments had played on Rich’s mind same as they did on his. Even though he had the first appointment of the day, he still had enough time to review what he would tell his therapist. He was going to keep her on a ‘need to know’ status same as his mum.

Dr. Panicker had other plans. She set a case file box between them. “Internal Affairs finished going through Walt’s locker and desk. As his executor and sole heir, you are entitled to his personal effects.”

“Thanks. Saves me a trip and the Yard postage.”

“I thought we could go through them together.”

God, she was transparent. At least when Gil Hoffman eviscerated somebody, he was honest about it. Why did they want to dig around for a reaction? He was managing, establishing a routine, renewing old acquaintances, developing new interests and hobbies. She wouldn’t be happy until he sobbed with his head in her lap. That always won accolades at the care management meetings. Next session she would bring Anderson in to re-enact a full cavity search.

“You’ve gone very quiet, Greg. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that I spent several days last week going through Walt’s things and that I’m quite
She ignored the edge in his voice although he saw the flush creep up her neck. “Not quite through. Just think how good you will feel when this last box is properly sorted.”

“It will be his warrant card and medals. Probably several rolls of antacids. Deaf aid batteries although he never had one handy when that bloody thing started to squeal. Change of clothes—street clothes for when we went to the pub after. Pictures of Betty.”

“Let’s see if you guessed right.”

Deliver him from fucking newbies. She was going to mount his head and hang it on her wall next to her spit shined diploma. Clearly, his life was not his own. She touched Walt’s things and it was worse than the money grubbing landlord pawing through the flat. “Tell me about this,” and she would pull an item out of the box, hungrily scanning his face for a reaction.

A vulture, that’s what she was, circling the body, picking over the remains. Nothing had fully killed Walt. Not the body bag or the coffin or the flat being let or the selling off of his clothing. But this was the last and when it was through, a man that had been larger than life would be reduced to two boxes, one with a model train and one with a few medals. Someday, My would do the same for him. He would come to the bedsit and consign most of it to the skip or charity and then put the wallet and a few photographs in a shoe box, that and the name plaque at the mortuary would be his legacy. He shivered.

“Are you cold, Greg?”

She said his name too often in that way people had of trying to remember a name by inserting it into the conversation at regular intervals. But she bloody well knew his name; she couldn’t have that many patients yet.

“A little. It sits in my bones after my run.” He had sweat running down his back, but he let her adjust the heating.

“You don’t look like you’ve been sleeping very well.”

“Does anybody after such a tragedy?”

“Not for awhile. I could give you something.”

“I had to take something for a few days at the beginning, but I don’t like to. I’d rather face my issues.”

“That’s admirable. Is your partner being supportive?”

“Of course. He’s been through something similar, and we’ve had long talks. It’s an encouragement to be with someone who’s been down that road before. He’s my rock.” If you wished it were true, it couldn’t be a lie.

“I’d like you to start keeping a journal. Document your feelings for at least an hour a day. You’ll find it very helpful to track your progress. And I want you to get this book. *Living with PTSD.*” She handed over a card with the title written on it. “When you rang me about moving our sessions to Mondays, you mentioned wanting to double up on sessions. If you’d still like to do that, I think it’s warranted, but you’ll still be on leave at least eight weeks. I’d also like you to consider attending a support group for officers with PTSD.” She handed him a brochure.

Greg wanted nothing more than to have someone drive him home and carry him up to bed and
now he had more errands and assignments. They would look good in the empty cavern of his diary, but he was completely overwhelmed. He was being murdered by pamphlet, one inch at a time. “Since my husband is helping me, I think once a week is sufficient, but I’ll definitely look into the group. Thank you.”

“Ring me if you experience any flashbacks or night terrors.”

“Absolutely. Have a good week.”

He gathered up the last evidence box that Walt would ever need and forced himself to walk calmly from the office. Once he was in the stairwell, he moved as if he were in a fire drill. In the car with the box beside him in the passenger seat, he sat for twenty minutes without the faintest idea of where he could go. It was 10:00 a.m. and the entire day stretched out empty before him.

“Let’s go look at trains, Walt.” He searched on his mobile for the nearest hobby shop and drove there, waiting for the sky to fall.
On Wednesday, Mycroft was firm that they would spend the evening together because he would be gone on business for at least four days. “I barely see you anymore, love. Let’s do something even if it’s just a cuddle during a film.”

“Don’t you have to pack?”

“Morris is taking care of it so that we can have our time.”

Damn Morris taking the only ready out from Greg. Then inspiration. “I have to do my assignments for therapy.”

“I’ll write for a bit then. It was cozy last weekend with the fire. We were both productive.”

Greg sat the timer on his watch for an hour. “I have to journal for an hour and then read a chapter in my PTSD book.”

“Carry on. I’ll be in the village.”

My was so bloody cheerful. Greg felt strongly tempted to write about what a dick his husband was being, but he had worked hard at keeping the journal what a therapist would most need to hear to release someone for active duty. So he wrote about his fantasy husband instead, the man he thought he married.  

*My is a rock for me, the strong center when the memories spin around in my head. With this much support, I know that I am getting a little better each day. He’s helped me to process my feelings and provides constant reassurance that I am not alone while I recover. While the pain of that terrible day will be with me forever, I know that I can find a new normal with God’s help and the love of my husband.*

He then flipped back and forth between his journal and the book his therapist had assigned. There was a handy chart of recovery, and he wrote in the persona of a man on track for getting back to work within the month. There was a small sense of satisfaction in covering the pages with thick, black writing. He had chosen a pen that would bleed through the paper so that he only wrote on one side and he used his largest hand. It would be quite an impressive display of pages at his next session.

He flinched when My’s shadow fell across the page and slapped the journal shut. “May I help you?”

“May I borrow this?” My had already picked up Greg’s Bible. “Michael is quoting scripture again and I haven’t the foggiest where it’s found. What an atheist is doing writing about a vicar, I haven’t a clue.”

Greg sighed and stopped the timer. Starting once he’d stopped was like running on wet sand. He had to get it down in one go, but My had ruined that. “You could have used your mobile.”
“I know it’s ridiculous but I have to use an actual Bible and feel the pages under my hand. Michael wouldn’t have a mobile so I can’t.”

“Take it. I was right in the middle.”

“Sorry, love. Pay me no mind.” My smoothed down Greg’s hair and then kissed the top of his head, nuzzling into the hair.

Greg pressed the timer with exaggerated movements and took up his pen. *It’s amazing how he knows exactly what I need even if it’s time apart to reflect. He can sense my moods and gives me space when it all gets to be too much. His own interests keep him busy and we come back together because we want to not because of obligation. There’s so much to share after our separate adventures. I really enjoyed telling him about my visit to the model train shop and my talk with Father Forster. My is such a great listener. I am thankful for his intuition and sensitivity.*

My’s shadow came across the page again. “Greg, what the bloody hell is this?”

Greg’s head snapped up. My rarely swore. He was holding the tract from Michelle between his thumb and finger as if it were a dead rat by the tail. He dropped it in the waste basket and then took out his handkerchief to wipe his hands. “I won’t have that filth in my home.”

“What if I want it?”

“Why would you want that mangy rag full of propaganda? It’s tripe.”

“It was given to me.”

“By whom?”

Greg pressed his lips together. He wasn’t volunteering any information about his routine.

“It has to be either Michelle or someone at Walt’s church unless you’ve had the misfortune to be accosted on the street during your run.”

“You said that you wouldn’t read the surveillance reports.”

“I said that I wouldn’t read that one and I didn’t. But your behavior has continued to be concerning.”

“That’s splitting hairs, and you don’t have them to spare, My.”

“You’ve got to stay away from her, Greg. Even if she weren’t giving you poison like this, she’s dangerous. You’re too vulnerable right now.”

“Thanks for thinking that I’m too weak and stupid to look after myself against a wee nursing mother. That gets my confidence back in place.”

“I said vulnerable. You are hurting and she will press her advantage. That’s what those sort of people do. At the same time, we are quite lucky that her faith forbids her suing you. I doubt I could keep that out of the papers.”

“She was actually very kind. She forgave me.”

“Forgave you for what? Greg, you did nothing wrong.”

“I did nothing. Nothing. Your little editing experiment proved that in black and white. Put it to music. Call it Piss Poor Leader or Failure. One and the same.”
My was looming over him and he felt trapped in the chair. Standing helped but he was still backed in the corner between the desk and the wall. “I need out of here. I don’t have to listen to you tear down the one thing that’s helping me.”

“Do you mean your surveillance routine? Do you know how many calls the local district has had about you lurking? You aren’t thinking straight and your technique has been sloppy.”

“And now you insult my work. Or what used to be my work. God, My. Next you’ll tell me that I’m bad in bed.”

“I can’t say that, can I? You aren’t in my bed, but so help me, you will be when I come back from this trip because I won’t tolerate separate rooms another night. Do whatever you have to while I’m gone to prepare yourself because a reunion will happen.”

“My diary’s right here. Let’s just pencil in rape for the ninth, shall we?”

The sentence hung there, one that could never be taken back. The angry back and forth was stopped cold. They were both breathing heavily and red in the face. Greg felt his panic rising; he wanted out of that room at any cost. He cursed the slowness of the landlord. He needed to sleep somewhere else that very night but couldn’t waste money on a hotel.

My groped about as if he were blind and sat on the edge of the desk. “I hope I’ve never taken you when you were unwilling. I don’t plan to start. You don’t want me that way anymore. I can accept that but I do need your affection when you can manage it. Sex used to be the only way that I could get any comfort. Those precious stolen moments when my partner was sated and might allow me to rest my head on his shoulder or put an arm around me. If I’ve pressured you, I’m sorry. You’ve spoiled me and I’m quite addicted to cuddles.”

Greg capped his pen and began stacking his books. “I’ll do the rest of my lessons tomorrow when you’re gone.”

“Could we talk a little more about Michelle without it turning into a shouting match?”

“I don’t know.”

“We need to try.”

Greg slid past My, eying the door longingly. My hated cigarettes because they reminded him of Rory and of Sherlock’s addiction. Greg sat on the couch and lit one, blowing a stream of smoke toward the light. “I need a drink.”

My was painfully eager in going to fetch drinks for them both. He hovered like a waiter until Greg sipped his and nodded his thanks; then he perched on the edge of the couch like a guest unsure of his welcome.

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“I only talked to Michelle once. I needed to apologize and give her a chance to tell me whatever she needed to. I expected accusations but I got absolution. She’s all alone, My, with those babies. I owe it to Rich to keep watch.”

“I promise you, love, she is being looked after. She has her own security team in addition to her own support system of family and church friends. The people in her building are rough, but they have a code of honor. The Yard’s fund for widows and orphans will never run dry. Ruth has a scholarship to a boarding school where she can get psychiatric care and stop being a junior mother.”
“The one thing that I’d found to do that had some meaning for me is unnecessary? You’ve made me redundant. That’s two in one month. Christ, I’m worse than useless.”

“If helping others gives you pleasure, we’ll find some other charity that needs you. But please, if you won’t for your own sake, for hers, please stay away from her. I can’t help but think that all of that Christian rhetoric has made you question your sexuality, and subconsciously, you’re distancing yourself from our marriage as some kind of attempt at redemption.”

“I’m begging you, do not analyze me. I’m too tired for another row, but if you turn me into a psychological puzzle, I will say more hurtful things, and I’m not the truly vulnerable one in this room.”

“I was merely suggesting that—“

“Shut it, My. If you want to salvage any sort of togetherness tonight, you have to leave off now.”

Sipping on their drinks, they sat as awkward and upright as two virgins, waiting for a room. Greg was completely drained from the adrenaline rush of panic and the scolding that he felt was undeserved. My had seemed clueless up until this point and now it was mostly out there. Surely he knew about the flat and Greg’s con job on the therapist too.

My cleared his throat and spoke slowly as to someone disturbed. “You’re working quite hard at your therapy. He must have some merit.”

So he didn’t know. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get my life back.”

“So will I. Anything you need, sweetheart. Money is no object.”

But it was. Money was everything, and Greg knew his savings would be gone within weeks. He would live in the bedsit and look for a flatmate or something farther afield. Even though it had destroyed Greg’s pride, he was thankful that My had limited his contribution to the household. He would need every penny if the Yard cut him loose. Fortunately, he didn’t need much food anymore. He was down to one meal a day and skipping some days. Coffee and cigarettes weren’t cheap, but they killed the appetite.

When he got in the bedsit, he would put up the model train. Tiny as the room was, he could run track around the whole thing and back again. He would smoke all day without any dirty looks. He wouldn’t hurt anyone’s feelings but his own, and no one would look longingly at his crotch. His old life was gone, might as well make a clean sweep of it. “Things are never going to be the same, are they?”

“No, they won’t. I’m so very sorry, love. I know what it is to lose a whole world.”

“I suppose you do know.” Greg put down his glass and lit another cigarette, not to spite My anymore, but to keep himself from screaming.

“Poor dumb bastard that I am, I keep trying to get it back anyway.” Just like that, tears were frighteningly close.

“If I swear to keep it platonic, may I hold you?”

“Please be careful. I feel like my skin’s been removed.” He stubbed out the cigarette and scooted over on the couch, shivering at the leather that was cooler in the space that had been between them.

My’s touch was feather light, obeying Greg’s warning. Greg at once regretted it. He didn’t need
tentative; he needed the stuffing squeezed out of him. My couldn’t really win with someone so changeable. Greg settled for hanging on tight as My stroked his hair, finger combing the mess that was growing long since he had no reason to keep it a professional length.

He could hear My’s heart beating slow and steady under his ear as long fingers pressed the knotted muscles in his neck. Greg couldn’t remember the last time his neck had been loose. It took longer with light touches to unkink the muscles, but they had nothing better to do. He stiffened when My’s hand pulled his shirt loose from his trousers, but the same light touch was applied to his lower back where the ache seemed to throb day and night. A groan slipped out; it was hard to keep his teeth clenched when he was taffy.

“I think there’s still some oil in the naughty drawer. Would you like me to do your feet?”

“God, yes.”

It was out before he thought and bloody unfair to send mixed messages. Later when Greg was gone, My would say, “And I rubbed that arsehole’s feet for him. Ingrate.”

But Greg’s feet were cold and sore all the time. When the nightmares let him be, the cramps set in. His body reminded him daily of every injury that he’d ever had in sports or work. If My could make his feet stop hurting, he could do whatever he liked with Greg’s arse.

Greg stretched out on the couch and snuggled into the warm leather where My had sat. My bustled about in the drawer and at the mini bar. The microwave went for a bit; Greg started to drift off, spent from the effort of staying put instead of fleeing. Then My was taking off his socks and shoes. Before Greg could feel the absence, warm damp cloths were wrapped around his feet. Then My’s fingers worked from his heels down the sole to his toes, each toe getting full attention even the pinky toe. He stopped holding in the moans.

His ankles were given the same treatment, the warmth spreading through them, the hurt easing. “If you take down your trousers, I’ll do your calves.”

Anxiety rang the bell but Greg ignored it. He fumbled with his zip and made an attempt at shoving his jeans away. My curled Greg’s fingers around the waistband of his pants to hold them steady and then tugged the jeans free. A blanket went over his legs, and then My was pushing the tightness down his calves and out through his toes. Over and over, the strong fingers sent all the hurt away. He grunted and panted, the sounds muffled against the leather.

He didn’t know he was crying until he tasted salt where tears had run in his mouth. His hand was too heavy to wipe them away. My had moved up to his thighs, folding the blanket over his feet. How did he know that Greg had been having sciatic flares? My had switched to a cooling lotion that he smoothed along the red hot line of the irritated nerve, but he didn’t follow it all the way up into Greg’s buttock. He was keeping his word to not give sexual touch. Greg very much regretted the order.

Finally, he went over Greg’s lower back again, rubbing the warm oil in, patiently coaxing the muscles. Greg wanted to be naked and have those hands on every part of him. His cock had filled, and he didn’t even care. He thought of those oiled hands milking him dry, and he needed it. But he couldn’t ask—after he’d belittled My for weeks about being too horny. Greg had given up his right to ask and there was no going back.

He turned his face into the crook of his arm. My worked at Greg’s neck and shoulders as far as the collar of his shirt would allow. When Greg fell asleep, My was still stroking his hair, murmuring nonsense that blocked the bad voices.
Late in the night, Greg woke from being too hot. My had built up the fire before falling asleep, looking all of thirteen, sitting sideways with his legs hanging over the arm of the chair. It was testament to how tired he still was that he didn’t wake when Greg stirred. Even the reflexes of a world class agent deteriorated from sleep deprivation. Greg pulled back the quilt and took off his jumper and shirt. The radiant heat felt amazing on his chest. For the first time since he had started running, his body didn’t hurt. He lifted his bad leg and turned it from side to side, the range of motion much improved by My’s rubdown.

He had slept, heavy and dreamless, for longer than he had since he finished the sleeping pills the first week after the tragedy. All of the same problems were still with him but for the moment, he was at peace. Stretching his arms as high as he could, he twisted until his back popped. The air felt like a warm bath. Although he had stopped taking all of his prescriptions, he was still half hard from My’s touch hours before. Wanking seemed like a possibility. He wiggled out of his pants and stroked himself, thinking of My letting the rubdown become a rub-one-out. But the heat and the lack of pain was pulling him toward sleep again. He woke to morning light, cock in hand.

My had just walked into the room in white shirt, tie, boxers, and black socks with garters. “I didn’t want to get rumpled when we were saying goodbye.”

Just like that, Greg wanted My, wanted to reach inside the boxers and pull him out, stroking their cocks together until they both shot all over the starched fabric. Then he wanted to take My’s tie off, bind his hands, and suck him until he came again. He wanted to make him miss his plane, no matter that it was a private plane. He wanted to slide his hands under the tail of the shirt and spread My’s cheeks and leave a bite mark on the sweet peach fuzzed mound, maybe even lick off some of the freckles.

My sat on the floor beside the couch, averting his eyes from Greg’s fingers, which flexed around the morning wood. “You seem to have slept well. I’m so glad.”

Greg reached out his free hand toward My’s chest, but he caught it up and kissed the palm. “Don’t you want something to remember me by?”

“I want you more than anything in this world but not while you’re conflicted. I would give myself to you and an hour later, you would hate me for it.” My’s eyes were too sad for there to be any accusation or malice.

“This is a first. You’ve never turned me down, not even when you had a migraine. Not even when you were half dead and the only bit of you not injured was your twig and berries.”

Greg pulled the quilt over his lap. He didn’t have much experience with rejection and he wasn’t a fan. My had been far more gracious about it than Greg’s shouting and name calling when he wasn’t interested—something else to feel guilty about. “Goodbye kiss?”

“Of course.”

Greg reached up to pull My in and put all of his need into a long, intense kiss. They stopped for breath, foreheads resting against each other. My tasted of mint and citrus. Greg knew his own breath was foul, but My had kissed without hesitation, delving his tongue deep enough to make sure Greg’s tonsils hadn’t grown back.

“I will always come home to you, and if you let me, I will rub oil on every part of your body until you are a silver puddle in the middle of our bed.” He ran his fingers through Greg’s hair until it stood on end. “I’ll suck you so hard that you look like Einstein. Your hair may never lie flat again.”
My’s erotic to do list kicked Greg’s arousal up to the next level, but the fear was creeping into his belly. In four days, he might feel differently and the pressure to perform after their hiatus would be huge. He didn’t know if he had the stamina to fuck My, and he didn’t know if he ever wanted to be fucked again. His body had been violated enough.

He was thankful for My’s restraint and the chime of the alarm on My’s mobile. “Time for me to go. I still have to put on my armor. Wait for me in our bed, love. It comforts me to think of you there.”

My brushed the fringe back to kiss his forehead. He couldn’t seem to leave Greg’s hair alone, his long fingers combing out the tangles. “I love you, sweetheart. I’ll ring you tonight.”

Greg knew already that he wouldn’t be taking the call. There had been a time when he would have counted the minutes until that call, a time when he would have been tearful at spending even one night away from My. That was all gone. He couldn’t wait to have the house to himself. “Be safe, My. Goodbye.”

He waited until the house was completely quiet except for the crackle of the fire. Somehow he was still half hard. He found the oil My had been using and took himself in hand. Rare sunlight filtered through the curtains competing with the flames. It was decadent to be warm and naked on a weekday morning while the rest of the world worked. There was nowhere to be. He could even take a day off from running.

Not knowing when he might ever be hard again, he took his time. His mind drifted to fantasies of My cuffing him to the bed and then filming it. He thought of the previous night’s massage and what it would have been like if My had pulled down his pants and spread his cheeks, inserting an oil slicked finger.

Nothing was getting the job done until he remembered the night with poison control and went back to the idea of My taking him there in front of the whole crew of men and women. “This is my bit of rough,” My would say, holding up Greg’s cock for all of them to look at. ‘Would you like a demonstration of his capacity?’

My would get himself off, fucking Greg fast and hard, but he would milk Greg into a cup afterwards. “I only allow him to come on birthdays and holidays. His kind doesn’t understand generosity. I prefer him needy but docile.”

Greg’s orgasm went on forever, aftershocks still shooting through him when he dozed off. The mobile woke him, but it took several rings for him to understand where he was and locate his jeans where they had been tossed the night before. No one rang anymore and My had just left so it wouldn’t be him. His eyes were itchy, and he couldn’t get the number in focus so he got brave and answered. “Hello?”

“Hello, love. Did you fall back to sleep?”

Shit. Fuck. Bugger. Cunt. “I thought you were leaving.”

“Slight weather delay. I wanted to make sure that you were alright and reassure you that I still want you quite badly. Can you forgive me for being cautious?”

“I’m glad you kept a cool head when I had lost mine.”

“I miss touching you. I promise when I get home, we’ll make up for lost time. I’ve been thinking about your chest, nuzzling that gorgeous hair before kissing all the way down to your treasure trail and if I time it just right, your cock will be there to greet my lips.”
Greg’s heart pounded in his throat. His breath was getting shorter and the room grew dark. He could feel the pressure already, expectations that would be completely beyond him. He felt hunted and trapped. Only being naked kept him from running out of the house. It was time to say something before My could hear the panic in his voice. “I don’t know what I’ll feel like by then, My.”

“As long as we’re together and I can touch you and kiss you everywhere, I don’t care what else happens.”

“Mum’s ringing in. I have to go now.”

“Give Gigi my love.”

“Have a good trip.”

Greg fumbled as he tried to turn the mobile off then finally left it there on the couch, not knowing if the call had terminated or not. He stumbled on the steps and clawed his way upward on hands and knees, slamming the door and locking it when he got to the guest room. His breathing was ragged, tearing at his throat. He sunk down on the floor, the carpet feeling strange against his arse. His arms burned and tingled from lack of oxygen; his lips went numb.

“In through the nose, out through the mouth, Greg. You won’t die.”

His breath came back but the fear stayed. There was a time bomb in his chest. My would come home and expect sex; Greg had sealed his own fate with one slip of his guard. Could there be a way to put My off sex? He used the doorknob to pull himself up, all the soreness back in his muscles. He toddled into the bathroom and surveyed his body. The challenge was that My never said much about Greg’s body. Greg was the one giving compliments. Nearly a year into the marriage and he wasn’t sure what about him appealed to My. Maybe he was just a convenient receptacle.

But My had mentioned the treasure trail, and running a finger down it was a frequent go to move. Braving the expanse of the hall, he snuck into the en suite and got the trimmers they had used to take off beards. Ignoring his wild hair and bloodshot eyes in the mirror, he zipped off the dark line of hair that bisected his belly. The blades tickled and his nipples hardened. He surveyed the result. The smooth pale stomach showed off the weight loss. He had been at an ideal height for this build when the accident happened. If he continued skipping meals and running daily, he could get back to his academy weight.

With his stomach bare, his chest hair looked like a fur bra. If My liked chest hair as much as Greg did, a boyish chest might be a turn off. Greg ran the trimmers up the middle, giving himself fur pasties. He hadn’t been smooth since his early teens and that one unfortunate case with vice. It was going to itch like bloody hell for weeks when it grew back, but worth the price of his freedom. He got one side clean, but his hand shook and a pass on the other side caught his nipple. He had to lean against the sink until the black spots went away.

Blood ran down his belly all the way to his thigh. He thought he might vomit. What if he had cut it off? That would definitely be a turn off for My, but Greg still had enough sense to not want to mutilate himself, right? He quite liked his nipples. Somehow it was still there. Blowing out more breaths as his heart continued to pound, in tandem with the throbbing of his wound, he finished shaving his chest.

Then his arms and legs didn’t match his torso. He bared them next. With all of his body hair gone, he resembled a cotton swab or a paint brush. He thought of My’s heart beating rabbit fast as his fingers combed frantically through Greg’s hair for comfort, and he flashbacked to the feel of
Rich’s blood and bone caught in the strands. He meant to only take off some of the length, but the cord had a kink in it so he couldn’t reach the top of his head and when he tugged it, the trimmers slipped and made a deep gouge. He was committed.

He closed his eyes and went by feel. Eventually his whole head felt like a tennis ball, no more long locks, just fuzz. “Oh god, oh god, oh god. I look like a convict on a chain gang or a cancer survivor. Christ, what have I done? You can’t hide this kind of crazy.”

Even as fast as his wild hair grew, he was in for weeks of humiliation and exposure—in the dead of winter, no less. My would have done with him now. He repulsed himself. Only his cock still had fur and he would let that alone. Looking in the mirror had been a nightmare; looking down at the floor was a shock. There was a whole schnauzer on the tile. He knelt and raked it up in his arms, hugging it to him and wishing he could glue it back on. There had been enough loss without the self inflicted sort.

He sat there on the floor with the ruin of his good looks cradled in his arms until the chill got to him. The room was not especially cold, but his head was bare and unexpectedly, his arms, legs, chest and stomach felt a breeze as well. He felt like he was wearing an ice pack as a hat.

Rummaging through the cabinet at his back, he found an empty dop kit and put the hair into it. If it never grew back, he had his memories. On wobbly legs, he staggered over to the towel rack and got one around his waist just in time. Morris came into the room in an apron and rubber gloves, carrying a large basket of cleaning supplies. They both screamed.

It was Greg’s turn to swear. “Jesus fucking Christ, can’t a man have some bloody privacy in his own home?”

The basket dropped to the floor as Morris stared at Greg’s head. “What have you done, man?”

Greg wanted to cry. Clearly he looked like hell to a friend. To strangers, he would be a freak. “I thought it was time for a change.”

“Are you having brain surgery?”

Morris had accidentally viewed their first encounter with camera sex, but Greg had kept his shirt on for that and stripped My. It was fortunate then that he wouldn’t know how much shaving Greg had done.

“I don’t care how bad a case of lice you had, Greg, that wasn’t the way.”

“Fuck off.”

“I think I’ll have to but you can’t unsee that.” He shuddered and backed slowly out of the room, closing the door as he went.

Greg had slept well the night before and with an adrenaline high from panic and sudden extreme hair loss, he doubted he would be able to nap. He didn’t think he could concentrate on a book or movie. He would have to go running or scream and hit things with a hammer.

Running with a bare head was like taking an ice bucket challenge. Some might call it invigorating; he called it torture. Millions of tiny needles stuck through his skin straight into his brain. If called on, he felt he might be able to sing opera. His bollocks turtled until he could feel them hiding behind his navel; his nostril hair froze as the snot dripped off it. He had an ice cream headache in his third eye, but his cheeks were numb.

When he returned to the car, he was shivering too badly to drive. Even with the heat turned on full
blast, it took a long time to get control of his body. His cheeks hurt when they thawed, possibly wind burned. His chest was tight, and his head pounded with the beginnings of a migraine. He needed to get home before it hit with full force, blurring his vision.

By the time he pulled in the garage, he was gagging with nausea. If he went through the kitchen, Morris and possibly Tuppy, would give him the business about his hair or the lack. He made the longer journey through the front, cursing every step between him and his medicine. Several tries were needed to get the pills down, fishing them out of the sink after he gagged and had to spit them out. Even the night light was sending stabs through his eyes which saw two of everything. The medicine didn’t stay down, and the sips of water he took to clear away the vomit came up too.

Panting with pain, he got his clothes and shoes off, everything damp and smelly, his sense of smell nearly a super power from the headache. He needed a shower, but the thought of water drumming on his head was beyond his tolerance. As he eased himself into bed, trying to keep his head still, the sheets were icy against his nakedness. He wanted My there, imagined fur under his cheek, wished for clever fingers to rub his neck, and then thought the price was too high.

Hours passed, the stench of his own breath causing dry heaves. Shivers wracked him, jarring his head and the tight muscles in his neck and shoulders. Then fever took over, and the covers were hot and heavy on his bruised skin. A beam of light crossed the bed, and he cried out.

“Sorry. I’ll come back later.”

Bloody Morris. His obsession with clean was going to kill somebody one of these days. If Greg hadn’t been such a dick earlier, he would have asked for a glass of water and a breath mint, but he’d burned his bridges. Finally, he dozed, his own whimpers waking him. The clock read 2:00 but he wasn’t sure if it was AM or PM. His bladder made the decision to get up. Where the liquid had come from, he couldn’t say. His mouth was so dry his lip was stuck to his teeth.

After splashing water on his face, he was able to take the pills. It was a double edge sword. The pain medicine was laced with caffeine so it would take the edge off, but he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He was trapped. Traffic lights and head lamps would blind him, and he didn’t fancy puking on himself in the car. His head would not improve without food and drink, but going out into the light would make it worse. Again, he missed My. Even if he were angry with Greg, My would have got food for him, knowing how debilitating the headaches were.

His mobile revealed the change of date so the time was after 2 AM. Morris would be in bed. Greg didn’t feel he could justify the expense of a cab. There was food in the master bedroom, the scene of his follicular genocide. He put on a dressing gown intent on a foraging mission, but Morris had left a picnic basket in front of the bedroom door.

A thermos of chicken soup later, he was able to go through the rest of the basket. Egg mayonnaise sandwiches, crisps, an orange, a plum, oatmeal raisin biscuits, a smaller thermos of cocoa, carrot and celery sticks with humus, a neck pillow filled with some kind of grain, and at the very bottom, a small squishy wrapped gift. It was a knitted hat, dark gray and brown tweed, thick and soft. He put it on right there sitting on the bed.

Then he ate everything in the basket, the flavors so exquisite they penetrated his cigarette dulled tongue. While he ate, even though his eyes hurt from the glare, he watched the telly for the sound of human voices. As he sipped the cocoa, he began to weep. He should have gone on the trip with My or asked him to stay home because suddenly, he missed the bedside picnics they used to have. Pressing his mobile to his lips, he rocked back and forth, trying to conquer the urge he had to ring his husband. It would be cruel to give My false hope when their marriage had run so far into the ditch.
Crying had made his head pound and he leaned back on the pillows, counting all of the reasons why they weren’t going to make it. Too old, too set in their domestic habits and used to living alone, both leaders at work with intense jobs and punishing schedules, both in careers where human life was at stake and both with the high risk of losing people under their leadership. My was too emotionally damaged; Greg was too overwhelmed to be the sole carer. My was a genius; Greg was dim as a post. My had the sex drive of a rabbit on Viagra; Greg could barely get it up once a week if he took his medicine. My was rich; Greg was just getting by and now was likely unemployed. It had been doomed from the start.

Greg thought about ringing My anyway. He could give My a few happy days of thinking he was on the mend. He could hear his voice and the love in it. Still he hesitated and to get his fix, he played all of his voice mail messages from My instead. This made him cry harder. What the hell was in his migraine prescription this time?

Finally he went to the master bedroom, feeling like an intruder. Morris had cleaned and changed all the linens. No pillows or sheets or towels with My’s scent. No clothes in the hamper. He got the fur lined hat that My had worn for a trip to Russia, spritzed it with My’s cologne, and climbed into the huge bed. Putting the hat on the pillow, he nuzzled it, pretending it was My’s chest. A fresh round of sobs shook him as he realized that he would never get bare chested cuddles again, but he couldn’t remember the last time, hadn’t realized it was important as it happened.

He fell into a restless sleep, broken by the caffeine in the medication. When he woke himself from crying in his sleep, he went back to the guest room where his mobile was and picked it up, fully intending to ring My regardless of the consequences. There was a voice mail.

“I apologize for the early hour but you’d been so eager to rent one of our flats. We have one coming available today if you’d like to come by and see it. If it suits you, we can settle terms and have you moved in by the weekend.”

Greg took it as a sign. He showered, wincing as he automatically filled his cupped hand with shampoo and had nothing to wash beyond tennis ball fuzz. The heat from the shower loosened his sore muscles, but the high power setting of the shower head that was his preference drove bullets of water into his defenseless skull. It was going to be a long winter.

Two hours later, paperwork pending, he was the proud owner of a small room with one narrow window looking out on the blank wall of another building. There were cigarette burns in the bathroom sink and the concrete block walls felt damp. A shower stall meant no more baths. Chipboard furniture suitable for second rate theater productions. Sagging shelves, warped drawers, the veneer patched with wood grain contact paper. He had a narrow single bed and a table for two with one chair. The hall smelled like piss and he heard someone coughing as he walked by the identical doors, feeling like an animal in a stack of cages.

He spent the rest of the days that My was gone arranging his possessions into groupings that would fit in a gym bag so he would be ready to move out a little at a time. With Morris’ hat to keep him from hypothermia, he kept running, finding new routes near his new residence. It wasn’t a home because home was wherever My was; he was homeless now. For all its faults, his little cell might seem like a palace if he lost his job and could not get another. Few people would hire him with his extreme haircut which made him look shifty and deranged. His therapist would have a heyday with attributing symbolism to his shorn state.

The night of My’s return, Greg was sick from nerves and was glad of his empty stomach. He felt like a child waiting for a scolding from a dad. His mum had always made him wait for his punishment until Rich came home, tired and hungry and angry.
My gasped. “Oh, sweetheart, what on earth have you done to yourself?”

“I wanted a fresh start.”

“You’ve certainly got a blank canvas there. Do you like it?”

Greg shrugged, going for nonchalant. “It’s growing on me.”

“I certainly hope so.”

At least, his shocking hair don’t had delayed the welcome home kiss. All too soon, My was reaching for him. “I’ve missed you, baby, and I’ve caught up on my sleep so there’s no reason for separate beds any longer.”

My’s kiss hurt and not because Greg’s lips were chapped. It was the lump in his throat filled with all the words he wanted to say—apologies and empty promises. It all tumbled around in his head until something else came out, but he knew it as truth when he heard it. “I can’t move back. I’m sorry but I need more time.”

“What you need is my love. Remember how good you felt when I took care of you? We made plans for my first night back.” My’s arms wrapped around him and he almost caved. It would be easy to give in and get the cuddles he had wanted; sex wasn’t such a high price to pay for affection and companionship. He could be with My one more time and knowing it was the last time, he could carve it into his mind. My had taken his hand and was trying to tow him into the bedroom.

“My, you’ve got to stop it. You’re smothering me. I can’t breathe.”

“I’m not asking for anything more than your presence. Be near me. That’s all.”

“Why do you even want me around? I’m bad company, and we keep arguing. You’re better off without me.”

“Don’t ever say that. While I was gone this week, you were all I thought about. Please, Greg, I know if we make time for each other that you’ll feel better. It’s difficult when you are raw and angry with grief but isolating won’t fix it. You need people around you. Trust me. I’ve been through this.”

Greg thought about his headache and sleeping with the bloody fur hat because he had been lonely. He thought about the stark, smelly damp of the bedsit and how his mobile never rang, but he couldn’t walk into that bedroom with My. Sooner or later, My would get rid of him. He wanted to be the one to leave instead of being asked to leave.

He eased his arm out from under My’s grip. “I’m not doing this to hurt you, I swear it. Your situation was different; you were not at fault. My workplace accident was preventable but my negligence ended two lives. The only way I can give those deaths meaning is to make sure that I never hurt anybody again.”

“So you live in a cave for the rest of your life? Morris and I tried that. It does not work.”

He turned toward the safety of the guest room, but My grabbed him by the shoulders. “I won’t lose you, love.”

The panic rose as he felt trapped. “If you really love me, you’ll let me go for awhile. Don’t make this harder on me than it has to be. I’m trying to do the right thing.”
My took his hands away, holding them palm up. “So we don’t have sex, we don’t sleep together, I can’t touch you, and we don’t talk. What’s left?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is this marriage over?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well that’s not an adequate answer.” My’s voice cracked and Greg stopped backing away to watch tears run down his face, one clinging to the mole on his cheek. “I won’t allow you to go.”

“Last I checked, I still had free will or do you plan to tie me to a chair?”

“Where did the love go? All the promises we made.” My was crying in earnest now.

Greg felt a sick need to finish it. “I think they died in that little room when Walt did.”

“But I still love you.” My covered his face with his hands and sobbed, sagging against the wall.

“Don’t be such a fucking baby, My. You said you didn’t want nappies or a Daddy. Have you changed your mind?”

“That was a failed experiment. Just the one night and—“

“It was every fucking night. Two men died, friends that I let down, because I had to hold your hand every bloody night since we got married. I can’t even piss alone; you’re so goddamn needy. Get off my tit!”

Greg watched the emotions run across My’s face, trying to memorize it because it wasn’t his face to love any more after this moment. Part of him hoped that My would keep on fighting or even grab him and kiss him senseless. Greg had wanted to be the one to go, but My left first. The Ice Man drew himself up to his full height, gave a small bow and said “Apologies.”

Then he walked to the master bedroom and quietly closed the door. The click of the lock was the sound of My’s heart breaking. For all his big talk of needing to go, Greg stayed, shutting himself in the guest room. Taking a pillow into the loo, he turned the shower on full blast and then sobbed himself empty, the pillow almost smothering him.
Debridement

Chapter Summary

Greg and My struggle with the aftermath of Greg’s outburst.

As a cadet, Greg had done a stint with the suicide division and one of the older coppers had told him about the very few people who survived a jump. “Halfway down, they saw solutions to all of their problems.”

Moments after saying unforgivable things to My, Greg realized that there were workable solutions to all of the issues in his marriage. He had survived the jump, but his marriage was DOA.

He remained in bed all day, getting up only to relieve himself and take a few sips of water for cotton mouth. Every muscle and joint ached and his skin felt raw as if it had been scraped. Even the gentle brush of the soft sheets hurt. His eyes burned, even after napping, and his panicked breathing made his chest tight, his smoker’s waking cough continuing throughout the gray and cheerless day.

He had heard the distance sounds of My getting ready for work, the shower and the tread of his footsteps as he left the upper story. He even thought he heard the decisive slam of the front door. Greg wanted to run after him and beg him to stay home so that he could make amends, but it was far past that point. The solicitors and papers would come later, but the marriage had ended in the hall with insults hurled while My cried, his face crumpling. He had needed mercy and compassion and received cruelty. My was a proud man; he would never come back for more abuse. He had retreated into the Ice Man, and Greg doubted that anyone would ever penetrate that guard again.

Greg had undone nearly a year’s worth of good works with a few cutting remarks. He had been focused as a surgeon after cancer, excising their love with a few slices of the scalpel. In severing the cord, he had cut his last tie to sanity. My had been supporting him after all and his rages against My’s constant inept efforts to help had been giving him strength. Without My to fight, he was suddenly weak and lost with no respite.

Clinging to scraps of normalcy, he sent his mum a text at the regular time, squinting at the bright square of his mobile with sore eyes.

Taking a duvet day, beautiful. Will write you tomorrow.

Oh, Greggie. So glad. You’ve been pushing way too hard.

I love you, Mum.

I love you too, sweetheart. Sleep well.

He desperately wanted to call her and pour it all about before her, but he had always solved his own problems, not wanting to worry her. Last night when he spewed out venom, he had thought only of relieving the pressure, but now he saw how badly she would be hurt by his divorce. She loved My possibly more than her own son. What if she chose My instead? He was the better child by far and would be able to care for them as they aged. But would he when Greg was his ex-husband? Greg certainly wouldn’t be able to have them come and live with him in the bedsit.
He thought perhaps Sherlock would choose him over My, and John would stand with Sherlock. My would get Morris and so Tuppy by default. His cheeks heated with shame at the sorry lack of friends he had now. He threw the blankets off and lay in the chilly dim unable to think of one person who would be fully in his corner. Having dreaded the worst case scenario for weeks, it was still a different thing altogether to live it through. He wondered how long it would be before he was evicted.

His stomach growled as the hours passed, but he was up to three days between meals and hunger was one of his few constant companions. Running his hands down his body, he was surprised at how much weight was gone. His stomach was flat, his legs toned to ropy hardness.

Morris vacuumed the hall carpet and Greg was thankful for the obnoxious noise of another human nearby. The pipes filled with water as he cleaned the shower in the master bath. Then he was gone too.

Greg dozed fitfully, the nightmares thick and fast. During waking moments, he fantasized reunion scenarios and tearful goodbyes. He wanted to kiss My more than anything, to taste his lips one last time. If they’d kissed last night when My got home, he couldn’t recall.

Coming awake to total darkness in a panic, he realized he had missed his therapy session. His cough provided an easy out as he wheezed and hacked his way through a message about feeling ill and taking a day to rest, and he thought she might be pleased he was practicing self care.

It was after nine when My came up the stairs, his footsteps slow and heavy. Greg’s heart pounded with fear. My could go to the secret compartment, get a gun, and put Greg out of his misery. My could put himself out of his misery. Would he do something desperate? Greg was off the bed and his hand on the doorknob to intervene before he realized that the Iceman would never rid the world of genius. My could want the sweet release of death, but the Iceman would laugh at such cowardice. All the long years of isolation after Rory’s death, My had never taken the easy out. Greg exhaled.

Greg stayed in the room, the trap of his own making, while the whole world was in bed. In pairs. And he had no one. His last hope was the place where all sods and losers ended up eventually—the church. He would go to early mass and then make his confession to Father Matt. Priests were paid to care.

With a clear plan of action in mind, Greg dozed off, missing mass and office hours. He woke sweaty and confused. Forgetting where he was, he rolled over to reach for My. The shock of the empty bed cut through him; he cried a little in the shower between bouts of coughing but not enough to feel relief. Even though Father Matt might not be at the church, he would run in that neighborhood just in case. There was no plan B.

He went by the charity shop first, wishing for a kind word, but the ladies were deep in inventory and he barely netted two “hello, dears” before they became engrossed in the ledger. Cold air burned his lungs and constricted his chest; he felt a bit dizzy and the bench in the little garden next to the church’s car park was quite inviting. He sat there and listened to the rasp of breath until it calmed. He would walk around the church once and then find somewhere else to go, a book shop or diner where he could nurse a coffee for a few hours. What he didn’t feel capable of was going by the bedsit although it was time to begin moving his things.

The church van was parked near a side door where Father Matt was lugging a fruit box. He put it down to greet Greg. “Funny you should happen by just now. Walt and I always did this bit together.”

He gestured toward the van which was packed as full as possible without blocking the mirrors.
“Need some help?”

“I’d like that.” Suddenly the young priest’s face contorted. He leaned against the van and shaded his eyes. “I can get through a day or two without thinking about him. Work is an acceptable pain killer. Then the loss comes over me in waves.”

“Me too. He was always there; I never had to think about it. He was a terribly subtle presence in spite of all the shouting.”

Father Matt laughed, nodding in agreement. Then he looked up and Greg could see the tear tracks.

“Do you need a hug, Father? I know you don’t know me very well, but any port in a storm perhaps?” He barely got the words out when the priest lunged at him, breathing heavily. Greg patted the slender shoulders at first, but then he gave up on what might be proper and hugged the man tight, boy more like, still in his twenties. “You’ll be alright. He wouldn’t allow otherwise. It’s okay, lad. I mean, Father.”

“No, it’s ‘lad’ today. I have never felt so young or out of my depth. One hundred families expecting their usual allotment from Father Christmas, and he’s dead of a heart attack. Could you call me Matt while we unload the van?”

“As long as you don’t tell my mum.”

Greg grabbed two boxes of oranges and followed Matt down a narrow stairway and a long corridor not much wider. There were many doors to empty classrooms with the requisite pictures of saints and Jesus; the door at the end of the hall was closed and padlocked.

“I hate that we can’t have trust but stout locks make good neighbors.”

“I believe it was the American poet Jack Frost who said that,” Greg remarked in an attempt at humor as he took in the advanced stages of wear in the paint and fixtures.

“Well spotted. You’ll certainly feel Jack Frost’s presence here in the dungeon.” Matt put down his load and unlocked the door. “Good thing Walt saw fit to leave me with a copy for deliveries and such. If he had only left a copy of his shopping plan. I have a list of the families that he served but I don’t know the shops where he got special deals and I don’t know what he gave the children last year. It was on a rotation, very complicated but designed so that they wouldn’t get the same thing two years in a row.”

“I have his notebooks. I may be able to find it.”

“Oh, if you only could. I’m sure anything would be welcome and they likely need new underwear and coats more than toys, but Walt thought every little girl should have a doll and every little boy a toy car or some other sexist gift. I preferred dolls to cars fairly early on; my sister was longsuffering.”

Greg tried to ignore his own wheezing as they climbed the steps for another set of boxes. “Are you telling me that you’re gay or that you turned your back on the fashion world for the sake of the cross?”

“A little of both. I suppose that was my painfully obvious way of letting you know that I’m no one that can judge you. Quite the cliché, a gay priest, hmm?”

“My husband is writing a lovely story about a gay vicar.” He sat down suddenly on the steps.

“Alright, Greg?”
“I miss him. More than when it happened.” He hoped that Matt would ask him which man he was referring to but he didn’t.

“At least you can take comfort in the fact that you appreciated him while he was here.”

“No, I don’t think I did. Not nearly enough and now it’s too late.” He meant all three of the men he had lost.

On their next trip to the large, cold room full of boxes, Greg noted that each box was neatly labeled by gender and age range. “He’s already got a few things here.”

“He was very organized, as you know, but he said that he’d got behind. I think he’d been feeling unwell for some time before we noticed. I’ll get it all done, but today, I’m overwhelmed. And we’d grown quite dependent on Walt’s own contribution. We didn’t budget for Christmas beyond this fruit which we get in bulk.”

“Do you have other blokes that can help? Maybe some of the young dads?”

“The ones young enough to be truly helpful are at work, and the ones willing to help shouldn’t for sake of their health. All I need is another old one dying from a tumble down the stairs or catching pneumonia from working in the basement. The heat is shut off to that room to preserve the fruit until Christmas. We can’t ignore the discount of buying it in season.”

Mildly flattered that the young priest did not put him in the old man category, he put himself into the deep water of volunteerism. “I have all of Walt’s things. I’ll go through them today and see if I can maybe take up where he left off. Must be some way for me to work it into my busy schedule.”

Driving home, he was able to push back the true state of things by focusing on the project. By the time the gifts were delivered, he would be finished with his required therapy sessions and might be able to get back to work. He also might be able to fill long parts of the sessions with talking about the project, which could be perceived as progress toward healing. The sun had come out and he felt lighter inside.

With his mind fixed on where he would begin his search, he forgot to be furtive and stepped into the hall just as My came out of his study with a sheaf of papers in his hand. They both froze as the papers drifted down to the floor.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Greg said, trying for a laugh as he inched toward his own study.

My didn’t speak but his eyes, dark blue with fury, bored into Greg’s.

“Well, this is awkward,” Greg tried again in some sort of kamikaze verbal spew. If My blinked, Greg didn’t catch it. He was locked into those eyes and saw hatred and disgust there. All of the good feeling from helping the priest and from having a new purpose had drained away under that gaze.

His mum’s favorite weapon had been the silent treatment. He was straight back to his teens, waiting for his father to come home and give him the belt. He had that same mix of shame and hurt, knowing that he had done wrong and the punishment was well deserved, but not wanting to take the pain. What hurt more than the belt was his mum’s stare, her lips pressed into a thin line; the break in their closeness, the isolation from the acceptance of his family. Rich would be calm, adding no drama. He would get it over with, not in anger, but in the weary, methodical way of an overworked man. Then he would say, “I’m disappointed in you, Greg. I thought you were old enough to know better.”
Greg made it into his study, leaving the door open. If My wanted to stand in the doorway and look daggers into Greg all evening, it was his right to do so. But My never came and Greg spent several hours going through Walt’s personal papers, something he had hoped to put off a while longer.

From Walt’s meticulously organized possessions, Greg found all that he needed to complete Christmas. Walt’s diary contained a timeline and detailed notes in his familiar block printing. He had also backed up all of the paper files on a thumb drive with an entry for each family and a list of instructions for someone taking over the task. Walt must have known then.

Greg wanted to share all that he’d found with My—the grief that his friend had known he might be dying, the excitement and anxiety about taking over the Christmas project, and the concerns about budgeting and setting up a trust from Walt’s estate so that the project could continue. He was halfway to the door when he recalled that they weren’t speaking, and the realization was a body blow that had him sitting on the coffee table, willing himself to breathe.

The next morning Greg returned to the working world and was surprised at how much comfort he took from its rituals. After his run and a long hot shower, he had the drive in with no shame at being unemployed. Marci, the church secretary, handed him a large mug of coffee and a baked treat, saying each morning that he looked too thin. She would walk him down to the basement to his own festive makeshift office in the store room that smelled of fruit and sweets. Father Matt would come by at some point during the day to chat and praise his efforts. Marci brought him a plate for lunch, pleased to have someone appreciate her cooking, and in that safe place fully away from the life he had destroyed, Greg ate hungrily.

Business hours were spent wrapping and labeling packages, setting up appointments with shop managers, confirming contact information and delivery addresses for the families, and learning if any new children had been born or adopted. When the church was shutting for the night, Greg helped with the locking up and walked Marci to her car, paying her back for the coffee and food with his protection.

Evenings involved driving to various shops where Walt had agreements with shopkeepers for discounts on large orders. This proved to be a Hobbit journey through the city since the man had tried to support small business first. Greg’s favorite shop had been the teddy bear maker’s and he was slightly jealous as he boxed and wrapped each soft cuddly fellow, each one having a unique personality because of the hand stitching. He kept an extra one for company as he worked, firmly pushing back memories of My’s bear dreams where My and a giant teddy pleasured each other.

Behind the absorption in his work was the niggling feeling that he should be moving out of the townhouse completely. This pressure was underscored when he came home late one night, hoping to sneak through the kitchen since it was long past dinner. My and Morris were at the kitchen table. My’s head was bowed and Morris had an arm around him. Although My looked away, Greg knew he’d been crying. A stab of jealousy surprised him. My’s tears were no longer Greg’s to dry. He slunk up the back stairs, feeling like a guest who had overstayed his welcome.

The week passed quickly nevertheless; his routine lulling him into what seemed to be a new normal. He hadn’t thought about Friday—the crowds, the traffic, the air of excitement as everyone rushed to be with their special people. He slogged on, waiting in queues twice as long as on a week night. The smell of pizza came into the car, reminding him of their first date. How naïve he had been to think it could last.

Lonely and sad, he was unprepared for an unpleasant encounter with the generation gap. The boy had that thick side swept fringe made popular by an obnoxious American popstar. It required him to sweep it back with his fingers whenever he had to look up from his mobile which based on the frequent eyerolls was a great trial. His fingers missed one gel laden strip which lay on his
forehead, making Greg want to move it to the proper side like a ribbon bookmark.

“Is Calvin Whitson in please?” He hadn’t rung in advance because this man had been one of Walt’s most faithful and generous suppliers.

“No.”

“Would you care to expand on that?”

“He retired.”

“Would his replacement be in tonight?”

Another flip of the fringe, an eye roll, and a big gusty sigh.

“Anyone in management. I just need to speak to an adult.” This truth burned all bridges. Apparently, it was Greg’s month to offend everyone around him. A man in his thirties was summoned from the back but had little more to offer.

“Walt Shetterly. A Christmas order for model cars, board games, and jigsaw puzzles.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name, sir, but I can tell you that we are in the process of updating our stock. Kids want electronics now. I can’t see my nephews sitting still for anything that’s not on a screen.”

“If they were poor they might.”

“I’ll show you our clearance section. There may be a few old fashioned toys left.”

Greg hated being patronized almost as much as he hated shopping. He was now going to have to detour from Walt’s plan, and the task overwhelmed him. He only knew one child close to that age, Ruthie Tillottson. He recalled her obsession with his mobile. The budget wouldn’t allow for that pricey of a gift.

Greg spent the rest of the evening wandering aimlessly from shop to shop, trying to find replacement gift ideas for 10-13 year olds. For the girls, he decided on hairbrushes and manicure sets with nail varnish in garish colors and little decals of flowers and kittens with matching clear lip balms in fruit flavors. The sparkling items were inviting enough to appeal to him and cheered him to the point that he hatched an idea for the boys—a small tool kit and a basic book on home repair. He was in an aisle jotting a list in Walt’s diary when his name was called.

“Lestrade?”

It was Anderson with Dimmock. “How are you?” He asked in that quavering voice used for the elderly and infirm.

“How’s the life of leisure?” Dimmock asked, trying to make it alright.

“I think I’m just as busy. Taking over Walt’s Christmas charity work, weeks behind schedule.” Greg was relieved at having an explanation to make a good show of his forced time off when a coughing fit seized him. As he hacked up a lung into the sleeve of his coat, he watched them tick off the clues—bizarre haircut, bags under the eyes, extreme weight loss, tobacco stained fingers, smoker’s cough.

“Sorry, lads, it’s that time of year,” he wheezed out. “I’d best be getting on. Lots to do.”
He was at the exit when he checked his pockets and Walt’s little book was missing. He had put it down when he started coughing. It was a long walk back to the aisle where he heard Anderson in the next one over, cutting him to pieces.

“How the mighty have fallen. Long overdue, I say.”

“I think it’s sad.” Dimmock was pitying and that was worse than Anderson’s open hatred.

Greg forced himself to listen to it all.

“Did you see that haircut? Prison issue. How would that look at a press conference. No, he’s through. Completely past it.”

“I doubt that.”

“Sullivan has promised the promotion to Sally. Only a matter of time. Then you’ll see the department run as it ought to be with my behind-the-scenes guidance, of course.”

“Oh, of course.”

“If you play your cards right, you could slip into Sally’s old position.”

“I’d rather not. I’ve got a bad back.”

Dimmock’s wry support was not enough to take the sting out of Anderson’s words. As well as he knew Anderson’s tendency to exaggerate and put on airs, he still hurt from the humiliation. Sullivan would replace him. He knew that and had been working all along for a life without the Yard, but hearing it as fact from a weasel like Anderson was the last straw.

Greg stumbled to the carpark but he had been to so many shops that they all blended together. Where was the car? The carpark glowed unearthly from streetlights in the mist and the wind whipped damp against his cheeks, cutting through his coat as if it were a dressing gown. When he finally found the car, he was thankful to be out of the wind but shivered until he thought his back would break.

It was near closing time, and he feared that Anderson or Dimmock might see his car. He drove around to the loading dock, nearly ramming into a low concrete barrier. Driving was right out until he collected himself. Not trusting his skill to any delicate maneuvers, he swung the car in a slow arc until he was facing away from the dock at a scrappy line of trees. The bared branches swayed wildly in the wind, dark in stark relief to the clouded sky. They looked like desperate starving people, begging the heavens for bread. He turned off the engine and sat hunched over the steering wheel.

The pain shot through his chest, taking his breath as the car spun; the blackened trees waving as he passed by. He whimpered, but the hurt was too deep for tears. He clung to the steering wheel, surrendering to the dizziness until his eyes closed on the whirling landscape.

When he came to, ninety minutes had passed. He hadn’t slept but he hadn’t been present either. His hands and feet were numb, and the rest of him aching with the cold that had settled in his heart and spine. He hadn’t had anything to eat or drink in several hours. His tongue was swollen, his lips chapped. He thought of My’s smooth pink lips that he would never kiss again.

He fantasized about going home to a hot bath and supper on a tray in bed, the blankets piled high. He could taste one of Morris’ scalding soups and the fresh baked bread, feathery on his tongue. After his belly was full, maybe My would read to him until his mind quieted and then hold him, keeping the nightmares back.
But this was his new life. He would get soup in a cup on the way home and tomorrow buy a large hot water bottle with a fleece cover to share his bed. The chill damp concrete walls of the bedsit made a bed buddy as necessary as a toilet. Thought of the cell brought on a coughing fit that made the tears run. When he could breathe again, it was time to leave, but he had forgotten how to drive.

The dials and gauges stretched before him, looking as complex as the control panel of an aeroplane. Fatigue settled over him, every breath a struggle. His eyes burned and itched; his hands shook though he could not feel them. He had driven here; the skill wouldn’t just disappear.

The likelihood of freezing to death in a public place was remote, but the wind shook the car, and the likelihood of being in a workplace shooting had also been remote a few months ago. He needed help but there was no one to call. John couldn’t drive; Molly couldn’t afford a car; Morris gave him the stink eye whenever their paths crossed. A cabbie wouldn’t come to a back alleyway for a shop long since shut. He tried one last time and got the car started but couldn’t manage the gear shift. With heart thumping dread, he rang My. If My sounded worried or was at all kind, Greg would beg forgiveness and sleep in his own bed that very night.

But the Iceman answered in a snide tone that he had never used on Greg. “Mr. Lestrade, how kind of you to call? How may I help you?”

“I need a ride. Could you have one of your minions uncloak and drive me home?”

“Someone will be with you shortly.”

Greg held the mobile a long while, listening to dead air. If he were going to be frozen out by the Iceman, hypothermia seemed a better option. He shoved the door open against the wind and levered himself out of the car, every injury he’d ever had protesting against the bone violating cold.

He would walk until he dropped rather than suffer yet another humiliation. His bad shoulder made grinding noises when he swung his arms to get the blood pumping. He had barely made it two blocks when the limo pulled up. My had come himself.

“Fuck it,” Greg said, trying to pick up the pace on numbed fit.

The limo kept pace with him and the window in the back slowly lowered. “Good evening. Changed your mind about the ride?”

Greg considered how long it might take him to walk to shelter and how sharp the needles were in his lungs with every breath of frigid air. He also thought about riding up front with the driver but if My could stand it, so could he. He got in the backseat.

For the second time that evening, Greg was thoroughly scanned by unfriendly eyes. Then My began texting and pointedly ignored his wayward husband, but there was a blanket and a bottle of water on the seat between them.

My was in black tie which made his pale skin glow and his hair shine like a gemstone set in black velvet. He smelled amazing even at the end of the night, his signature fragrance more pronounced to Greg since he hadn’t been exposed to it in days. Around his neck was a tartan scarf, cadet blue shot through with thin bands of bronze and gold, the colors of his eyes and hair. He was wearing a new coat. None of it had anything to do with Greg,. My was moving on with his life in his own circle.

Greg, who was grubby with a day of working in the basement and then shopping, felt every bit...
his age and station. Why had My ever let him in? He had touched every part of the man beside him, kissed and licked his way all over the body that was now completely off limits. While his cock and company were in retreat from the cold, he felt a wanting deep in his belly to undress My there in the car, leaving just the scarf. Fortunately, a sip of water went down the wrong pipe and by the time he finished coughing, the judgmental gaze of his soon-to-be ex husband had put him off completely.

He leaned back against the soft seat, rubbing warmth back into his fingers under the blanket. Greg busied himself with his mobile since there was nothing he was allowed to look at and nothing he could say. The limo slowed although it was hard to tell in the plush and muted compartment. Then the divider between driver and passenger lowered and Art handed in a paper bag with a label from Greg’s favorite fish and chips shop.

It was the best meal of his life, the piping hot food warming his hands and his belly. He couldn’t stop himself from gulping it down, even knowing that he looked dead common with his hands and mouth coated with grease. The car was permeated with the odor of a seaside brothel, drowning out My’s scent.

“Perhaps you should try eating once a day. Some people find it helpful.” My pressed the intercom. “Art, we’ll be requiring a second serving.”

Greg didn’t argue. He finished the second meal, resisting the urge to lick his fingers. Finally warm again and with a full belly, he struggled to stay awake, not wanting to be vulnerable before the Iceman. His heavy eyelids won, and he slept hard until a blast of cool air hit him. They were parked in the garage; My had exited the car without waking him.

Greg hung onto the car and then the wall of the garage, trying to block memories of hiding there shortly after the shooting. My had found him and bent him over the car and ---the swirl of cold air by the kitchen door brought him back to reality.

In spite of the late hour, the kitchen was fully lighted. Morris was at the stove, stirring something sweet. My was turned toward the light and warmth, slowly folding the scarf. Greg hoped Morris was making rice pudding. They could have it with cocoa, the three of them sitting at the kitchen table, talking over the evening if Morris would only make some sign that Greg could be forgiven.

But Morris turned from the simmering pot with a stern face. “Finally decided to come home then? Bloody prodigal.”

“Don’t!” Greg put out a hand to shield himself and walked out. The front stairs were chilly from the big windows on the landing and the skylight. The warmth from car and kitchen were gone by the time Greg reached the top step. He paused at My’s door, thinking of a hot bath, cuddles and sympathy. He’d thrown that all away. Even if My would forgive him, Morris never would. Greg was trapped with no way back.

In his own dank room, he sicked up all that he’d eaten. The fried food was too strong on an empty stomach. Vomiting aggravated his cough and he had to face the fact that he was catching cold. Still in his clothes, he crawled on top of the covers and slept the clock round. He woke chilled and climbed under the duvet. Noon of another rainy day, according to his mobile just before it lost its charge. His stomach growled, and he knew he needed food, but he let himself drift back to sleep where nothing could hurt him.

My sat on the edge of the bed. “Wake up, love. You need to eat something.”

“Too tired.”
“That’s what happens when you don’t take care of yourself.”

Greg looked up. “You aren’t angry with me anymore?”

“No, you had a dream about a row, that’s all.”

“It was so real. How do I know what’s true?”

“Kiss me. Feel my lips on yours. Your kiss is true.”

Greg kissed his husband; just a soft brushing of lips, afraid to try for more. “I thought I’d never get to kiss you again.”

“But you are.” My took off his shirt and got under the duvet. “You need cuddles.”

Greg kissed My again, teasing his lips open with his tongue before resting content against My’s chest, the hair tickling his cheek. “I’ve missed you so much, baby.”

Greg woke, nuzzling his own forearm, his palm wet where he had kissed and licked it. Before he could overanalyze, he went to the master bedroom. My wasn’t there. Courage failing, he walked down the stairs, but both studies were empty. Finally, he searched all of the downstairs but My was gone and the kitchen was empty and dark. He had no idea where My could be, and after the response to his call the night before, he would not try again.

While he made a lunch of crisps and poorly executed powdered soup, he tried to get the dream out of his head, but denial was for ponces. The reality was that My hadn’t even cared enough to wake Greg and help him get out of the car.

The text indicator buzzed on his phone and though he knew better, he hoped for a miracle. But it was Sherlock.

You’re hurting him.

The message could be anything from a note of brotherly concern to a neutral observation to a bit of praise on a job well done. Greg responded in kind.

I know

There were no further texts.

Unable to face the shops, he forced himself to begin another daunting task. With the house empty, he was able to take a carton of books and a suitcase of summer clothes over to the bed sit. He had hoped to leave any gifts from My behind but most of his clothes had been replaced over time, and his finances wouldn’t allow for a whole new wardrobe.

He forced himself to stay at the bedsit for an hour, putting books on the shelf and staring out the window at the bricks of the building opposite until he could see the pattern in reverse when he closed his eyes.

The townhouse was still empty when he returned. He snuck into the master bath and got the little bottle of green stuff he always took for a cold, carefully avoiding the first aid kit, which still supposedly hid Big Purple from Morris. He wondered if My was using it every morning. The shower bench was tempting; the steam would be soothing and clear out his sinuses, but he couldn’t risk running into My. Sick and lonely, he needed his husband but if the Iceman showed up instead, Greg would shatter.
Dosed with a night time cold medicine on a fairly empty stomach, he was soon dead to the world and a repeat dose around midnight got him through until morning. When he couldn’t sleep any longer, he went for a run, a slow one with all the wheezing and the cold air hurting his chest. He slipped in the back at early mass, but his cough was a distraction and even a cough drop passed to him by a woman that looked like his mum wasn’t enough to stop the deep barking. He went home, driving slowly through the quiet streets.

He even stopped for breakfast, forcing down food he could barely taste. People around him seemed to pull away, and he felt tubercular and leprous. Maybe he should ring a bell and cry out “Unclean” or “Make way for the lepers.” It was going to be a long empty day and he wished it was already Monday. His therapy appointment would slow down his Christmas work but maybe Father Matt would let him stay a little later.

Tired of judgmental looks whenever he coughed, he gave up on the library and the book store. Knowing that he should pace himself while ill, he finally drove home after going by the chemist’s for a family size bottle of the liquid green escape. Any time was night time today; he needed out of his head.

He had just puffed his way to the top of the stairs when My came out of the master bedroom, belting his dressing gown over what appeared to be nothing. His hair was damp and unstyled; his face free of make up, the freckles more prominent in the natural light of the skylight. “Greg, a word if you don’t mind.”

Greg tried to edge around. “I’m in the middle of something. Can it wait?”

“It’s regarding Morris or I wouldn’t trouble you.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, he’s doing quite well other than being in love.”

Greg shifted his weight, swallowing rapidly to try and prevent a cough. He was too close to the top of the stairs and felt the vertigo coming for him. His head seemed to float above his body like a flocked balloon. There might be a fever. My could do most of the talking, but it was not My. The Iceman’s eyes were coldly appraising, looking down his hawk nose; his lips pressed thin. How had Greg ever loved such a pompous arse?

“I’m leaving on an extended trip. Since you haven’t been taking your meals here, we were wondering if Morris might have some time away. He and Tuppy could go on a mini break or just spend some time at Tuppy’s flat.”

Greg watched a drop of water travel down My’s chest, where one lapel of the dressing gown was turned under, showing a wide strip of fur. He wanted to chase the drop with his tongue and see if the Iceman’s skin was warm or cold.

“He’ll come back once a week for a tidy and to do your laundry. He can also stock the pantry as needed.”

“No need. I’ll manage. How long are you going to be gone?”

“I don’t know.”

Greg realized what a cruel sentence that was now that he was the recipient. This then was how the marriage would dissolve—not in a soul cleansing row but in cold civility fading into silence. He’d had enough of judgment for the day; he would thaw the Iceman and bring him down to a commoner’s level.
“I might go away myself.”

“Are you sure Michelle can spare you? Or are you chasing another religious icon this week?”

“That was beneath you, Mycroft.”

“Since you’ve gone back to cigarettes, I’ve reclaimed my sarcasm. We’re still happier than most couples I know.”

My was trying hard to maintain the façade but a flush was rising up his throat and on the tips of his ears. Greg felt less lowly. “Look at you flushing, all scrubbed and fresh from your shower. You aren’t so high and mighty. You’ve been fucking yourself mad with Big Purple, haven’t you?”

The two high spots of color appeared on My’s cheekbones. “It doesn’t complain.”

“As freshly fucked as you are but I could still get you hard in seconds.” Greg moved closer until he thought he could warm his hands on My’s blushes. “Look how carelessly you’ve tied this knot.”

Greg snaked a finger against the silk tie and the cloth parted, showing My’s cock half hard before My jerked the edges back together and pulled the belt tight. “You will not turn a beautiful thing we once shared into some kind of joke. I am still your husband. If you cannot give me your respect anymore, at least give me your compassion.”

“You want me.”

“Yes but I’m working very hard at not needing you.”

My stepped into the bedroom and slammed the door. Greg was standing close enough to feel a puff of air and stood stupidly in the hall, breathing through his mouth, shocked at his own behavior. He had implied that My forced him but he had just sexually humiliated My by exposing him. Only the day before he had dreamed of kissing My and had searched the house for him, seeking reconciliation. Now he had committed more unforgivable atrocities. The Holmes’ pride would never let My take Greg back after this offense.

He took double doses of everything and slept hard enough to sweat. When he woke, it was early evening and his mouth was so dry, he had to pry his lips off his teeth with his fingers. Seeking something more than lukewarm tap water in his cupped hands, he checked the hall and finding it empty, intended to go down to his study and see if there was any beer or Coke left. Walking past the bedroom, he heard muffled sobs cut short. He stood with his palm pressed to the door at heart level, debating on whether to knock. When he finally did, there was no answer.

Greg worked at the church all week with dripping nose and racking cough. Marci brought him endless cups of herbal tea with lemon and honey. With the aid of Cepacol lozenges and terse sentences, he kept his cough at baby long enough to complete the shopping. My left on Tuesday; Morris on Wednesday after giving the old place an extra thorough cleaning. Greg was alone.

After keeping mostly to the guest room for so long, he enjoyed the wide open spaces for a bit, but his cough echoed strangely and his chest hurt all the time. When My had traveled for business before, Morris had always been downstairs, ready to help, to feed Greg and spend more time with him when he found himself at loose ends. They played cards or talked about music; Morris enjoyed hearing about his cases. There had been phone calls to My each day even if it were just to say good night. Now there were empty hours in silence. He took to leaving music or a telly on low volume in each room and was especially comforted by the radio in the kitchen as if Morris
had just stepped into the laundry room.

As the cold got a grip on him and he continued to take the night time cold medicine, he slept more, having a chance now and then to kiss My in his dreams, but more often than not, he dreamed of terrible rows or the shooting, and woke frightened. Friday after lunch, he wrapped the last of the packages. His folding work table had been moved to the hall as the room filled. Now narrow walkways separated the floor to ceiling stacks of boxed which he had stenciled with holly berries and leaves around each family name and address. He felt strangely empty and close to tears.

At the townhouse, he tried to make a celebration for a project completed by building a fire in the library, thawing a carton of Morris’ soup and a loaf of the crusty bread, opening a bottle of wine, and watching his favorite movie on the big screen. But he had shown the movie to My, and now it was forever connected with hand holding and cuddles and My watching intently, wanting to understand him better through his choices. He scanned My’s collection and chose a documentary on Russian history which had him nodding in minutes. He switched to telly and let it play until he had napped enough to have the energy for the trip up to bed.

Looking in the mirror as he shaved Saturday morning, he knew it was time. Packing moved too fast—his guitar, a few CDS and DVDS, and toiletries. A suitcase, a briefcase, and a hanging bag. Not much to show for a life. He took the house keys off the ring and put them in his wallet, not yet ready to leave them on the kitchen work top.

Driving away as slowly as he could, he tried to cry but only a few tears came, not enough to ease the lump in his throat. Ending his marriage quietly seemed unfair to all the passion and promises they had shared. He was horrified at how simple it was to go. The pressure built until he yelled, forcing his hurt into an ugly noise against the silence.

He had to pull over to conserve his energy after venting. There would be no rescue ride this time. People were all around him having a happy Saturday. Whimpers escaped through his clenched teeth. Disgusted at his weakness, he forced himself to get supplies for his new “flat.” A hot plate, a wee kettle, and dishes, one place setting, a skillet and a pot. Linens for a single bed(first time he’d slept in one so narrow since age 9). Candles for the pervasive mildew, urine, and cabbage smell. Towels, flannels, cleaning supplies, and a rug. Then groceries—the sort of things you could make with a kettle or a single burner—powdered soups, tins of beans and pasta. Bread, fruit, biscuits, and small bottles of juice and milk.

As the daylight faded, he got it all into the dim room, each trip to the car taking him past doors where he heard coughs and arguments and at one door, great shuddering sobs. Had he dreamed that My had cried that Sunday after he stripped him naked in the hall? He hoped his behavior had been a nightmare; he had been surprised at his own cruelty. Some animal had shit on one of the welcome mats and he couldn’t have agreed more with the sentiment.

When he had every item in place, there were still several hours to kill before bed time. He lit the candle and put out the lights. He had a cup of tea and some biscuits. “Welcome home, Greg,” he said, lifting his cup in a mocking toast.

The flickering candle light caught the movement of the doorknob as it turned slowly to the left and then the right. He eased out of his chair and over to the door, yanking it open to reveal a man his age with a lock pick in hand.

“Sorry, mate. Wrong door. They all look alike.”

“So you decided to pick my lock at random?”

“This? No, this is a nut pick. My friend has some nuts we’re going to crack and eat while we
watch a fight on the telly.”

“I’ll stop you there with a bit of trivia. I’m a copper, going through a divorce. I’ve got nothing left to lose and a lot of rage to give so I’m likely not the man you want to fuck with right now. Spread the word.”

When he slammed the door shut, he put the rickety chair underneath the doorknob but then slid down so that his body would be a barricade. He regretted his extreme weight loss. While he had considered that his new housing situation—he couldn’t call it home—might result in death by tuberculosis, bubonic plague or Legionnaire’s disease, he had not fully comprehended the odds of being robbed. His copper’s eye had spotted the scratches around door knobs and the strangely shiny locks on some doors, indicating replacement, but he had been in denial about this fact as he had been with so many other things.

If robbery was that regular of an occurrence, then mugging was also a possibility. The sound system was going to have to go back to the townhouse. Maybe My would allow him to keep it there until he found work and a better place, but he would also price storage lockers the next day. There were far more valuable items he would have to remove from this Dickensian hellhole. He wouldn’t have them tearing Bruce limb from limb while searching for drugs or money or have his Mum’s quilt trampled by boots. He had to keep them safe.

He dragged the bed in front of the door to try and rest until first light. Who knew if there might be several residents pooling their resources to steal new tenants blind? When he was lying down, his cough got worse and he didn’t dare take anything that would make him drowsy, not on stake out. Every time he caught his breath and thought it had stopped, someone in the building coughed which started him up again. By morning, his throat was so raw he could barely swallow.

Getting to the car was an ordeal as it was still pouring buckets. He tucked Bruce into his pants, pulling his jumper over the little guy. His mum’s quilt was in a carrier bag that he hooked over his arm; the big box of equipment had holes cut out for handles. He hoped the cardboard would last at least until the car. There were no hands free for an umbrella. The rain soaked his hat and coat and the box in seconds.

He hurried as quickly as he could while spewing germs into the foul air. One of the handles tore as he fumbled with his keys. But he was soon locked in the car and sat a bit before managing to start the car. The drive took forever; he was dreading the emotion of returning to a place where he could not stay.

He left the box in the garage, overwhelmed with the task of carrying it in the house, let alone up the stairs. Nothing had prepared him for the empty kitchen. Morris was nearly always there. The house was dark. Nobody was home. Even though the thermostat said that the room was the same temperature, it felt much colder. Greg had done it to himself, pushed My and Morris away. The cough was like an enemy, and he was easily being defeated. He regretted all the wet morning runs and the cigarettes and the slacking on his daily pills and eating so much shit. Again, he had done it to himself and fully deserved it for failing so many people and yet being the selfish bastard that he was, he wanted to stop coughing.

The steps were too much to take in one go. He stopped in the library and rested on the deep leather couch. No fire in the fireplace, not even the embers. Clean as a whistle and bloody cold. The leather was icy even through his coat and jumper, and the room was dim. He imagined they might find him here, pale and shriveled and say, “He had it coming.”

He alternated shivering and coughing until his chattering teeth took a chunk out of his cheek. After an hour, the grandfather clock told him that it was time to climb another level. Dragging himself up by the banister, he made it to his study where there was a beer. Somehow he was
hungry but the crisps and peanuts only made him cough more. His eyes burned and the telly looked strange, the blue light hurting his eyes without the lamps turned on but they were too far away. He used up all the tissues coughing up hunks of orange, yellow, and green sputum. It was tuberculosis come to call. Maybe they would feel sorry for him, but they would be wearing paper masks which would spoil the effect as they carried the husk of him down the stairs.

He managed to sleep for nearly three hours, a strange twilight of it that made him feel worse. He left the telly on for company, not that he would ever hear it over his cough, and climbed the last flight, stumbling and taking the last few steps on his knees.

My’s room was closer and where he wanted to leave Bruce, in the room that used to be their room. Maybe he could rest for a bit. After all, the only thing in his diary was therapy. He flipped the gas fire on and immediately felt cheered. There was a chicken soup packet and the thought of it gave him the energy to fill the kettle. There was an orange in the fruit bowl and that was suddenly more desirable than any food he had ever eaten. Between bouts of coughing, the silence hurt though. The study telly wasn’t up loud enough to do him any good here. Fumbling with the remote to see what My had been watching, he was shocked to the core to hear the theme from *Wind in the Willows*.

Badger was having soup, just like he was. The soup boiled along in the microwave as the water for tea did its work in the kettle, and he peeled the orange actually able to smell the good citrus through his stuffed up nose. Of course, he burned his tongue on the first bite of soup and couldn’t taste much. The orange stung his raw throat. But somehow, with a simple story to follow and a visit to a room where he had once been happy, it was good enough.

He hadn’t meant to sleep, not at all. To that end, he had stayed dressed although he kicked off his shoes out of respect for the duvet. But he stayed on top of the covers and kept his coat on. If he lingered after he ate his supper, it was to finish the episode where Toad got a new motor car. It wasn’t right to leave things unfinished. The soup and tea had gone right through him and the need to piss dragged him to the en suite. Then he sat on the floor for awhile, resting his hot face against the sweet cool of the porcelain until he crawled to the medicines under the sink.

Even after Greg’s raid a week past, My still had a whole great box of things, bless his hypochondria and Greg soon found cold tablets and a huge unopened bottle of cough syrup. Blackcurrant flavored so it wouldn’t ruin him for pie the way the cherry daytime medicine had. He drank it down as fast as he could; then read the package while he caught his breath. Non drowsy formula. Well, what the fuck good did that do anybody? Because god knows if you had a cold, you wanted to be alert and ready for work. The bloody stuff probably had caffeine in it and tasted like the pathetic sweets the priest had handed out to children when Greg was small, the paper stuck fast to them from being in the man’s pocket in all weathers.

Nevertheless, Greg took bottle in hand and levered himself up, intending to go to his little cell. The one without a fire or a fruit bowl or a big shower with a bench.

There were two more episodes on the DVD. Greg pulled his coat around himself and sat up properly on the bed, not drowsy at all, and settled in for *Toad Meets a Ghost*. Half a bottle was gone before he started to shiver, and the last episode was still playing when he climbed under the duvet, just for a little while, just to get warm.

*Sherlock Toad had gone and got himself a new automobile. A black cab, and in his arrogance and ignorance, he planned to put on his new and matching jaunty cap and mix with celebrities. It would be a hoot to defer to them at first and then reveal himself as a mutual famous person. What a laugh they would have!*

*But first he would have a practice run by fetching each of his friends from their homes and driving*
all about the river bank and perhaps even the Wild Wood. John Mole was reluctant to get in the car, but felt honored to be invited first. If Ratty Mycroft and Greg Badger were going, then it would all be fine.

Soon the four were off, the three passengers gripping at door handles and each other as the car careened around narrow paths. Badger had just asked Toad to stop when they went around a particularly blind curve and straight into a fallen tree.

Badger Greg was caught in the wreckage, but clawed his way out looking for his friends. Mole and Toad were shaken but unharmed beyond scratches, but Rat lay still in a pile of dead leaves, thrown clear of the wreck but broken all the same from his flight. Greg crawled to him and checked his breath. Nothing. No breath sounds, no heartbeat. Greg’s own heartbeat was loud in his ears; he shouted for help but Toad was wailing about his car and Mole seemed to be in shock.

Greg didn’t want to waste his breath on begging for their help. The exhaust from the car was choking him and he needed to get puffs of air to his friend between coughing spells. To make matters worse, a small fire had broken out under the bonnet and the air was stifling. Soaked in sweat and sore from bruised ribs, Greg struggled as he tilted Rat’s head and cleared the airway. Ratty’s dear little paws were limp, and his narrow chest barely rose as Greg gave him all the breath that he had.

“My, please. Take a breath, please.” The time was passing and their situation getting more dangerous as the happy fire licked at dry leaves and twigs. “My, you’ve got to grab hold. Help yourself; I don’t have the breath.”

He needed to speak loudly to be heard over the flames and Toad’s self pitying screams and the far off sound of the fire engine coming. But the toxic fumes of the petrol and oil were stabbing at his throat, and his chest ached with the effort to push out every breath.

“My, please, come back to me.” Then finally only the name, called in a wee voice as My’s body shrunk to that of an actual rat, tiny and forgotten already, likely to burn in the approaching fire. Greg sobbed between coughs, trying to get out of his coat to cover the tiny body. Someone was shaking his shoulder. He fought them off. He wouldn’t leave his friend who was far dearer than he had ever realized.

As he pushed away the hands, he felt his own life ebbing away, his injuries more serious than they seemed, He had lost another friend with his carelessness. He was drowning in his own fluids, not enough air pressing through his swollen throat, far easier to let go.

When he came awake gasping, My was sitting on the edge of the bed, and Greg was so glad to see him alive that he almost forgot their estrangement. Only another fit of coughing kept him from throwing himself at the gaunt figure of his husband.

“You’re very ill, Greg,” he said, resting a cool hand on Greg’s oily forehead.
As Greg recovers from a major illness, he does a lot of thinking about his marriage.

My rang the Ministry’s on call doctor while Greg coughed gobs of phlegm into the wastebasket. He hated hearing My’s polite, business voice, but he was too weak to confront any issues.

“Mycroft Holmes here. I’ve just come back from a business trip to find my husband at death’s door. Could you help us? Thank you so much.” He turned to Greg. “He’ll be here within the hour.”

“Here?”

“I don’t think you should be out. It’s teeming rain.”

Greg wanted to protest that he had to leave. His remaining possessions were unguarded, but he could feel the fever climbing, the air shimmering as Mycroft collapsed and expanded in Greg’s wavering vision. He still wasn’t quite sure if this was a fever dream, and he would wake up alone in the house with nobody to save him.

“The doctor needs to ask some questions to speed the diagnosis. How long have you had the symptoms?”

Greg held up ten fingers, closed his hands, and held up three more. If it was past midnight, it could possibly be fourteen days of a slow death.

“His cough is productive.” My tilted the wastebasket to look in it. “The sputum is orange tinged with pink which I assume to be blood and bits of green as well.”

Grabbing blindly at the wastebasket to bring it back under his mouth, Greg let loose a fit of coughing that went on until the black dots danced before him, and he had peed a little into pants that were already none too fresh.

“Oh, I’ll get one from the en suite. We have to take your temperature.”

“Face of the sun. Top of an AGA.”

“Clearly, but he wants a number.”

He lay back against the pillows listening to My rummage through the medicine cabinet, hoping he wouldn’t find a rectal thermometer. His luck couldn’t rule that out. My returned with one used for children that could be stuck in the ear. “I don’t think you can stop coughing long enough for the oral one. Doctor, I’m taking it now.”

It tickled in Greg’s ear for a long time and the beep of the timer was way too loud.

“40.2 in the ear. Really? Not delirious but altered. A and E?”

Adrenaline shot through Greg. “No hospital!” He meant to sound firm, but another coughing fit
took the force out of it. “No, My, please?”

“We can discuss that after your examination. I can’t thank you enough for coming out on such an abysmal night.”

My put the mobile down on the opposite nightstand and appeared to be undressing. He removed overcoat, suit jacket, waistcoat, and tie then started to roll up his sleeves. Greg watched between coughing bouts, curious but resigned to whatever might happen.

“Would you like a tidy before the doctor comes?”

Greg nodded, feeling like a caveman communicating by grunts and pointing. He gripped the edge of the bed to lever himself up. The fever had him floating a foot off the floor.

“The doctor suggested a lukewarm bath to bring the fever down.”

Greg shivered as the cool air of the room hit his sweaty back. “Hot, please. I’m so cold.”

“You’re burning up, lo-l- like a house afire.” My had started to say ‘love.’ It was just his habit; it didn’t mean anything.

Greg looked down at himself and his soaking clothes. Although he couldn’t smell himself, he wasn’t smelling much of anything past the congestion. Clearly the evening was going to be a laundry list of awkward revelations. “No clean clothes here.”

“I can pop something in the wash.”

“No clothes here at all.”

My paused. “I have something. I’ll get it and meet you in the shower. Call out if you can’t manage.”

Greg wondered if they were going to shower together which would be beyond awkward. Once My had left the room, he hung onto the nightstand and then scooted along the wall to steady himself. He got his jumper off and his belt undone but couldn’t manage his shirt buttons or his fly. He was trying to toe off his shoes without falling down when My came back with clothing draped over his arm.

He hung it over the towel warmer and then reached for clean towels and a flannel. “Need help with the buttons?”

Without any comment or drama, he quickly unbuttoned Greg’s shirt and fly, pulling down the zip. “If you’ll toss the clothes out, I’ll get them in the wash so they are ready when you need them.”

If Greg hadn’t already felt like shit, My’s practical kindness would have finished him off. He dragged himself into the shower and got the shower head down before collapsing on the bench. Even his favorite temperature setting that was usually piping hot seemed tepid on his heated skin. His remaining strength was fading so he soaped himself with My’s gel since his own was at the bedsit. The scent of sandalwood comforted him. My’s face soap was gentle on his sore nose and abraded cheeks. He did feel better.

My was not in the room when he emerged but the towels were ready. Already starting to shiver, he moved to the towel warmer to see what he would be wearing. It was a silvery nightshirt, silk that whispered easily down when he pulled it over his head. There were thick gray and tan tweed socks for his icy feet, and a warm dressing gown, gray velvet with a brown lining. A tag in the pocket read “Happy Christmas. All my love, Mycroft.”
My was in the bedroom. The fire had been lit and there was a cup of tea on the nightstand. The corner of the duvet was pulled back. “I changed the sheets while you were bathing. There’s Echinacea tea to open your sinuses and soothe your throat. The doctor should be here shortly; he’ll text me when he arrives.”

Greg climbed in the bed, completely spent from his shower. My went over to the seating area and busied himself with his phone. A tickling in his ear woke Greg—the thermometer again. “Mr. Lestrade, I’m Dr. Sutherland and I’m here to examine you. Let’s remove our top, shall we?”

“You first.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the doctor pulled out a small notepad and jotted a few words. “Patient is irritable.”

“Roger, it’s silk. I don’t think it will obstruct your exam.”

“And where did you get your medical degree, Holmes? I’m here; let me get on with it.”

“I thought Kingston was coming.”

“When I found out the call was from you, I couldn’t pass up the chance to see an old friend.”

To prevent more nattering, Greg pulled the nightshirt off, having to lean far forward and tug since he was sitting on it. He was keenly aware of his lack of pants but even with his weight loss, doubted that a pair of My’s would have fit him.

The doctor’s hands were all over him, and his touch felt wrong, too familiar somehow. Perhaps he did need to steady Greg while he listened to his breath sounds, he didn’t need to rub his back or cup his pec. When he checked in Greg’s throat with the penlight, his thumb stroked along Greg’s jaw. Gloves were not enough to protect from hands that went lower and lingered longer than they needed to.

Dr. Sutherland put his stethoscope back in the bag, not a black one, but a deep burgundy. “I think I’ll check for a hernia as hard as he’s been coughing.”

He started to pull the duvet lower but My stopped him. “Let’s tackle the illness first. He’ll have his own doctor manage below the waist.”

“You always were a tease, Mycroft.”

“Your diagnosis, doctor?”

“Pneumonia in one lung, the other not far behind. I’ll get a culture but it appears to be of an extremely severe bacterial variety further complicated by malnutrition and dehydration. Has he been on assignment?”

“No, he’s with the Yard and was involved in a shooting where he lost two men.”

Greg felt like he was watching a squash match behind the glass. Something had happened between these two, and My hadn’t liked it. But the doctor was coming back at him with a giant swab, ramming it down his ragged throat, which started him coughing again while the swab was capped in a test tube.

“I’ll have this to the lab with results in 2-3 hours, but I’m going to begin treatment now. Will you transport him or should I call an ambulance?”
Greg couldn’t get enough air to speak but My said, “I’ll have a nurse in. We’ve done it before.”

“As you wish, but such a lot of time and trouble. Are you sure this bit of rough is worth it?”

“My husband is worth it, I assure you.”

“Good on you then, Lestrade” Sutherland said, running a hand up and down Greg’s arm.

Assured that he would not have to go to hospital, Greg closed his eyes. If the man wanted to
grope him, he was too worn out to stop it. His eyes flew back open when he heard, “I’m going to
sedate him so that he can rest. He’s going to need all his strength to fight this. It’s a nasty bug.”

The vial and needle were there. He tried to get away, but the covers were heavy and the room was
spinning.

“Shall I give it to him in his hip?”

“The arm will suffice, Roger. Find your own husband instead of going after mine. Have a care;
he’s terribly afraid of needles.”

Being talked about as if he weren’t present was taking a toll. Greg felt like an old dog, riddled
with ailments. The cold of an alcohol wipe stung his arm. The veterinarian had done all that he
could and now was the inevitable tragedy of pet ownership. “Please don’t do this. I’ll be good.”

He wanted My to hold his hand but gripped the bed clothes instead. The needle pinched hard, and
he thought he could feel it scraping his bone. “Please don’t put me down, My. I’ll be a good dog
from now on, I swear it. Don’t kill me, please.”

Once he was dead, My would have sex with Roger over Greg’s dead body. He was just a bit of
rough for My to dispose of, a one night stand that had dragged on and was harming My socially. It
was time for him to go back to his own kind. He was still whimpering as he got dragged down.

He woke, his mouth cotton dry from the oxygen, and his chest and ribs still sore from coughing
even in his drugged state. Soon he had the more pressing concern of realizing that he had shit
himself. How many times in the past year had he been humiliated? As he squirmed a bit to test the
degree of the problem, his movements slow and distant to his fogged brain, the blanket was lifted
off him and a slight coolness washed over his body.

There was a ripping sound that he pieced together with a crinkling noise. Christ, he was wearing a
nappy. My wasn’t the baby, he was. His carer was in full surgical garb with the mask covering
half his face and the little hat leaving only his eyes exposed. There were only a few minutes of
awareness before the next dose of sedative took him back under, but he dozed knowing that his
arse was clean and dry.

The mix of fever and sedative brought nightmares that he couldn’t remember , but he would wake sobbing, his face wet. There was something he needed that was lost; he couldn’t remember what. But when the sadness and fear became unbearable, sometimes there was a cool hand stroking over his head and once he thought lips brushed his forehead. He clung to that dream to block out the bad ones. If it was the doctor getting handsy, he didn’t even care. He was desperate for comfort.

Living in a twilight world of sedation and dwindling fever, Greg survived the breathing treatments
and spoon feedings of soup or porridge; he followed the nurse’s instructions and thought of little
beyond drawing a deep breath that didn’t hurt or rouse his cough. The nurse looked familiar but
he didn’t even let himself place the man behind the surgical mask. It was too easy to slip away,
ilness and exhaustion a reasonable excuse.
The soft diet led to soft stools and he was regularly soiling himself, waking to the frigid swipe of a moist towelette on his arse. The humiliation was lost in the fog of good drugs and hopelessness. He’d found an acceptable way to die without going to purgatory for suicide. No one would blame him for fading. But he woke eventually, feeling an absence of pain or sickness.

“We’re lessening your sedation now, Mr. Lestrade. Are you ready to rejoin the land of the living?”

The young nurse’s chubby cheeks and bristly brown hair made Greg wonder if he was still in *The Wind in the Willows*. His carer was a hedgehog.

“How long?” His voice was strange, weak and high pitched like an old man’s.

“Three fun filled days and nights. If you promise to eat this yoghurt, I’ll tell all about your adventure.”

“I don’t like yoghurt.”

“Most people don’t, but your body has been stripped of all the good bacteria to kill the bad and now we’ve got to get a culture started again. This is the tastiest way, I assure you.”

He swallowed the creamy stuff, trying not to taste it. The coolness streaked all the way down his throat into his stomach. “Do I know you?” he asked the man that had been wiping his arse and feeding him.

“Kenny Burke. I took care of Mr. Holmes briefly back in the spring. Lars was here during the day, and I was on call at night, but then Mr. Holmes went to his mother’s.”

Greg didn’t want to remember back to a time when he thought My was dead. He looked around for something to focus on, but he didn’t recognize the room beyond his hospital bed. “Am I in hospital?” My had promised, hadn’t he?

“No, you are in the dining room of your very own home, and a pretty penny your husband has paid to keep you here. Doctors and lab technicians coming to the house. State of the art machines and medication. An antibiotic so powerful and top secret that they had to have a lock of my hair and a sperm sample before I got clearance to administer it. That’s after I’d already been vetted back to my great grandfather by the Ministry.”

Another spoonful of yogurt slid down. Greg tried not to gag and breathed through his mouth. His throat was irritated but he didn’t cough. His lips were smooth; somebody had been putting balm on them. He didn’t ask anymore questions since Kenny seemed to be a wealth of information without prompting.

“Mr. Holmes had an elevator put in. They used the old dumb waiter shaft after he forced it through the planning commission. You’ll be able to ride upstairs to your own bed soon. You are free of disease so we can focus on building your strength.”

Nurse Kenny wiped Greg’s face and held a cup for him to drink water from a straw. “We’ll get fiber into you to firm up your stools. My patients like to get out of nappies as soon as possible. We can start using the bedpan this afternoon if you like and possibly the loo should you be feeling especially adventurous.”

Greg was mortified to think his arse had been out in the wind while this young bloke had been chatting about it. My and Morris and Tuppy probably all gathered around to stare at his hole while Kenny changed him.
“There’s no need to be shy. No one could hold it in while taking that cocktail of drugs. It’s my job to keep you clean and dry. I don’t mind a bit.”

The one thing that Kenny didn’t talk about was My’s whereabouts. Greg needed him but couldn’t bear to ask in case the Iceman responded. My had been kind but distant when Greg was feverish. He would have to focus on getting well and leaving as soon as possible. If all his things had been stolen, he would start over. He’d saved Bruce and his quilt; everything else could be replaced.

For being seriously ill, he was a busy man. There were breathing treatments and baths, and he had to get up and walk several times a day as well as eat six small meals of bland food. He lost track of the days; but he knew he had been at least two nights back in the master bedroom. Kenny told him that My had moved into the guest room. He thought he heard My’s voice when he was napping, but nothing seemed real.

There were cards from Marci and Father Matt and the charity shop girls. Morris came in each morning and talked over menus with him in a professional way, thrilled by the cooking challenge, nothing more. His mum phoned each day for only a few minutes. “You need your rest, love, but I had to hear your voice. Mycie is giving me the details. You do what the doctor says.”

By the time he was able to make several turns around the garden, feed and bathe himself, he should have been ready to go back the bedsit, but he had lost his drive during the illness. Somebody else could make the decisions. He did what he was told by his nurse and the rest of the time, he escaped into mindless telly watching or gratuitous naps.

“It’s normal to be a little blue after a major illness,” Kenny assured him, but Greg knew it was grief that he was no longer able to push aside. It hit him full force and he lay there and took it.

This half life might have continued unchecked indefinitely although Kenny was getting ready to leave him. “The rest is up to you. It doesn’t take my help for you to go on longer walks and eat a bit more each day.”

Greg had grew used to Kenny’s chatter and he wasn’t sure how he would manage being alone again. Then My came into the room one morning in full Iceman uniform. Greg was shocked at how haggard he looked. Deep lines were etched around his mouth, his eyes were bloodshot, and he’d cut himself shaving and not bothered to hide it with make up. He was courteous but his eyes were empty. “I’ll be leaving to complete my business now that you’re on the mend. Is there anything that you need or even want?”

“I want to go home.”

Greg saw the pain flit across My’s face that this place wasn’t home to Greg anymore, but he transformed quickly into the Iceman on task. “I’ll see to it immediately.”

“I don’t have any clothes here.” Greg had been wearing hospital gowns or his new night shirt and a track suit for outside that also seemed to be a Christmas gift.

“Let’s get you on the road so you can be with Gigi in time for lunch. I’ll send a courier this afternoon with your things.”

“Thank you.” There were so many other words that needed to be said, but he didn’t have the courage.

He let himself be led like a child. A visit to the loo, then bundled into his coat and led down to the car; My was sending him in the limo so he could lie down, and Kenny had made a bed for him. The divider was down so Art could look in on him, and Morris had made a basket with drinks and snacks.
He shook hands with Kenny at the car. My had not come to see him off and it hurt even though he had no right to expect it. “Will you thank the night nurse for me? He was there for the worst of it, but I never got his name.”

“There wasn’t a night nurse, Greg, and that’s all I’m permitted to say.” Kenny winked at him.

Stunned, Greg sat in the car and picked at the label on a water bottle. My had looked after him, wiped his arse, and stroked his head while he fought for his life. My had even kissed his forehead; he had to believe it wasn’t a dream. His heart had given a small leap when My came in the room. Maybe they could mend things after all. Puzzling out how they might move forward exhausted him and lulled by the car and his nest of blankets, he slept.

Art woke him at the turn off for his neighborhood. He couldn’t see out of the tinted windows in back but through the windshield, he saw familiar streets. His mum came bustling out to the car without her coat, wiping her hands on a tea towel. He had thought he might cry when he saw her, but he stayed dry eyed while she wept in his arms, pulling back now and then to cover his face with kisses, saying over and over, “My poor baby. You’re so thin.”

Ginny had started baking and cooking as soon as My called. A huge pot of chicken soup summered on the stove, and savory scones had just come out of the oven to be slathered in butter. Greg was actually hungry and tucked in while his parents chatted with Art. It had been kind of My to send him along as someone familiar to Greg, and Art always enjoyed a visit with the Lestrades. My would have to make due with one of his other drivers during a stressful time. While pondering all of this, Greg was shocked to reach the bottom of his bowl.

“Best go easy, love, based on the papers Mycie emailed me from the doctor. You can have more after your lie down. The flavors will be blended even more after it’s simmered all afternoon. Now I’ve got another little treat. Mycie says you’ve been craving it.”

He wondered how My knew he’d been craving jelly and what else Mycie had told his Gigi in their daily chat. But she bustled with happiness as she sat a little dish of red jelly before him. He had wanted his mum’s jelly since his throat first started hurting and ate slowly, letting it slide down and cool his throat. Feeling a bit sheepish in front of Art, he was still weary enough for his mum to tuck him upstairs. “You used to ring my little glass bell if you needed me but now you can text me. I’ll put your mobile here on the nightstand. I’ll wake you for tea.”

“I won’t sleep.”

“Be good to rest after your trip then. Welcome home, Baby Greggie.” She kissed the top of his head, tucking a hand knit throw around him.

He woke to darkness and was confused but the smells and shadows were familiar. As if sensing he was awake, Ginny tapped lightly on the door before entering. “Mind your eyes, love, while I light the lamp. I’ve brought your tea on a tray. Mycie and Morris sent all sorts of lovely things with the courier.”

There was a steaming flannel for his hands and face. “I learned that on our flight to Italy. You get a hot towel in first class. I’ll unpack while you eat, shall I? The lad brought the bag upstairs for me.”

Greg ate baked beans and toast on his childhood dishes, the ones with Peter Rabbit as he sat up in his narrow bed. The little fellows reminded him of Hop and My, and he had to wash the lump in his throat down with tea. One thing he must never do was tell his mum that a divorce was coming.

“Oh, isn’t that lovely?” She held up the silvery nightshirt My had put on him the night he was
burned up with fever. "Mycie got this for you. He’s so good at knowing your colors."

“We’re having problems, Mummy.”

“That’s not news, is it? Both of you talking all around it as if I don’t know my boys. You’ve had a nasty shock at work and you took it out on him. You’ll soon get that sorted.”

“I don’t think so.” Greg’s chin wobbled but he forced down another spoonful of beans to cover his weakness.

“It’s all dark and gloom because you’ve been ill, but you’ve come home for a bit of pampering and when Mycie gets back from his trip, you’ll patch things up. A marriage has seasons where you can’t keep your hands off each other and times where you can’t stand the sight of each other. But love renews itself. You’ll see.”

She had no idea how bad things had got, but he didn’t want to frighten or sadden her. She could keep hoping; they hadn’t signed any papers yet. “I’ll get the rest tomorrow, Mum. Time for me to start doing again.”

“Take your pills, baby. It will all seem brighter in the morning.”

His mum was in charge and he didn’t have to do anything but eat and sleep and take his pills. The next day after his shower, he opened the other suitcase. His quilt was inside and wrapped inside it were Bruce and Hop. Greg could imagine that My would have packed the quilt and Bruce to give Greg some comfort while he recovered, but putting Hop there made Greg think that My was saying goodbye, returning the gift that had unlocked his frozen heart. Greg cradled the toy in shaking hands, remembering the feel of My against him as the sobs tore through his body when he faced a life time of pent up grief. It was the most courageous thing Greg had ever seen. Tomorrow he would face this symbol that they were truly over, but today he would remember the good man he had once been and their marriage when it had been positive for them both.

Greg settled into his parents’ routine far too easily. His mum woke him at 5 a.m. with tea and a biscuit and his morning pills. Then he snuggled under the covers for another hour while the furnace took the chill off. He had a quick wash before driving his mum to early mass, leaving Rich behind at the kitchen table in boxers and dressing gown, reading the newspaper with a big mug of copper’s tea beside him. My had sent Greg’s car with the couriers, and Greg managed to drive the short distance to the church.

The little old ladies doted on him, pinching his cheeks and patting his arm. He enjoyed the attention. While they said their prayers, he sat on the back pew, fingering his rosary and thinking of My’s village and how Graham had been able to bear whatever pain young Michael was in. How he wished he could be as strong as My’s characters. Praying wasn’t something he knew how to do beyond repeating the lines he had learned for confirmation class, but he did begin saying with each phrase, “Help My. Please help My.”

My didn’t have a loving mum or a dad whose quiet strength was always there. He didn’t have a safe place to go when the world got too big. He didn’t have happy childhood memories or older sisters that adored him. He didn’t have a community that inspired and challenged him, keeping him up with his adventures as if he were a celebrity. Greg remembered how empty and cold the house had been when he went back the night of his fever. My was living there now alone except for Morris who was glowing with new love and leaving to be with Tuppy whenever he could. Greg had been My’s best friend and he had left him alone. Mending My’s broken heart was beyond Greg’s skill set so he begged, “God help My.”

When they returned from the service, it was his time with the paper over breakfast of porridge,
toast and sausage. This meal never varied. After breakfast, Greg and his dad staggered to the lounge, carrying their full bellies like pregnant women. My called promptly each day at ten, but Greg had managed to be asleep or in the loo for each call. The telly was on all day, and he didn’t question his dad’s viewing selections. The images passed by while Greg tried to block his memories of the shooting and all that had come after. He couldn’t say what he had watched later, but more and more, he reflected on happier times and the thought of My’s unguarded smile or the way his long body cut through the waves at the villa. Greg wondered if My would keep on writing the Village story and if so, would he remove the character of Graham Lester.

After lunch, he got outside during the warmest part of the day for a walk. His dad walked with him at first, but soon he was walking too quickly, just short of a jog. Exercise helped manage his anxiety. It felt good to cover ground again and to move past the streets of his childhood home. Soon though, alone with his thoughts, he resorted to reviewing his actions and punishing his body for them. He did do a bit better at stopping himself when his lungs stung from the cold air. Every easy breath was a gift.

His mum made him rest in the afternoon. As he got his energy back, he took to reading some of his boyhood books. Robinson Crusoe had been a favorite although the man’s solitude hit a little too close to Greg’s current state. He read his comics which were now collector’s items and the mystery series he had read as a kid that likely inspired his desire to be a detective. It was a comfort to read stories where he knew the outcome and mysteries that had a tidy solution. His own future was blank.

He also worked on his Italian each day even though he doubted he would ever see Italy again. My had even packed his Bible, but Greg had stalled out at Leviticus where the foot notes were longer than the text. When he couldn’t sleep after a nightmare, the rules of Old Testament camp life worked better than a sleeping pill.

After his nap, they had a heavy tea and all his old favorites made an appearance—toad in the hole, macaroni and cheese, and fish fingers, toasted cheese, and mashed potatoes with tomato soup. Sometimes when he finished eating, he felt like he should go upstairs and start on his lessons. He helped with the washing up instead.

If his dad went to his local, his mum would sit with her knitting in the lounge while he played the guitar for her. Trying to sing still started him coughing but she liked the instrumental music. He found peace in the challenge of playing. If his dad was home, they watched something on the telly. He wondered what My did in the evening and who was getting his time and attention now that Greg was conveniently out of town. He had no right to wonder, but he did.

Rich slept in his chair for at least an hour before they all went up to bed at nine. Greg missed My most of all at bed time. The single bed highlighted his loneliness. Under his mum’s careful management, he had been taking his regular prescriptions again and his libido came back as sharp as grief. He had wanked buckets in the little bed during his teens and did so again, spilling into a sock which he rinsed out during his shower. There was no joy in it and after, he felt worse than ever and wished for My’s fur hat to cuddle against his cheek. The thought of never nuzzling against My’s chest again brought tears but at least the physical release helped him sleep.

The one thing that he knew for certain about his future was that he did not want to return to the bedsit. It was a hopeless place, designed for losers who had no family or friends to turn to. He thought it quite likely that he might die there, his spirit crushed beyond reviving. But he didn’t know what else he might do. He was stuck.

Maybe he could move back home. It wasn’t such a bad life, living at home. Lots of people had to move back in to care for aging parents and he might be able to find work more easily in a smaller place with less competition. He could make his savings last longer if he didn’t have to pay rent.
His parents would benefit from his contribution to the household expenses, and he would have regular meals and clean laundry so that his focus could be his health and his work.

He was considering this one morning, nursing a second cup of tea while his mum made scones for lunch. Her mobile rang, and he watched her face light up in that special way that it did when My called. He tried to get out of the room, but she pointed a finger at him. “Greggie, stop right there. Mycie, I’m putting him on and the two of you are going to talk. I’ve had enough of this nonsense. You will have a civil conversation today.”

Greg took the phone, not sure he could hear anything over the blood rushing in his ears. My could probably hear him panting. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I don’t either.”

“But I guess we need to talk.”

“Yes, you certainly do,” Gigi said, tamping her cutter into the dough with unnecessary force.

My sighed. “We do need to talk, but I’d prefer to do so in person. I only called because Gigi worries. I try to wait until the last minute before I cross into unsecured air space. It’s not so long that we’re out of contact then. She misses our daily chats when I’m away.”

“I really appreciate how thoughtful and generous you’ve been to her.”

“She’s easy to love.”

“Unlike her son.”

“I’m sorry, Greg. I only have a minute.”

“Are you in danger?”

“Yes, but don’t tell her that.”

It suddenly seemed important to say three words regardless of the state of their marriage. “My, I still——”

There was a terrible squeal and the line went dead.

“Did you get the squeal? It’s always like that when he crosses over. Never mind. You’ve made a start. I’m proud of you.”

The days continued in their sameness until he knew that he could never stay there without losing his mind. When his mum talked about My normally, as if nothing was wrong, he wanted to scream and would have to go out for a run, cursing his lungs for aching and his body for its weakness.

He had stayed too long and it was time to go back but he didn’t know where to go. Facing the empty house, let alone Morris, was beyond his strength, but it wouldn’t get easier by waiting. As if reading his mind, Ginny said one evening, “Mycie will be home tomorrow. It’s time for you to go.”

“Are you evicting me, Mum?”

“I’m sending you back to your husband.”

“What if he doesn’t want me back?”
“He doesn’t have a choice in it any more than you do. You made vows. Come into the lounge, love.” She took him by the hand and led him to the sagging green couch. He sunk down beside her, feeling again like a sulking teen. Rich was asleep in his chair. She patted her lap and he put his head there the way he had when she had got him through countless migraines.

“You’ve got no hair for me to pet, have you? No matter. You remember what it feels like.”

He thought he was going to get a lecture on marriage but she started down another path. “Do you remember poor little Jim? You saved him from that bully and he worshipped you. You were inseparable for months and then he did something you didn’t like. I can’t even remember what, but you cut him off without another word.”

“I had a migraine and Dad took him to the movies without me.”

“Jim didn’t have a dad or any uncles except the men his mother brought home. He still sends me a Christmas card every year. He’s a doctor in Ibiza, mostly treats sunburn.”

“Yes, Mum, I know.” He’d been shown every one of those Christmas cards through the years and the guilt had been part of the festive season.

“You were so tender hearted, bringing home all those strays, the boys no one else wanted. And you were as sweet and loving as Christ with them as long as they did everything your way. You couldn’t do enough for them and then you got done and discarded them like an old tissue in your pocket. And the men you dated. You were all about each one until you weren’t and cut them out like a tumor.”

“They weren’t marriage material. It had to end eventually.”

“Not this one. Not My. He’s a keeper. You’ll have to work it out.” Ginny’s hands stroked over his head, making patterns in the nap of his fuzz.

“I want to, but I don’t know how.”

“That’s because you’re trying to make all the decisions by yourself. You have to talk to each other. There are two people in your marriage.”

“We have tried but we end up fighting, and each row is worse than the last.”

“There will come an end to that bit if you push through. We spoiled you, the girls and I, but it’s time for you to do the right thing. Mycie doesn’t have anybody in his corner but you, and he needs you. You’ve set it up that way. But you also need him. Maybe before the talking, you need to take him to bed.”

“Mum!”

“Your mother’s right. I don’t know about the bed and all. Still, she’s right about patching things up. Get your coat.”

Rich had apparently not been asleep, and Greg followed him obediently to the car, wondering if they were driving somewhere for him to get the belt. When they got to the pub, his dad led him to the private room in the back. His dad’s usual cronies, Stumpy, Clint, and Harold were there but the room was full of people. Some of the older guys he recognized as coppers who had served with his dad, but there were men and women his age and younger.

“There’s the man of the hour, lads. Come on through, Greg,” Stumpy said, waving a hand toward
two chairs at the head of the table. “Does he know, Rich?”

Rich shrugged but his mouth twitched, the way it did when he had done something clever.

Harold pounded an empty mug on the table and waited for the room to quiet. Since Harold hardly ever spoke, the older blokes began shushing the others until the room was silent under Harold’s hawk like gaze. “Greg, your dad told us about you losing two officers. He said that you missed the wake because you were injured in the shooting. We’d like to remedy that now.”

Servers came in with trays, and pints went round until everybody had one, and there were two full glasses in the middle of the table. “Gentleman, be upstanding. Here’s to Walt Shetterly and Rich Tillottson. May they rest in peace but may their memory be with us always.”

After everyone had taken a drink, there was a moment of silence except for throat clearing. Greg ran his thumb back and forth on the ridges of his glass. “When I was still quite green, we had to evacuate a university building because of a bomb threat. Students and teachers were everywhere in the plaza, and we had a time of it keeping them back. Apparently, there were always crank calls during exams. What the crowd didn’t know was that there had been an actual bomb a few days before that we’d been kept out of the news.”

Greg’s throat was dry, and he took a swallow, feeling exposed, but he wanted to talk about Walt. “This girl came down into an empty space at the side between two officers. She had her book bag over her shoulder and breezed down the steps as if it were an ordinary day. She ignored when the officers called out to her.”

He took a chance and looked up. There was no judgment or boredom on anybody’s face, just listening. “Walt got to her and I knew from his face that she was about to get a scolding. Then she started to sign. Of course, we weren’t trained in it even when I was at the academy let alone when Walt started. But he always had his little note pad handy. He scribbled on it, and then she looked up and noticed the entire square of people staring at her. She was mortified.”

“Walt,” his voice gave out so he took another swig. “Walt held out his arm like it was a cotillion, and he walked her down the side of the building away from the square and around the corner to the other side where she would blend into the crowd. He took a sign language class after that, and it was hard for him, but he didn’t want to leave out anything that might help someone in an emergency. At that time, he had no idea he would have to wear a deaf aid in future.”

He saw one of the old blokes touch his ear self consciously. “That damn thing would squeal in staff meeting and set everyone’s teeth on edge. He would turn it low whenever he could and then we’d have to shout anyway. He was a stubborn bastard but he was our bastard and we loved him. I wouldn’t wish him back but god, I miss him. To Walt.”

They drank again and the load on Greg’s heart was a bit lighter. Stumpy Edwards stood up, his eyes glittering with tears, jaw jutting against the wiggle of his chin.” Here’s to us. Who’s like us? Damn few, and they’re all dead.”

A shout went up, glasses clinked together, the servers came in with the next tray, and the coppers were off. The stories grew in length and volume. The job was the same wherever and whenever you served. Greg pushed back the knowledge that he likely wasn’t with the Yard anymore. His dad had gone to a great deal of trouble to make this night for him, and he was going to enjoy it.

He got to tell all of the tales that he wanted to of Walt, and two of his dad’s contemporaries had known Walt, who was now the stuff of legends for the next generation. One of the younger fellows came up to him and shook his hand and Rich’s. “Thank you for including me, sir. It meant a lot.”
“Running off so soon, lad?” Stumpy called out.

“I’ve got an early call.” But he was blushing furiously.

Someone shouted, “She’s got to have it every day, Joe.”

“And twice on Sundays,” Joe answered back, looking close to heat stroke from his flush but also pleased to be included in the good natured teasing.

“Newlywed,” Clint said, shaking his head. “I remember the days.”

Greg felt a twinge the alcohol couldn’t relieve. He was still a newlywed for a little while longer but could possibly be newly divorced in the new year. Suddenly he wanted My there beside him to see how men could be kind to each other rather than the vicious competition of the Ministry. He wanted someone to talk it all over with afterwards.

As the talk wound down and the old guard was all that remained, Greg wondered how they would get home. He had paced himself since his stomach was still a bit sensitive but he still wasn’t safe to drive. He needn’t have worried. One man had an ulcer and couldn’t drink; he loaded up his car. A few took cabs, but Clint’s grandsons took most of the men home, proud of the chance and glad for the tips.

At home, Greg said, “Thanks, Dad,” pushing the words past the lump in his throat.

Rich hugged him tight. Greg stood there a moment, taking in the comfort, but also sad at how much smaller his dad seemed. Rich winked and reached up in the cupboard to get a bottle of paracetamol. They each took four with a full glass of water. Greg slept soundly without nightmares.

The next morning, there was no hangover. He was ready for one last Mass with his mum, but was surprised to see his dad dressed and ready. Rich sat on the back pew with Greg and was decidedly uncomfortable, tugging at his collar and wiping sweaty palms on his pants.

His mum stayed to chat with two of her friends. He heard something about the altar cloth looking tatty and needing washed and mended before the holidays. His dad was thumbing through a prayer book, still uncomfortable even though the service had ended.

When the sanctuary was finally empty, his mum and dad exchanged a look. His dad cleared his throat. “We’re going to light a candle for your men.”

They went toward the altar, his mum making the preparations with the thin wooden lighters and the candles from the box. When Greg’s hand started to shake, his dad steadied it. “For Walter,” his dad said, lighting the first.

Greg didn’t think he could speak but when they lit the second, he was able to say, “For Rich.”

His dad lit a third. “For Mycroft and for this marriage that is still new.”

They led him to the front pew and sat on either side of him. His dad opened the book which looked tiny between his gnarled fingers. He didn’t need the book for the Hail Mary, in a hoarse voice he began with Ginny echoing him in whispers, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

All three crossed themselves. Then Rich consulted the book and read, “Be mindful, O Lord, of thy servants, Walter and Rich, who have gone before us with the sign of faith and who sleep the
sleep of peace. To these, O Lord, grant a place of refreshment, light, and peace. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Something broke loose in Greg, and he was sobbing so that it rang in the rafters of the old building. His dad got hold of him, pressing his head into a bony shoulder. Greg cried himself empty, not able to stop for anything. His dad’s hand rubbed over his head, slow and easy.

When he finally sat up, dripping with snot and tears, his mum didn’t break her rhythm of prayers as she fished a packet of tissues out of her handbag and passed it over. Her lips moved in the ancient rhythm, and her fingers shifted on the rosary. Greg watched awhile, letting his breath slow to match her movements. He was drained.

Greg mopped his face and blew his nose several times. His dad did too. Then he leaned over and rested his head on his dad’s shoulder and remembered the time his first crush had died in a car crash. He had been stoic through the funeral, watching the closed casket. His dad had been there to direct traffic and keep peace since the crowd had been large, but when it was over, and Greg had stood lost in front of the church, his dad had found him and took him round back to the alley where they kept the bins and Greg had cried himself sick in his dad’s arms.

His dad pulled him close again, kissing his the top of his head. “Listen to me, love. We’ve drunk to their memory and said prayers for their souls. Now you leave them here. Your mum and I will look after them. It’s time for you to get your own house in order, eh? Don’t carry them anymore.”

Greg nodded. He had been focusing on loss when the living needed care. It was time to go home to My.
Reconciled

Chapter Summary

After one last big row, Greg and My reach a tentative ceasefire.

The car was stuffed to the brim with Greg’s suitcases, guitar, laptop, Morris’ hamper restocked with Ginny’s baking, knitted throws for Morris and Art, a scarf for My, and Rich’s old lunchbox in case Greg got hungry on the drive home. “You won’t have to dig around in the big hamper if you have this on the seat beside you.”

Ginny had been steady through the days of Greg’s weakness; now the tears were flowing. “You need to be with Mycie but I’m going to miss you so. Come back with him as soon as you can.”

Rich gave him another tight squeeze then advised, “Say ‘I’m sorry’ at least three times and then ‘I love you’ at least twice. It works on your mother.”

“I let it work on me,” Ginny said, slapping her husband on the arm but then tucking her cold hand in his pocket. “Promise me, love, that you’ll stay at it until it’s fixed. Sleep in your own bed tonight, wrapped around him.”

“I promise, Mummy.”

Greg left his parents’ house full of hope. It started to rain shortly after he turned out of the neighborhood. The rain became a torrent just outside the city limits. He still tired more easily and could feel the pressure of the weather conditions and his concern for the safety of the drivers around him, but he thought of My. “I’m coming home to you, baby,” he whispered as he hit a deep puddle, and the tires skidded a bit.

Further on, he came on a car that was driving far below the posted speed limit, its hazard lights on. He had to go quite a distance behind this blinking mess before he was able to pass, fretting the entire time at the delay.

Next he was held back by a construction crew which appeared to consist of several men in hard hats looking down into a ditch while their caravan of vehicles blocked the road. The second construction crew twenty minutes later seemed to involve several men in hard hats standing around looking up at a pole while a crane blocked traffic. Greg wanted to scream. He put in a Christmas CD but the happy songs were too bright for his mental state. After all My wouldn’t have to make amends just because Greg wanted to.

His other Christmas CD was as quiet as snow falling on pines, and he got sleepy, wishing he was under a warm duvet, curled around My. As the rain continued, requiring the highest speed of his wipers to clear his vision, he began to fantasize about a reunion.

He would walk across the room, and My would break into a big smile, eyes sparkling, and would stretch out his arms to wrap Greg up. They would kiss slowly and deeply, tongues flicking in and out. My would lower him to the floor, undress him, and—

No. Greg wasn’t ready for sex yet. He was ready to wank while thinking about My’s body but not to submit yet. His skin hurt too much.
They could hug. A nice safe platonic hug with squeezing and pats. Then sitting on the couch in front of a fire, they would hold hands and talk for hours, catching up on the events they had missed in each other’s lives during their separation. My would have a brandy in hand and give Greg sips out of it. As their inhibitions loosened, My would scoot closer, drawing Greg in for a kiss. His hand would slide beneath Greg’s shirt to rub his back. Greg would snuggle closer, resting his head on My’s shoulder, lulled almost to sleep by the soothing touch until My’s hand slipped down the back of Greg’s jeans.

No. Again. How could he make amends and show his love without being fucked within an inch of his life? The confidence he had felt when he promised his mum had all drained away. He was overwhelmed and almost phoned her for a second dose of courage, but they couldn’t build their marriage with her as a mediator.

He needed something for them to do while they got reacquainted—a challenging, very public activity that would occupy My’s mind and leave little time for temptation. If only he hadn’t already completed Walt’s Christmas project, My might have enjoyed working on it with him. It was not yet time for delivering the boxes and they needed something to do for the afternoon. Going for a run was out because of the rain and that eliminated a relaxing drive in the country as well.

Making a happy Christmas for others had been healing for Greg. He came back to this idea. Working on a Christmas project together would show My how he had been spending their time apart and giving someone else joy might bring joy back to them. He remembered babysitting for Rich and Michelle just before the shooting; he and My had worked as a team to do something nice for the whole family. Taking care of the children had been fun.

Even though My was not fond of Michelle and her views, he wouldn’t be able to refuse Greg this way of making further amends for Rich’s death. Greg spent the rest of the drive envisioning My choosing the perfect teddy bear at the little shop, or looking at model trains, or holding a little pink dress for baby Hannah. There was so much to tell him about the choices he had made at each store, and they could review his decisions about Walt’s trust.

The rain followed Greg home and he left his things in the car, getting soaked carrying the food in. There was no one home, and not even a smell of cooking to indicate that Morris had been there. The house was chilly and dark and Greg fought flashbacks of his arrival when the pneumonia had him.

There was a text from his mum indicating that My’s flight had been delayed for weather and the rain was creating traffic delays in the city. He didn’t respond, not up to another pep talk. His courage was dribbling out with each passing moment. If My had greeted him at the door, he might have been able to get straight to the point, but now he had time to think.

He ate the lunch his mum had packed at the kitchen table, feeling quite sorry for himself. Even with her large portions, he was soon done and the washing up took only minutes. He went up to his study, feeling like an intruder, but the desk reminded him of his last time there, mapping out his Christmas project. He should do business there. He phoned his therapist to see about starting his sessions again. He had missed several due to his illness.

“Hello, Greg. I’m glad you called. I’ve spoken with Chief Sullivan and we feel that you’ll benefit from an additional eight sessions. Now don’t worry; you’ll be able to take holiday time in the new year to cover the additional leave. I feel we haven’t really got to the core of your issues.”

“But I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to do. You’ve seen my journal. I know I’ve been ill but I’m ready to finish. We only had a few more sessions to meet the requirement.”
“Eight sessions is a suggested number, but it’s actually as the therapist sees fit on a case by case basis. We are lucky that Sally Donovan has been able to step in as acting team leader.”

“Lucky that, how she stepped right up.”

“We’ll have all the time we need to get you fit.”

He said the right things and made an appointment for the following Monday then considered throwing his mobile through the window. His position had been filled; there was no going back, and he was not taking a lesser role at his age. Anderson would be his boss by proxy, and he would not submit to that no matter how badly he needed a job. He was trying very hard and nothing was going right. The whole universe was thwarting him.

He went into My’s study for paper and pen and wrote a letter of complaint about his girl therapist and her delusions of grandeur. He then crafted his resignation letter to Sullivan ending it with, “Fuck you and the horse you rode in on also known as your wife.”

There was nothing on the telly at that time of day but he tried to find something, pushing angrily at the buttons as he searched. He wondered how long he would have to wait there to fulfill his promise to his mum. The room was chilly, and he didn’t trust himself with fire. There was a new throw on the back of the couch, soft as a kitten and smelling of My’s cologne. He would lie there and do deep breathing exercises so that he wouldn’t take his rage out on My.

A change in the light woke him. My was standing in the door of the study, back lit by the hall lights. His head was cocked in his deduction pose, but Greg couldn’t see his eyes as he blinked the sleep away. “Hello.”

My bowed and Greg knew with dread that it was the Iceman. He felt exposed and ridiculous, literally caught napping. He scrambled up, his legs tangled in the throw, but he got a light on so that he could see My’s reactions. “Mum said your flight was delayed. I know traffic was awful.”

“Your mother was pleased to have you home for so long.”

‘Your mother’ he’d said—not Gigi. Greg suddenly realized that My had every right to not even listen to an apology but reject him on the spot. “I was thankful to have that time with them. Thank you for arranging it.”

“You’re looking well.”

“I’m gaining ground each day. It could have been much worse if you hadn’t brought in the miracle drugs.”

Greg was still struggling with the throw and My leaned down and tugged firmly, folding it into a tidy package which he put at the foot of the couch. Greg wished it back for shelter, My’s eyes scanning him more thoroughly than the X rays at the airport. He closed his eyes, letting My look his fill, and he went back in his mind to how much he had missed My and all the nightmares of losing him. He reminded himself of all the kind things My had done to watch over him even after he had been hurtful to him.

Then he leaped. “My, I know we’ve got a great deal to get sorted, but come with me now. I thought we could make a happy Christmas for Michelle and her kids. I’ll take you around to all the shops and we can catch up on the way.”

“No, I don’t think that’s wise.”

“Why ever not?”
“It’s not necessary.”

“Christmas isn’t about necessary. It’s about pouring out all you’ve got with no thought for yourself.”

“They have been provided for. I’ve set up a trust through the Yard and there have been other contributions besides ours. Michelle has more than enough for a lavish celebration for her children even without the care of her church and her extended family. There’s no need to mix in it, Greg. She’ll only hurt you.”

“She has every right to hurt me if it gives her peace.”

“She does not!” My’s eyes were blazing, and the tip of his nose was red. “I cannot watch you self destruct again. I am ground down to a powder.”

Greg’s mind was fixed on the course he had planned. He was angry at all the road blocks that had come his way. He would feel his face getting hot. “I came here today with hat in hand, offering you something that’s brought me joy, and you thwart me. That seems to be the order of the day.”

My stared at him in silence, reading him to an unfair advantage. Greg felt like neon arrows were pointing out all of his tells to the laser focus of a Holmes.

“I don’t want to be deduced right now. Do you know how hard it was for me to humble myself and come back here?”

“I cannot imagine.”

“Why the sarcasm? I promised Mum that I would make things right.”

“On your time table. That’s tidy.”

Greg tried to ignore the tone and keep his focus on what he had committed to on the long drive. “I don’t want to argue or say unkind things. I’m going shopping for Michelle’s kids whether you come along or not. Clearly, you’ve had a rough trip and you’re irritable, but maybe we could talk later.” He turned to leave.

“Are you in love with her?”

“What the fuck?”

“You are fixated. You let her change you, introduce new habits, renounce me. Are you in love with her? Is it because she can give you children? She won’t, you know. You’re damaged goods.”

“I don’t want her.”

“Then why see her? She’s been manipulating you all along.”

“Because it could have been me. My dad’s name is Rich. Mum had two miscarriages before I was born and one after. Did she tell you that in your little chats? That last one, they had to gut her or she would have kept trying. Three kids on a copper’s salary back then. One Christmas, all I got was a shirt.” He ran out of breath and stopped, realizing how loud he had been talking.

“It’s the young priest then.”

“Excuse me?”
“He’s got your heart now, your time and energy.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Don’t blaspheme. Your boy wouldn’t like that.”

“I don’t owe you any explanations but that is so past the mark that I’ve got to set you straight, no pun intended. I suppose even your CCTV has limits so you didn’t see all the hours I spent in a cold, damp basement wrapping gifts by myself. Matt wasn’t even in the building half the time. He was on church business.”

“Wouldn’t take that long.”

“I wouldn’t desecrate a church. Mum would kill me. And I wouldn’t cheat on you, but if you think I would, then you’re not the man I married.”

“Ditto.”

Greg stood there, knowing he would lose any argument, would never be as witty and quick as a Holmes. He walked out but couldn’t resist calling back over his shoulder, “Fuck you.”

“Please do. If you can.”

Greg was shaking all over by the time he got to the car, but he managed to get out of the garage and to a nearby side street. Instead of playing the martyr this time, My had given as good as he got. Greg was angry and hurt and sad, looking at the shambles of his marriage, but he was also bloody proud of My for standing up for himself.

Although it wasn’t any fun without My beside him, Greg went back to all the shops and got the same gifts, but he had the faces of the Tillotson children in his mind as he made each purchase. He added an age appropriate train set and a table top Christmas tree in case baby Hannah was crawling. He went by Foyles for books and puzzles. Other children might want technology, but Michelle’s faith had kept her family in the Stone age so they might like old fashioned toys. He had the gifts wrapped and kept careful tally of the items, making a list so that Michelle could approve before giving them to the children. At Tesco, he bought a ham and fresh vegetables as well as tinned items, sweets and biscuits, and Orangina.

Once he had started Walt’s Christmas project, he had not been to the Tillotson flat and found himself anxious. He carried the teddy bear which he hadn’t wanted to box up and thought that maybe the boys could help him unload the rest once Michelle gave her permission. A long time passed after his knock, but finally Michelle opened the door, slipped through it, and stood before him in the hall. “Mr. Lestrade, how are you?”

“I was ill, but I got better.” He grinned before realizing she knew nothing of Monty Python.

“And how is your soul?”

“My soul?”

“Are you following Jesus in every word, thought, and deed?”

“I read my Bible and pray. When I was visiting my mum, we went to early Mass every day.”

“That’s vain repetitions like the heathen do. I’m talking about listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to keep you from sin, not praying to a statue and getting a free pass for chanting.”
Greg thought of his mum’s face, shining with pride in him and peace in her heart after spending time in sanctuary and of his dad, gnarled fingers gripping the prayer book as he prayed for the soul of this woman’s husband, a stranger to him.

Michelle misinterpreted Greg’s silence as agreement. “Have you ended your sinful relationship with Mr. Holmes?”

“We aren’t together anymore. I have my own place.” Saying it out loud cut through him.

“Are you in counseling to retrain your thoughts?”

“I am in counseling, yes.” He wondered why he was submitting to this interrogation.

“You need to find a church home, a real church.” She turned to go back inside.

“Wait. I’ve brought gifts for the kids.”

“I can’t let you around the children.”

“Then I’ll bring them up and leave them here in the hall. You can get them after I’ve gone.”

“They were bought with blood money. I can’t accept them.”

Greg’s temper rose. “I’ve done everything you told me to do. Changed my life, helped a Christmas charity, and ended my marriage. What would it take to earn your acceptance?”

“You’re forgiven, Mr. Lestrade, but you’ll always be a murderer.”

Greg stood open mouthed, staring at the closed door, still clutching the teddy bear. Somehow he got to his car, which was full of unwanted gifts. All the things he could have said to her came to him as he sat staring through the windshield. For the first time since the shooting, he didn’t feel guilty.

Two boys were leaning against the building watching him, one of them smoking. He got out of the car and slowly walked toward them. “Could you spare one for a fiver?”

“You must really want a smoke.” The kid laughed but handed one over and then with a shake of his head, passed the lighter. “Trying to quit?”

“Not today. He leaned against the building next to the boy and let the smoke wash over him, the lit end of the cigarette like a candle of hope. “Who’s the granny in this building, the boss who knows everything?”

“Mrs. Briggs in 206.”

“Fancy a bit of work? I’ll pay.”

He went to 206 first and submitted to the another woman’s judgmental scrutiny. “I brought gifts for the Tillottson family, and she refused them. Thought you might be able to take them and put them where they are needed. These boys will help me bring it in, and I’ll pay for your trouble.”

“No need to pay me. If you’ve had to deal with the likes of her, you can have my help for free.” They shook on it, and he quite liked her.

It was done quickly, the boys waving away additional money beyond the fiver for a good smoke. He left the boys where he’d found them, holding up the building. In the refuge of his car, he let the hurt in. Michelle had every right to bar him entrance to her home, but he would be damned if
he’d let her shit all over his mum’s faith. As he went in search of a pint, he knew the worst of it was that My had been right about Michelle.

Greg drank steadily, his caution at not turning into a drunken sot discarded now that he had no place to go and no one worried about him. He was burned out at trying to come up with solutions. Somebody else could try for him. He was done.

When the staff pushed him to order food, he did and ate without tasting it. When they cut him off and confiscated his keys, he didn’t argue. Bleary eyed and wanting to hug everyone in sight, he got into the cab and slept. He didn’t want any trouble other than how to remove his shoes before climbing into bed.

When the cabbie woke him, he got out, nearly falling over as it sped away. He watched the lights until it turned the corner, then looking around, found himself at the townhouse, the last place he wanted to be. Taking shelter on the front steps, he checked his coat pockets. His wallet was empty; his phone dead and his charger in his car which was god knows where. He couldn’t hide in the garage all night when it was colder than ever, and he was still in recovery from pneumonia.

He would have to go inside—if he still had his keys. His keys were in the front pocket of his jeans, car keys removed. If he snuck in, he could sleep in the library until coherent and be gone by sunrise, calling a cab on the landline, but he was less likely to be seen if he went around back. The wind pushing on his bare head sobered him enough to walk around and go through the kitchen door. Inside, he stood with his back against it, pleased to be out of the cold.

A woman was singing in the darkened house—her voice husky with sadness. He knew her voice and the song, which was almost as old as he was. The music took him down the hall to Morris’ room. The door was ajar and Greg peeked into the butler’s little lounge.

Morris’ hair was straight on end, and his shirt was untucked and unbuttoned. His bare feet were propped on the coffee table as he tipped up a bottle of My’s best brandy and had another swig. Greg felt ashamed at the subtlety of his own bender which was quickly fading.

Clearly the world was upside down. Greg pushed the door open and Morris looked at him through slitted eyes, puffy from crying. “He’s left me, Greg.”

Still muzzy, Greg stepped very carefully around the coffee table to sit down beside Morris. “What happened, mate?”

“We had a corker of a row about something petty, and he walked out.”

“But that doesn’t mean he’s left for good.”

“You did.” Morris’ accusing stare would have been formidable indeed save he was cross eyed.

“I came back.”

“Welcome home. I’ve missed you.” Morris hugged him and passed the bottle.

Greg took a restorative sip and kept it. Morris never drank because his father had. Morris never hugged. Morris never went about with his hair mussed. Signs of the apocalypse.

“You should phone him.”

“I tried. He doesn’t answer. So fuck him.” Morris held this courageous attitude for thirty seconds before the tears poured out of blood shot eyes. “What am I going to do, Greg?”
Greg hadn’t a clue but drinking wasn’t the way. His stomach was as busy as a tank full of piranha and sooner or later his binge was going to become a purge. They sat in silence listening to Greg’s belly rumblings until Morris realized the song had stopped.

He stood up and with pain staking care, got the needle in the correct position on the record, his head moving around as he watched the turn table. “Candi Staton must be heard in the original vinyl.”

“God, she was good. My sister played this an entire summer until it lost all meaning. It was her break up anthem.”

Candi (and Morris) sang, “He called me baby, baby all night long.”

“Tups calls me ‘baby.’ I was the young pretty one this time.” He slumped onto the coffee table and leaned in close enough for Greg to get tipsy on fumes.

“I called My ‘baby.’ He liked it.”

Morris howled with the record. “Lord, I feel so empty since he’s been gone.”

Sympathetic tears welled up in Greg’s eyes. They listened to the song, both completely at sea with grief by the end.

“Play it again, please.”

Morris got up and stubbed his toe on the table leg, crying out in pain and falling to the floor. Greg got up to help and nearly fell himself. He held a hand out to pull Morris up, but neither of them had much in the way of balance, and Morris fell into him. He bumped against the wall, and Morris ended up with his arms wrapped around Greg’s waist. Having a long slender body leaning against him was familiar and comforting. There was nothing wrong with a hug, but it went on too long and after a while, he patted Morris three times on the shoulder to break the hold.

Morris put his hands on Greg’s hips to steady himself. His eyes were glassy. “Rory?”

Greg took in the sad blue eyes and the abundant chest hair pouring from an open shirt front. As Morris leaned in for a kiss, Greg didn’t stop it as soon as he should have. My and Tuppy were gone. Why shouldn’t two friends find solace in each other? But when Morris’ face tilted toward his, Greg turned for a kiss on the cheek. “We’re both drunk, Morris. Let’s not make another mess.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Tuppy boomed from the open door.

Morris gasped and whirled around at the sound of his soulmate’s voice. He bobbed like a jack in the box trying to get oriented after such an abrupt movement. “You came back!”

“Of course I did.”

Tuppy was there to steady Morris so that Greg could step away. He wondered how much Tuppy had seen.

Morris was draped around Tuppy like a feather boa. “Don’t ever leave me again, Tups. I can’t bear it.”

“I only left because you ordered me out of the house. I’ve phoned several times but clearly, you’re in no fit state to charge your mobile. This was on the work top.” Tuppy held up a mobile and pressed a button with no result.
“I’m sorry, love. I’m sorry.” Morris was sobbing into Tuppy’s chest.

“There now, I know you’re sorry, lad, and you’ve already given yourself a harsh punishment with the head you’ll have in the morning.”

The moment was intimate and not for Greg’s eyes. He headed for the door, planning to sleep it off in the library.

“I’m not done with you, Lestrade,” Tuppy said in a completely different tone. “Wait here while I tuck Morris in.”

Greg stood rooted to the spot but after swaying for some time, he thought he might be allowed to sit. He listened as Tuppy took Morris to the loo, got him to take some pills, and then undressed him for bed. “Now then, sweetheart, you rest here while I get Greg sorted. Then if you are awake when I come back, we’ll have a cuddle.”

“And you’ll stay?”

“For as long as you let me.”

There was a pause which Greg imagined as a kiss. He was feeling more alone than ever. Reaching to rub his face, he found that his cheeks were wet.

“And I’m still your boy?”

“You will always be my boy.”

“I love you, Tups.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. Rest well.”

Tuppy came out of the bedroom and gave Greg such a look that he followed without comment or question. Greg sat in the chair he was assigned while Tuppy stowed the bottle under the sink and made coffee. While it was brewing, he sat down across from Greg.

“I’ve held my peace until now because I hoped you would work things out on your own, but I found you in my place tonight so there will be no more dicking around.”

“I didn’t intend to start anything.”

Tuppy waved this away. “The road to hell. Shit or get off the pot, mate. You have two options.”

He fished in his pocket for his key ring and removed two. Greg stared at them as if they contained answers.

“Option one. Go upstairs and fix your marriage.”

“He’s sleeping.”

“Then you wake him and you shout at each other until you’re through. Lance the wound and start fresh.”

Greg swallowed a little bit of bile that had come up. “Or?”

“Or go up and apologize. Let him have closure. Then go to my flat. There’s an empty one to let in my building and I can get you in it by end of week. I’ve been doing the odd consulting job for a
private security firm and they’d be glad of a detective should your time with the Yard come to an end which I doubt it will.”

“I have a place.”

“Spare me. You never intended to live in that shithole. It was a cowardly half arsed attempt and we both know it. Get yourself a reasonable place to live if you’re going to leave him.”

“I don’t have a choice. He’s not the man I married.”

“And you are the same as you were a year ago?”

Greg shook his head, feeling very much a schoolboy again. He wondered when he’d have done with lectures from people over seventy. “He’ll never forgive me.”

“Have you asked him?”

“No, all we do is argue.”

“That’s a good sign. Means you both still care. When you can’t be bothered, that’s when it’s over.”

Tuppy got up and poured two mugs of lethal smelling coffee and did not add milk. He stared pointedly until Greg took a sip. He could feel his esophagus disintegrate. “It’s over, Tuppy. There’s been too much damage to ever come back from.”

“Then put your coat on. I’ll ring Art to take you to mine. This key gets you into the lobby and this one into my place. The flat number is engraved on the key should you not remember by the time you arrive.”

Tuppy’s grip was far too strong under Greg’s elbow and he stood to ease the pressure. “But first, we’ll go upstairs and make that apology. He’s earned the right to say whatever he needs to say to you. Be a man and give him closure, eh? The solicitors will sort out the rest.”

Greg was being hustled across the kitchen and his brain hadn’t caught up yet. “I’m not ready.”

“You fucking get ready,” Tuppy growled in his ear. “I’ll have no more of this killing him by inches. Do not waste my time.”

They stood at the bottom of the stairs with the moon shining down through the skylight. Tuppy’s other hand gripped Greg’s chin and jerked his head up. “Let him go to be with somebody that can love him all the way, or you get in there and take him as he is, but don’t spend another minute on the fence. I’m 72, Greg, and Morris and I have maybe ten good years before cancer or dementia gets me. I don’t want to waste even a minute without him.”

“What do I say?”

“Keep it simple. And stop trying to play both parts. It’s his life too.”

A belch rose up that was full of sick which Greg swallowed down. He began to shake hard enough that Tuppy was shaking too. “Now then, lad, it’s not the end of the world. You’ll be alright. Give him a chance. Talk to each other.”

He pulled Greg in and even though he was several inches shorter, Greg felt small in his embrace. “You can do this.”
“I promised my mum that I would keep trying.”

“There you are, then. Off you go.”

Greg started up the steps, his legs quivering. He gripped the rail and pulled himself up.

“Oh and Greg? If I ever catch you sniffing around my man again, I will end you.”

“Noted.”

Greg didn’t quite make it to the loo by his study and sicked up all over his jumper. It tasted mostly of coffee and he had Tuppy to thank for that. He got the spew laden top off and left it draped over the toilet. He was thankful for once that his hair was shorn so he could wipe off the little bit of vomit that had leaked when he pulled the jumper over his head. He still gagged as he scrubbed himself.

Nothing seemed real anymore when he looked in the mirror. It was his former home but it didn’t look familiar. Because he had changed, everything around him was different. He couldn’t go back to before the shooting, and he couldn’t picture moving forward. There didn’t seem to be any way to make it right.

He sat on the floor of the loo, the small space feeling safe. It was a nothing room and he could think there. His mum and Tuppy had both said that he was trying to figure it all out on his own. He couldn’t predict or control My’s reactions. Maybe he could break it down so the enormity wouldn’t intimidate him. If he apologized, then he was keeping his promise to his mum. Either My would take him back, or he would have shown them that he tried and My wasn’t having it. Regardless, if he apologized, he would have made an effort and could sleep in the house somewhere this night with a clear conscience.

While he was seated, he took off his shoes, not caring to announce his appearance. He was a bit light headed but nearly sober from the sheer terror of facing his husband. Moving very slowly, he got to the top floor, thankful for the moonlight. His heart was pounding as he tried the doorknob, hoping it might be locked. No such luck.

With the blood rushing in his ears, he couldn’t tell if My was sleeping or not. He inched toward the bed, his legs giving out when he made it to My’s side. He knelt there, empty in every way. It took three tries to get any sounds out. “My?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry for all of it. I know you can’t forgive me but Mum and Tuppy said that I had to try. I’m not sure if you’ll believe me after the way I’ve behaved, but I still love you. My love isn’t worth much anymore, but I thought you should know.”

There was total silence except for his teeth chattering. When he couldn’t bear it any longer, he repeated, “I love you, and I’m sorry.”

There was a rustling of covers. “You’re shivering, Greg. You’d best come on through.”

My held up the duvet, making a welcoming shelter. Greg crawled in as My budged over to make room. Greg only had a minute to notice that the bed wasn’t that warm before he was engulfed. Once My’s arms were around him, the shaking increased until he thought it would never stop. He wasn’t breathing much either and got lightheaded. He bit his tongue.

For a while, he couldn’t even think but just held on while My’s arms were so tight around him that it hurt and obstructed his breathing further. He didn’t care. It was as if he’d been pulled back from
the edge of a cliff seconds before the earth gave way, and he and his rescuer lay on the very edge looking down into the abyss where they both might have fallen to their deaths.

Once he stopped shaking which took a long time, My eased his grip but didn’t pull away. “This is where you belong. In our bed.”

It was better than forgiveness. My sounded quite firm. Greg rubbed his cheek against My’s top, wishing he could bury his face in My’s chest but knowing it was far too soon for that. The thick fabric was damp with sweat and had a strange odor, not My’s usual scent. Greg moved his hand along My’s back but couldn’t find a waist band. “What are you wearing?”

“Do I have to say?”

“Unless you blindfold me, I’m going to find out come morning.”

“It’s the blue footie pyjamas you got me for our baby experiment. I cut off the mittens.”

“God, My, is it as bad as all that?”

“The bed was very cold without you.”

Greg hugged him again, wanting to give comfort for all the nights they had slept apart. “I’m sorry. I’ll say it as many times as I have to.”

“You’re home now. That’s all that matters.”

But Greg wanted all his cards on the table. He didn’t want My giving him an easy time of it and resentment coming out later. While the wounds were still raw, he wanted every last shard of glass picked out of them. “I hurt you on purpose. I could blame it on the shooting, but I made a choice to be cruel.”

“I know.”

“Sometimes, I hated you.”

“That was entirely mutual.”

“I don’t hate you now.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.”

Greg wondered how long they might lie there making small talk but then he caught a whiff of his own breath. “I can’t sleep here like this.”

“Please don’t go. We can make it work.”

“No, I mean I can’t sleep while my breath reeks of cigarettes and sick.”

“I’m redolent of mildew. I’ve been rinsing this out in the sink and hiding it from Morris.”

“I’m sorry for that too.” He had done his dad’s suggested three apologies plus one. “I love you even your mildew.”

“Let’s have a shower.”

Greg started to panic but My was up and headed for the en suite. “I’ll go first so I can find something for you to wear.”
“Oh, thanks. My suitcases are still in the car at a pub to be remembered later.”

“My people will take care of it in the morning. I’ll put out a fresh toothbrush.”

While My was in the shower, Greg removed his trousers and wandered around the room in his T-shirt and boxers. He cautiously sipped at a bottle of water he found in the mini fridge, hungry but not willing to risk more. He wished they were far enough along in their reconciliation that he could join My in the shower and soap his back for him. There was that one little spot in the middle that he couldn’t reach.

When it was his turn in the bath, he picked up the blue outfit where My had left it by the hamper. It was quite worn and Greg was glad it had brought My some warmth during their separation. He showered quickly in case My changed his mind by having too much time to think.

When he got out of the shower, chocolate brown silk pyjamas were waiting. They would match his dressing gown. He would have to send his mum a picture. He cleaned his teeth twice, feeling suddenly shy.

When he finally came out, My was smoothing the duvet. “I changed the sheets so we won’t be accosted by the creeping damp.”

They stood on opposite sides of the bed, paralyzed with the weight of starting over. Greg felt as if he were going to have to start every day for the rest of their lives with an apology. He still didn’t know how to make it right. It couldn’t be so simple as My welcoming him home as if nothing had happened. The hurts and misunderstandings were still there. “I’m so afraid that I’ll hurt you again.”

“You will, but maybe you could cut back on the intentional bits.”

“There’s so much rage in me, My. I don’t know how to get it out.”

“I think you’re going to have to see someone. An expert that you can’t con.”

“I want Gil, but he’s retired.”

“I’ll get him for you.”

“That sounds ominous. I won’t have him bribed or coerced.”

“If he’s the sort of man that could be bribed, I wouldn’t want him helping you.”

He had hurt My again, this time completely by accident. They were walking right along the edge of arguing again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“We’ll go to him together, but for what’s left of the night, do you think we could table this discussion?”

“That might be best.”

“I do want to talk it all over with you, love, but I’m weary and I haven’t slept the night through since you left our bed.” My’s eyes were glittering and Greg understood what the admission had cost him.

My climbed into bed on the fresh sheets, looking exhausted and small. Greg followed, staring at the gulf of bed between them. Nearly a whole year of marriage, and they were back to staying on opposite sides. He remembered how early on, when he had made a small overture, My had met
him half way and was glad for it. “Do you think I might kiss you?”

“I’d like that.”

But with permission given, Greg was suddenly at a loss. “I’m nervous.”

My waited, eyes cast down to where his fingers traced the pattern on the duvet. Greg needed that little push from My’s side but it didn’t come. Then he realized that My was open but reluctant after Greg had shamed him and accused him of being needy. It was going to be Greg making the first move for awhile. He leaned across the bed and stroked My’s cheek, shocked at the sharp jut of bone. He kissed him there anyway and then taking his other hand, turned My’s face up toward his.

Their noses bumped and Greg missed My’s lips completely. “We used to know how to do this.”

“Try again?”

Greg closed his eyes and held out his hand. When he felt My’s fingers link with his, he squeezed three times for ‘I love you’ and My squeezed back his answer. He stopped worrying about giving My a perfect kiss and put his lips wherever they fell, on My’s chin and his nose and his eyes until finally, their lips met in the usual way, and it was good. My whimpered into his mouth as he submitted to Greg’s lead.

“I couldn’t remember what it felt like to kiss you anymore. I wasn’t paying attention the last time. I’m going to remember every kiss I give you from now on.”

Greg deepened the next kiss and My’s arms went around his neck, his body pressing close. Greg slid his hand under My’s top to rub his bare back. He needed My’s skin which was soft and fresh from the shower. My gasped. “I’m sorry, Greg, but I’m not ready.”

“It’s fine. I’m not ready either.”

It was awkward again. Greg felt thwarted even though he was miles away from being ready for sex and had only hours ago been thinking of all sorts of diversionary tactics to avoid it. Now that they were on speaking terms, he missed the comfort of My’s body. He also wasn’t used to ever having to initiate intimacy. My had always been more than ready and usually took the initiative.

There he was trying to work out the problem by himself when My was sitting beside him. “Do you think we could hold each other?”

“I’d like that.”

They bumped heads; Greg’s head already ached with the promise of a hangover and his stomach was none to steady. “Could you hold me?”

My reached his arms out, and Greg immediately felt better when his head was on My’s shoulder although My’s collar bone pressed against his temple where the headache thudded. The adrenaline was fading and Greg thought he could eventually sleep. When My’s fingers rubbed circles on Greg’s head, the sense memory took him back to being sick and alone and then having the phantom touch of the night nurse soothe him. Tears were close and he wiggled a finger between My’s buttons to touch My’s chest, only a little touch, only for comfort.

My’s hand reached between them and unbuttoned his top, pulling it free so Greg could nuzzle against his bare chest. Cool lips pressed against the top of his head. The night nurse had an excellent bedside manner. My was the one who needed rest, yet Greg kept dozing when he wanted to memorize every moment. He still felt empty and lost, his future uncertain, but My had
forgiven him and that was enough to be going on with.
Greg and Mycroft meet with Greg’s therapist. Mycroft struggles with how to be supportive but not smothering.

They were polite with each other, tentative, awkward, and stammering. Mycroft had thought that if Greg came home and was once again in their bed, that all would magically be restored. It was not. They had slept fitfully in spite of exhaustion; Greg had a nightmare and Mycroft had been unsure if comforting him was acceptable or not.

He was haunted by the things Greg had said in their worst arguments and was careful to not touch Greg’s chest in any way even though it was clothed in pyjamas. How could he know the difference between being a supportive spouse and being smothering? Alarm bells and sirens rang in his head before any word or action. Exhaustion remained and the emotional pain was a cramp in the back of his throat.

Greg was cowed. Their reconciliation seemed to have set him back in regards to his PTSD symptoms. He flinched at any sudden sound or movement, and his eyes darted back and forth in hypervigilance. Mycroft could see the tension in his muscles as if the guilt were a visible load on his back. Any revenge fantasies Mycroft might have entertained during their separation were erased as Greg remained penitent, apologizing constantly for anything and everything.

After Greg had explained Morris’ binge, they opted for a brunch of convenience foods from the mini fridge to give Morris and Tuppy some rest. Fruit and cheese and crisps and soup from a packet and cocoa. Mycroft was pleased to see Greg eat a reasonable amount. His weight was still concerning but he hadn’t been recovered from the pneumonia for that long; it only seemed a long time because every minute without him had been an eternity.

They took a second cup of cocoa and the biscuit tin down to Greg’s study for some couch and blanket time in front of the telly. Mycroft needn’t have worried about reading signals. Greg was pasted to him, reaching out for his hand, leaning against him, watching him longingly when he got up to stir the fire.

Mycroft finally pulled him in and petted his head. Greg nearly purred. The telly was merely a screensaver; neither of them having the energy or focus to make sense of it, but it gave them room to breathe and to take conversation slowly.

“I’ll call Gil the next time I get up,” Greg said.

Mycroft could feel him summoning his resources to move forward. If only they could stay in the house forever where they both were safe. Mycroft would be quite content as a recluse, but Greg would wither and die without social contact. “I’m sorry that you have to.”

“If I’d seen him in the first place or someone that he recommended, I’d be well by now.”

“We can’t know that. You experienced severe trauma. It’s going to take time no matter who your doctor is.”
“I’m sorry that I scammed my therapist.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t hold you accountable. They all seem like charlatans to me so it’s difficult to tell. Will Gil be able to help, love?”

Greg’s body was tense again under Mycroft’s hands. “He’ll strip me down to the bone, but that’s what I need. He’s always put me back together again.”

“You won’t be alone this time. You’ve got Morris and Tuppy and John, even Sherlock. And me for all that’s worth.”

“You’re worth it all, baby.” Greg froze after the endearment slipped out. “I’ve ruined that for us, haven’t I?”

Mycroft struggled for an answer. The pet name filled him with shame and fear at what he had done and at how he might fail in future, but Greg needn’t hear all of that at present. “I don’t mind it as an endearment as long as it doesn’t mean you’re feeling sucked dry.”

Greg raised up to look in Mycroft’s eyes, his own eyes bright with tears. “I’ll make it right, My, I swear it. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

Mycroft moved Greg back to his chest and kissed the top of his head. “All that’s finished. Let’s focus on getting you well.”

He didn’t want Greg penitent. It only prolonged the discomfort. He wanted normal with Greg all cheeky and sure of himself and getting lost in each other’s bodies and baths and showers together and eating off the same plate and Greg as teacher, taking Mycroft deeper into love. Greg was in his arms and the grief was still there, an intruder. He wanted someone to comfort him because his husband was still missing in action but Greg was the only person in his entire life aside from Cook that had ever provided comfort. He had become addicted to affection and support and was twitchy and irritable without it. Sympathy for Sherlock made an unexpected appearance.

The next morning, they sat side by side on Gil’s couch. His study reminded Mycroft of the captain’s cabin of a yacht, gleaming wood shelves and cubbies on three sides and on the fourth side huge windows looking onto a vista of gray sky.

Gil Hoffman might have been a ship’s captain in another time. Taller than Mycroft, Gil was twice as broad in the shoulders. Although his thick ginger hair was graying, his eyes were sharp and Mycroft found that submitting to a laser blue gaze was not as enjoyable as giving one. He was also not fond of the man sitting behind a large desk like a headmaster scolding ill behaved pupils while they had to stare into the blinding light of the horizon. He had not offered them tea.

“So what drove you into my clutches this time, Greg?”

“I said some unforgivable things to My and hurt him badly.”

“I’m fine.”

“I asked Greg, sir.”

Mycroft hadn’t been shut down in such a manner since prep school. He did not care for it even if this man could help Greg.

Gil continued. “So you waited until you nearly destroyed your marriage and were ill unto death before you thought to ring me.”
Greg shrugged. “You retired.”

“You retired from the Yard, not from the friendship.” This was said with a penetrating scowl that made Mycroft want to apologize.

“Furthermore, you conned that chit that replaced me, knowing full well the kind of work that you needed to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Greg sunk lower into the leather couch, hanging his head. Mycroft reached for his hand, giving him the three squeezes for ‘I love you.’ Greg squeezed back.

“What have I always told you?”

“ ‘Ring me if you need me.’ But that was for emergencies.”

“What would you consider an emergency? One of your team took his own life. Your mentor died in your arms. You attempted suicide by starvation and cigarettes, there’s a tongue twister. You alienated your husband. The house is on fire. You need me, mate.”

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“I’m bored out of my mind. Laurel has threatened to enroll me in a watercolors class. For the love of God, bother me.”

Gil turned his chair and looked out the window for a long moment. Mycroft didn’t dare speak but looked at Greg who seemed more cowed than ever.

Gil continued, in total command of the day. “ Speaking of Laurel, I can say this now that I’m officially retired, you were always her favorite, Greg. Would you go to the kitchen and help her with tea and biscuits? That’s my clever ruse so I can speak to your husband alone.”

Greg left the room, closing the door behind him. “There now, that’s better. The scolding and intimidation are over. You’re a pale eyed ginger like me. I’ll come around so you can stop squinting into the light.”

Gil came around the large desk and settled himself on the couch next to Mycroft. There was a tremor in his left hand and he winced as he crossed one leg over the other, holding it in place. “Greg told me that you’re a genius. You’ve picked up on my infirmity. ALS.”

“Does Greg know?”

“No yet. He needs to see me as strong for now. I will tell him when he’s ready, but if I reveal it too soon, he’ll be reluctant to go as deep as he needs to for fear of taxing me. You’ll keep my secret.”

Mycroft nodded, feeling underwater before they even began. He chafed at being a subordinate. He hadn’t been in a meeting with someone else in charge in quite awhile. This was one of the things Greg had brought into his life that he wasn’t too fond of. Yet Gil seemed like a force of nature, a formidable opponent or ally. Now Mycroft had a huge secret to keep and a horror that a man so strong would be felled by a wasting terminal illness.

Gil moved on without further comment on his condition. “I’m going to enjoy this brief interval before you begin to hate me. I can’t tell you how pleased I am that Greg has met someone to love and actually followed through to marriage. Clearly, he is smitten, and you are a longsuffering and
compassionate husband.”

“I try to be but I’ve missed the mark completely.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Greg will tell you in his own way. But I want to learn to be the man he needs.”

Gil scanned him, head to toe, and looked into his eyes for a socially awkward amount of time. “I think you’ll serve.”

Mycroft disgusted himself by being pleased with the assessment.

“I’m going to do an information dump, trusting that you’ll interrupt me for clarification.”

“I’ll try to keep up.”

“Even though Greg grew up as a copper’s son, I think of him as a thoroughbred, born to race. While he might grouse about work and talk frequently about having a holiday, he doesn’t know how to rest. He gives himself away until he’s empty and then withdraws to recharge, but he doesn’t have a clue about selfcare.”

“He had trouble unwinding on our holiday in Italy.”

“Exactly. You probably found him up in the middle of the night carving the Sistine chapel on a wheel of brie. I’ll give him more written work than he can possibly finish, and he’ll go at it like he’s being paid. While the assignments are helpful to our process, their primary function is to keep his mind occupied and to give him a sense of forward movement. I will candidly tell him so; he will not heed me.”

“How can I help?”

“You and I are team mates in his healing, but you are his co-pilot. He will become dependent on me in the short term, but you should know that my ultimate goal is to break that tie as quickly and safely as I can. He will develop tools to manage his own anxiety. I will urge him to share this information with you so that you can hold him accountable. A supportive partner makes all the difference.”

“I’ve done what research I can on PTSD, but I would welcome your guidance on additional sources.” He cursed how pompous he sounded. Gil was noting every idiotic slip, he was sure.

“It’s his trauma, but let’s have no heroes. Be strong for him to a point, but ask for help when you need it. A spouse in crisis is one of the greatest stressors. I will maintain patient confidentiality, but you may ask me anything you like. Sometimes I may not be able to answer but that doesn’t make your questions inappropriate.”

“Should I come to sessions with him?”

“You are always welcome but only if he invites you. If you are here, I fear that he will caretake you and not get down to business.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a distraction or smother him.”

“One of the hurtful things he said. Hmm.”

Apparently the Holmes’ bothers weren’t the only men with intense observational powers. Poor
Greg didn’t stand a chance at a private thought.

“Mr. Holmes, do you understand that a hurtful comment such as that tells us more about Greg than about you?”

“I regret that I did lean on him quite heavily in the months before the shooting.”

“As I understand it, you were missing in action, presumed dead, and sustained life threatening injuries.”

“Minor bruising and a broken ankle.”

“The bloody downplaying. I’ve stopped fighting it. Greg was there for you completely without drawing any boundaries. That was his lookout when you were injured, to say ‘no’ sometimes and go for a run or a pint with his mates. He never learned that skill which is part of why he serial dated. It was easy to discard a casual relationship when his well ran dry.”

“I am lacking in skills too.”

“Of course you are. You’re a man. Please don’t take the things he said in anger too far into yourself. They are distortions. We’ll all learn together. Laurel can tell you that even after thirty five years of marriage, I am still a work in progress.”

Mycroft felt marginally better. “How can I help him without getting in the way?”

“You are a diplomat with a gift for reading people. If he were your guest, what would you do? After our sessions, he will experience a variety of emotions. Provide healthy outlets and distractions, physical exercises, mental challenges. Some days, he’ll be exhausted and you might need to put him down for a nap. Recently, I’ve rediscovered the healing properties of a good lie down.”

“Do you think it would be intrusive if I take some time away from my work to be with him?”

“I think he will welcome it, but have your own occupations for the days that he is doing well, and don’t neglect your own work. We will meet each week day morning for as long as we both can stand it. Perhaps you could come home at lunch?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“I know you will. We’ll set him right. I’ve done it before when he had no one in his corner but his mum.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Mycroft reached over to shake hands, but it wasn’t his meeting to end.

“A few housekeeping details. Greg will pay for the sessions. We need to leave him his masculine pride.”

“I’d be glad to supplement his payments privately.”

“Money is not the issue. I’d do it for free, but Greg needs to feel that he’s contributing to his own care.”

“And the last issue is the most difficult. I need your word as a gentleman that you will not bug this room where Greg and I will meet. Vet me in any way that you see fit. Bug my kitchen, loo, and bathroom if you fancy a show, but Greg has to feel safe with me. Leave my notes alone too—if you can read them. ALS has not improved my penmanship, I assure you.”
Mycroft went through a series of emotions. Anger at being managed, grudging respect at Gil’s willingness to open his own life but protect Greg’s, and guilt that he hadn’t respected John’s therapist’s notes at all. He had studied them, telling himself that it was for Sherlock’s sake. All the while, he had wanted to know how this small angry man had won Greg’s and Sherlock’s hearts. He had hoped to find some way that they were alike so that someday, his brother might care about him or he might have something to offer Greg.

Gil had taken the pause for thought as a refusal. “I’m sure you can find someone who will see him on your terms, but that sort of doctor won’t help him a bit.”

“I’m not questioning your conditions. I agree it’s essential that Greg feel safe. You will have clandestine security to protect your household and notes. Please let me know if they intrude at any point or if you should feel their services are inadequate.”

Gil nodded. “I won’t ask. You will have already checked my security level and will tell me what you can on your own terms.”

“I will, just as you’ll keep me informed on the progress of your illness. I can be of help there. The best of specialists are at your disposal.”

“That would be much appreciated.”

“Is there anything else that I should know?” Mycroft smiled as they both jockeyed for power with meeting ending phrases.

“Your husband is a very stubborn man unaccustomed to asking for help. That nasty independent streak is what brought him so low.”

“No, that’s my fault. I didn’t know how to help him properly.”

Gil laughed. “I appreciate your honesty, but Greg was swatting away help like a wounded bear long before you came on the scene. He’s going to lash out more. Rage is a cover story for terror. I’ll direct as much of it as I can toward me. Please let me know if he crosses the line into verbal abuse. Lean heavily on the other people in your support circle.”

Gil wasn’t omniscient after all because there wasn’t one bloody person in the whole world besides Greg that could help Mycroft. He was worse than alone. Complaining to Morris or Tuppy would be disloyal and a tad fickle since he had announced that if Greg would just come home, everything would be fine. John had his own cross to bear. Mummy was wintering in Barbados as if she’d have a significant contribution. Phoning Gigi helped a little. She had nursed Rich through losing a partner. Mycroft considered flying there some morning, if only for an hour, to put his head in her lap.

No, it was his load to carry and he was proud to do so. He surrendered to Gil bloody Hoffman and tragedy and loss.

“Shall we have that tea now? I think Laurel was baking scones.”

Mycroft didn’t even observe as they ate the delicious scones and had Scottish tea. The talk flowed around him since Greg had known the doctor and his wife for most of his career. The lavender and lemon pastries were a taste of summer on a winter's day, the tea was an acceptable Scottish blend.

“But some days the German in me wins out, some days the Scottish but always stubborn with a ginger temper.”
They tried to draw him out and he thought he might have answered politely. For all his eidetic memory, he couldn’t recall the conversation afterwards beyond Gil’s remark about his heritage and Laurel’s kind, weary eyes as she filled his cup.

The chat was winding down, the tea leaves sitting in the cups, waiting to be read. Gil put both hands on his knees and levered himself out of his chair. “There’s no time like the present. Mr. Holmes, if you’ll excuse us, we’ll get started.”

It was happening too fast. They had been sipping a relatively nice blend of tea and suddenly Gil had waved a scalpel and announced that he planned to eviscerate Greg with a butter knife. Mycroft reached out his hand for Greg’s in what he knew would be perceived as a defensive gesture, but from the way Greg clutched it, he knew his husband was frightened and needed him.

“It’s alright. I just want to make a time line of basic information today, and discuss any symptoms Greg might be having. It’s possible he may need medication for a short time, and I’d like to get that started straight away.”

“I won’t use pills.” Mycroft’s wedding ring dug into his finger under Greg’s grip.

“Did you take an antibiotic when that perp stabbed you in ’07?”

“Yes.” But Greg’s chin was up in a defiant stance.

“Then you’ll take whatever I prescribe, and I’ll wager your husband would agree. Besides, you might not need anything or you might need a mild dose for 3-6 months. We aren’t talking a lifetime commitment other than your marriage. Medication in conjunction with talk therapy can speed recovery.”

Greg nodded reluctant agreement.

Mycroft had mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was glad that Greg had someone strong to guide him through his pain and memories, but there was a sense of loss. Someone else would be making the decisions about their lives. They had certainly run the marriage into a ditch on their own and required assistance, but he understood now why Gil had said that he would come to hate him.

“I’ll wait in the lobby, love. I have some calls to make.”

But after he phoned Anthea to arrange his schedule to mornings only and to prepare some of his work for home in the afternoon, sending it by courier, he sat staring at the wall, wondering what Greg was going through in the flat above. He was overwhelmed at the prospect of reading Greg well since he had failed miserably in the past. He had been oblivious to forcing Greg into sex; how many times he didn’t know. Greg had nearly died on Mycroft’s watch. How could he hope to do any better this time?

Greg came down after an hour and thrust a bit of paper in Mycroft’s hand. It was a prescription for a mild antidepressant that also had been shown to combat anxiety. Gil had made a conservative choice, but Greg was silent and sullen all the way home.

The first morning of Greg’s therapy, Mycroft arrived home at half past eleven and paced the floor for an hour. He sat down at his desk when he heard Greg on the stairs and staged his level of engagement, reading glasses propped on his beak, typing home row repeatedly until Greg appeared in the doorway of the study. “How was it?”

“Somewhere between prostate exam with cold lube and a glass shard enema. Suffice it to say, I’ve been probed.”
Mycroft stood beside the desk and tried to ease his on-guard posture. He held his arms at his sides but placed his palms outward. He thought Greg looked like he needed a hug. He couldn’t trust his own judgment anymore.

Greg crossed the room and reached out without hesitation. Mycroft gathered him in, pressing a cheek to the sleek otter surface of Greg’s shorn head. “Morris said you waited lunch on me. I’m sorry to be late. Gil has given me several assignments, and I’ve been to the library and Foyle’s. School is in session.”

He complained about the workload over lunch, yet he couldn’t stop discussing the projects, his voice infused with purpose. “I’m to write my trauma narrative. He never made me do that before. He says it might work into an article for a criminology journal. You’re the writer in the family. Would you help me, My?”

“I think a narrative is a personal thing, but I can edit for you.”

“I don’t think I’m up for it, not for an academic journal. I can write a crime scene study or do an annual budget report, but this will be read by scientists. If it gets accepted.”

“You’re forgetting your eulogy for Walt. That’s a bit of writing you could take anywhere.”

Greg smiled shyly, his pleasure in the compliment was heart melting. “Thanks, My. That was a lovely thing to say.”

Later in the afternoon they camped in Greg’s study. Greg had migrated from his big desk to the couch, his finger stuck in a formidable tome to mark his place. He sat turned so that he was facing Mycroft, his stocking feet tucked under Mycroft’s thigh. While Mycroft pretended to read the dossier he was holding, he was too aware of Greg’s nearness to concentrate.

When Greg became lost in his book, Mycroft watched the way his brow furrowed and he squinted a bit, his reading glasses not quite the right prescription. When Greg bit his lower lip in thought, Mycroft was lost. Greg caught him watching and gave Mycroft a once over of his own. “You are bloody adorable in glasses, My.”

“Men don’t make passes at guys who wear glasses.”

“Don’t they?” Greg slid one foot out and trailed his big toe along Mycroft’s thigh.

With his cock making its way toward daylight, Mycroft ignored the flush spreading over his chest, neck, and face, and patted Greg’s foot. His body could respond but he wouldn’t indicate by words or actions that he wanted Greg. That would be either smothering or forcing sex, and he must never let either of those happen again.

Greg moved his foot back. “I’m sorry, love. Force of habit. I used to always get horny when I studied dry or difficult material.”

“What is it?”

“Gil wanted me to research the pathology of officers who turn to crime. I guess he wants me to see that it’s more common than we know and not anything that I did or didn’t do as his commanding officer. I’m to write a profile on Rich as I would for any other perpetrator, but there’s so much jargon and statistics in this article that I’m lost.”

“Would you like me to take a look?”

“I don’t want to interrupt your work for mine.”
“It’s not pressing.” Mycroft put down the profile of a budding third world dictator in order to take up the study of tragic choices for third rate coppers.

He had scanned the article in seconds, the contents in his memory for eternity. Surreptitiously, he took in two other articles and the journal’s purpose statement so it would not appear that he had breezed through material in seconds that Greg had been struggling with for an hour. Now it remained how to translate the findings without patronizing Greg.

He needn’t have worried. Greg was asleep, arm hanging off the couch, reading glasses askew. Mycroft got up and stretched Greg’s legs out and covered him with the plush throw, removing the crooked glasses. Then he watched over Greg while he slept.
Greg has a rough day while trying to make amends, but pizza, chocolate, and chest
hair get him through it.

Dedicated to rescue workers who suffer from PTSD. May they find some comfort
wherever it may be.

MyGregn (the 'g' is silent)

Mycroft hadn’t been able to maintain a sense of home without Greg. In spite of all Morris’ efforts,
the place had taken on the pallor and chill of a fine hotel. Greg was the heart of their home, and
when he left, the flame flickered and died. Now it was light and warmth again. Mycroft couldn’t
wait to get there each day.

They fell into a routine of working together each afternoon after a special lunch. Morris was
showing his support with delicious meals including new dishes that he experimented with to keep
Greg’s appetite up. Then they walked to Greg’s study and focused on books and papers.
Sometimes Greg slept for a bit on the couch, but his stamina was returning. The color was back in
his cheeks, and his eyes were bright. Still Mycroft watched him carefully.

They had dinner early which gave Morris more time with Tuppy. Then they watched some telly
or a movie in bed frequently waking up to turn out the machine and lights. “We’ve turned into my
parents,” Greg said but he stayed in the routine.

Greg went for runs most mornings. Gil had instructed him to exercise in moderation so he wasn’t
driving himself to the point of collapse. They ate breakfast together, and Greg would reach out for
a hug before leaving for Gil’s. Some days, the hug turned into holding as Greg dreaded the
wounds that he would have to open in the coming session.

One afternoon, Mycroft found Greg at the kitchen table which was littered with stacks of books
and papers. His laptop was open. Greg had a pencil behind one ear and another clenched between
his teeth. He was hunched over a notebook, scowling. Morris was at the work top, chopping
vegetables into a tiny mince. He gave Mycroft a slight shake of his head.

“Decided to work down here where the action is, eh?” Mycroft said, wincing at the false note of
cheerfulness. He put his hands on Greg’s shoulders and leaned down to kiss the top of his head.
“You look very important and very busy.”

“I want to finish the trauma narrative and a rough draft of the article today.”

“Has Gil given you a deadline?”

“No, but the sooner I put this behind me, the sooner I can focus on being a better husband.”

Morris punctuated this sentence with a vicious chop and then reached to turn up the radio on top
of the refrigerator.
“You already are the best husband I could ever want, so much more than I even dreamed of.”

Greg continued scribbling in his journal, but Mycroft could see that he was close to tears with a migraine lurking. His shoulders had been like bricks when Mycroft touched them. He needed to rest but he would fight it, seeing it as weakness and failure.

Mycroft’s heart pounded with anxiety at saying or doing the wrong thing. If Greg was dead set on finishing, he might lash out in panic and frustration. Mycroft wasn’t sure he could bear it, especially in front of Morris, yet he had to try. He slipped the pencil out of Greg’s hand and curled his fingers there. “Come away, love, for a little while. No one will bother your papers. Dance with me.”

With a hand around Greg’s waist, Mycroft could feel the tension pulsing through him. Greg resisted at first but did not say anything cruel. He pulled Greg close until they were swaying back and forth to the gentle music, holding each other instead of dancing. He Greg’s neck where the migraine hummed. Morris’ hand on his back eased him a few steps forward. Greg followed Mycroft’s shuffling box step until they came to the elevator.

“Why don’t you take a dance break with me, love? We haven’t danced since my birthday.”

“Can’t. I’ve got to finish.” There was panic in his voice, and when the point of his pencil broke, his body jerked with an exaggerated startle.

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“No elevator,” Greg mumbled, stiffening against Mycroft’s shoulder.

“I don’t want you to climb the stairs. I’ll hold you all the way.”

There was just room if they pressed tightly together. Morris pushed the button. Greg was trembling with pain and fear. Mycroft tilted Greg’s head up and kissed him deeply. By the time they surfaced, the door had slid back, and they could step into the hallway with only a short walk to the bedroom.

Greg hesitated at the door. “I’ve got to get back.”

“A wee lie down, sweetheart, to fix your poor head. Then you can go back to it fresh. Morris won’t touch your things. It will all be waiting for you.”

Greg’s compliance indicated how raw he felt. Mycroft pulled back the duvet and fluffed Greg’s pillows. Greg lowered himself to the bed; raising one leg by pulling on his jeans, he got one shoe off. Mycroft knelt and removed the other one. Greg struggled out of his jumper and T shirt then fumbled with the zip of his jeans.

“Do you need help with that, love?”

Greg grunted, tugging at the waistband. Mycroft got the button undone and the zip down with trembling hands, thinking of all the times that the snick of the zipper was a preamble to sex. Greg couldn’t seem to coordinate his movements so Mycroft lifted him up against him and shoved the trousers down over his arse, then put him back on the bed and pulled the jeans off each leg.

Greg’s chest heaved with the exertion. “Sorry, My, I had a nice afternoon planned since I did my work this morning.”

“We still can. I’m going to light the fire and get your pills. You’ll have a decadent nap followed
by dinner on a tray and a bath if you like. Stay there a moment. It’s hard to swallow pills lying down.”

Mycroft tried not to stare at Greg’s beautiful body, stripped save for the black briefs that were molded to him. He was so beautiful that his hands twitched from wanting to touch him. They had been changing clothes clandestinely since their reunion, bathing separately, and Greg’s near nakedness fueled a deep hungry ache for their former intimacy.

When Mycroft got a water bottle from the mini fridge, he pressed it to his crotch. Shame coursed through him. Greg needed his care, not some bloody perversion. What kind of sick bastard got aroused by a man who was ill? He gathered up pills and the gel mask and a damp flannel and went to Greg, easing himself down on the bed, trying not to jar it.

Greg gagged on the pills, getting them down by sheer force of will. His hand trembled, sloshing water out of the bottle. Mycroft steadied it for him to drink and then placed everything on the nightstand before holding up the duvet for Greg to climb under. He started to tidy the room so that Greg wouldn’t trip over his clothes if he got up suddenly to be ill.

Greg reached a hand out from under the covers. “Stay? Please?”

“Of course, love.” He kicked Greg’s clothes under the bed and went around to the other side to undress himself, thankful to be wanted. He debated with himself as he unbuttoned his waistcoat. Would Greg be uncomfortable if he stripped off or would it be more awkward if he wore pyjamas and Greg was just in pants? Greg had found comfort resting his head on his husband’s chest so Mycroft stripped to the waist first. Then he dropped his trousers; no point in overthinking it. Greg was too sick to care.

As soon as he was in bed, Greg rolled over and nestled against Mycroft’s chest. His body was taut from fighting off the pain. To distract himself from the direct contact with Greg’s skin, Mycroft focused on massaging the knots out of Greg’s neck. The room was quiet except the occasional gust of rain blown against the window. Mycroft slowed his own heartbeat and turned his movement to the rhythm of it until he was in a meditative state, taking pleasure in Greg’s scent and the touch of his skin.

He might have dozed, but Greg raised up, pressing his palms against his eyes. “I need to sleep it off but the caffeine in those bloody pills has my heart racing.” He flung himself back on the pillows, groaning as the movement sent a fresh wave of pain through his head. “My eye is going to fall out.”

Mycroft felt the usual anxiety of whether an observation would be too smothering and intrusive and gave it anyway, braced for an angry retort. “You’ve taken on too much. You are pushing too hard, love.”

Greg was silent, one hand cupped to his eye, his jaw working. Mycroft thought it was the pain until Greg’s voice broke as he said, “I have to show you that I’m doing everything I can to put things right. I don’t want to fail you again.”

“You can’t, baby. You won’t.” He rubbed his hand up and down Greg’s arm.

A tear ran out between his fingers. “I have to get better as quick as I can. I’ve ruined our whole first year.”

Greg was speaking out of panic. Mycroft rolled him to his side, and Greg snuggled against him. His chest was soon wet with Greg’s tears and mucus. “Don’t cry, sweetheart. You’ll only make your head worse.”
“Can’t get much worse.”

He lay still while Mycroft rubbed his lips across the shorn hair. He tried to whisper the right words, words that Greg had given him as a mantra to put Rory to rest. “You’ve paid long enough.”

Greg heaved a sigh and sat up, patting the nightstand until he found the box of tissues. He filled several, tossing them over the side of the bed. Then he pulled his knees up and rested his head on them. “If I were a good man, I’d leave you so you could be with someone better.”

“There’s no one better than you.”

“Why did you stay with me?”

Mycroft hoped his answer would be the right one; he had nothing but the truth. “Every night in your sleep, you cried out for me. You would only quiet when I held you and promised not to leave.”

“God, I’m pathetic.”

“I’m here, Greg. For the duration.”

“You are one sick bastard.”

This also was true as the nearness of an emotionally wracked Greg had Mycroft’s cock leaping like a salmon en route to spawn. He took the flannel and wiped Greg’s face. “Let’s try the eye mask, love. It will keep them from falling out, hmm?”

Greg submitted to care and finally fell into a fitful sleep which deepened as the medication took hold. Mycroft wanted to keep watch so he tried to go to his village to keep awake, but he hadn’t written much since the tragedy. He wasn’t sure where Graham and Michael could go with their relationship. Sex didn’t seem as feasible for that time period and setting. Marriage was not something they would have considered at all. The village was small, their privacy limited, both men always on call, and their platonic friendship had already been scrutinized by an inquiry.

He was painfully aware of how little he knew about gay men of the time period but doubted that they would have had long heartfelt talks about their relationship or even acknowledged it as a relationship. Research was needed but sources were scarce since a man loving a man was a criminal offense even forty years after his couple had met. But even if all he wrote was inaccurate rubbish, he needed the distraction if he could only get past the one scene.

Their kisses had deepened over time, and Michael would run his hands desperately over Graham’s shirt, wanting something he wasn’t even sure existed. After several days when work had interrupted them time and again, Michael kissed him frantically, one hand twisted in his shirt as if he would ever flee from the attention. The normal desires of a young man had overtaken him. Michael wanted to consummate their relationship, but he struggled with the tenets of their culture as well as his holy vows. “I want you, Graham, every minute of every day. The Bible says one thing; my heart says another.”

“Loving someone can’t be wrong. Even I can’t imagine a god that petty.”

“God is love.”

“Can you retain that after we’ve been together? Because if there is any chance of you harming yourself, we’ll stay as we are. I won’t allow you to scar your beautiful body any further.”
“As long as I know that you love me, nothing bad can happen to me.”

Michael’s eyes shown with trust, but Graham remembered the suppurating cuts and burns that would be marks forever on the creamy skin. The boy could have so easily gone septic. “All of the love in the world can’t save you from your own mind, lad. You’ve got to be sure before you lay with me. Get it sorted in your own mind and heart, and make peace with your god before you come to me.”

“You mean I can’t see you until I’ve thought it through?”

Graham put his arms around the boy’s waist, whippet thin and trembling. “What I mean is that we will stay chaste until you know with your entire being that a physical relationship is acceptable.”

Michael sagged against Graham. “Life will throw enough obstacles in our way. Don’t ever leave me if you can help it.”

“I promise to keep near, sweetheart.”

“I love you, Graham.”

Graham hoped his bright lad would always be so open with his affection. “Here’s something to dream on, eh? When you’re sure and we go beyond kissing, what would you like to do?”

A pretty flush spread across Michael’s cheeks and down the slender column of his pale throat. “I’d want to see your body. All of it. And touch you and have you touch me. And then, then press our bodies together, nothing but skin between us.”

“There now, that’s dreams enough for both of us. Sleep well, love.” He brushed his hand across Michael’s warm cheek, tracing the flush, and then kissed him lightly.

Mycroft came back to himself as his cock filled. He thought about what it would have been like to have a tender, kind man for his first lover and to take time to let it happen slowly as he was ready. His first had taken him like a trophy and left him lying there, ashamed and in pain, oozing sperm and feeling dirty. Then he had never spoken to Mycroft again other than to joke about his lack of prowess. If only Greg could have been there to hold him and tell him he was beautiful.

Memories of his lonely humiliating years searching for intimacy had deflated his wayward cock and brought him near tears. Such a long wanting time with no one in his corner. Morris and Rory had been his first friends but they had each other, and third wheel was almost worse than being alone.

Greg mumbled, throwing his leg between Mycroft’s. He was heavy with sleep and feverish. What if he was having a relapse of pneumonia? The doctor had warned them of the possibility and Greg had been pushing himself. He popped his arse up as he did sometimes in his sleep. Gigi said he had done it since he was a baby. His leg pressed right into Mycroft’s crotch, and Mycroft filled again, Greg’s white hot skin rubbing against his.

As he fought the erection, he couldn’t fight the memory of Greg’s voice cold and mocking “Let’s just pencil in rape for the ninth, shall we?” or the cold rush of air as his dressing gown fell open when Greg exposed him. “As freshly fucked as you are, I could still get you hard in seconds..”

Shame couldn’t shrivel him as Greg wriggled in his sleep. Mycroft was rock hard, throbbing, and resisting the urge to grind against Greg’s leg took all his strength. He slid out from under Greg and holding on to the bed, inched his way to the en suite, willing his cock to stand down.
With the door to the bedroom firmly shut, he turned on the lights, removed his pants, and faced the full length mirror. His cock was huge and angry and would not be denied. A sob escaped and he shoved a flannel in his mouth to muffle it.

Greg was in the next room miserable and alone. Mycroft was not going to pleasure himself when Greg needed him. Ice for the Iceman. He got in the shower and turned the water as cold as it would go. Then he scrubbed at his genitals with the flannel until they were sore. He ached everywhere from the cold but once the physical symptoms of arousal had been quelled, he found the emotional yearning was still there.

Greg was waiting in their bed, but he wasn’t the man that had patiently taught Mycroft to hug or made jokes out of the things that frightened Mycroft. His beautiful body was not Mycroft’s to touch anymore because he had broken Greg’s trust and violated their intimacy with his own excessive need. Whoever Greg had been was gone forever, and Mycroft missed him. He had affection, lots of hugs and kisses, and periods of sleep cuddled together although Greg’s nightmares were fierce and frequent. What he didn’t have was getting lost in each other until it was nothing but touch and taste and the whole world wiped away by their joining.

He checked his reflection in the mirror, freckles ugly against his pasty skin, cock limp and shriveled and balls drawn inside. Greg had made him think he was beautiful, one more delusion that he would never allow himself again. In the bedroom, he crawled back under the covers and tried to calm himself. His heart hurt worse than his cock, but there would be time enough to examine his shame when Greg was well.

He lay on his back as every sexual encounter since the beginning played on a loop in his mind. Where had he exerted pressure? Or made assumptions? How skilled an actor was Greg? Had Greg initiated because he wanted sex or because he thought Mycroft did? If Greg came, had he enjoyed himself or was it merely mechanics? Had Mycroft’s excessive libido created Greg’s impotence as a defense? Even if he talked to Greg about it all, there was no way to be sure. Bringing it up during Greg’s recovery would be selfish. He wasn’t sure he could ever trust again, but he needed the intimacy enough to have it on any terms. He choked back his tears in the old way, his body easily responded to the default of stinging eyes, a lump in his throat, and a heaviness in his chest.

Greg rolled over and rubbed himself against Mycroft, who was pleased to find that the chafed skin of his cock meeting linen killed his arousal. Greg nuzzled Mycroft’s shoulder. “So cold, Iceman.”

Then he gave out a little snore and it was some comfort that Greg had been dreaming rather than insulting him directly. There had been enough insults for a life time. But as Greg’s body warmed him, he knew he would endure any humiliation to prevent facing a cold, empty bed. If Greg turned on him again, he would take every angry word, even beatings, so long as he didn’t have to be alone.

He could tell when the medication began to wear off. Greg’s neck tightened under his hand, and his breathing grew labored. While he hated to wake Greg, he hoped they could prevent the full force of the pain. “Wake up sweetheart, time for another pill.”

Mycroft missed the way that Greg’s hair used to stand on end when he woke. However, he was still sweetly befuddled and took instruction well. After the pills were down, Mycroft kissed his forehead. “I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

Greg scratched over his scalp. “The pounding is a bit quieter. Maybe if I ate something?”

“Are you hungry, love?”
“Ravenous.”

No two migraines were ever the same. Sometimes the very thought of food could bring on projectile vomiting to the point of dry heaves and sometimes fighting the pain was like a hard workout that burned up calories. “What would you like?”

“Take away pizza. Lots of salt and grease. Beer and Coke.”

“Cola or cocaine?”

“Don’t fuck with me. I’ve got aneurysm.”

Mycroft retrieved his mobile from the nightstand and keyed in his pass code. When the screen lit up, Greg groaned and pulled the duvet over his head.

“I’m sorry, love. I didn’t think. Fancy anything else?”

“Chips and something extremely chocolate.”

Mycroft switched off his device and patted the figure under the blankets. “You can uncloak. I’ll step into the loo to order.”

In this time of a mild health crisis, Mycroft used the knowledge he had gained from stalking Greg years before. It had started with a desire to vet him since he seemed to be a skilled carer for Sherlock. The boy didn’t fight Greg the way he did his older brother. But long after he trusted Greg with his brother’s life, he continued to watch, falling hopelessly in love before he caught himself. He knew the place where bachelor Greg ordered his pizza and what his favorite pie was, Dominos, a large with extra cheese and extra double pepperoni.

Perhaps the pain would dull Greg’s observations so he didn’t know how closely he had been watched. Mycroft hoped to provide comfort, good and happy memories, but Greg might be reminded of his carefree bachelor days before marriage brought him low. No point in overanalyzing. They were outside the delivery area, and he had to arrange for his own retrieval. He rang the basement security detail and provided pizza for all on duty if one of them would play delivery boy.

Then he spoke to Morris regarding the chocolate and of course, the gifted chef immediately knew what to prepare. Morris was pleased to be feeding them both again. He and Tuppy were thriving which always helped. “It should be ready just when you need it. Text and I’ll bring it upstairs. How is he, Myc?”

“Miserable. He’ll have to slow down.”

“He’s trying to make amends.”

“He needn’t prove anything to me. I love him and that’s the end of it.”

“It’s a process, I suppose.”

“We have a respite this evening. I apologize in advance for the take away abomination that will come thought your kitchen. He requested salt and grease.”

“He’s thin enough. This once won’t hurt. ”

“If he wanted elephant stew, I’d go to the zoo myself.”
“You’re a good husband, Myc. Give him an extra cuddle for me and Tups.”

“How far we’ve come, eh?”

“Indeed we have. Best get back to him, mate. Let me know when he’s ready for his extreme chocolate.”

Mycroft turned out the light and stood as his mobile went to its resting screen. Morris’ compliment had been given with the best of intentions, but he and Greg both knew the truth. Mycroft Holmes was a rapist. At some point in the past year, he had taken Greg unwilling, perhaps more than once. Some actions were beyond forgiveness. He got out the ice pack. The past was beyond repair, but he could ameliorate a headache.

As Mycroft felt his way to the bed in the dark, Greg sat up. “Can you buy me a wig?”

“Of course, love, but why?”

“I want to be buried with hair on.”

“You’ll have your silver tresses back soon enough.” He put the ice pack on Greg’s head and started to massage his scalp.

“Maybe a hat then. Or a closed casket with a tasteful photo.” Greg moved the ice pack to the back of his neck. “Not the boudoir photo or me in uniform. The one of me in a tux is quite nice.”

Mycroft moved his fingers to Greg’s forehead and then down his cheeks, learning his husband’s face in the dark. He pressed lightly and it seemed as if he could feel the pain trapped there. If he had the healing touch, he could take Greg’s pain into himself.

“Practicing your Braille?”

Mycroft jerked his hand back. “Sorry.”

“It felt good, baby, but I’m feeling cross. Come hold me until the pizza gets here.” Greg settled eagerly into Mycroft’s arms. “I don’t have time for this. I’ve got Walt’s gift distribution on Saturday.”

“I can help if you like. We can make a plan tomorrow.”

“Would you, love?”

“I can provide vans and lorries and staff to whatever scale you need.”

“You make everything better. Thanks, My.” He slept hard, his breath stirring the hair on Mycroft’s chest.

Mycroft hated to interrupt him when the food came, but Morris had been working to keep Greg’s meals on a schedule and they had already skipped lunch. Good nutrition was essential, but he was still thin enough that he needed to eat whatever appealed to him. Morris had left the food in the hall. The boxes were unusually heavy because he had thoughtfully heated his baking stone and slid it under the pizza. My wondered how he would ever have cared for Greg alone.

“If I get your sunglasses, can you manage some dim light?”

“I think so. I don’t want to spill.”

Morris had provided a thick festive table cloth which they spread over the duvet. Their cold drinks
were on the nightstand while the heat from the pizza box warmed Mycroft’s lap through all the layers. “Careful, it’s hotter than normal take away,” he said, handing Greg a giant slice on a plate.

“You didn’t have this flown in?”

“No, but it was driven across town.”

Greg fell to, grunting and smacking his lips. “God this is good. It tastes just like the ones I used to get at Dominos.”

“It is. Anything you need, Greg. I will provide it.”

“If I didn’t have a gob full of garlic, I’d kiss you right now.”

“Go on then.”

The tomato and garlic reminded him of the villa and how they had feasted on the Tuscan food until even their sperm tasted of it. How he had loved holding Greg’s cock in his mouth!

After the kiss, Greg let out a soul clearing belch. “That’s the ticket. My ears popped. Glad we didn’t have the queen to tea for that one.”

He was still beautiful to Mycroft, the light twinkling on his silver fuzz, the sunglasses and bare chest lending him a debauched celebrity look. The unchecked sounds as he devoured another slice threatened to harden Mycroft in spite of his self inflicted chafing.

“Let’s have the telly, My.”

“Are you sure?”

Mycroft turned the sound low and dimmed the screen to thirty percent. He already had heartburn from the greasy food, and didn’t mind surfing the channels for Greg who was still chewing. The selection was a poor one in the early evening.

“A movie then.”

“What would you like? I’ll get something from your study.”

“No, don’t get up. We can watch whatever is in the player.”

“Are you sure? Because I think it’s Wind in the Willows.” Mycroft felt his panic rise. That video would forever be connected with their failed experiment in infantilism, and yet he had received comfort from it during his lonely nights of their separation. It had been playing when Mycroft had found Greg in their bed, delirious with fever.

“This is silly. I’ll find something else.” He couldn’t read Greg’s eyes behind the dark glasses, but his body language was anxious and guarded. “I won’t be gone two shakes.”

Greg reached across Mycroft and pressed ‘play.’ “I don’t want you to go any farther than the loo just now. If my head explodes, you’ll have to put the hat on me.”

It was surreal. They watched the familiar characters. The poor quality of early stop animation and static sets seemed tailor made for dim light viewing. Greg munched on his chips and picked bits of meat off the remaining pizza. Mycroft sipped his Coke, wanting to remain alert for Greg; the heavy food was making him drowsy. “I nearly forgot. You requested extreme chocolate.”
“Will you judge me if I say I’ve got room for it?”

“Not at all, sweetheart. You need to eat.”

He turned away and cupped one hand over his mobile to text Morris. *Bring on the chocolate.*

*Shall I come in?*

*You are welcome. We are decent."

*For once.*

He chuckled and looked up to share the exchange with Greg. The telly was back on instead of the video.

“Look, My. I found something.”

It was *Vicar of Dibley*. Greg must have truly hated the Willow video and all of the marital drama with which it was connected. He stroked over Greg’s pelt. While he would welcome back the unruly mop, he did like the sleek feel of growing hair. “How’s your head?”

“The food helped.”

“But--?”

“Still pulsing and my eyes have gone funny.”

“John might have something.”

“No needles.”

Morris bustled in and lifted the two plate covers to reveal what appeared to be individual bundt cakes. As he tapped a spoon on the top of one, a river of steaming chocolate sauce poured over the side. “Lava cake with ice cream, whipping cream, and extra chocolate sauce on the side. Milk and coffee to drink.”

“When I get better, I’m going to write a song about you.”

Morris actually blushed and gave a small bow. “Glad to see you with an appetite again, Greg.”

“I don’t know if tonight was proper nutrition, but I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Thank you, Morris. I hope you made some for you and Tuppy.”

“Oh, we’ll have dessert,” he said his mouth quirking into a smile as his scar reddened.

“Keep cake and carry on,” Greg said, digging his spoon into the chocolate and licking it off. “That is bloody fine sauce.”

“Would you say it’s extreme?”

“I’ll let you know at the other end.”

Morris winked at Mycroft and left the room.

"Here, My try this.”
Mycroft should have said that he had his own little cake, but he loved when Greg fed him. Chocolate was the sort of thing he had given up in order to maintain his weight, and then cocoa had become one of their bedtime rituals thus he connected the flavor with Greg and safety. When Greg had gone, even the smell of chocolate had made him want to weep.

“I need to pay him more.” He explored the contents of the well stocked tray. “Let’s see what a little whipping cream does.”

He put a bit of white fluff on his cake and dished up a spoonful for Greg to taste pushing aside memories of Greg so weakened by illness that he couldn’t feed himself.

“That’s brilliant.” Greg snaked out a finger and took a bit more cream off of Mycroft’s cake. His pink tongue lapped the cream from his finger.

Mycroft was thankful for his heavy exfoliating as the sight of Greg’s tongue brought nasty thoughts. He poured Greg a glass of milk and a cup of coffee.

“I just want some sips, love. There’s enough caffeine in the pills. Share with me.”

“You know Morris will have made decaf at this time of night.” But Mycroft did as Greg asked. He liked to share a cup; it was the kind of thing married people did. The last dish held scoops of vanilla bean ice cream that had been frozen extra firm to keep its shape against the steaming cake and sauce. He put one on top of his chocolate volcano.

“Do you think Morris would make me one of these anytime I wanted?”

“I’m sure he would.”

“Because when I get better, I want to stick my cock in one.”

Cake crumbs sprayed all over the tray. “That was unexpected.”

“That’s how much I love this cake.”

“I see where that puts me.”

Greg giggled and then clutched at this head. “Don’t make me laugh, My. It still hurts.”

“A bit early but you could have more pills.”

“No, they make me shake.”

“Not getting any relief then.”

“It’s come galloping back. Are there any ice packs left?”

“I’ll check.” Mycroft put the melted one back to refreeze and got another.

Greg put it on top of his head and adjusted his sunglasses. “Alms for the blind?”

“You don’t have to joke when you’re ill, love. I know it hurts.”

“I deserve it.”

“You don’t let me talk that way. I’m putting the ocean track in. Let’s rest.”

Mycroft could have slept for days. He shut down everything but the CD player and made his way
carefully to the bed in the dark. Greg held up the duvet for him, and then they were back in their private world under the covers. He let the rhythm of the waves slow his breathing while Greg petted his chest. Perhaps if he modeled resting, Greg would be able to calm himself too. The total darkness and the sounds that reminded him of the villa pulled him down into sleep.

He was awakened, as he so often was, by sobbing. Between the sobs, Greg was calling his name. “Please, My. Don’t go. My? No, God, no. My!”

Greg came up on his knees in the middle of the bed while Mycroft fumbled for a light. The heavy draperies were pulled, and he couldn’t even distinguish shapes. His hands found the nightstand and then his hand brushed the mobile. He keyed in his code and accessed the torch app. “Greg, sweetheart, wake up. It’s just a nightmare. Come back, love.”

Greg was hunched over his cupped hands, whimpering. Mycroft knelt beside him and wrapped him up as best he could, kissing the top of his head. “I’m sorry, love. I’m so sorry.”

It was a night terror, and Greg took much longer to waken. His breathing was ragged, his body in spasm. Then Mycroft felt him go limp as he oriented himself. “My?”

“Yes, love. It’s My. I’m right here.”

Greg threw his arms around Mycroft’s neck in a stranglehold, throwing them both off balance. He rubbed his hand over Mycroft’s belly. “You’re not hurt?”

“No, I’m fine aside from being worried about you.”

“I’m sorry. I try hard not to wake you when I’m dreaming. It must have been the medication.”

“You aren’t responsible for what happens to you in your sleep. You should wake me for help. This is not something to go through alone.”

He could feel Greg trying to collect himself, but he would pull away slightly and then tighten his grip.

“What does Gil say about your night terrors?”

“That I should talk about them to re-orient myself. It’s a dream and it’s not happening right now.”

“It’s not real, but I’m sure it feels that way. Would you like to try with me? I’m not a therapist, but I’m a good listener.”

Greg seemed to be gathering himself to share the images that were tormenting him but he held back, taking a breath and then letting it go without words. Finally he spoke. “Some of them are the same, but they still get me every time even when I know they aren’t real. “We’re going for a ride and then the crash comes and —“

“You’re doing fine, love.” Mycroft reached to rub his back.

“I’m going to be sick.” Greg thrashed to get his legs free of the covers and ran into the en suite where he vomited. Mycroft followed him, staying near but trying not to smother. After plugging in the night light and dimming it with a cloth, he busied himself putting a towel on the warmer, wetting two flannels, and pouring a bit of mouthwash into a cup. When Greg stopped and draped himself over the toilet, Mycroft knelt beside him and wiped down his back and arms.

“I think that’s the worst of it. I’m sorry, My.” His voice was weak and shaking.

“I’m the one who is sorry for bringing in all that rich food. You were impaired, but I knew better.
Look up, baby. Let me wipe your face.”

Greg submitted to having his face cleaned like a child’s. He was still feverish, and Mycroft again recalled caring for him when he had pneumonia. “Rinse your mouth. That’s the way.”

He had nursed Sherlock through many withdrawals and spent many nights on loo floors, keeping calm outwardly while inside he keened with worry. Greg scooted over to lean his back against the wall. “Don’t you want to go back to bed, love?”

“Not sure I’m done. Wasted all that good food when there are starving kids in China.”

“China can look after itself tonight.”

Mycroft sat down beside him. It seemed to be his new lot to be forever on tenterhooks, not knowing what Greg needed. As he puzzled over whether he should urge Greg back to bed or into a tepid shower, Greg began to recount his nightmare. “When I had left you and got ill, I was out of my head, I guess.”

“In the dream?”

“No, in my miserable real life.”

Mycroft wondered why they were going back that far but for once in his life, he knew when to shut it.

“I came back here to an empty house. Thought I was sick enough to die.”

“You were.”

“I was afraid of the silence so I had the telly on in the library and the study and finally up here. *Wind in the Willows* was in the player, the one about Toad getting a new car.” Greg scratched at his chest and the fading scars from the infected rash he had got when he shaved.

“Real people got all mixed up in my dreams with the animals. Sherlock was Toad and drove with us like he was mad. Of course, there was a crash. I think I was Badger and being bigger and furrier, I was only scraped up, but you –“

Greg drew a shaky breath and swiped at his eyes. “So bloody fucking stupid. Just a kid’s story.”

“All stories are important. All dreams have meaning, even mine with Bruce.”

“I’ll let you work that one out with Gil.” Greg’s tone was sarcastic, but he placed his hand lightly on Mycroft’s abdomen.

Mycroft waited until he couldn’t bear it. “Sherlock as Toad, perfect casting by the way, crashed the car, and I was hurt?”

“You were Ratty. You kept getting smaller with wee paws and a little pink nose that twitched. You were shrinking until you were just a regular rat without any clothes, but I loved you. I could see your wound and the guts were—“

Greg moved his hand over Mycroft’s stomach, still checking. He was panting and swallowed hard, keeping the nausea at bay. Mycroft wanted to get Greg past the telling, better out than in. “My tiny rat self had been eviscerated in an accident.”

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but Christ, it was real.”
“Remember my recurring dreams, love. Nothing ridiculous about trauma.”

“I tried to get your guts back in, but you stiffened with the pain. I was hurting you by holding you.” Greg cupped his hands as if the body was still there. “I could feel your life fading out, your heartbeat slowed against my fingers.”

In the dim light, Mycroft could see the tears running down and dripping off Greg’s chin. He wiped them away but more fell.

“I begged you not to leave. That was selfish. The pain must have been unbearable. My hands were slick with your blood.”

Greg crawled over to the toilet and vomited again. Mycroft rested a hand on his back which was no longer feverish. When it was over, he wrapped Greg in the heated towel and then sat on the floor in front of him, joining their hands so Greg could have a different sense memory.

“I caused you pain, and I don’t know if I can bear it.” Greg pulled his hands free and covered his face. While he cried, Mycroft’s first reaction was to deny the pain, but Greg had hurt him badly. He was still struggling with the things that Greg had said and he had no one to talk to for perspective. He rubbed Greg’s head. Should he shush him? Maybe like the vomiting, the sobs were a purge, better out than in. The worst possible time to have a delicate discussion was when they were both exhausted, yet there was also unresolved tension from what had been left unsaid.

When Greg got quiet, Mycroft handed him a roll of loo paper and waited out the honking and trumpeting. Hoping for the best, he began, “It did hurt, and I’m quite relieved to know that you’re sorry. I needed to hear that again.”

“God, My, you were the last person on earth that I would want to hurt.” Greg gritted his teeth but tears continued to leak out.

“All hearts are broken.” How many times had he said that to Sherlock? When Father died, when they put Redbeard down, when he fell in love with John. He had mocked him for his tender heart when Sherlock had been paving the way. He sighed, he could only mend one fence at a time.

“It did hurt, but I forgive you just as you forgave me for making you use a separate bath and not seeing to your security clearance or making time for our breakfasts. You taught me how to forgive.”

“I’m pants at it.”

“It seems to require a great deal of practice.”

“A lifetime’s worth.”

“I believe that’s what our vows entailed.”

Greg got to his feet, pushing himself up against the wall. Mycroft’s ankle protested all that time that he had sat cross legged, but Greg gave him a hand up. They held each other for awhile, another disaster averted. Then Mycroft got them both into dressing gowns. “I’ll make tea, something mild. You’ll be dehydrated.”

“None of that herbal shite.”

“You’ll drink what I give you and like it.”
Mycroft made peppermint tea, a little stronger than he would for himself with plenty of sugar. They sat by the fire, sipping tea in silence, stunned by exhaustion and overwhelmed by the toll of moving forward. Finally, Greg shed his dressing gown and got back into bed. Mycroft followed, relieved when Greg lifted his arm and scooted close. “It won’t help me at all if you punish yourself. In the end, that was the worst part.”

“What was?”

“Watching you self destruct and not being able to hold you.”

“You’ll have your fill of it now.”

“I can never get enough.”

Greg brushed his hand back and forth across Mycroft’s belly until they both fell asleep. Spent beyond his limits, Greg sank like a stone into dreamless rest, but Mycroft dreamed of Bruce’s warm embrace and was comforted.
Duvet Day

Chapter Summary

As Greg recovers from his migraine, Mycroft conquers his writer's block.

When the alarm clock sounded, Greg turned away from Mycroft enough to grip it and yank the cord from the wall. Nevertheless he was soon making swimming motions toward the edge of the bed.

“You’re not going anywhere today.”

“I’ve got therapy.”

“I forbid it.”

“You’re getting toppy, sir.” Greg sunk back under the duvet and rubbed his stubbled chin against Mycroft’s shoulder. “I think I like it when it’s for my good.”

“You had a rather rough night and I would imagine you have a hangover without the happy memories. I want you to rest today, love.”

“Will you stay with me?”

Mycroft thought of the agenda on his desk at the Ministry, a list three times the length of what we could accomplish in one day. “Who else would take care of my baby?”

Greg looked at him with adoration, and Mycroft tried to see only that sweet gaze and not the hatred that had burned in Greg’s eyes for weeks.

“I’m going to phone Gil. I’m sure he could use a duvet day as well.”

“He was sick yesterday which is why I ended up working from home most of the morning.”

“Well then, cheers all around.”

“He will still accuse me of shirking.”

“Then I shall offer to show him the video of you retching.”

“You filmed it?”

“No, but I doubt he’ll require that sort of proof.”

“Was I very disgusting?”

“You were miserable, and I found it sad.” It took all of his former tricks to not begin weeping.

“It was my own fault for overeating.”

“Sweetheart, let me ring them now so that he can stay in bed if he needs to.”
Greg shuffled off to the loo, bleary eyed but capable.

Mycroft hated ringing anyone but especially new people where the power deferential was undetermined. “Mrs. Hoffman? This is Mycroft Holmes. My husband Greg is a client of Dr. Hoffman.”

“I know who you are because my husband only has one patient. I served you tea in my kitchen.”

“I didn’t want to presume.”

“You may presume.”

Mycroft wasn’t sure how to manage sarcasm outside the constant stream of it from Sherlock. Best to ignore it and move forward. “Greg is ill. I think it best if he stays home today.”

“Is it contagious?” Suddenly she was all business.

Mycroft realized that she would be worried about her husband’s health considering his condition. “He gave himself a migraine from studying without his reading glasses, but he is a bit feverish. He’s also in charge of a sizable charity event on Saturday, and I think the stress is manifesting physically.”

“He’s been worried all week about how he will make it to all the stops. I give them tea before their sessions and I hear things.”

“I’ll manage the logistics if he’ll let me.”

“What are we going to do with our boys? Independence is all well and good until they make themselves sick trying to slog through it alone.”

“Is Dr. Hoffman unwell?” stupid question, you git. He has a terminal illness. “Morris said that Greg came home early because Gil was having a rough day,” Mycroft glanced in the direction of the loo where the shower had started.

“He’s not ill yet other than the obvious, but he’s been pushing too hard.”

“I’m sorry for our part in that.”

“Please don’t apologize. He needed something to occupy his mind. Still he won’t rest in the afternoon as he should. The reason he’s been able to help Greg over the years is because he’s a workaholic himself. He never took the advice he was giving.”

“Greg is putting so much pressure on himself.” Why am I chatting with this woman about things that aren’t actually her purview?

“Yes he is, always has done.”

“I don’t know how to find a balance between concern and controlling.”

She laughed. “Neither do I. You’ve got the right idea about today though. Any resistance we get against pampering will be minimal. I’m so glad you phoned. We can use them against each other.”

“Pardon?”

“Tell Greg that Gil needs his rest, won’t you?”

“Yes, excellent. Thank you.”
“Let’s keep in touch. We carers must stick together.”

Mycroft was fortified by the call. While he found trust difficult, Laurel hadn’t asked for anything especially dangerous. He felt she might be a worthy ally for the weeks of Greg’s treatment. Perhaps he didn’t have to be so alone.

When Greg emerged from the en suite he looked drawn. His color was not good. “I feel like shit, but I’ve got to get out of that bed.”

“Laurel said that Gil needs to rest today. What would you like to do?”

“I’d like to have a deep breath without my head pounding.”

He walked into the closet, rubbing his head with a towel, and Mycroft sat on the bed, afraid that anything he said or did would trigger a torrent of pain fueled rage.

Greg came back out and kissed his forehead. His body was warm from the shower and smelled lovely, bare under his dressing gown. “I think I should try to eat some breakfast and see how I do. Could we get away with very tatty clothes today? My stomach is sore from all the puking and I want something soft.”

“Wear what you wish, love, even pyjamas. Choose something for me.”

Mycroft went for a shower, relieved that Greg was angry at being sick but not angry at him. In the breakfast nook, they sat in silence, watching the clouds scurry across a gray sky as if they too were craving warmth and shelter. Rather than serving immediately, Morris came to ask what they might like.

“I puked like a kid on his first drunk, Morris. Something tame but with lots of black coffee.”

Morris returned quickly with coffee and toast. “Try this for starters while I make eggs and porridge. Go slow, mate.”

Mycroft watched Greg pour his coffee. Even though he was pale and his eyes were still blood shot, he looked beautiful in a gray cable knit jumper and gray plaid pyjama bottom. He had chosen a blue fleece top for Mycroft with navy track bottoms. They both wore fleece lined slippers with thick striped socks. He pressed his hand against the window to feel the cold and know that he was safe inside.

Greg wrapped his hands around his steaming earthenware mug and breathed in the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. “Aroma therapy, that is. Thanks for seeing me through the night, My. I’m sorry to be taking up more of your time during the busy season.”

“It’s my pleasure to be home with you for the whole day.”

“It’s different than the weekend, isn’t it? Feels like we’re doing something dirty.” Greg put the mug down and rubbed his forehead. “Except that I still have so much to do for tomorrow. How did Walt ever do it alone?”

“He didn’t have pneumonia, for one. We’ll see to it after breakfast. I have some ideas.”

“I’m glad somebody does.” Greg bit his lip and Mycroft watched his body language change to tense and guarded.

“Let’s be in the moment, shall we? I’m warm and comfortable, anticipating a delicious breakfast
with my husband.”

“We don’t have to go anywhere today.”

“Exactly.”

“Could we work in the library then and leave it there when we’re finished?”

“Excellent suggestion. I’ll get the fire going while we wait on breakfast.” He bent to kiss the top of Greg’s damp head as he left the room. Morris tended the fireplaces daily so it didn’t take long to have a busy little fire working. Then he slipped upstairs to get both of their laptops and Greg’s briefcase. If Greg allowed him, he could have the whole operation organized in minutes, but he didn’t want to hurt Greg’s pride by easily solving a problem that had seemed insurmountable.

He set up the computers by the long low couch and turned on a single reading lamp by his favorite end nearest the window and farthest from the door. The wind hurled leaves at him, stopped by the thick panes, and he snuggled deeper into the warm clothes that Greg had selected for him.

In the breakfast nook, Greg was still communing with his coffee. Mycroft resisted the urge to touch him again. He had to learn how to give Greg space so he wouldn’t leave again. Turning his attention to the stack of newspapers, he tried to plot a bit of diplomatic strategy as Greg collected himself with a thick slice of toast. He tried to keep his eyes on the type and not watch Greg’s teeth tear into the crust or how his tongue darted out to lick the butter from his lips.

Mycroft could get all of his news en route to work via computer and use the briefing that Anthea prepared for him daily, but he loved the ritual of the morning paper, the smell of the ink and the crackle of the pages, the crisp sheets softening as they were read and then folded beside his place like a discarded napkin.

Morris came to the table with the plates of food, eggs bright yellow against the tan of the plain pottery. “Potatoes are always a good choice for a dodgy stomach, and have a few sips of juice to keep away the scurvy.”

Mycroft surveyed his breakfast with delight—toad in a hole, fried potatoes, a slice of tomato and a ramekin of porridge with cranberries and walnuts. The reds and yellows on the heavy plate stood out bravely amid the gray of the morning. Morris had brought the matching tea pot with its satisfying weight and sandpaper surface. His special blend of tea steeped in waiting for the bit of cream that Morris nudged toward him.

“You need this, Myc,” he said, putting a hand on Mycroft’s shoulder. “I’m glad to be taking care of my boys today. I’ll bring more coffee.”

Morris patted Greg as he glided from the room. Mycroft buttered two more slices of toast and put them on Greg’s plate. “Jam?”

“Maybe later.”

Greg looked up, his eyes clearing as the coffee took hold. “Thank you for having breakfast with me today.”

“I’d do anything for you, Greg.” Tears surfaced without warning and he rubbed his eyes to hide them. He would have to be more careful; he was weak when he got exhausted.

Morris came back in with the coffee pot full. “I thought the cheerful breakfast set would be a bit loud for Greg’s head today, but these dishes don’t do much to dispel the gloom.”

“I like these. They remind me of your village, My.”
Morris stirred up the fire. “You can have your tea on them, too. For two.” He put his hand to the teapot and was satisfied that it was still scalding and then went back through the swinging door.

Mycroft wanted to treat his meal as a meditation. Greg ate steadily like a stevedore at his trencher, the firelight sparkling on his fuzzy head and on the bowl of oranges, chestnuts, and holly leaves at the center of the table. Mycroft bit into the toasted slice of Morris’ hearty whole grain bread then licked the salted butter from his fingers. They were having it rich today. He watched the thick cream swirl and muddy the depths of the clear tea in his mug which reminded him of the brown river that ran beside the village. Michael had tried to cleanse himself in that river while Graham watched.

His egg was cooked perfectly and he dipped potato into the center of the sunny yolk. These were foods for the ages. Michael and Graham might have had a breakfast such as this one. Suddenly, he could see the scene as clearly as on film, a scene beyond the writer’s block that had plagued him while Greg was away. Michael and Graham were at breakfast the morning after their first sexual encounter.

Michael’s body hummed with afterglow as the rough pottery under his fingertips reminded him of Graham’s rough beard rubbing against his shoulder. The stubble had left a rash that he wished would stay forever. He lay his hand palm up on the table, his fingers tingling at the memory of Graham’s cock, hot and throbbing in his grip. Graham reached over and gave his hand a squeeze. Yes, they would make a secret language for their secret society of two. They would manage.

Mycroft came back to himself when Greg’s fingers wrapped around his.

“How are things in the village?”

“Getting warmer.” He ducked his head, suddenly shy. Michael’s innocence lingered.

“You’re flushed, My. What are they up to?”

“I’m not sure. It just came into focus.”

“Can you write today?”

“I think maybe I can.”

“I’ll manage on my own if you can get to work on your story.”

“No, there’s time for both. We have all day.”

The library was cozy with the fire burning and the lamps turned low. Rain poured down the windows, but they were safe at home. Sitting side by side on the leather couch, they both took up their laptops.

“How Walt did all of these deliveries alone, I’ll never understand. And if there’s any family that actually saves the packages until Christmas like Walt thought they would, I’d like to meet them.” Greg typed with two fingers, pressing each key with agonizing slowness while Mycroft watched.

“The list is alphabetical but I’ve been trying to group them by address.”

Greg scrubbed his hand over his head. Even in the flattering low light, he was pasty with great gray bags under his eyes and already frustrated before they began.

“If you email me the address list, I have a program that will map the route and transfer it to the
GPS of the vehicles.”

“You don’t.”

Mycroft braced himself for a scolding, either because he had interfered or because he hadn’t. But Greg laughed ruefully. “Gil said I should have asked you sooner. Would have saved me all kinds of stress.”

Greg rubbed his eyes and Mycroft passed him a pair of reading glasses from the drawer of the end table. It took an inordinate amount of time for him to find the file and send it.

Mycroft’s fingers flew over the keys. “I’ve procured a delivery lorry with optional surveillance equipment loaded with the proper coordinates. I thought we would also take the limo. Children seem to like it, and it’s a far more difficult car to steal.”

Greg took off his glasses and pressed his palms against his eyes. “Who will drive the lorry?”

“I’ll schedule a driver. How many other staff do you think we’ll need?”

“There’s me. Would you come, My?”

“I’d been planning to all along if you’d have me. And Art will drive the limo.”

“He would make a good Santa. Walt had a costume but it’s in bad shape.”

“The Ministry has quite an arsenal of seasonal disguises. Shall we go as elves?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. Pointed ears, pointed shoes.”

“And tights?”

“Like a second skin.”

Greg leaned his head back. “There’s a picture that does something for me.”

Mycroft typed some more. “I’m having Anthea send me dossiers for agents available in the city. I’d imagine we can accomplish some side business with our little troupe of players.”

“And they would be willing to help?”

“They won’t have a choice, love, but we’ll pick them together. Some are good with children; some have used street performing as a cover. Tuppy was a nanny once.”

“He certainly took me in hand. Mary Poppins, he’s not.”

“There’s a picture for me. Your sweet little arse, rose red from a hiding.”

“You can cane me later but if you don’t mind, wait until my head is better.”

“Shall I get your pills?”

“No, they make my heart race. I need to do without them when I can.” Greg gingerly felt around his head. “Would you believe I’ve got sore spots on my scalp like I’ve been pounded inside and out?”
“I would believe that, poor baby.” Mycroft kissed where he was rubbing. “Shall we select our team?”

“Isn’t it too late to ask? Deliveries will take all day tomorrow. I didn’t arrange for help loading from the church because only so much would fit in my car.”

Mycroft thought it would have been easier if he’d been in on the planning from the beginning even if it was just to hire a van, but the task wasn’t impossible. There were people to help them who enjoyed problem solving on a far greater scale, and skilled agents restless from enforced leave.

“Violet Sparks, gymnast, acrobat, trapeze and high wire. Cat burglar as needed, but I won’t say more on that.”

“Violet Sparks. Sounds like a porn star. Is that her given name?”

“It is. She’s worked at a nursery for her cover story twice and received excellent references. She’ll do tumbling and hand stands, climb up fire escapes.”

“The kids will like that. Put her in a violet elf suit if it’s not too on the nose.”

Mycroft typed in a requisition for her services and emailed her. She had requested reassignment twice in the past month. He had barely pressed send when her reply of acceptance came back. “Violet is ready and willing. I’ve got a juggler here and then we’ll add some muscle. It’s all coming together, love.”

“Thanks, My. Walt would be pleased.”

Greg took his hand and he didn’t want to say that he needed it to type. Mycroft became engrossed in the task. Some at the ministry considered logistics beneath them, but he had always enjoyed the clean puzzle of getting people and goods to the right places. He didn’t realize how fully he had gone into his mind until the task was complete an hour later.

Greg’s head was heavy against his shoulder as he snored softly. His hand had slipped from Mycroft’s as he slept. Mycroft regretted waiting so long to help but Greg had seemed to want the responsibility to keep himself busy. There was the rub. How could he know when Greg needed him and when he needed the challenge? It was never clear.

While Greg slept, leaning on him with the trust of a child, he again rehearsed each time they had had sex. When had he raped Greg? How many times? Or had Greg only meant that if Mycroft continued to pursue him, then it would be non-consensual? He was desperate to know and understand. Some days the sorrow had been enough to fell him. Then he would rationalize that Greg had made a careless remark designed to wound as a feral animal lashes out in pain.

But all of the barbs had a ring of truth to them. Still that didn’t explain why Greg had intentionally exposed him that day, seeming to take pride in his ability to arouse. Had Greg been delirious with fever? Mycroft couldn’t stop cycling on it whenever he was still. He hurt all the time in the deepest part of himself. Tears welled in his eyes, but he must never cry in front of Greg again. He sought refuse in his village where the relationship was new and undamaged.

Graham was pleased as the days passed to see Michael thoughtful but not tormented. He ate regular meals and got his rest after days filled with a mix of study and physical labor. He was regaining his health and building confidence in the warm embrace of the village.

They saw each other every day for meals and sometimes Michael brought his satchel full of books over and prepared sermons while Graham went over his accounts ledger or caught up on his
clinical notes. It was good to be together in the same room, and Graham’s yearning was a sweet torment. If Graham’s mother had gone on to bed, Michael would cling to Graham for a good night hug and then turn his face up for a kiss.

Graham had thought they might go on in this way indefinitely, and neither of them had mentioned a physical relationship in quite some time. But one morning, Graham’s mother received word that her sister had fallen and broken her ankle and would need help for a few days.

She bustled about the kitchen. “What will you boys eat while I’m gone? I haven’t time to make much.”

“I’m sure two grown men can manage not to starve, Mother. Go to Aunt Bess and try to enjoy the visit in spite of her injury. If she’s not getting proper care, send word and I’ll have a look at her.”

He saw her to the train, disciplining himself to hide his excitement. After all, Michael hadn’t mentioned wanting more so perhaps he had decided against that type of union. At lunch time, Graham told him the news as they ate their sandwiches.

“I can make dinner. There’s nothing on my list that must be done today. I finished this week’s sermon last night.”

“We’ll have a bottle of wine to celebrate, and I’ll take my turn at cooking tomorrow.”

Graham kept the conversation light at lunch, but throughout the day, his mind wandered to possibilities which he had to squelch. It was enough for them to share a meal together where they could speak without guarding themselves.

Graham went home eagerly. Michael was in the kitchen, wearing Mrs. Lester’s apron which wrapped twice around him. The heat of the stove had flushed his cheeks, but he was beaming with pride as he placed the meal before Graham. For a minute, Graham thought of his bride Jenny and how she loved to feed him. Even when the pregnancy had made her ill and weak, she had cooked for him as long as she could.

The table groaned with a bounty of vegetables his patients had provided as payment for their treatment. The roast chicken with herbs was also from a grateful villager. For a center piece, Michael had place a loaf of Mrs. Lester’s golden brown bread and a glazed cake decorated with fruit slices. “I baked the cake today. Don’t worry. It’s your mother’s recipe.”

When they were seated, Michael bowed his head to say grace. Graham waited to tuck in until the silent prayer was finished, resisting the urge to take the boy’s hand as he had his little wife’s such a long time ago--before God took her and the baby. No morbid thoughts would intrude on this meal; he must focus on Michael and the rare treat of time alone together. “This looks and smells delicious, lad. Well done!”

“Wait until you taste it.” But he was pleased.

“I would eat my own shoe just to be near you.”

“It may come to that.”

Graham poured the wine. He and John had shared a glass now and then. It was good for John’s stomach and his weak heart although Graham never mentioned the medical benefits since John would have resisted. He liked to see the color back in those fair cheeks and John’s small tense body taking its rest. Again he pulled himself back to the present to carve the chicken. Juice ran as his knife sliced through the crisp brown skin.
“That’s a fine bird, Michael. You can cook for me any time.”

“Young mother would have something to say about that.”

“I think she would be willing to share.”

He was hungry, having rushed through breakfast and made his own sandwich at lunch. He filled his plate a second time and added a thick slice of bread slathered in butter. The wine erased the toil of the day. Graham felt sore muscles loosening as a peace settled over him. Michael grew quiet but gazed at Graham with shy smiles.

“That was a lovely dinner, sweetheart. Since you did the cooking, I’ll do the washing up. Why don’t you go and rest in my study?”

Michael readily agreed. Then Graham wondered why he had sent the lad away when they could have done the chore together and finished more quickly. Yet he enjoyed a brief separation to anticipate the evening. He hoped there would be kissing and holding.

Greg stirred and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and then opened them wide. “I’m trying to get awake. Where were we?”

“It’s all taken care of. We’ll meet at the church at seven, the whole team for a small catered breakfast. Father Matt will be there. You can show your staff where the boxes are and how they are organized. You’ll instruct them how it is to be loaded but I have a schematic for that if it looks right to you.”

Greg was watching him, mouth agape.

“if there’s anything wrong, I’ll change it, sweetheart.”

“No, this is great. Maybe over breakfast I can tell them about Walt.”

“I thought we could all get acquainted since we’ll be together all day. We’re feeding them well and giving them a small gift but they also have some reconnaissance to do during the deliveries. Your neighborhoods have a few hot spots that warrant a closer look. They’ll be on payroll for duty.”

“I won’t have to feel like I’m using them, you know, taking their weekend at such short notice.”

“The Ministry takes care of its people.”

“Unlike the Yard.”

“I should hope not.”

Greg hadn’t talked about his job at all. He looked down at his thigh, tracing the plaid design of the fabric. His long dark lashes made shadows on his cheeks. Mycroft worried. Did he need to draw Greg out? How was he feeling about his work? Did he miss it? They only talked about therapy superficially. They talked around the shooting, picking at the edges. Mycroft had no idea how to interrogate someone he loved.

“So we’ll load after breakfast?”

“I have staff for loading in addition to the staff for delivery. We’ll only have one lorry with us while another one loads at the church and then meets us to swap out. Art will be Santa. He’s quite pleased to be asked. All the young agents have accepted their assignments. Father Matt will stay at
the church and monitor the loading. He said he has plenty of calls and paperwork to keep him busy in between. And we’ll feed him of course.”

“You spoke with him?”

“He’s young. We texted.”

“All this while I slept? Christ, you’re a fast worker.”

He shrugged. “I have more resources.”

“Still brilliant, My. Thanks so much.” Greg leaned up and kissed him.

“Not too much? Not taking away your power?” Mycroft hated himself for pressing for the reassurance.

“Probably should feel guilty for dumping it on you but we’re a team, right?”

“Yes, we are, and consider all of the hours that you spent shopping for gifts and them wrapping them in that dank basement until you made yourself ill.” Mycroft’s breath caught. He mustn’t reference back to that time at risk of tears.

He shouldn’t have worried. Greg’s eyes were heavy. His body drooped with fatigue even after his nap. “I’m sorry, My. It’s supposed to be a whole day at home for us but I’m knackered to my very soul. Even after all that coffee.”

“It’s supposed to be a day of rest. Sleep is the priority.” Mycroft put one of Morris’ needlepoint pillows on his lap. Greg stretched out, sighing as he settled in. Mycroft scratched his fingers through the velvety pelt, thinking suddenly of otters. A log in the fireplace shifted as if even the fire was having a lie down.

Greg yawned until his jaw popped. “What will you do, love, while I’m being lazy and selfish?”

“Back to the village, I think.” He spread a cashmere throw over Greg.

“What are they doing now?” But Greg was snoring before Mycroft could formulate a replay.

Sex scenes were surprisingly hard to write. Mycroft had to stretch his mind back to recall losing his virginity. His first encounter had been awkward, humiliating, and at times painful. He had felt like a trophy afterwards and got more fulfillment out of touching himself in the loo when he got home. Graham would do much better for Michael.

Michael had cleaned as he cooked so the kitchen was soon tidy. After Graham threw out the dish water, he went about closing the curtains and locking the doors. He fetched the papers off his desk in the surgery in case Michael wanted a normal, productive evening of working together, but the study was dark and the fire had burned down. “Michael?”

“In here.”

His heart began to thud as he walked toward his bedroom. In front of the fireplace, Michael stood in just his shirt, the threadbare fabric transparent, revealing his lithe figure and the fact that he had removed his pants and was quite aroused.

Graham’s heart went to his throat. Michael was beautiful, golden in the firelight, standing proud and unashamed. All the love and hope that Graham had been holding back rushed through him. He was stunned.
“Graham?”

“Sorry, love. Your beauty took my breath.”

Michael didn’t duck his head to deflect the compliment as he usually did but received it with a smile. “You waited patiently while I thought things through. I’m ready now.”

“You’re sure, lad? Not just pressured by the circumstance of an empty house?”

Michael walked over and whispered in Graham’s ear. “Would you kiss me?”

Graham cupped Michael’s face in his big work worn hands and pressed their lips together, not deepening the kiss until Michael opened to him.

“I want to be as close to you as I can. I’m burning with it. If loving you puts me in hell, I’m ready to go.”

Them Graham was kissing with abandon, letting Michael feel all of his need. He’d been waiting forever to kiss Michael’s neck and the long column of his throat.

Michael’s hands ran up and down his chest, tugging at the fabric between them. “Can you take some of this off?”

“How rude of me.” Graham unbuttoned his waistcoat, the simple task daunting since most of his blood was below the waist. He sank to the bed to take off his boots, wincing as his trousers pressed against his full cock.

“I’ll do it.” Michael knelt in front of him to untie the laces and the act this brought to mind left Graham gasping. They had to slow down. Michael was risking not just his heart but his faith and soul in order to be with Graham. This night had to be special.

Once his boots were off, he took down his trousers to prevent doing himself an injury, but he kept his shirt and pants on. In the midst of the fog, he wanted to protect Michael. It was easy to go farther than you were ready for as he had learned in some fumbling encounters when he was Michael’s age and studying at St. Bart’s. He stood and pulled Michael against him. “I love you, sweetheart, and we’re going to do all of the things that you want to in good time, but let’s savor it, eh? You only have one first time.”

Michael brushed a hand though his curls, tousling them further. “Please, Graham, I’m burning.”

Ever the doctor, Graham felt Michael’s forehead and the back of his neck, but it was the fever of arousal, not illness.

“Please, Graham, I can’t bear it.”

“Lie back on the bed then. I’ll help you.”

He sat on the edge of the bed while Michael lay back, pushing his hips upward, seeking touch. Graham stroked a firm hand up Michael’s thigh, feeling the wiry hairs. He had touched Michael’s thighs when he treated his wounds, but now he would touch him as a lover. There had always been a towel over Michael’s crotch. Now he would touch him without boundaries.

Soon the long pulsing weight of Michael’s cock was in his hand. He had barely measured the length of it twice with easy strokes when Michael let out a strangled cry, his head thrown back in ecstasy.
“There now. That’s better.”

Michael lay still but his whole body trembled with after shock. Graham stroked the bright hair, soft as a kitten’s and kissed his forehead. When Michael stayed inert, Graham got a towel from the washstand and cleaned him gently. Then he lay beside Michael, propped on his elbow, and traced the pale brows and brushed a finger across the feathery lashes. The sun had kissed Michael as he worked outdoors with his parishioners. His hair had lightened and the freckles Graham loved were in abundance. While still slender, he had developed muscles working in the fields. Graham was eager to uncover every inch of him.

Michael came to, glassy eyed but smiling. He rolled over and buried his face in Graham’s shoulder.

“Any regrets?”

“Only that I waited so long.”

“It was best for you to think it through, love. I’m glad that we waited.”

“Years of waiting, then it was over in seconds.”

“You’re young. You’ll be ready for another go presently.”

“May I touch you now?” Graham nodded but Michael was already unbuttoning his shirt. “You’ve seen me when you treated my wounds, but I’ve seen precious little of your body.”

Graham helped him strip the shirt off his shoulders, urgency thrumming in him again, but this was his first time too. He had never been touched with love by a man, and he wanted to remember Michael’s every movement.

Michael stared at his chest, hands poised over it. “Do you remember when I was new? Mr. Tinsley had that abscess on his foot.”

“Not my choice of subjects at the moment, but yes.”

“Your shirt was covered in blood and worse. You stripped to the waist to wash yourself, and the water drops ran down your chest. I wanted nothing more than to do this.” Michael’s fingertips brushed across his nipple until he groaned.

“I wish you had.”

Michael uncovered him eagerly, stripping his pants down his legs. But as his hands worked their way back up, he hesitated. Graham wanted him to go at his own pace, but Michael looked up at him in confusion. “Just take hold of it, love, as you would your own.”

“I’ve never done that.”

“With another man? It feels the same.”

“No, I mean I’ve never touched myself except for call of nature and washing it.”

“Do as you like then. I doubt it will take long.”

Michael was too gentle at first, moving slowly in a way that was designed to torture, but he didn’t know any better. “Teach me?”

Graham put his hand over Michael’s and set the rhythm. Then he watched as Michael sat back on
his heels and concentrated, a bit of pink tongue caught between his teeth. Michael’s hand was on
him, more than he’d ever dared dream. “Good God,” he shouted as he went over.

Soft kisses brought him back to himself.

“I’m glad to know where this path leads.” Michael traced the dark line of hair on Graham’s
lower abdomen.

“All roads lead to Rome.”

Michael laughed. “I don’t even understand that, but I know it’s funny.”

“We’re going to bloody well laugh. Been a hell of a year, lad.”

“Better now.” Michael stretched his arms toward the ceiling.

“We’re just getting started. Your turn again.”

“I like this game.”

“It’s not a game, Michael. This is loving.”

“Until I met you, nobody had touched me lovingly since my mother died. I don’t think they even
saw me, but you see me, don’t you?”

“Every beautiful inch. I’d like to see more. Time to be rid of this shirt. I can rip it off if you like.
It’s quite worn.”

“Please don’t.”

“Then show yourself to me.”

Michael’s fingers were on the buttons. Graham was struck again by how beautiful he was more
now than ever with his hair a fright and the cares and worries off his face. Naked, he knelt on the
bed before Graham and held his hands out, palms up. He was offering himself, body and soul.

Graham reached for him and pulled him close. “I love you, Michael. I’ve never been with a man
I loved before. It’s all for you, only you.”

“I love you too, so very much.”

He rubbed up and down the boy’s back, feeling his body hum with need. If he had never touched
himself, how had he survived the years of longing?

“Will it always be so urgent? This wanting?”

“I hope so, love.”

“You never called me that before.”

“It’s our secret word. It’s our truth. You are loved. I’ll show you how much.”

Graham kissed and licked his way over Michael’s chest, flicking his tongue across the wee pink
buds under the nest of hair. Michael tossed his head from side to side on the pillow, his hands
gripping the sheet beneath him.

When Graham took him in hand, his body bowed until it seemed only his heels and the back of his
head still touched the bed. Michael grunted with each stroke, his breath ragged when he wasn’t holding it. Graham watched; he didn’t want to lose his ‘patient’ before the treatment was over.

He could feel Michael’s cock swell that last little bit in his hand, his balls had drawn up, but still he resisted. His teeth were clenched tightly, jaw jutting out. “Michael, you can let go. It’s alright, lad.”

Michael’s hand moved across the sheet. Graham took it and squeezed. “Come for me, there’s a lad.”

With a last groan, Michael surrendered. His body shook even as Graham cleaned him and checked the fire for the night. When his body finally quieted, Michael was completely spent. Graham rolled him over until they were pressed together from head to toe. Michael sighed and wriggled until one long leg was between Graham’s. Graham stayed awake for as long as he could, running his hand down Michael’s back to cup his bottom, the muscles taut, even in repose. He longed to bury his face there, to make Michael writhe and cry out with new forbidden pleasures but instead he rubbed his cheeks in Michael’s curls. There would be other nights. Michael sighed again, pressing his pelvis into Graham’s thigh. “Love,” he said, not even waking.

Even though they had gone to bed directly after dinner, the night was brief. Graham woke first to the gentle surprise of Michael wrapped around him, the steel pipe of the lad’s cock pressed between them. Graham would never be able to keep up with the lad, but this morning he was also ready to go.

Petting Michael’s hair, he whispered, “Wake up, love. I want more time with you before the day interferes.”

Michael stretched and wriggled, pushing himself harder against Graham. “I’m never leaving this bed.”

“Then you sha’n’t. I’ll feed you and bathe you until you grow very fat, and each night, I’ll satisfy your needs. But I am a working man and must earn my bread.”

Michael lay his head on Graham’s chest and stroked his long fingers over Graham’s ribs. “What happens now?”

“We go on about our work and try to be together whenever we can.”

“I’m not sure that I can hide what’s happened to me. Moses had a veil to hide his shining face after being in the presence of God.”

“I’m no god, and I think a veil might create more questions.”

Michael was silent. Under Graham’s hand, his muscles tightened as the cares of his life came back. Graham pushed away his own sadness that they were destined to be apart more than they were together.

“Sit up a minute, lad, and we’ll make plans.”

Michael grunted as his cock bobbed about when he scooted to lean against the headboard.

“I’ll see to that in a minute.”

Michael turned toward him, eyes shiny with tears. “I love you. That’s all.”
“I know you do, and I loved you first. If I could, I’d parade you down the street as you are now, and tell everyone, ‘He belongs to me.’ But that’s not the world we live in.”

Michael’s eyes blazed with the easy anger of the young. “Love can’t be bad. We aren’t hurting anyone with what we do in the dark.”

“That’s a battle for another time. I only want to get you through this moment.”

“What is required of me in this moment?”

“That’s right.”

But Michael’s head was down as he picked at a loose thread on the quilt. He was already distancing himself.

“I don’t want you to think I’m a coward. I don’t fear judgment or prison or even God. But if they should catch us and take you from me, I couldn’t endure the separation.”

“We could emigrate.”

“And leave your mother? I shouldn’t think so.”

“She could come with us. Every town or village needs a doctor.”

Michael kissed him shyly on the cheek. “I want more, Graham, God help me, I do. But the cost is too high, isn’t it?”

“Afraid so, sweetheart, but I will always be with you here.” He put his hand on Michael’s chest. “You will carry me with you in your heart.” Then he pressed his lips there and held them, sure that he could feel the beats pulsing beneath his kiss.

Michael’s body loosened again. He ran his fingers through Graham’s hair until it was straight on end. He could have stayed that way until they had to leave, but there was the pressing matter of two full cocks. He wanted Michael happy and light again, and so sated that he would have at least one day free of yearning.

“Now, we’ll kill two cocks with one stone, eh? Your fingers are longer than mine. Put them ‘round us both. That’s it, clever boy.”

Michael was a quick study. He experimented with pace, fast and slow, and rubbing his thumb over the heads. Graham stopped worrying about giving advice. It took awhile longer because he’d come so violently the night before, and Michael was on his third climax in a night’s work. He closed his eyes and explored Michael’s body by touch, the smooth skin of his hip, the press of bone beneath it, the springy hair of his chest and the wiry hair that surrounded his cock.

He stroked a finger down Michael’s throat, the Adam’s apple jutting up beneath the stubble. Then he put a finger to Michael’s lips, and the boy took it in to suck on the tip. The flick of a tongue and Graham cried out, spurtting all over Michael’s hand and cock. He grabbed Michael and worked his spend into Michael’s cock. His arm was weak from release so that he made the gentlest of passes up and down the shaft, but it was enough.

They fell to the bed panting while their bodies cooled. “One last thing to remember me by.” Graham rubbed his stubbled cheek firmly against Michael’s thigh until it was lightly abraded. “I’ve set my mark on you where you can see it and feel it. Whether we are together or apart, you are mine.”
Then acting on a hunch, he tickled Michael’s knees with a most satisfying result of boyish giggles. “Are your feet ticklish too?”

“No, Graham.” But Michael’s toes were already drawing up in defense, yet Graham was merciless.

When Michael was finally spent, they lay on their sides for one last look. Graham traced a finger down Michael’s long, crooked nose. “Will you make me breakfast if I do the washing up?”

“Will you catch a bear for me to eat? I’m famished.”

They washed together then Graham sat to watch the lovely sight of Michael shaving, the muscles in his back flexing as he moved Graham’s razor over his flushed face. When it was Graham’s turn, he cut himself twice. Covering up their naked bodies with clothing was one of the few human acts that Graham believed was a sin. He stopped them frequently for kisses; Michael’s hands strayed to Graham’s chest constantly. But finally when they were both presentable, Michael grabbed him in a desperate hug. “If last night is all we ever have, it is enough.”

Graham cupped Michael’s face, his thumbs stroking back and forth across the freckles. “I promise we’ll find a way, but near or far, I am always with you.”

Then he let Michael rest in his arms until he was ready to go. A knock at the kitchen door ended their Eden.

Mycroft startled as Greg sat up suddenly. “Are you crying, baby?” Greg’s rough thumb brushed tears away.

“Happy tears for my couple. If I’d only met you when I was Michael’s age.”

“I was a prat and a player. I’d have left you by the side of the road with your trousers around your ankles.”

Mycroft couldn’t imagine Greg being anything but gentle even after he’d seen the rage that Greg was capable of. “I still wish you had been my first; then maybe I wouldn’t have…” turned into a rapist.

“I’d like to take my most mature self back there and give you a proper seeing to. I would be careful with you.”

“I think that’s some of what I’m trying to do with the village. Give myself a better first time.”

“Lovely, My. I’m glad. When will I get to read it?”

“It’s all in my head for now. Not sure when I’ll get a chance to transcribe it.”

“I’m sorry that I’ve taken you away from your writing for so long.”

“It’s just a hobby.”

“No, you’re really good at it, My. If you weren’t the leader of the free world, I think you could make a living at it.”

“You’re biased.” But he was pleased. It was nice to have something to offer besides political power, and he could enjoy success that wasn’t based on manipulating others.

“I’m proud of you, love.”
Greg kissed him and the shame receded. He could take it up again later.
“I’d like you to keep this costume,” Greg said, looking from Mycroft’s pointy hat all the way
down to his pointy turned up shoes, lingering on his legs clad in blue tights. The blue tunic came
to mid thigh but with My’s long legs, it still looked shockingly short.

“I’ll buy them all, love, if it pleases you.” Mycroft looked his fill of Greg’s tight little arse in silver,
toned like a statue’s because of his fitness regimen. He wondered if he would ever be allowed to
access it again.

They glanced toward Morris who looked a bit like Robin Hood in his green elfware. Tuppy, the
shortest and roundest of the four, resembled a lemon in his canary yellow suit.

The morning had gone smoothly. The young agents enjoyed each other’s company and the
chance to perform in a low pressure situation. The silly costumes were a great leveler and they’d
had a fine time of teasing over breakfast. Violet who was a natural born games director had
instructed them all to choose their elf names. Mycroft was Gingerbread for his hair; Greg was
Silver Bells although there had been a fair amount of joking about Silver Balls in reference to the
snugness of the tights.

Morris was Parsley, Tuppy was Lemon Tart. Violet was still Violet but her fellow girl elf was
Orangina and the two pretty bits of muscle they’d brought on were Merlot and Banoffee dressed
in burgundy and tan costumes. There was a game invented for using elf names properly with
forfeits for forgetting and bonuses for instigating Christmas names for other objects and tasks.
Mycroft had lost track because he was watching Greg glow. The fruition of this project had done
more for him than all of the therapy thus far.

He had faltered only once, as they stood beside the loaded vans and lorries. While the rest of them
looked rather silly, the sparkling silver stars of Greg’s costume made him look regal. He was also
deeply moved and nervous that all should go well. When there had been only grief and fading hope, he had put his whole heart into the project. It had been his alone, but now the scope of it required that he have help. Mycroft could see that sharing the day would be bittersweet.

“I’m here to facilitate and support, love, but you are in charge. Everyone will follow your lead.”

In the comfort of the limo, Greg gave the senior Santa team basic information about each family they would visit. Four men who had done field work had no trouble recalling names or situations. The young agents followed behind in the surveillance van, always white but today also sporting red candy stripes. Their brightly colored costumes entertained and distracted as they unloaded the boxes and gift bags. As part of his Santa costume, Art had a sack full of wrapped sweets to give out in handfuls while the senior elves each took one wrapped package apiece. The young elves navigated the narrow stairwells with the heavier items.

At each flat, Mycroft used his powers of observation to deduce true need. At some homes, there were tell tale signs of able bodied people abusing the system—a new telly, brand name trainers, take away cartons from a posh restaurant. His heart was not as big as Walt’s and he made his own notes to compare with Greg’s later. Some folks would be on Santa’s naughty list the following year.

At the places where clothing was clean but worn and handshakes rough with calluses, Mycroft bowed low over a grandmother’s hand, the bells on his hat jingling as he slipped a note into her hand. Or he returned the strong grip of a working man’s hand and placed a roll of notes there with a magician’s precision. The pockets of his tunic were stuffed full of notes, some folded into origami stars and bells, enough money to supplement what Greg’s toy budget could not supply.

Things were running smoothly although Mycroft would never enjoy mixing with large groups of strangers. The costume did give him protection as people saw an elf, not him. As the morning progressed, Greg grew visibly more relaxed. Mycroft’s planning and organization were working. After an hour as they got in the car for the next set of flats, Greg kissed his cheek. “Thank you. I’m enjoying this.”

He was warming to the work and exhaled too soon. They came to a flat where a young woman only opened the door a crack. “You have the wrong apartment. I did not sign up for any Christmas charity.”

“I understand, ma’am, but we have your name and a few small gifts for the children. Since we are already here, would you mind taking them instead of having us carry them back to the lorry? I wouldn’t want to tell Santa that we made a mistake.”

The door opened slightly. Mycroft thought he was lucky that Greg was decidedly gay because that charm was deadly with women.

“My husband has gone to the shop for cigarettes. If the gifts are very small, it might be nice to have something for the baby.”

“I understand, ma’am, but we have your name and a few small gifts for the children. Since we are already here, would you mind taking them instead of having us carry them back to the lorry? I wouldn’t want to tell Santa that we made a mistake.”

The door opened slightly. Mycroft thought he was lucky that Greg was decidedly gay because that charm was deadly with women.

“My husband has gone to the shop for cigarettes. If the gifts are very small, it might be nice to have something for the baby.”

He knew and could see that Greg did as well. It didn’t take such great powers of deduction to see the signs of domestic abuse. He let Greg lead because coppers had more experience in such things, and Greg knew people.

“We have a lady elf with us called Violet. Would it be okay if she comes in to see your little girl? She can do tricks, tumbling and such. Your husband might feel better if he returned unexpectedly and there was a woman with us, eh?”

Violet’s dark eyes surveyed the room at a glance and she nodded slightly to Mycroft. She took the
little girl over to the toy box and started making the child’s doll dance. The toddler was unnaturally well behaved for a child not yet school age; a baby slept in the secondhand crib by a small telly with a cracked screen.

“I’ve texted the truck for a food box,” Greg said. “Could we make some room in your kitchen?”

“We’re fine really. There’s no need.”

But Greg had a hand on her elbow and she was submissive. When they were out of earshot of the child, Greg leaned over and whispered. “My name is Greg Lestrade. I’m with Scotland Yard when I’m not an elf. I’m trained to help people who may be in dangerous situations.”

Her eyes darted wildly to the front door now closed with the chain on. “I’m not in any danger in my own home.” But her voice went high.

“I’ve told you my name and this is my partner, Mycroft. Violet is amusing your little girl. What’s your name?”

“Eliza. That’s my daughter Polly and the baby is called Keith.”

“Eliza, your husband beats you.” It wasn’t a question.

In the lounge, Polly laughed as Violet stood on her head and her purple hat fell off. She rolled into a somersault and got the hat back on her head without using her hands all the while keeping watch over the children.

“We are all in forms of law enforcement. We can get you out today, and your children will have a happy Christmas in safety.”

“I tried once before but he found us. It was worse after.”

“We can relocate you. All expenses paid. New home, a job, child care. We’ll see that he doesn’t follow this time.”

Greg looked to his husband. Mycroft nodded. He would make it so.

“Why would you do that? Last time, we were at a shelter. It was so noisy and none of those things were promised.”

“This is a different program.”

“But why me?”

“Because it’s Christmas. Because this is your chance but we do have to hurry. You left once. Are you ready to stay gone this time?”

“Yes.” Her voice was strong as she watched her children. “There’s not much time though. He doesn’t like to leave me long.”

Mycroft’s mind clicked through all the variables—his own people and the ones he wanted to save. He noted how the little girl followed instructions well, and the trickle of milk at the corner of the baby’s mouth indicating that he had been fed recently. He visualized the young wife’s height and shape. “It’s the work of a minute.”

He texted Art and the agents at the truck while giving Greg, Violet and Eliza rapid instructions in his Iceman voice. As the group left the building eight minutes later, bystanders might have noticed
that the burliest elf was missing, that the purple elf was less sprightly, and that Santa was more portly, but the van and the limo were gone before anyone could question it.

Safe behind the tinted glass, Polly wriggled out of Santa’s canvas sack. Art unfastened his red Santa coat to reveal Keith in a cloth sling. “Slept through it all with only a wee fart to let me know he was there.”

Eliza wept against Mycroft’s shoulder as he patted her back. “There now. He’ll not bother you or any other woman ever again.”

They picked up Violet two streets over, looking pleased. “I was bent over the sink so he couldn’t see my face. I’m not sure he realized it wasn’t you before he was bound and gagged, trussed up like a Christmas goose.”

“He didn’t hurt you?”

“No and he’ll think twice before he raises his hand to a woman. Not that he’ll see many where he’s going.”

“Hell?” asked Eliza.

“No, dear. He’ll be reassigned to a place where he can take his anger out on appropriate targets like rocks. The frozen ground will soon cool his rage.”

Mycroft handed over a clean handkerchief from the depths of his tunic and consulted his mobile. “The cleaners have him now. We can circle back and fetch Banoffee. “Is there anything else you need from the flat. He won’t be back.”

She had faced the dilemma many times of what she would take if her home was on fire. In the end, it was her daughter’s teddy and the children’s baby books and photo albums. She hugged the baby to her. “I have all I need.”

After they saw the little family settled comfortable in a safe house, the day progressed, each stop getting easier as the vehicles emptied. When the room of treasures at the church was bare and swept of stray ribbons and glitter, they stood about, not yet ready to leave.

“Next year, with Himself’s permission, I’ll grow my own beard long after summer’s past, “ Art said, stroking the costume beard.

“I’ve got a friend who could paint the lorry to look like a sleigh,” Orangina said.”

“I could do some baking and include simple recipes for Christmas treats.” Morris jotted down ideas on a bit of wrapping paper.

“We could all help with the wrapping. You won’t be unemployed next year, sir,” Merlot said to Greg.

As the young agents continued to make plans, Morris whispered to Mycroft, “Shall we feed them? It’s your house, Myc, but I could make a nice heavy tea.”

Mycroft looked at Greg’s happy face. “Yes, let’s have them all back to ours.”

As they left the church, Greg took Mycroft’s hand. “Happy early Christmas, love.”

Mycroft raised their clapped hands to kiss Greg’s. He was moved by all he had seen. “Do you think it went well?”
Greg nodded. "Thanks to your help."

Morris fed them all, an apron over his bottle green tunic. The young ones tucked into tray after tray of Christmas biscuits and within minutes, mince pies fresh baked began to disappear as well while Tuppy held court with tales of his clandestine career. As his talent was appreciated in both word and deed, Morris continued adding dishes to the table, including his own pizza and large cups of his cream of tomato soup.

Mycroft took up his usual role as reluctant observer while his husband made a potentially awkward gathering into a cherished holiday memory. Greg was, well, gregarious. In spite of his career giving him every reason not to, he loved people. Mycroft watched him help Morris serve while complimenting him on the meal. He pressed extra helpings on the young agents who needed the approval as much as the home cooking. Greg was friendly but not flirty, a consummate host.

The meal was a fine end to the day. Tuppy, another friendly force, started the stories by telling one on himself. "I was young and keen for whatever the task, even to put on a skirt. My supervisor took one look at me; I had it all, the tights, the wig, lipstick. He said, ‘There’s ugly women in this world, but none so ugly as that, thank Christ. I never worked in drag again these many years."

Greg threw back his head and roared. He was magnificent, fully himself. Mycroft wished that he could be like that, in the thick of things. He sipped his lager and picked vegetables off his slice of pizza. In the circle but alone as he had been the night of his birthday concert.

Greg was telling his own story, both hands going, his eyes sparkling. His enthusiasm for all things was one of his best qualities and in direct opposition to Mycroft’s cynicism. Here was the Greg Lestrade that Mycroft had fallen in love with all those hours of watching from afar on CCTV. Now, in his own house, he was still watching.

"Isn’t that right, love?" Greg asked, breaking into Mycroft’s reverie.

"Absolutely." Mycroft raised his bottle in salute with no idea what he had agreed to but grateful for Greg’s attempt to include him.

His young agents pleased him when they listened and asked questions of the seasoned officers rather than promoting themselves, but as hot pizzas and fresh drinks continued to appear, they ventured their own tales. Greg listened to each one, leaning forward, tongue between his teeth, but once he caught Mycroft’s eye and mouthed, ‘I love you, baby.’

Greg’s love was such a mystery as it always had been. Mycroft found himself with a drink that he didn’t remember requesting. He could hold his liquor and had done many times to keep the upper hand whether for work or pleasure, but tonight he was exhausted and morose. When the toasts started, he gulped instead of sipping. Greg couldn’t drink because of his medication; he was toasting with ginger ale and so kept the salutes going.

They toasted Walt and absent friends, and a somber mood to match Mycroft’s was descending around the table. “To Rory,” Mycroft said lifting a shaking glass as Morris froze.

“‘To Rory,” Tuppy echoed and kissed Morris’ temple.

“To this fine meal,” Greg said, pulling them out of the ditch.

Everyone banged glasses, bottles, or fists on the table. Morris blushed. “To our young guests,” he said. “May your happiness come early and stay late.”

“Well said, sir,” one of the young ones said.
Mycroft braced for an awkward pause, but Morris said, “There’s a chocolate cake.”

Greg stood up. “Each one of you has made today special; please stay as long as you like. Morris’ desserts are the stuff of legends. But it’s time for me to take my husband to bed.”

Now the awkward silence fell.

“So nothing like that, kids. A sad fact of aging is that you prize sleep above cake and other sweets.” He winked at Mycroft. The cheek.

Then they were hand in hand going up the stairs. Mycroft stopped on the landing since the stairs seemed to have turned into an escalator. “You don’t have to leave the party early on my account.”

“I do want to honour your introverted heart, but mostly I wanted them to have time with Tuppy when the boss wasn’t lurking. He’s retired; he’s got a wealth of information. He needs to teach as much as they need to learn.”

“You are correct as usual. Why couldn’t I see that?”

“Because you were busy being beautiful.”

“Not likely in this get up, but thank you.”

“Maybe Morris can talk about Rory? And that might prompt some of them to share war stories. I get the feeling they don’t have many people to talk to outside of work.”

“You never stop helping people.”

“When I get my head out of my own arse. I hope I’m never as selfish as I have been.”

“You can’t keep punishing yourself.”

“No, it’s past time to get on with things. Now Mr. Holmes, give us a kiss.”

Mycroft was terrified of even a peck. If they kissed it might unleash the beast in him that he wasn’t even aware of. If Greg wanted a kiss, he could have it, but he would have to take it. Mycroft needed everything to be crystal clear.

Greg did that thing with his tongue and then said, “Your costume has been driving me wild all day.”

“How so?” Mycroft tugged at the hem of the tunic which ended at mid thigh.

“When I was a boy, I had a massive crush on Mr. Spock.”

Mycroft grunted as Greg’s tongue traced his false ear then sucked on the lobe. He wanted to enjoy himself. It was all safe and healthy if Greg initiated, wasn’t it? He heard the words again, Greg’s voice as cold as it was now warm. Shall I pencil in rape?

How could he ever be sure of consent again when his instincts had been wrong before? Greg might pursue sex now and hurl accusations later, but if he rejected Greg, there might not be other chances. He had thought they would have more time before Greg healed enough to be in the mood. He found himself pressed against the uncurtained window of the landing, the cold seeping instantly into his bones. The icy fear mingled with it until he began to dissociate but couldn’t find his village in the fog.

“Are you with me, love?”
“Could we go to our room, please. I feel exposed here.”

“Of course we can.”

Greg took his hand, but Mycroft’s warning bells grew louder with each step. Putting his guard back up felt miserable. In the past he had been able to view sex as a satisfying hobby wherein sometimes he received the affection that he craved. But it was all superficial and fleeting. He didn’t care for the men who shared his bed, and they certainly didn’t care for him. Some even loathed him. He had taken little joy in the power it gave him. His body was just another political implement.

Then Greg arrived, and he had given himself over completely. All the old ways of surrendering his body had been nothing compared to intimacy. Greg had his heart and his trust. Then these had been broken with Greg’s trauma fueled rage.

Mycroft forgave but he didn’t care to be surprised again. Sometimes he thought that he deserved it; sometimes he thought that he had done the best he could. There were two in the marriage. Maybe Greg could have refused instead of submitting. Greg had taught him about foreplay, and most of the time, there would be more than sufficient time for Greg to say no before they were joined.

For all of the Holmes brothers’ ability to read people, they couldn’t always deduce their husbands. Mycroft wasn’t sure that he could trust his own instincts. What was love without trust? He didn’t care to stay in a marriage that limped along in faded glory. They were broken, and it might be best to cut their losses.

When they were safely in their room, Mycroft took the precaution of locking the door even though the frightening things were inside. Greg hugged him and it felt good. His arms were strong and warm. Mycroft leaned against him, so afraid of hope. “My hero,” Greg said, kissing him gently. “God, you were brilliant.”

“All in a day’s work,” Mycroft said.

Gratitude and affection turned to foreplay. Greg’s hands roamed over him in old patterns that felt awkward after such a long hiatus. He had lost the plot, and alcohol was slowing him down. Greg’s tongue in his mouth was a bit like gristle, foreign and disturbing. The fear was cold inside him and he shook, but his cock didn’t give a damn. There was very little in the tights to keep it in check. He was hard with no way to hide it. A whimper escaped as he remembered Greg exposing him after his bath.

“It’s alright, baby,” Greg said and reached between his legs to squeeze him. “You’re gasping for it.”

How could he be terrified and aroused at the same time? Greg stroked him and it hurt because of the shame. Scrabbling, scrabbling in his mind, he formed a plan of misdirection. “Might I offer an alternative?”

“I’m not fucking Tuppy even if it is the season of giving.”

“You are so bloody funny when you’re stroppy.” He was acting and it nauseated him.

“I am as God made me. What’s your plan B?”

“Naughty elf photos.”
“Would you really?”

“Five poses of your choice, immortalized on film.”

“With the ears?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s brilliant.” Greg went in search of his camera.

Mycroft had no idea what they would do after the elf porn shoot, but he would have time to think and get his cock back to six o’clock.

Greg fitted a lens on and checked the light. “Would you get the fire, love, and the lamps? It’s too bad we can’t send porn Christmas cards.”

“At least not to Her Majesty.”

“She might fancy it, but we wouldn’t want to cause her any marital strife.”

“May I have five pictures in return?”

“Sure, My. It’s only fair.”

Mycroft sat on the bed, relief and fatigue making him feel as if he could drop through the floor to China. Wouldn’t that be a diplomatic incident? He let Greg pose him. He left his body but had nowhere to go. This wasn’t the sort of thing he wanted in the village. Greg took a full body shot on the rug in front of the fire, snapping far more than five pictures but that was fine. While the camera clicked and whirred, Greg kept up a steady patter of compliments. “You are so beautiful, love, so sexy. That’s the way. Stretch out for me. Gorgeous.”

Greg’s tunic got rucked up as he squatted to get the right angle. Mycroft could see that he was aroused too. Maybe it could just be sex and no one would get hurt. What if they stayed in the moment? Playful and happy after a great success of a day helping others. By the time Greg asked him to remove his tunic, he felt proud to show off his body. Stress had kept his weight down, and he had worked out at the ministry sometimes to stave off loneliness.

Greg’s tongue peeked out between his teeth as he tilted the camera. His elf hat was tipped back rakishly. “These will turn up a treat. Your chest hair glistens in the firelight like magic. Such a pretty ginger elf with your ginger nuts showing through your tights.”

His erection was going to feature prominently in the photos. It was so bizarre that his brain shut down. He arched his back and spread his legs, showing his yuletide twig and berries. Greg came to do close ups of his ears, thanking him with gentle flicks of his tongue inside the ear canal. Mycroft shivered as Greg blew across the dampened ear.

“I don’t have any of your arse.”

Saved by the muse, Mycroft rolled over, wincing as his cock was trapped under him. He did as Greg commanded and kicked his feet up so the curve of his elf shoes pointed to the ‘sweet curves of his luscious arse.’

“Best idea ever, My.” Greg patted his rump. “You’ve been a good sport and patient so your turn now. How do you want me?”

Mycroft was overwhelmed but copied Greg’s process with a full body shot followed by a close up
of Greg’s lovely face. His eyes were still shining from the day. He was happy and Mycroft wanted him but the risk was too high. Once Greg’s tunic came off, Mycroft was too hard and too confused to think of other poses. “I’m sorry. My mind’s gone blank.”

“Would you like me to strike a pose?”

“Yes, please.”

“Turn around a minute. I want to surprise you.”

Mycroft faced the other way which gave him time to exhale. If only he could give himself a few strokes to take the edge off; this excessive libido was what had harmed Greg. He had to keep it in check. If he turned around and Greg was exposed, he wasn’t sure he could control himself.

“You can look now.”

Greg was bent at the waist and was pulling his tights down to expose one buttock. His elf hat was cocked at a jaunty angle and his mouth formed an O. “Naughty elf.”

Mycroft took the photo and then Greg laughed.

“One more?”

He nodded, able to smile at Greg’s enthusiasm.

“I’ll be right back.”

Greg went into the en suite and giggled sporadically before calling out, “Ready.”

The door swung open, and Greg was again bent double but this time his bare arse was covered in white shaving foam. He hugged himself and shivered. Mycroft took the photo but was thoroughly confused. “Why would an elf shave his arse?”

“Why not?” Greg giggled again. “It was meant to be snow. Damn, it stings.”

“Best wash it off then, but I hope you’re done shaving things.” Mycroft was still disturbed by Greg’s shorn head.

He sunk down in the chair and pulled a throw around his shoulders. Even though the room was warm, he still felt cold. He hadn’t ever been warm since Greg had left his bed. He had craved the heat of Greg’s body. Terror had run its frigid fingers down his spine when Greg was ill. He had counted every labored breath until the antibiotics took hold. On such a happy day, he was still embarrassed and afraid.

There was a knock on the door and after his quavering invitation, Morris came in still in elf costume with a fresh apron that said, ‘Climb my North Pole.” He raised an eyebrow at Mycroft’s state of undress, but did not comment which would have been rather hypocritical. “Where’s Greg?”

“Washing foam off his arse.”

Morris eyebrow went higher. “You may not need it now, but I brought cocoa and gingerbread with some holiday biscuits. I had thought it was your old introversion that brought you up here rather than whacky hijinks.”

“I think I got all the foam off,” Greg called from the en suite.
“There’s whip cream for the cocoa if you are running low on the foam.”

“And where are you off to?”

“Tuppy and I are going to play hide the lemon.”

“Watch out for his Christmas cracker.”

“One more, My,” Greg shouted. The en suite door swung open, and Morris and Mycroft were treated to Greg, stark naked except for his elf hat and shoes. The hat was over his cock.

“Gentleman, I’ll leave you to it.” Morris bowed to each of them before pointing his pointy shoes toward the door.

“Well, he’s seen a sight he can’t unsee.” Greg was beautiful as he laughed. “Can’t unring that bell or my elf name isn’t Silver Bells.”

Mycroft was able to chuckle at both men who had been very surprised. He took the camera and got a few snaps of Greg with the pointy hat as loin cloth.

“Later we can take pictures with the shoes on and our cocks will have matching curves.”

“Christmas Eve perhaps.”

“I think Mum will enjoy hearing about our little adventures.”

“Some of the photos would be suitable to show her.”

“You write the captions, Gingerbread. You’re such a good writer.”

“Thanks, I try. But are we done being elves, love? I’m rather chilly.”

“Sorry, baby. Yes, of course, let’s get into our pyjamas. You go on. I’ll fix the room.”

Mycroft swayed as he pulled on soft, thick fleece and warm slippers. He heard quiet orchestral Christmas music backed by ocean waves. Greg had moved the low table in front of the fire and placed blankets and pillows against it for a fire side nest. The room was lit only by candles, their favorite scent of vanilla and sandalwood. He took up a throw that had been warmed by the fire and pulled it over himself. A large, firm pillow was at his back, supporting him as he exhaled. What a bloody long day it had been. His bad ankle throbbed from wearing costume shoes. He watched shapes in the flames until Greg came and knelt at the little table. “Shall I make you a cuppa, love?”

“A hot drink would be perfect. Thank you.”

“Are you warm enough? I’ve built up the fire as much as I dared.”

“I’m feeling better.” He ventured a Python quote.

“I feel happy.” Greg laughed. “But I really do. Have your cocoa, My, and we’ll look at the snaps.”

They sat shoulder to shoulder to view their elf selves on camera.

“Look at you, gorgeous.”

“I love you in silver.”
“This was a brilliant idea per usual. We played today. I wasn’t sure that I still could.”

“It would appear that everyone had a lovely time.”

“Not to mention three lives you saved. They’ll be alright?”

“She will be provided every opportunity. It’s up to her.”

“Sometimes, no matter what you do, they go back.”

“She won’t have that option.”

“Good. I’d have killed him myself if I could.”

“Not kill. Re-educate. There are some women in our special forces that will rather enjoy adjusting his thinking.”

“I’ve got chills.”

Mycroft was pleased. He sipped the cocoa and felt the warmth trickle down all the way to his empty stomach.

Greg took a sip of cocoa, licking the whip cream from his lips. “That’s the stuff. Let’s have a gingerbread in your honor, Ginger Elf.”

“The hot drink is all I need.”

“You alright, love? You didn’t eat much pizza.”

“I’m fine.”

“Let’s share a piece. We missed the chocolate cake. Do you know Morris whipped this cream himself and had it in a little ice bath in case we didn’t get to it right away. He’s an artist.”

Greg fed him some of the dense, moist gingerbread. Morris knew how to balance the strong flavor of treacle with the spices. The fact that it was made with egg white, whole wheat flour, chia and flax didn’t matter. The flavor and texture was superb. But truth be told, he would eat anything that Greg offered him on a spoon.

“Let’s have the other half. There’s peppermint schnapps here. Can I tempt you?”

“Yes, please.” The alcohol burned and cooled simultaneously. Mycroft rubbed his fingers over the mug which was striped red and white like a candy cane, the embossed stripes pleasing to touch. The hot milky drink contrasted with the cool bits of peppermint sprinkled on the whip cream. Mycroft sipped the drink, letting the schnapps flow into him like medicine.

Greg squirmed and scratched his leg.

“I don’t know how women do it. Tights and leg hair don’t match; I could scratch myself raw.”

“I suppose they shave.” Mycroft took another sip. “Don’t you dare.”

“I’ll shave my face because the Yard makes me, but nothing else. Never again. Now I’m comfortable.”

“One thing about costumes, it feels so good to get them off at end of day.”
“Here, baby, you’ve got some cream on your beak.” Greg dabbed with a napkin then kissed the tip of his nose.

Mycroft watched his hand reach out and stroked Greg’s bicep. There was a reason why he shouldn’t, but he was too spent to recall it. Greg smiled and squeezed Mycroft’s fingers.

A halo of firelight shimmered around Greg’s shorn head. “This is good, yeah? I feel like I’ve been spinning for months. But it’s over now, and I can focus on you. No more striving. Just peace.”

The cocoa was silencing his inner critic so he drained the cup. Things seemed to go more smoothly when he let Greg assume his responses.

“You used a bit of misdirection with the photos, didn’t you?”

Shame at being caught out flooded Mycroft’s cheeks. He nodded.

“You were right. Look up, baby.”

Mycroft couldn’t meet Greg’s eyes. He would see it all. Greg made it more difficult by waiting patiently. Finally with his heart thudding in his throat, he looked into those brown eyes and saw love rather than judgment.

“Your body is ready, but your heart isn’t.”

Mycroft nodded again. He wasn’t a talkative tippler, yet here was Greg before the fall, and he wanted to pour it all out. He started to say I’m frightened but it wouldn’t come. “I have concerns.”

“And you should. I wanted to thank you for using a Plan B instead of rejecting me out right. We haven’t been together in months so when we do, it ought to be its own occasion.”

“I’d like that.” Mycroft couldn’t imagine ever being sexual again, but he wanted to put himself in whatever scenario Greg had.

“When it’s the right time, we’ll both know.” He put his arm around Mycroft and kissed the top of his head.

He sat there with his eyes closed, wanting to remember the feeling. His heart had just stopped pounding hard from the tenderness, when Greg said, “There are other things we could do.”

Mycroft needed a swig of Greg’s cocoa before asking in a deep voice, “What did you have in mind?”

“A good old fashioned Christmas snogging.”

“To be honest, I’m not certain what that entails.”

Greg stroked his cheek and whispered, “I want to hold you and kiss you for a very long time.”

“Oh.”

The first kiss was chaste. Mycroft had enough presence of mind to do what he had doing since their reunion. He didn’t resist, but he didn’t respond. He sat passive while Greg kissed down his jaw and sucked at his earlobe again. His fist was clinched under the blanket. Fear was erased by yearning; he was desperate to touch Greg, but he mustn’t.

Greg licked at his Adam’s apple which always left him weak with need. Then Greg’s lips were on his again. It was crucial that he hold back because of reasons. What were they?
“I’m home to stay now, baby. Let me in.”

When Greg’s tongue slipped inside, Mycroft couldn’t fight himself any longer. He kissed back urgently, keeping Greg there with a hand on his neck. Greg’s tongue was insistent, laving his palate then flicking so rapidly that he couldn’t keep up. He felt it in his nipples and cock and arse, great throbbing waves until his fist unclenched. His hand lay palm up on the blanket to show Greg that he had surrendered. Greg laced their fingers together and squeezed rapidly in sets of three, infinite ‘I love you’s.’

Finally, they stopped for air. Mycroft squinted through heavy lids and saw that Greg’s eyes were heavy with arousal too. He watched as Greg’s expression turned smug as he caught his breath. “Well then, how are you now, Gingerbread?”

“Warm.”

“And?”

“Like little elves are dancing around my North Pole.” Should there be any doubt, Mycroft pointed to the sizable tent of his pyjama bottoms.

Greg threw his head back and laughed as he had at Tuppy’s stories. “Are you drunk, love?”

“Rather.”

“Well, you taste like Christmas.”

“I’ve got fairy lights hanging all around my arsehole.”

“God, I love you.”

“I love you too.” Mycroft was not so very drunk. He had attempted to be funny, and Greg had laughed. It was gratifying.

Greg kissed him again, and he gave himself up to it as his head was turned this way and that for various nuzzlings. Greg’s stubble abraded his cheeks. Teeth scraped the special spot behind his ear; lips pressed at the base of his throat. He strained upward and might have been able to fly if he wasn’t weighted down by so many clothes.

Greg chuckled. “How is your North Pole now?”

“Still pointing North.”

“Are you really drunk or just pretending?”

“A little bit of pretending. I wanted to make you laugh.”

“You did that. Thank you, love.”

Greg rolled him over, pressing him against the rug. He held him there in a tight hug, hand under his top on his bare back. “We both needed this.”

Greg’s fingers traced his nearly invisible eyebrows. “So fair and beautiful, my husband.” He smiled and Greg traced his lips, then ran his finger down the bridge of Mycroft’s nose.

“My giant crooked beak.” Even his tongue was heavy, the words slurring. He must have dozed because he came to when cool air reached his shoulder. Greg was taking off his pyjama top. He
felt vulnerable. It was one thing to take off his top for Greg to find comfort against his chest but quite another to be undressed while sleeping. The dull thud of panic was back in his throat, and he must have made some sound of protest.

“It’s alright. Just for cuddles, baby. That’s all.”

He let Greg finish even though he felt awkwardly naked, but then Greg’s top was off too. His cheek met the skin of Greg’s chest. Skin to skin. He sighed. One warm hand rubbed his back while the other tickled up and down his arm. He had forgot how much he loved that sensation. These were the normal things that they used to do before the shooting. Today the tragedy had been in the background. Greg seemed steadier. Maybe he could rest for awhile.

“Sweetheart? Do you want to sleep here tonight? Before the fire? I’m game, but we did have a lot of extra activity today. Might wake up rather sore.”

“Bed,” he said, with no idea how to get there.

“Up we go, then.” Greg had to stand and take both of his hands, leaning back for leverage. Mycroft was fuzzy from a bit of candy liqueur, god help him. Greg guided him to the bed. “I’ll just tend the fire and then meet you there.”

Mycroft shivered as his back met the cool of the sheets. He went into the fetal position and thought warm thoughts. Hell, forest fires, cauldrons of toxic waste. The room grew darker by degrees, and he thought he might be going blind. It was just Greg putting out the candles and banking the fire. Then finally as he was drifting off, Greg slid under the duvet.

“Here we are.”

The movement erased the tepid hollow Mycroft had created for himself. He went into a chill. “You’re shivering. Come here, baby.” Greg patted him on the arse. “Spatula.”

He was lying on top of Greg, their bare chests pressed together. “I’m not too heavy?”

“No, actually perhaps a bit lighter than you should be.”

“I’m fine.”

“I must start seeing to you again.”

He had only got over the shock of Greg loving him when the shooting happened. Being cared about was a costly luxury when you had to give it up. Before he let go, he had to be sure. “Greg?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Is it really you?”

“It had better be. I’ll not have some brazen elf rising above his station and taking my place in our bed.”

His chest shook with laughter as Mycroft nuzzled into the heat of him. He fell asleep in Greg’s arms, the only place he had ever felt safe.
Hard to Bear

Chapter Summary

The therapeutic process continues to be uneven, and exhaustion sets in. Rich Lestrade shares some information that surprises Greg. Walt's legacy provides a bit of hope.

Chapter Notes

Very thankful to be house sitting where there is a big table for spreading out my hand written scraps and free wi fi.

Hope it's not selfish to post again so soon. Going to get as far as I can before the owners return.

Thank you to everyone who commented. I would finish just for myself but it's nice to have company.

His eyes had just closed when he woke to whimpering. Greg’s whole body stiffened under him, and his ragged breaths were magnified in Mycroft’s ear.

“Walt? Breathe for me, please.”

Goosebumps raised on Mycroft’s bare shoulders. So they were reliving the shooting again. Greg’s hands spasmed in rhythm to the chest compressions he was doing in his sleep. He counted as he gasped for air himself. When he had night terrors that were flashbacks, he was as deaf as he had been that day. Mycroft had to comfort him by touch and it took longer and required care. Greg sometimes flailed in his panic and could inflict bruises and scratches which he punished himself for the next day. It was so difficult to not go ahead and take the punishment in order to stop his terror quickly.

One of the night terrors had been so extreme that Greg had gone feral, crawling into a corner and growling when Mycroft tried to touch him. He had hunched over with his hands cupped, keening a horrid high pitched sound that plunged and rose with his breath. Mycroft had been forced to let the terror spend itself as he watched helplessly.

Even though Greg couldn’t hear him, Mycroft spoke for his own benefit to drown out the strangled cries. “It’s alright, love. Only a nasty dream. We’ve had such a lovely day. Come back to me. Think on that.”

He rubbed Greg’s head in the manner that calmed him when he had been ill. Without the pyjama top, he was also able to rub his heaving back. “You’re safe in our bed, and you’re getting better, truly you are.”

They had only had one day’s respite. He felt as if he had lost his husband all over again.

Greg got his breath back and sat on the edge of the bed. “Go back to sleep, My. I’m fine. Just
need some air."

“Will you ring Gil?” Mycroft was damned either way. If he showed concern, he was meddling. If he kept his mouth shut, he was the Iceman.

“In the morning. I guess we still have things to work on.”

The forced cheerful resignation was worse than neediness. Mycroft didn’t know what to do for him, but if it had been before the shooting, he would have trusted Greg to take care of himself. He waited a decent interval before putting on his pyjama top and fleece lined slippers. Since he could no longer assume that Greg was at home, he went to this study and checked the security cameras one by one until he found Greg in the library viewing the montage of comfort images that Mycroft had made. He watched Greg watching for a long time. Finally, he went to the kitchen and made an extra large mug of builder’s tea. If Greg rejected it, he could say that he had made it for himself.

He snagged a blanket from the laundry room and folded it over his arm like a waiter’s towel. Thus armed, with offering in hand, he went to face his husband. Braced for an attack, he didn’t know how to respond when Greg welcomed him.

“Brilliant, love. Come and sit.” Greg patted the couch, then reached out for the tea. “There’s the staff of life.”

After he had taken a sip, he passed it back to Mycroft who eventually caught on that they were sharing it. They sat side by side like old men on a park bench and stared at the screen. When the tea was finished, Mycroft spread the blanket over them. Under its folds, Greg grabbed his hand, squeezing until his ring pinched his finger. The computer clicked through the images—a nest of baby birds, the terrace at the villa, Gigi in a caftan, a slice of Morris chocolate cake.

“Gil says that this is an excellent way to help with PTSD. You are so clever.”

“They use something similar to treat agents with trauma, or the reverse to obtain information from a reluctant subject.”

“I’m not going to ask what sort of pictures they use for that.”

“Mostly Anderson, clogged drains, stewed prunes, war memorials, baby rats, but mostly Anderson.”

“You’re funny.”

“I try.” He had amused Greg twice in one day.

“I’m really sorry, baby, but I’m going to need a cigarette.”

“Smoke away then.”

“I’ll go to the garden. The only thing that scares me more than my nightmares is Morris’ face when he smells smoke on the drapes.”

They put coats on over their pyjamas and walked into the frigid night. The city was as quiet as it ever got while Greg lit his cigarette. His lips quivered as he blew the first plume of smoke into the air. Mycroft reached for his free hand and held it.

“I thought I could do without these. I’m sorry.”

“We all have vices in times of stress.”
“What’s yours?”

Mycroft wanted to say, Being held by you but he had given that up too. “I smoked.”

“What have one with me. Minding me is the biggest stress there is.”

“No thank you. I couldn’t bear the agony of quitting again.”

“Well, I’ve that to look forward to.”

Greg took a last long drag then flicked the butt away to make a small shooting star. “Shit. I’d better pick that up or Morris will find it when he hoovers the grass in the morning.”

“Leave it.” Mycroft pulled Greg into a tight hug.

“Oh, that always feels so good.”

Greg nuzzled into his neck. Mycroft was fortified by the contact. They were holding each other up. He was not alone. Many people were helping Greg. He could choose to feel less burdened. They were making progress. He almost convinced himself, but he was a life time skeptic.

“Let’s watch some more of my movie.”

Greg covered them both with the blanket but his hand searched until he found Mycroft’s. His thumb rubbed over Mycroft’s wedding band while they watched, glassy eyed. Mycroft stood guard. If he had only stayed awake a few hours before, Greg wouldn’t have had a nightmare or could have wakened before it became a night terror. He would have to be more vigilant.

They spent a quiet Sunday. Greg was subdued after a talk with Gil, chewing on his lip as he stared unseeingly at the telly. There were no more overtures for sex. Mycroft was too spent himself to provide a jollying out of the fugue. He tried to do some reading for work and kept dozing. It was a relief to choose early bed and lie side by side in their own private pain.

On Monday morning, Mycroft dozed in the car on the way to the ministry, arriving chilled from being awakened suddenly on arrival. A headache throbbed in his temple, and his body was heavy and sore. Anthea came in with a stenographer’s pad and fountain pen. She paused while a junior staff served tea. Since meeting Greg, Mycroft had worked to learn their names, but he doubted he could manage much beyond his own name at present. When the girl had left, he consulted his itinerary. The list had become unmanageable. “Korea?”

“In a holding pattern. No action required.”

“They are going to delay until the last minute yet again. I hate it that Christmas truce turns into a chess game every year.”

He sipped his tea and winced. “What is this?”

“Herbal. Morris reports that you are getting too much caffeine.”

“Morris takes too much on.” But he drank it, too tired to demand another cup.

They moved rapidly through all of the hotspots, forming short term and long term goals for each negotiation. Anthea had constructed a timeline and a master project grid which was something Mycroft had done in the past. He had found that his colleagues couldn’t keep it all in their heads, and his impatience was eased if he provided them with visual aids. Now he needed the diagrams himself.
She placed two stacks of papers on his desk, one marked ‘read and sign’ and another marked ‘scan and edit for content.’ He felt overwhelmed but dutifully began. If he were to go home at lunch, he needed to move at double time through his morning. Behind his reading glassed his eyes itched, and a chamomile burp tasted unpleasantly of silage. Anthea had labeled all of the documents with sticky notes of explanation and sticky page markers where he was supposed to sign. Ordinarily, he might have felt patronized, but his reaction times were slow and his hand shook as he turned the pages. She had marked all of the documents for editing lightly in pencil; he agreed with all of her corrections. She had evolved over the past year into a deft diplomat in her own right.

As he signed the last page, she entered the office with an armful of blankets and pillows. “I can manage the rest of the morning. You’re going to have a lie down.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re looking ragged. If you can’t sleep at home, you’ll have to sleep here.”

Shame washed over him at his weakness but he could barely see her for the grit in his eyes. She was right. Several negotiations were at a most delicate stage and required his best attention. If he should err—well, it didn’t bear thinking about.

The white pillows looked extra fluffy as she made up the couch. “No one will disturb you.”

“But you’ll wake me if anything reaches a turning point?”

“Of course. In the mean time, you are in a very important meeting. I sha’n’t tell anyone that it’s with your pillow. I’ll wake you at your regular departure time.”

He stripped down to his shirt tail and boxers, feeling like a naughty schoolboy missing class for a feigned cold. It was unlikely that he would be able to fall asleep under such unusual circumstances but he could rest his eyes and try to ease his headache.

Lying down without Greg reminded him too much of the empty bed nights but he hugged the extra pillow to him. The fabric was warm to touch as he rubbed his face against it to smell a hint of lavender. The throbbing in his head stopped.

He woke feeling lighter and lay under the fuzzy blanket, gathering his strength. There was a lovely long time of dozing before Anthea came in with a large tray. “Hot towel, sir. Your private blend of tea, fully caffeinated. And cranberry walnut scones with a buttercream drizzle.”

“Thank you, Anthea, truly. This was far beyond your job description.”

“You take care of him, sir, and I’ll take care of you.”

When Mycroft got home, he found Greg pacing the floor. His lower lip had teeth marks in it. Mycroft stood in the doorway at a loss. Did Greg need solitude or comfort or advice or a blow job? Would asking him be smothering or needy? The great diplomat had no clue how to help.

He was on eggshells all the time. While Greg was finding out what it meant to live in constant anxiety, Mycroft was discovering how exhausting being a carer was. Certainly he had looked after Sherlock, but something about caring for a spouse was different. He had nowhere to decompress, a need he had scoffed in others. Greg’s pain was present at all times, in their food and drink, even in the air they breathed. Mycroft could not release the great weight of it, even in his sleep. The respite of a nap at the office or a happy day like the Christmas project made the descent back into the stress that much worse.
With no clue as to how to respond, he said nothing but did walk into the room and sit down, bracing himself. He had succeeded Saturday night in helping Greg; maybe he could make a lucky guess again.

Greg wheeled on him, scrubbing his hands through the ghost of his hair. “I’m about to crawl out of my skin. I need a cigarette but Gil fucking Hoffman wants me to quit using my crutches so often. One per day. Christ. I need to go for a run but it’s pouring buckets, and Gil says that I’m supposed to exercise in moderation. I can’t settle down to do my assignments, and everything on the telly is rubbish.”

Mycroft took it all in, keeping his face blank. He was pleased to hear Greg express anger at Gil who had been constantly quoted in hero worship for days, yet he realized that he needed the man’s help. Angry Greg was too much for him to manage on his own. He resisted the urge to put his hands up in defense at the angry glare or even more tempting to crawl under the desk.

“Gil says that I’m to start my trauma narrative over.” Greg’s eyes were huge, and tears started to shimmer.

Mycroft resisted the urge to curse the therapist. Writing was agony for Greg, and he had worked faithfully on the piece each day. “Why would Gil do that? You worked so hard.”

At this mild compliment, a tear overflowed. Mycroft took Greg in his arms. They had to trust Gil’s decisions or start over with another therapist. He was trying to learn how to support Greg without interfering because if he wanted his husband back as a fully functioning adult, he would have to do less or end up failing as he had with Sherlock. Today was not the day for weaning though. “I’m sorry, baby. It seems unfair.”

Greg pulled away, wiping his eyes. Mycroft gave him a handkerchief. “there’s something else that Gil wants me to see. I’ve looked it over until it has no meaning.”

“Did he give you feedback?” Mycroft imagined strapping the main into a chair and force feeding Greg’s pages to him.

“I’m to stop blaming myself and go deeper into what I was feeling instead of it reading like an action report. I don’t even know where to begin, My.”

He had to tread so carefully. “Would you want help?” He paused. “My help?”

Greg had not allowed him to see the document and had locked himself in the study for a portion of each day, coming out red-eyed and spent after. “Gil offered but I wanted to do it myself. And I was angry with him. Now that I’m home, I can see that I’ll need a fresh pair of eyes.”

“I can edit to your specifications. I can look at only certain pages. It’s still your work. You decide.”

Since he was not going to the Yard, Greg had been carrying his papers in the supple leather bag that Mycroft had bought him right after the wedding. He rifled through it. Mycroft saw an image of him shirtless with the strap of the bag over his shoulder, then mentally erased his trousers to reveal gray boxer briefs. He remembered how Greg used to prop himself up in bed, naked except for his reading glasses.

Greg had them on when he turned, the once crisp pages rumpled in his hand. “Maybe you could mark the bits where I blame myself?”

“Would you need observations or my questions for clarification?”
"Yes." Greg’s face brightened. “That’s not cheating, is it? For you to give your opinion or ask me things?"

“No, it’s not. Everyone needs feedback. Anthea and I worked on several documents this morning in the exact same way.”

“Gil would have given me advice if I’d let him.”

“He still will, I’m sure.” Mycroft allowed himself that one dig.

He took the pages, feeling as if he were holding a loaded gun. Greg sat on the coffee table, facing him with his eyes still shining and huge in the dim light. Mycroft counted the pages to see what he was facing while Greg started chewing on his lip again. He put on his own reading glasses, and Greg leaned forward in suspense.

“Sweetheart, this won’t work. You’re looking at me like Christ on the cross, and it’s tearing me to bits. You’ve been at your desk for hours. Why don’t you go for a short run even through it’s raining? Have Morris draw you a scalding bath when you return.”

“Are you sure I’m not abandoning you with the mess?”

“We’ll go over it together afterwards, but now, you’re a powderkeg.”

Greg seemed relieved and left without further discussion. Mycroft bent to his task, settling himself at the desk with colored pens. Soon he was engrossed in the story. Greg had gone back to the very beginning, meeting Walt and accepting him as a mentor. The paragraphs were full of foreshadowing and second guessing. Mycroft underlined each instance where Greg blamed himself for not being psychic or super human.

He added marginal comments:

*You couldn’t possibly have known.*

*Even Rich’s wife didn’t know.*

*Only gods are omniscient.*

His pen stilled as he came to the description of the shooting. The language turned clinical as Greg criticized every choice he made from the moment he received the call, but Mycroft had scanned Yard protocol and found nothing wrong in Greg’s decisions. Mycroft hadn’t marked any of the pages from the shooting until the end. He wiped the tears from his face and wrote furiously, “Why did it fall to you? Why did it have to be you?”

Exhausted, he put down the pages. He was chilled to the bone by osmosis, the grief fresh again. He leaned back, closing his eyes and visited the village chapel. Michael was putting out hymnals for the service but didn’t disturb him. His body was heavy with emotional fatigue as the horrific images played beneath his eyelids. Then Greg was sitting beside him, flushed and fragrant from his bath.

“How bad was it, My?”

Mycroft pushed his grief down until he heard a click and could treat the document with cool detachment. “It’s well written, but there’s a great deal of self flagellation as Gil had said. You make a big shift in tone once you get to the actual trauma. It was probably a good exercise for you to write all of this back story, and I think you should keep it for a published article later, but for this assignment, I think you should focus on the day of the shooting—nothing before or after.”
Mycroft set aside seven pages, and Greg brightened considerably.

He drew a line through half of page eight. “From here, then, ‘I was at my desk when my phone rang.’ Your language changes to straight documentation. There’s nothing about what you were feeling, sweetheart.”

“I know that’s what Gil is after. He’s always prodding me, trying to get me to cry and have a big scene so he can feel he’s earned his pay.”

“Then let him have that, Greg, so it can be over. Take your medicine and get out. Would you like me to dictate? I’ll jot down the emendations.”

“What’s the bloody first sentence?”

Mycroft blocked out his memories of his father’s voice which had been triggered by Greg’s angry tone. “I’ll read aloud until I think it needs something. You stop me if you hear something that you want to change. This won’t take long.”

Greg nodded, drawing into himself. Mycroft felt that he was gutting him with a biro. He wanted to be anywhere else.

But he read, “It was approximately 0900 hours when the call came from the archives. Walt Shetterly informed me that Rich Tillottson had stolen money from evidence boxes.”

Mycroft paused to let Greg interject, but he was rolling up the belt on his dressing gown as if it were the most important task in the world. He attempted to prompt Greg. “So you might say, ‘I found out that a colleague was stealing and I felt—’

“You want to know the fucking truth? My very first thought was Sullivan will have my job now. This is what he’s been waiting for.

Mycroft couldn’t grasp why Rich’s dishonesty had anything to do with Greg or his employment but at least Greg was expressing a feeling. “Alright then. Maybe you could say, ‘I felt like his behavior was my responsibility.”

“No, we’re going to write the truth and then Sullivan will see it in my file and sack the poof like he’s been wanting to do for years. Tell it true, My. Write about what a self involved prick I was.” The muscle in his jaw worked. “Look at your husband. See me for what I really am, and then you can give me the sack too.”

“I can’t. There aren’t any other applicants.”

Greg laughed but it was closer to hysteria. He snatched the papers out of Mycroft’s hands and threw them on the floor. “It’s bad enough that I’ve got to face my weakness as an officer and a man but to have me write down all this shit. It’s fucking cruel to show what a Neanderthal I am on paper. Christ, My, I’m barely literate, and then to show it to you, a genius and a gifted writer. It’s too much.”

Mycroft had reached his limit. He was furious that Greg was tearing himself down over an exercise that was supposed to be therapeutic. “I’m calling Gil.”

Greg looked as if here were a child caught between two disapproving parents. “Don’t, My, please? I’ll get it right this time.”

He took up his notebook and leafed through for a blank page, but Mycroft took it from him. “That’s enough for today, love. If I feel that we need to, we’ll work on it in the morning, but no more today.”
Greg hung his head. Mycroft wanted to flay Gil’s skin off in strips, turn it into jerky and make him eat it. “Why don’t you have a rest, baby? I’ll speak with Gil and then we’ll do something pleasant for the rest of the afternoon. Lie back. I won’t be long.”

Greg let Mycroft put away the books and papers on his desk. “Be careful, My. He knows where the bodies are buried.”

“And I’m the one that put them there. Always room for more.” He kissed Greg on the forehead. “You’ve worked very hard. Rest now.”

His cheeks were blazing, and he was tempted to give in to the rage. He went into his study but couldn’t stop pacing. He needed to be far away from Greg for this call. He paced. It was five full rings before Gil answered and by then, Mycroft was ensconced in the reception room where the chill and uncomfortable chair added to his fury.

Gil had no idea of the white heat that festered under Mycroft’s courtesy. “Good afternoon, Dr. Hoffman. Is this a convenient time for me to have a word?”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Greg has been very upset today about his trauma narrative.”

“He needs to speak with me directly then.”

“He’s struggling with the assignment and doing a rewrite is—“

“He needs to tell me that himself.”

“I’m sure that he will during his session with you in the morning, but he’s resting just now, and I wanted to—“

“He can ring me after his lie down.”

Mycroft had used the technique himself of shutting down the other party, and he knew the smugness that it brought. He thought his hair might spontaneously combust. “Did you or did you not state that I could contact you with questions or concerns?”

“I did, but—“

“But you aren’t letting me express them. If you hadn’t cut me off three times, you might have learned that I want to understand this exercise better, and if it’s not too much to ask, I’d like to consult you on the best way to support Greg as he continues to edit it.”

“I see.”

“I would also like to share with you, if you can spare the time, that for Greg, writing is a form of self torture which I should think is what we are trying to avoid.”

“Most people struggle with writing as well as public speaking.”

“I’m aware, but this is different. He’s feeling inferior to me because of his education. His last writing prior to your assignments was Walt’s eulogy and that was an all day Gethsemane.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I have a brother in recovery. I’m no stranger to setting boundaries or forcing realizations, but Greg has been ill, and I don’t think we have to break him all the way down again to get the results
you’re looking for.”

“He’s the one pushing, Mycroft. I haven’t put a time limit on anything.”

“Oh.” In that pause, he felt his rage drain away. His fingers were sore from gripping the mobile. “How do I help him?”

“Is he talking to you about his feelings?”

“We had a wonderful day on Saturday. He was smiling and laughing. I thought we were on the mend, but no, he doesn’t say what he’s feeling. He makes self-deprecating statements. His nightmares have worsened. I can make deductions based on his body language, but no, I haven’t a fucking clue what my husband is feeling.”

“Neither do I. That’s why I was so keen to cut you off. It’s maddening to have a patient blocked. But two gingers with their dander up can do a lot of damage.”

“Apologies.”

“Mine as well. I suspect that he’s terrified and ashamed to admit it.”

“I agree, but I can’t imagine he was pretending to be happy about finishing Walt’s Christmas project.”

“PTSD is a kaleidoscope of feelings, sometimes from minute to minute. He’s happy, sad, grieving, angry, and underneath all of that afraid. All we can do is sit with him in whatever mood until he’s ready. I expect a breakthrough any day. The dam will have to spill over.”

“I worry about harming him without intending to.”

“I doubt you could do more than he’s done to himself.”

“I would never want to hurt him.”

“Nor would I but it’s what humans do to each other.”

They sighed simultaneously.

“Off the record, what he needs to do is shag his brains out.”

Mycroft blushed. “That’s complicated too.”

“I feared it might be. Physical or emotional?”

Mycroft wasn’t ready to trust Gil that far.

“An issue for another day?”

“Perhaps.”

“Well then. Have him take the afternoon off and do something mindless. We’ll sort out the trauma narrative tomorrow. I can omit it as a written activity. Thank you for ringing me. It’s good to speak with someone so astute.”

“I feel the same.”

“Please ring me again as you see fit. I’ll be more accommodating next time.”
Mycroft felt a bit better until he went back to the study. Greg looked ill where he lay on the couch. He held his arms out and Mycroft wished he could gather him up like a toddler and rock him to sleep.

“No more lessons today. Gil said.”

He fitted himself against Greg. If only they could go to a place where there were no words or clothing to hide behind, all of the bad things would fade. If they couldn’t find release, at least they could rest in each other’s arms. Greg was tucked under his chin. He rubbed his cheek against Greg’s shorn mane and took in the scent of him, still heightened from his bath. His eyelids grew heavy. They could sleep until dinner. All would look better after a nap.

“Gil wants me to admit that I was afraid in there.”

So not a nap. “Were you?” He shouldn’t have asked.

“You know that I was, and I still am. Whinging like a baby every night. Me being a coward, does it disgust you?”

The fire still crackled, Greg still nestled against him, but they were resting atop a land mine. “Everyone is afraid in battle, Greg. If you weren’t, you’d be a sociopath, and one of those is enough for any family.”

“My dad was never afraid. He lost his partner, and he was like a rock.”

“I seriously doubt it.”

“He was very good to me when I was ill, but if he knew—“

Mycroft sat up and reached for his mobile. They would get all of the difficult calls over in one day. “Gigi, how’s my best girl? My only girl for that matter.”

It was a ritual but today would be different. Greg was shaking his head ‘no’ while trying to climb over the back of the couch. “Greg needs to ask his dad something rather important. Could you put him on, please?”

“For the love of God, My, don’t do this. He’s never said but he’s so disappointed in me.”

“You aren’t telling him anything. You are asking a question.”

“I’m begging you.”

“Rich, it’s Mycie. Yes. Greg needs to ask you a question but he’s being stroppy about it. Help him, won’t you?”

Greg bared his teeth. “Hello, Dad. No, My’s got above himself. I’m fine.”

“I’m glad you’re fine. So ask me.”

Mycroft could hear Rich’s gravelly voice. His heart sank. They had wakened Rich from his customary doze in front of the telly. What if his hunch was wrong? Rich came from the ‘carry on’ generation.

To his credit, Greg did as instructed. “When your partner died, did you feel, that is to say, were you ever, I mean you probably weren’t but—"
“Spit it out loud for fuck’s sake. I’m not getting any younger.”

“Were you afraid?”

Rich’s voice went high. “Christ yes, I was afraid. Do you think I’m daft? I had a family to feed. Could have been me as easy as him.”

“You never seemed frightened.”

“Kept it inside for you kids but it ate me up. Your mum helped, but I’d have healed sooner if I’d talked to her. Better out than in.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Dad, when I was older?”

“Only saw you at holidays. There’s a fine topic for Christmas dinner, innit? My partner bled to death in my arms, and then sending you back into the thick of it.”

“But just now, when I was home recovering, why not then?”

“You had your own load to carry. We didn’t need to get into my old stuff.”

“We could have shared the load by swapping stories.”

“Maybe so. Not today though.”

“No, I’m knackered, but I’ll try to make a visit that’s not a holiday or one of us convalescing.”

“Bring your husband. He seems to have some sense. Your mother likes having him around. You get things all sorted with him?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mycroft saw more guilt settle on Greg’s shoulders to replace the relief of finding out his dad was human. Maybe he shouldn’t have interfered.

“Greggie? You left them here with us, lad, remember? We lit candles and said the prayers. Your mum does it again every morning at Mass. You leave them here.”

“She doesn’t have to do that.”

“it’s good for her. Makes her feel close to you, like she’s helping. She was a copper’s wife. She knows. Besides, it keeps her out of the biscuit tin.”

Mycroft winced as Rich’s laugh turned to a smoker’s cough. These Lestrade men and their bravado.

“You alright then?”

“Yeah, Dad. I’m alright.” Greg’s voice broke but he grabbed Mycroft’s hand. “My is helping, and I’m seeing Gil again.”

“No wonder you’re down. That lot would take the head off a rhino.”

“It stings a bit. That’s how you know it’s working.”

“You take your time. Take it slow, eh? Not a race.”
“You’re right.”

“Glad you finally noticed.”

“I’ll say goodbye now. I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, son. I’m proud of you.”

Mycroft coughed away the lump in his throat. He would have given anything to hear such words from the great Lord Holmes. Greg was playing with Mycroft’s fingers, rubbing his own over them. He slid Mycroft’s wedding band up and down on his finger.

“Let’s go to bed, My.”

Mycroft’s heart leaped before he caught himself. They might never have another stolen afternoon of passion, alternating sex and deep post coital naps, finally emerging sore and ravenous for dinner.

“I’m completely spent. You wouldn’t say no to a lie down, would you, love?”

“I think it’s just the thing.” He wanted more but a platonic nap was better than distant, angry silences or cold words hurtled like icicles at each other’s hearts.

Greg got his bag. “I’m going to take this all of the way out to the car so I’m not tempted. If we’re going to have the afternoon off, let’s do it proper.”

“Excellent. It will still be there tomorrow.”

Mycroft prepared their bedroom for sleep, hoping that they could get a full cycle of rest without nightmares. He pulled the curtains against the grey sky and turned on the white noise machine to rain. He pulled back the duvet, looking forward to the warmth of the bed. Getting hangers from the closet, eh undressed by the fire, moving slowly with a sense of pleasant anticipation rather than dread. He found peace in the ritual of getting the clothes just right, each button done, each crease smoothed.

He was centering his trousers on the hanger when Greg came in. “You look quite fetching in shirt tails, love.”

Mycroft dropped a curtsy, holding his white shirt out like a frock. Greg smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He put his arms out and buried his face in the starched shirt front. ‘I’ve been dreadful today. I know. I’m sorry.”

“We’re alright now.” Mycroft stroked Greg’s head, and it was quiet for awhile except for the fire and the soft rain. Greg leaned against him and he could have slept standing up even after sleeping all morning at his office. There were naps and then there were naps. He was finally warm enough, caught between the fire and Greg’s body.

“I’m completely spent.” Greg was still except for his fingers, fiddling with Mycroft’s shirt buttons until they were all open. He moved his hand up, grazing Mycroft’s chest all the way up to slide his shirt over his shoulder. He rubbed his thumb over Mycroft’s nipple until it poked, stiff and pink, through the hair. Mycroft’s cock filled, but Greg’s was soft against his thigh. The attention to his chest wasn’t sexual but a sleep child needing a comfort object. He was grateful that he had viewed it as such when Greg latched on, suckling with slurps and loud swallows.

Mycroft thought of cruel words that he could throw back at Greg. *Get off my tit!* Yet with the hurt and the arousal came a wash of love so profound that he could give Greg whatever he needed. He
had bottle fed Sherlock many times and recalled the sweetness when the little body wasn’t frantic or angry, but heavy with sleep. He closed his eyes and let it happen even if it was going to end badly.

His nipple grew sore, and he knew that he would feel the suckling all the next day. His cock ached with need.

Use me, Greg. Strip me bare. Beat me or take me dry until I’m raw, but please, be in me. Let me get lost in your body until there’s nothing but you. Use me until I’m empty of myself and full of you.

Greg pulled away. His eyes were barely open. Mycroft wasn’t sure he was awake. “Time for bed, love.”

“I don’t know what I was doing.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Greg sat down on the edge of the bed. “I lost two things today. One good, one bad.”

Mycroft ignored his protesting cock and knelt to remove Greg’s shoes.

“There’s no pressure to live up to my dad’s example anymore. He’s not Superman.”

“He’s very brave, as you are, but he’s still human. Was that the good thing or the bad thing?”

“Both. If the strongest man I know, isn’t so strong, what are we going to do? The grown ups aren’t coming to help. We are the grown ups.”

Mycroft looked over at the night table where Hop lived in the drawer. The night Father had taken Hop from him and mocked them both was the night he knew he was alone and that no other person was safe. In spite of the death and destruction Greg had seen as a copper, he had kept the safe place with Rich and Gigi. The shooting continued to take from him.

They got Greg’s jumper and trousers off. He was wearing the gray boxer briefs. Mycroft wanted to bury his face in the soft cotton. “In you pop, love,” he said, tucking Greg in.

Greg turned on his side. “Hello.”

“Hello to you.” Mycroft loved pillow talk but they were both exhausted.

“I’m sorry. I can’t keep my eyes open.”

Mycroft put his hand over the drooping eyelids. “I think that’s rather the point.”

“Dad and I will be closer now. That’s something.”

“It is.” Greg’s brow was furrowed with effort. He smoothed the wrinkles out. “We’ll get it all sorted out after a nap. Time for talking later. Go to sleep, Greg.”

Mycroft meant to keep watch, but he was cold and his greedy body demanded warmth. Once Greg was snoring, his face slack, Mycroft slipped away too.

Bruce the bear was there as if he’d been waiting all along. His chocolate brown eyes invited Mycroft to his den, a place of warmth and safety where his needs would be met without judgment. There was an overwhelming rush of lightness as if his burdens had been left at the door of the cave. He was held and protected.
Bruce made the decisions here. Holding was enough at first. He nuzzled soft fur and stretched until his toes pointed at the decadence of being warm.

Slowly Bruce examined him, sniffing him all over and nosing into his armpits and between his buttocks. He found the sore nipple and lapped at it with tiny flicks like a kitten’s tongue until it was soothed. He was hard, but Bruce did not mind but instead removed his pants and pressed a paw against Mycroft’s cock.

It was a firmer touch than he had used before. He established a rhythm of press and release that was strangely familiar. Bruce growled and grunted, his eyes sparkling at Mycroft’s enjoyment. He was going to come from Bruce’s firm and relentless touch. Bruce gave him a claw to suck on and howled with triumph as Mycroft came. He licked the semen from his paw as if it were honey.

Because it had been so long, he whited out. Blood pounded in his ears. He thought he was awake but Bruce was still pressing on his oversensitive, spurting cock. And Bruce seemed upset. The sobbed and batted at Mycroft’s cock. The sudden pain woke him.

Greg still lay on his side, held fast by the throes of a night terror. He begged Walt to hold on as his hands pressed against Mycroft’s cock in the motions of CPR.

“Greg, wake up!” He shouted over Greg’s sobs and pleading, then rolled away from Greg’s hand, too weak from orgasm to do more. His chest heaved with ragged breaths, and his cock leaped with aftershock like a landed fish.

Greg had wakened and was panting. “My? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, love.” He couldn’t even have a simple wet dream for relief.

Greg had knelt up on the bed and was leaning over Mycroft’s prawn position. The fetal curl would not hide the state of his pants for long. “Did I hurt you, baby?”

He squeezed his eyes shut tight in a childish game of if I can’t see you, you can’t see me.

Greg was crying as he stroked Mycroft’s hair. “I’m sorry, baby. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Quite the opposite.” Mycroft spread his legs to show Greg the damp patch on his pants. He waited for the accusations regarding his perversion, and how he couldn’t even hold back his libido for a short nap.

Greg spooned him and kissed the back of his neck. “One of your Bruce dreams.”

“I meant to keep watch over you while you slept. Never meant to do that.”

“You can’t help what you dream anymore than I can. When I’m not giving you what you need, you have to rely on wet dreams or Big Purple.”

“I’m not using Big Purple anymore.”

“No wonder you popped off then. You were all pent up.”

Greg rested his hand over Mycroft’s heart. “Enjoy the afterglow, love. I’ll hold you.”

The gentleness hurt worse than accusations. His body didn’t care and took advantage of the endorphins. He lay there with half of what he wanted and blocked out the memories of when they had both come so hard that they woke up sticky, hours later. Instead, Mycroft got up and changed
his pants. He put on a vest and winced when the cloth rubbed his sore nipple. He got back under the duvet and they lay on their sides, holding hands.

Greg’s long lashes were dark against his cheeks as he looked down at their clasped hands. “Gil says that we’ll do the site visit next week.”

“That seems soon. Like Rich said, it’s not a race.”

“It’s my fault really. I’m fixated on it so I can’t move forward.”

“I wish you never had to go back there.”

“If I’m to keep my job, I’ll have to. Otherwise, it would be like a monster waiting for me, and if I had to go to the archives without warning, I might have a flashback and Sullivan would sack me.”

“Can he really after what you’ve been through. Bad press, if nothing else.”

“He’d call it compassionate discharge, but I’d be out on my ear just the same.”

“You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. No wonder you were angry today.”

“I’m fucking trapped.”

“What are you most afraid of?” Stupid, stupid question. Damn.

“That’s a good question, My. So much of PTSD is boxing ghosts. I need to think about it for a minute.”

Greg wandered around the room picking things up and putting them down while Mycroft pretended to read a book. Could a probing question trigger Greg? All his research about PTSD had yielded little advice for spouses and was geared toward women in a patronizing way. His experience was with his own mother, Gigi, and powerful women leaders such as queens and prime ministers. He couldn’t imagine any woman wanting such sappy, chirpy advice for a complex problem. The information that did appeal to him was clinical; it was not his place to treat Greg.

Greg had stopped puttering and was making cocoa, an unlikely occupation if he were going to have a meltdown. Mycroft sunk back against the pillows. Hypervigilance was a PTSD symptom but he felt as if he were the one always on guard. It was torture to put back on the mantle of anxiety after their lovely elf fun. He would have to cherish each interlude.

Greg came over to the bed with a tray of cocoa and biscuits. “I’m in the mood for nursery treats again.”

Still, he put the tray down but kept fidgeting, tending to a candle that was smoking. “You asked me what I’m most afraid of.” His back was turned, forcing Mycroft to read his posture rather than his face. He was ready to give Greg a reprieve when the answer came. “I’m afraid of lashing out at you again and being lost forever.”

Mycroft was out of bed before he thought, the tinkle of china announcing that he had tipped over the tray. “I won’t let you get lost anymore. I will always come after you and bring you home.” He pulled Greg tight against him and repeated, “I will always bring you home.”

It was a smothering, controlling, needy statement to make and exactly what Greg needed to hear since he clung to Mycroft, shaking. He let the hug continue until Greg pulled back. “What if I called you a motherfucking faggot?”
“That would be unacceptable.”

Greg’s face fell.

“I would never fuck Mummy.”

Greg giggled and they kissed slowly before turning to face the spilled cocoa. “Maybe we should sleep in the guest room and deal with this in the morning.”

Greg froze. “I don’t want to go back there.”

“Then you don’t have to, but I think we’ll have to use the duvet from in there. Would that be alright?”

“Yeah. I’ll clear up this mess while you get it.”

Greg didn’t want to return to a room where he had been isolated with his trauma. Like the site of the shooting, the spare room would have to be faced eventually but not this night. Mycroft gathered up the duvet, stubbing his toe on a box under the bed. It was not like Morris to use under bed storage. He pulled out the box and saw it was marked ‘Walt Shetterly.’ Once he had the duvet rolled up, he carried it and the box back to their room.

“it didn’t go through. We still have dry sheets.” Then Greg turned to look at the box. Mycroft was afraid he might perceive it as a violation of privacy. Always on tenterhooks, he asked, “Would you like to assemble the train for Christmas? We could clear out my study and maybe have a small tree in there for the track to go ‘round.”

“Would it be childish?”

“No more than a ship in a bottle or a model airplane. It’s a thinking man’s hobby. I could join you if you like.”

“I’d like that very much.”

“We can begin after lunch tomorrow. Morris will clear away the furniture while you meet with Gil.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. You made such a good day for me. You really turned it around. I feel better.”

Mycroft exhaled. One day’s success, a life time to get through with every word, thought, and deed a potential trigger, but on this night, they were safe. “Anything you need, baby, I will make it happen.”
Train I Ride

Chapter Summary

Model train time. Greg has a success and a failure on his recovery journey.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented on my marathon. It really spurred me on to do more than I thought I could.

I think there are probably about three chapters in the material that I have left to type. Mycroft takes Greg on a wonderful healing vacation. They find peace and intimacy there as well as some new friends.

Hoping that these last chapters will go up faster. I'll do my best, but I have to leave the free wifi now.

Thanks again everybody.

Mycroft had never played with toys after Hop. He had built models of historically important buildings and vehicles which suddenly became beneficial as they assembled Walt’s train set.

“You’re so clever at this, My,” Greg said, trying to get two cars hitched together. “I’m all thumbs.”

Mycroft had been on his knees for worse reasons than laying out track for the Lestrade Express. The study was a fine big area for creating their world. Morris had cleared the room of all furniture except the floor lamps and fireplace tools. He had even thought to flip the rug over to the back side so they had a flat surface like sisal and were not dizzied by a pattern. The rug was softer to sit on than hardwood. Walt’s set had an extra box of track, and the train would have a satisfying distance to travel.

Mycroft winced as a sharp edge nicked his hand. Walt was a boy before child safety rules sanitized everything. Sucking on his finger, he watched Greg’s face as he became completely absorbed in his task of connecting the cars the way that he wanted. They also had a basic set of buildings—depot, water tower, cattle barn, church, some shops and houses, and a tunnel. If this hobby gave Greg a moment’s peace, Mycroft would make his home a bloody Lilliput from cellar to attic. As the track grew, he found his interest increasing. It appeared they would have enough to go around the room with several “miles” to spare.

“Why would Walt buy so much? The biggest room of his flat was smaller than this.”

“His childhood home might have been larger. Did he grow up in the country?”

“No, always here.”
Mycroft considered the matter than crawled over to look at the box. “We can make some curves in
the middle or add some low, rolling hills.”

“How do we make hills?”

“I’m not sure. From the picture on the box, I’d say you could buy them.”

Greg was silent for awhile, wiping the cars off with a rag and examining them for rust before
attaching them to the growing string on the tracks. “I found a shop that specializes in model trains.
Would you go with me?”

“Absolutely. I’d like to get some cows for the barn. And trees.”

“If therapy goes well, we could do it after lunch tomorrow.”

“Why don’t we have lunch near the shop. Make a day of it.”

“I’d like that, My.”

“It’s a date then.” Mycroft swallowed his fluttering heart to move it back into his chest.

They worked side by side, a peace falling over the room. When the circuit of the track was
complete and the engine and cars sat waiting, they connected the tiny control box. Mycroft
desperately wanted it to work for Greg’s sake. There had been too many disappointments, but the
set was ancient. When the wee engine coughed itself to life and tugged its cars around the track,
they both exhaled and leaned against each other. Mycroft could almost feel himself healing inside
as they sat on the floor and watched the train.

They let it run. Greg reached over and took Mycroft’s hand, giving the three squeezes. Mycroft
returned the nonverbal ‘I love you’ then raised Greg’s hand to kiss it, running his lips over the
gnarled fingers.

Greg’s grip tightened. “I want to ask you something, but I’m afraid you’ll laugh at me. Or be
offended.”

Greg wanted a divorce or worse, an asexual marriage. His heart pounded, peace gone. “You can
ask me anything.” He didn’t mean it, but that’s what you were supposed to say.

“It’s yours, and I have no right to ask, but maybe if we shared it, I mean, you’ve had to give you
your study, and I don’t want to throw off your writing--. Never mind.”

“I’m sorry but I’m not following. You’d best ask me straight out, no pun intended. Best way.”

“Could we make your village? I’m embarrassed to say that I haven’t paid attention as I should to
where all the buildings go or if the train even runs near it, but I thought it might be fun to try. Only
if it wouldn’t hurt your writing.”

I’m delighted you would want to.”

“Can you draw a map? We could make our shopping list from that.”

“I think I can. I’ll get some paper.”

“I’ll wait here in our village.” Greg grinned and then leaned over to kiss him.

_We’re both shy now_ he thought. Once in Greg’s study, he pressed his palms to his eyes, trying to
keep the tears in. So this is joy, and sometimes there will be good surprises.
They only had standard size paper and stationery in Greg’s study, and Mycroft had jettisoned his sketchbooks when Rory died. “I’m going to the kitchen for some butcher paper, love. I’ll make us a proper map.”

Morris had a roll of it with the metal tear strip for a clean edge. He had a ridiculous smile on his face and babbled like a fool while Morris tore off several sheets for him. “We’re going to make a proper village for the train, and I need to draw the map. And we’ll be having lunch out tomorrow because we’re shopping for supplies after.”

“I’m please, Myc. It’s good for you and Greg to have a project together.”

“Yes, we are working on a project together, aren’t we?”

As he trudged up the stairs, he imagined saying to Anthea, “I won’t be available this afternoon. My husband and I will be procuring supplies for a project.”

But the next morning, the joy had dissipated. Even though he had fallen asleep quickly and slept through the night with no night terrors severe enough to waken him, Greg was tense and distant, skipping breakfast to go for a run. Mycroft braced himself for a cancellation.

When Greg’s text came, Mycroft’s relief was out of proportion. Greg had chosen a place for lunch and sent him the address.

*I texted Art as well. I’m wondering if you could have him drop you at the pub, and then I’ll drive you home.*

*Excellent plan. We’ll make a world.* Mycroft pounded the mobile against his forehead. What an idiotic thing to say.

*You’re sure it won’t interfere with your writing? Because that’s far more important.*

*There’s nothing more important than you, but I think it will enhance my work.* He winced when it was too late at the phrase ‘my work.’ He was talking about his dabbles as if he were a legitimate writer.

*I’m chuffed. See you soon.*

*Me too. Soon.*

Mycroft savored the rate treat of something to look forward to. He liked telling Anthea, “I’m leaving for my lunch date,” and giving the address to Art, saying “I’m meeting Greg there.”

Greg’s smile was full when he saw Mycroft and they hugged, a quick manly hug with loud back slaps since they were in a pub. It was a novelty to have someone glad to see him. He was going to live in the moment today. Greg loved him now, and maybe that was all anyone could hope for.

The place was tired but clean, and Mycroft enjoyed his soup and egg mayonnaise sandwich. The ale was good, if a little sweet. Greg had a burger and a Coke in deference to his medication. He took a sip of Mycroft’s though and it was nice to share a glass in public.

As they finished up, Greg said, “I hope you’ll like the shop. I looked in several, and maybe some have a larger selection, but this man cares about his product, and he’ll take time to explain things to us.”

“I’m sure he can order whatever he doesn’t have. Expertise and good service mean more to me.”
“I’m the same.”

He wanted to kiss Greg right there in the pub. At the car, Greg opened his door first, and it was different than when an employee did it. He felt looked after. They hadn’t driven together enough for Mycroft to be tired of Greg’s hands on the wheel or the way he bit his tongue as he deftly maneuvered into a tight space.

“Wait a minute, baby.” Greg put up his hand and Mycroft waited to hear what he had to say.

Greg belched loudly and the car was filled with the scent of onions. “God, why do I do that to myself? I knew it was going to haunt me.”

“Was there more?”

“Wasn’t that enough?” Greg stifled another burp behind his hand.

“I thought you were going to tell me something?”

“Oh, right. The thing about this shop owner is that he’s stroppy. He’s got a luxury product. Most people come and look but they don’t buy. If you give him a chance, you know, listen to him, he’s quite nice. And a true artist.”

“I should think you’d had your fill of curmudgeons.”

“My husband the writer uses all the big words.”

A bell jangled as they entered the shop. Mycroft’s senses were overwhelmed by the vast array of products in a small space. All was organized although the categories were foreign to him, but there were no empty spaces and items were neatly stacked above his head where a model train whizzed by on a track suspended from the ceiling. He recognized the smell of model glue and paints from his childhood, but there were also the manly odors of freshly cut wood and cedar chips and pipe smoke and black coffee.

Mycroft would have liked to start from the window display on his right and worked his way around the shop shelf by shelf until he had seen everything. This was not Greg’s way. With Greg’s hand on the small of his back, he was walked to the far wall of the store where a dour middle aged man was smoking a pipe and cleaning rusted track with a wire brush.

“Stephen, I’d like you to meet my husband Mycroft. My, this is London’s premiere expert on railroads, Stephen Townsend.”

They shook hands, but Mycroft hadn’t received such a scathing inspection since his father died. While he wanted to bristle and revert to a snide comment, he was too fascinated by the way the brush, dipped in a dirty solution, was bringing the track back to a healthy shine. It looked like a very satisfying task.

Greg seemed in a hurry while Mycroft felt content to let the afternoon unfold in a world that required nothing of him to run smoothly.

Greg had thought to take pictures of Walt’s set on his mobile. “I think I told you last time about the set that I inherited when my friend Walt died. We finally got it set up and are hoping to add to what we had. Mycroft gave me his study so we have a whole room dedicated to the railroad. We’d like to build a village in there based on his novel.”

The brush scratched on the track. “You’re a writer?” It was spoken in the same tone as one might ask, “So you drink your own urine?”
“I’m not published, but I like to write for stress relief, and Greg seems to enjoy my story, or he’s kind enough to pretend.”

Mycroft envied that the man didn’t need glasses to examine the photos. “I have that gauge for your track and any additional cars that you might like to add. Some people enjoy a second engine and cars. Depending on your commitment to scale and accuracy, most of the accessories will do.”

“How accurate do you want to be, My?”

“Since we’ve started from the beginning, I’d like to do things properly.”

“You’ve got a fine set there in good condition. You’re dealing with a 3/16” scale. If you’re like most people, you would rather buy online than lower yourself to come into a shop.”

“I don’t like online shopping,” Mycroft said, having just realized this truth. He would have thought as an introvert, he might have been the opposite, but he liked to see and touch his purchases when possible. He enjoyed the choosing.

“Then you are welcome here. What time of year will it be on your railway?”

“I hadn’t even thought.” Mycroft paused to truly consider the matter, walking the streets of his mind village. “Let’s do full bloom to start with, everything lush and green.”

“There’s so much to think about, love. I had no idea, but Stephen, I hope this will be an ongoing project. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and our village won’t be either.”

“Perhaps I could browse awhile? Greg has been here before, but I’ve not been in a shop like this. There are probably things that we need that I won’t know about until I see them.”

“Browse away. My shop’s not crowded even in the Christmas rush. Take all the time you need; it will still be as empty as it is now, I promise.”

Mycroft edged himself into the stacks. Greg had not exaggerated Stephen’s manner. If they hadn’t so much needed his help, it would have been off putting. Greg was the people person; he could handle the shopkeeper all on his own.

As Greg chatted with Stephen, or rather at Stephen whose laconic responses could not be heard, Mycroft perused every aisle, his eyes entering everything into his mental card file as a little drawer marked TRAINS was filling rapidly.

Then he found the books. He needed them—all. There was a coffee table book full of photos of various engines, gleaming and ready, in beautiful locales. Train porn. There were heavy tomes of railway history and a smaller pictorial of depots and stations. He and Greg could visit them. There were instruction manuals for building your own accessories, from landscape features such as mountains down to wee dogs and further, to infinitesimal fallen leaves under autumn trees.

Then he found something that made him put his armload of future purchases on the floor. The cover was a painting, trees in full autumn color framing the tracks ad a shiny black locomotive came right toward the viewer. The title was in embossed copper letters. *Train I Ride* by Stephen Townsend. It couldn’t be, but it was.

The blurb on the back cover read, “Stephen Townsend lives and worked in Sevenoaks, London, keeping the magic of trains alive in his little shop.” The address was there, the spot where Mycroft stood.
He held the book in his hands. It was a book and a painting, the flyleaf indicating that Stephen had painted it himself. With mixed feelings, Mycroft noted that he had published the book himself. He imagined his own cover. Would he have a painting of the vicarage? Was The Village a proper title? He felt suddenly dizzy at the prospect.

Now he was the one that strode confidently to the back of the shop for conversation. “This is your book? You wrote this?”

“A little something from a long time ago, a vanity project.”

“Beautiful presentation.” Mycroft held it up for Greg to see.

“Thank you.”

Stephen wasn’t going to volunteer much, but Mycroft was a master interrogator. “What is your premise?”

“Encounters that take place on trains.”

“How did the idea come to you?”

“it’s nothing new or special. Lots of stories take place on trains. You don’t want to hear all that.”

“But I do. Truly.” Here was a novice but not a beginner, and as tight lipped as Stephen appeared, no one else would ever know of this conversation. “How did you begin?”

“It was an exercise prompt in a writing textbook. People watching. You were to observe two people for a particular amount of time and find a story in it.”

“I think my novel began because I was bored in class. I told myself a story to pass the time, but it grew.”

“I saw the same people every night on the train home. I wanted to know what happened to them before and after their ride together. There came a time when my imagining got better than what might have been true.”

Mycroft scanned the table of contents and then thumbed through the book. “So each chapter takes place on a different train with different characters. That is so clever. Infinite possibilities.”

“If you stay with it, all of the plots connect somehow.”

“That’s a tricky bit. I cannot imagine keeping all of that in your head. I have one setting and two main characters which is more than I can manage.”

“I’d be pleased to know what you think. My email is in the author’s bio.”

“I’d be delighted to talk with you more about your novel and writing in general. I don’t meet fiction writers very often.”

“Really? I think you could throw a rock anywhere in this city and hit a writer.”

“It’s a rare treat for me.”

Greg had started to squirm; writing was the last thing he wanted to talk about. “All right if I pick some things, love? I’ll match it to your drawings. Stephen, we’ll need quite a lot. Is there somewhere I could pile my choices?”
Stephen waved his hand the length of this work top.

“What if another customer comes in?”

“Not bloody likely.”

“Alright then.” Greg eased himself away.

“So are you still writing, Stephen? What is your process?”

He reached under his work station and pulled out a yellow legal pad and a handful of pencil stubs. “Never gets a virus. Nobody would steal it. Typing it in later is a bugger though.”

“Daunting, I’m sure.” Mycroft looked around him, making sure of total privacy even though he knew they were along. “Do you ever hear your characters talking?”

“Constantly. In the background like I’ve left the telly on.”

Mycroft was considerably relieved. “What’s it like to start a new story? I’ve been living with my people since I was sixteen.”

Stephen leaned forward. “Frightening but exhilarating.” They both sighed.

Greg came back with his arms full. “You blokes look pleased with yourselves, talking about your trade.”

“It’s a brotherhood,” Stephen said, surprising himself.

Greg waited patiently, but the thread was broken.

Mycroft smiled at him. “You’re wanting to go home and get started.”

“I know we’ll need more, but I can’t think what until we’ve built this lot.”

“I’m envisioning regular pilgrimages. Aren’t you, Greg? We’ll want to change the seasons once we educate ourselves. And perhaps I’ll add some characters, new villagers, that is.”

“If you don’t find exactly what matches your mental picture, I can do custom builds.”

“If I could sketch a place, you could build the miniature.”

“Have done, yes. Takes a bit of time, but time is what I have.”

“My can draw anything. You’ve seen his maps.”

“Greg, that wasn’t my best work, more of a pictorial shopping list.”

“Fine drawings, nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Then I’ll sketch some things after we finish with this round. Do you have a card with your hours and things? Stephen handed over his card, then trying to hide his excitement, he asked, “Shall I ring this up for you?”

“Yes, please. It will take awhile.”

There was the inviting stack of books and manuals, then a village in pieces—bags, boxes and
crates. Greg and Stephen were shocked at the total, but Mycroft didn’t even blink. “Rome wasn’t built on a dime,” he said, handing over his card with a flourish.

They loaded it first in the boot and then the back seat filled up as well. Mycroft would have the bag of books on the floor under his feet, and he already wished they had bought the teddy dressed like an engineer.

“Happy Christmas, mate,” Greg said, sticking out his hand.

“It will be now, thanks to you.” Stephen grasped his hand and shook it vigorously.

“We’ll be in touch soon,” Mycroft said, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder as he fought his emotions. “I don’t want to disturb you over the holidays, but we’ll ring or email shortly after.”

“You are welcome any time.”

He stood outside the shop, waving until they turned the corner.

Mycroft watched people walking along, preoccupied with shopping and getting home out of the rain. He was safe and warm, driving home with his husband after a lovely afternoon of creative endeavors. They had made a new friend. There was a hot dinner waiting for them and an evening of working together on the project. This is how normal people live. Everything that he and Sherlock had scorned was everything that he now wanted.

Greg had been talking to him. “My?”

“I was thinking about how wrong I’ve been about normal people. Being ordinary might be preferable.”

“We are in no danger of being ordinary, love. But we helped Stephen. I’m proud of us.”

“I hadn’t really talked about writing before with another writer. Feels strange but good.”

“You two were in your own world for awhile. Writing seems lonely other than the imaginary people in your head. I’m glad you connected with him because writing is something I don’t have a clue about nor do I want to.”

“It is hard work.”

“I’d rather make music…or love.”

“Or a village.”

All of the work from the previous evening had to be torn down in order to lay the green ground cover. They let Morris help with that part. Then he left to finish their dinner, ‘something portable.’

Mycroft wanted to mark a scale grid on the floor with painter’s tape before they began, but Greg started unpacking boxes. Whatever he put down would have to be repositioned later. He reminded himself that Greg’s engagement in the process was more important than accuracy. He pinned the map to the wall and hoped for the best.

Morris brought thick cheese sandwiches with scalding mugs of tomato soup, non alcoholic lager in bottles, and hardy oatmeal biscuits and apples for dessert. “A working man’s dinner,” he said, looking around him as Greg laid track out into the hallway.

“We’re still in the planning stages, Morris, lots of experimenting. It should settle into more
reasonable proportions once the infatuation subsides.”

“Not to worry. It’s not as if you were constantly entertaining.”

“Or likely to start. This is our cave for the foreseeable future.”

“I’m an introvert too, but Tuppy is pushing me to get out more. It’s different being out in the world with him at my side. He never meets a stranger.”

Mycroft watched Greg pop another section of track in place. “Greg loves people. I mustn’t let my neuroses hold him back.”

“Greg what?” He looked up from his personal railroad, eyes distant.

“Greg needs to eat his dinner. We don’t have to do this all tonight, love.”

Greg crawled over to them, looking all of seven years old, called in from play. Mycroft almost reached to stop him from taking a bottle.

“I’ll finish this track and then call it a night. I just want to send it round once before bed.”

They sat in the hallway, backs to the wall, and ate like miners. Greg tore great bites out of his sandwich and talked with his mouthful, spraying crumbs everywhere. Morris joined them, his chomps into a crunchy apple reminding Mycroft of Sherlock’s pony Wallace. Mycroft sipped his soup, making a slurp to join in the theme of poor table manners. As noisy as it was, it was peaceful.

Greg ate single mindedly, his gaze again going distant like a visionary’s. Mycroft imagined him as a builder, shirt off and sweat running through streaks of grime as he hoisted a beam over his head and his jeans slid down to rest low on his hips. Mycroft was lord of the manor, and the project was late. He had come to ascertain the progress and scolded the young builder who got his own back by fucking his master in the unfinished structure, leaving muddy handprints on white linen.

“My? Come out of the village for a minute, love. I’m taking the rest of this in my study. We can have our tea and biscuits later if that’s okay.”

“Certainly. You’ve anxious to get back to it, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s a good distraction. For you too, I think.”

Mycroft nodded and folded his legs under him in preparation for standing, but Greg gave him a hand up and pulled him in for a hug. Greg’s feat of the site visit was still there, bubbling beneath the surface. Mycroft didn’t call attention to it, but gave affection in place of useless words. He cupped Greg’s hand and brought it to his shoulder and rubbed his back. Greg squeezed tight, breathing ragged. Finally, he let go, huffing out a sigh. Mycroft kissed the side of his head, mouthing the fuzz.

“I’m going to lay track all down the hall and into my study. Come in there when you’re finished?”

“I won’t be long.”

With Greg engrossed in his own mission, Mycroft was able to lay out the village with the spaces to scale. It was like city planning. He was immensely satisfied to bring his drawing into 3D. The finished product gave him an idea of the scope that they could accomplish. It was a proper start but he looked forward to improving it with the addition of some of Stephen’s custom pieces.
When a check on Greg showed him still content, Mycroft went down to the foyer and retrieved his brief case. He had sent out that morning for some basic art supplies and couldn’t wait to use them. He had a proper sketch pad instead of butcher paper and the good soft pencils with a small sharpener. He had his gum eraser and some charcoal sticks. It was late, but they probably wouldn’t rest well anyway. He had time to make one sketch before bed. He could send it by courier to Stephen in the morning as a sign of good faith that they would keep their promise to buy his work.

He ended up on the couch. When he propped up his legs on the coffee table, they formed just the right angle, as good as any easel. He had missed the thick, rough paper and the feel of the pencil. The outline first, then the cross hatching and shadings, his finger tips darkening as he blended, the sense memory of what the tools did, the eraser giving him a second chance. It was odd to be so sure of a building that didn’t exist. His heart pounded as it appeared—as real as the home he was sitting in—the Lester’s cottage. Even though Stephen would not be creating it, he drew the kitchen garden, the pump and trough, and a chicken who had strayed near the kitchen door under the watchful eye of Mrs. Lester’s best mouser.

On another sheet, he drew the floor plan, labeling each room. Stephen wouldn’t need that either, but it would give him a sense of proportion and atmosphere. On a third sheet, he wrote a description of the kitchen and surgery, rooms where important events had taken place. He liked the way the pencil scratched dark lines into the paper as he wrote, satisfying in a way that typing wasn’t. As Graham or Michael might have done, he made records by hand.

Greg moved around the room, occasionally stopping for an absent minded caress. When Mycroft finally looked up from his sketch pad, Greg was lounging at the other end of the couch. “Listen,” he said, “Wait for it.”

He had done something with the sound system; his hands were full of remotes. There was a faraway whistle, echoed by a tiny one, then a chugging that increased in volume. The Lestrade Express appeared in the doorway and steadily moved around the track, through the tunnel of the big desk, behind the mountain of the couch, and back into the great canyon of the hallway with a merry toot.

Mycroft sighed. “It’s like I’m there.”

“I can’t stop running it. Carry on sketching, love.”

Mycroft consulted his watch. It was a little before midnight. He would sketch the vicarage, roughing it in. He could finish the details later. As he reviewed the scenes that had happened in those rooms, he was lost in his world again. Michael’s lonely home took shape under his fingers.

When he came back to the present to ease a cramp in his hand, Greg was still running the train. “Finished, love?”

Mycroft nodded, afraid to look at the time.

Greg turned out the light, revealing that all the other lights were out as well. The fire had burned down, and the buttons on the remotes glowed. Mycroft felt a frisson of fear in the darkness.

“Watch this, My. I’ve been waiting for you before I tried it.”

The recording of the train was louder in the dark. Mycroft was more aware of the surround sound which made him feel as if her were on the rails with a train barreling toward him. Then from the black shadows of the hallway, a small light appeared, their little engine that could. They watched it progress around the room. Then the light was out the door and away, presumably to the village.
Greg budged over, bumping against Mycroft in the dark, and kissed his ear. “Sorry, my night vision is poor.” Another kiss, more on target this time. “Thank you for today.”

Now the dark felt safe. Mycroft wrapped his arms around Greg for a cuddle. “We were productive and creative.”

“I’m pleased with us. But are you sure it’s not childish?”

“I’ll say it until you believe it. Model railroading is a manly hobby. Engineers and architects make models. Admirals build ships in bottles.”

“That rhymed a bit.”

“I suppose it did.”

There were gentle kisses without expectation, more romantic than sexual, and Mycroft found the onslaught of tenderness harder to bear than the raw lust. Deductions were more difficult in the dark. As Greg kissed down his throat, he wanted to raise his hips up and present himself. If they could keep kissing and their clothes fell away without planning it, he knew that being naked in the dark, they would find each other again.

If Greg tested him, he would fail and take his pleasure, no matter the consequences. The little train went by, its wheels clicking on the track. Greg moaned and buried his face in Mycroft’s neck, sweeping his tongue back and forth across the Adam’s apple. One hand cupped Mycroft’s head while the other went under his shirt. He was pulled tight against Greg until his breath was done, and his ribs creaked.

Greg was whispering over and over, “I love you, baby. So much, so much, my love.”

Mycroft surrendered to the comfort. They would both have excellent orgasms because it had been so long. Sex would help them sleep better. The train was coming around again. He panted into the wall of sound. Here was his chance to be with Greg and connect with him again before the site visit turned him into a stranger.

But Greg was slowing the kisses and easing his grip. He lay his hand over Mycroft’s heart and held him until their panting stopped and the closeness felt awkward. Greg fumbled in the dark for the light and as the beam revealed the truth of his arousal, Mycroft felt as if he had been slapped. Greg was hard but he didn’t want sex.

“It’s late. We should go up. You have work tomorrow.” Greg stopped all of the train sounds, and the silence pounded. “I’ll set things right here and then be along. Go on up, baby.”

As they completed their bedtime rituals, Mycroft tried to hold onto the peace he had felt as he sketched. It was disheartening to observe the tension returning to Greg’s body. There seemed to be a bottomless well of stress which the site visit would only fill further. “I could go with you to the site.”

“You’ve seen quite enough of me as a cowering cry baby. I’ll be braver on my own.”

“With Gil.”

“Yes, with Gil. My therapist.” Greg snapped back the duvet and sat down hard on the bed, chucking his slippers at the wall.

Mycroft’s head pounded a warning. He had lapse into smothering and was going to pay for it. He got into bed, keeping close to his side. He checked his alarm clock, turned out the bedside lamp,
and curled on his side with his back to Greg. There was no need to do any further smothering. If Greg needed anything, he would have to ask. The loaded silence reminded him of early in their marriage when he knew that Greg had an expectation but he didn’t know how to meet it.

Greg turned out his light and pulled up his side of the duvet. “I know you mean well, but you can’t fix this for me. There’s nothing you can say or do or buy that will help. It’s awful. I’m terrified and miserable. There’s no way out but to walk through it.”

“I’m sorry.” Mycroft felt that this was an all purpose statement that covered his many infractions and his sorrow that Greg had to endure more pain.

“I know you are, baby. Gil says this is the hardest part. Then I’ll get better, and we’ll have our lives back.”

Mycroft doubted that they could ever go back to before. He tried to go to the village, but it had also changed now that Michael had lost his innocence. Even his favorite character couldn’t go back. Happy was very difficult to write. He wasn’t sure he could.

He would leave Graham and Michael in peace since someone in the world deserved to be having regular sex. Greg’s physical rebuff had hurt. The push-pull was wearing him down. He felt ridiculous for getting excited. His body ached from the strain of holding back.

Greg moved surreptitiously under the duvet. Mycroft slowed his breathing until it sounded like sleep, and in the long pauses between breaths, he could hear Greg stroking himself. He put his hand over his ear to block out the ragged breaths. Then he could feel the vibration in the mattress. He knew Greg’s rhythm—how his tongue would be caught between his teeth until he gave out a little grunt at the end.

Mycroft had given up self gratification almost completely. When he did need to take the edge off to make himself sharp for a difficult negotiation, he did so in his office en suite with joyless efficiency. It wasn’t quite fair. He would give anything for a long hot shower with Big Purple and the total oblivion afterwards, but rapists couldn’t be choosers. It was down to wet dreams which he couldn’t control.

He should have been happy that Greg could give himself comfort. The poor man needed a stress reliever. Why couldn’t he be that for Greg? Clearly his husband preferred his own hand to Mycroft’s.

On the morning of the site visit, Mycroft gave up on the speech he was writing after the fourth mistake. His mind was on Greg. If he were re-traumatized, Mycroft wasn’t sure that he could bear the grief of it, but he couldn’t ring to see how it was going. Greg wasn’t a child or an idiot or an invalid. He was with his therapist, seeing to his own recovery. If Mycroft interfered in that, he would be smothering and enmeshed. It was selfish anyway. He wasn’t really worrying about Greg but rather himself.

The morning dragged on. He had two meetings which only his body attended. His mind kept trying to go to the village, but images from the CCTV intruded. Greg under fire desperately trying to save Walt, his futile efforts and cries for help, his isolation for too long before rescue came, his eyes hollow as he was led away.

“Sir, I think you’d better go home.” Anthea had promised to look after him. He didn’t argue, and he didn’t take any work with him. There was nothing to do in the car. He sat on his mobile to keep from using it.

Finally, he was home. Greg was too and quite early. As he went into the kitchen, he tried to read
the signs. Greg had his back to the door was taking to Morris whose face generally looked as if he were hearing tragic news. But when Greg turned, his eyes were bright. “I did it, My! No panic attacks. Even Gil was surprised. The flashbacks were really just memories.”

He hugged Mycroft, his body feeling strong again.

“Myc’s gobsmacked. Look at him.”

“We’ve forgotten how to manage good news, haven’t we love?”

Mycroft nodded. He feared he might cry. Morris hugged him gently, rocking them back and forth until Mycroft felt one tear run down his cheek. It was alright though. Morris stepped back, wiped the tear away, and kissed him there.

“The fact that you’ve found someone to love and trust proves that there is justice in the world. Plan the wedding of your dreams, Morris, as our gift and grateful thanks for your care.”

“That’s a pretty speech, Myc. We don’t want a big fuss, but if you and Greg would come with us to the registry office some morning, we would be pleased.”

“Name the day. Where’s Tuppy now? Could he join us for lunch?”

“He’s working today. Plainclothes at a shop that’s been having some issues. He should be home in time for dinner, but might have to meet us there.”

“You go ahead and eat with us then. Maybe we could have a little champagne.” Greg was absolutely festive, but Mycroft was dizzy, the day spinning out of his control.

“Thanks, Greg, but I’m done with drinking unless Tuppy is with me. It’s a promise that I made to him.”

Greg’s smile dimmed at the memory of that night, and he reached for Mycroft’s hand. “I made some promises of my own.”

All through lunch, Greg and Morris chatted. Mycroft made the proper responses, but there was a roaring in his ears and his lips were numb. Then Greg was saying, “I haven’t slept well in days. My’s had the worst of it. Go and have a lie down, baby. I’ll look in on your presently.”

Mycroft was too weak with relief to stand, but he did. Greg stayed seated but reached for his hand and kissed it. Somehow he found the elevator and then the bed which looked beautiful to him. He didn’t know anything more until he woke in the dark to Greg’s kiss.

“You slept in your clothes, baby. You didn’t even take off your shoes.”

“How long?”

“Three hours.”

Greg had covered him with his quilt. He wanted to remove his clothes and sleep three hours more, but he had been committed to a celebration dinner.

“We’ve made it a proper engagement dinner while you slept. It’s short notice so we’ll only have about twenty.”

“Who?”

‘Tuppy’s friends from the Ministry. A few of the staff next door that know Morris. John and
Sherlock will come for drinks, but then John says he’ll see if his behavior merits staying for the meal. Morris has a few chat room friends coming around that he’s never met in person.”

Mycroft wanted to crawl under the bed and suck his thumb. It was too much. “You haven’t been sleeping either.”

“I’m high on success and coffee. Probably crash later.”

On a good day, the last thing in the world that Mycroft wanted was to be around people. His resting anxiety rate was so high since the shooting that the least little thing would put him close to panic, but this was for Morris and Tuppy, Greg’s plan for them. It wasn’t about him. He staggered out of bed, stiff and disoriented. “Would you choose something for me to wear?”

Greg’s night, Greg’s control. He took a hot shower and longed for Big Purple to take the edge off his social anxiety, but those days were over.

“Don’t shave, sweetheart. I want you rough tonight,” Greg called through the door.

Whatever for? More humping on the couch? He checked his balls to see if they were blue. Feeling nominally better after showering, he put on the clothes that Greg had chosen, soft, casual things. At least his body would be comfortable if not satisfied.

Art would be joining them for the party but would also be the designated driver. Art had the chauffeurs from two neighboring houses in the front seat with him. Mycroft was squished between Greg and the door as eight people were wedged in the back of the limo. He was ashamed that these were neighbors he had never seen before. Butlers, housekeepers, a nanny. They were kind but shy and overly excited.

Fortunately, Greg’s gift at drawing people out saved the day, and nervous chatter prevented him from having to say much. Tuppy and Morris were radiant in their fresh, new love. Poor souls, it couldn’t last and then you were left with your soul in tatters, going through the motions. The memories would be a comfort though. Yes, they all had their memories. Greg squeezed his hand, and he ran his fingers back and forth across Greg’s ring. Still there. Still married at present.

Celebration dinners in restaurants had never made sense to him. The only common ground he had with the people around him was that they knew the guests of honor. The random seating had left him far from the retired Ministry agents that he did know. At the long narrow table, Morris and Tuppy were only heard by half the occupants. Greg was on the other side three seats down because Mycroft had been made to ‘budge over’ to make room for more which was supposed to make things merrier. It didn’t.

His seat mate to the left had asked about ‘footie’ which he had no answer for, and the young girl to his right was so intimidated by him that she giggled and stuttered until they both lapsed into silence, much relieved.

At least from this vantage point, he could watch Greg interact with others. He was animated, laughing and talking with his hands. How Mycroft envied his ease with people of all classes, but somewhere in the past year, Greg had shut down. Mycroft’s misanthropy had isolated and limited Greg, yet another crime he had committed against his love. Mycroft had done him damage at every turn.

Greg had faced away from Mycroft for some minutes, listening to the elderly man on his left tell an interminable story. Mycroft was bored in absentia. Greg laughed and squeezed the old man’s shoulder. As he moved to give his other dinner companion equal time, he grinned at Mycroft, waggling his eyebrows. ‘I love you,’ he mouthed, putting his hand over his heart.
Mycroft mouthed the words back, feeling on display. His heart pounded as it had from the very first time he had seen Greg in an ill fitted suit and rumpled rain coat. He’s mine for now.

Somehow he got through it as he did all meetings with forays into the village and one he hadn’t used in awhile, mentally trying different hats on people. His exhausted had nearly reached the point of giggling when the dinner finished.

Tuppy had driven himself to the restaurant and took Morris, whom they had given a few days off. Some of the younger set were going out for a drink. He was pleased to have his personal space back in the car even if he did have to sit bolt upright with his knees in his nostrils. The lift of his dessert espresso was already fading. In spite of his unprecedented afternoon nap, his body was reaching the point of no return.

He and Sherlock were able to go without sleep until the mission was over, the case solved, but then they had to recuperated in hibernation like bears. During the separation, he had frequent insomnia and then the hours at Greg’s bedside as he fought pneumonia and the night terrors. With the stress of the site visit over, maybe Greg’s nightmares would fade over time, but his body didn’t care. The crisis had past, and it was demanding its due. He had less than an hour before he collapsed and slept wherever he was.

His head hit the cold window glass with a thunk and wrenching of his neck. He left it there, but Greg lifted it slightly and something warm and soft was between his face and the glass. It smelled of Greg.

“We’ve been through a very bad time. He’s been my rock.” Greg rubbed his arm before linking their hands.

He couldn’t get his eyes to open or his mouth to work. He couldn’t hold Greg’s hand and had to let it go. Cold air rushed over him, searching for exposed skin. Greg’s hand was on his shoulder. “Home now, love. I’d carry you if I could.”

Greg mustn’t ever carry Mycroft again. He had to keep going—only a little while, only a bit father. Wakening suddenly put him into a chill. He used the small burst of adrenaline from the cold to lever himself out of the car and stagger toward the kitchen door. Not bothering with lights, he made it to the elevator which was small enough that he couldn’t fall over. He pressed the button, not even waiting for Greg.

He left his overcoat in the elevator, his suitcoat in the hall and his jumper on the door knob. He hung onto the door frame and toes off his shoes. Never had he been careless with his clothing; however he felt close to blacking out. Greg might have said something. His hearing was going, his eyes wouldn’t open. His belt was giving him trouble as he tried to undo it by touch. Greg helped with the belt and button, but at the snick of his zipper being pulled down, the cooler air rushed to his cock. Greg was stripping him where he stood. Did he want that? He remembered Greg exposing him, and then in the elf costume when his hard on was displayed, Greg had said, ‘You’re gasping for it.”

“Don’t!”

Greg stopped pulling on his trousers. “It’s alright, baby. I didn’t want you sleeping in your clothes again.” He was trembling as Greg hugged him. “Didn’t mean to scare you, love. I’ll get your pyjamas.”

Mycroft fell onto the bed, kicking off his trousers. The feat had given him enough of a jolt to finish pulling them off and throw them on the floor. He burrowed under the duvet, still wearing his shirt and jumper. Even half dressed with the covers over him, he felt exposed. He curled his
legs up against his chest, protecting his cock, but still ashamed even though it was limp from cold and weariness. Sleep took him while he was still shivering.

The next thing he knew, Greg’s lips were on his forehead. “Stay put, love. Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Mycroft’s eyes were heavy even after the earlier bed time. “Breakfast?”

“I’ll get something on the way. Morris isn’t here, remember?”

Mycroft tried to sit up and then lowered his expectation to getting his eyes open. “What time is it?”

“It’s early yet. I just wanted to get started. I’m going to make you proud of me today.”

“I’m always proud of you.”

Greg had the look he got when he was facing danger. He was buttoning his coat with jerky motions, and his jaw was set. “We didn’t get our private celebration last night. Rest awhile longer. Maybe we could have dinner here tonight? Cook something like we did at the villa. Or take away if you’re still knackered.”

“I’d like that.” Mycroft got out of bed, moving carefully out of respect for his screaming bladder.

“You don’t have to get up.” But Greg hugged Mycroft hard and kissed him like a man going off to war.

“I love you, sweetheart, and I am always proud of you.”

“You will be.”

“Let me piss and then talk to me a minute. We can at least have tea and toast.”

By the time Mycroft came out of the en suite, Greg was gone but a sense of doom lingered. He texted, and Greg made all the empty reassurances that were his tells when he was on a risky case. Greg’s security detail reported him breakfasting at a local café. When Mycroft got out of the shower, he was only marginally better at the report of Greg arriving at Gil’s for his regular appointment.

All morning his stomach fluttered. He wasn’t supposed to interrupt a session, but after his ten o’clock meeting, he was going to ring Greg regardless. He told Anthea that he might have to leave for a family emergency.

The call came at half past ten. “Gil Hoffman here. Greg’s had a panic attack and while he’s out of danger, we still need some extra help this morning. I’ve called in two prescriptions to your preferred chemist, and those will need to be picked up as soon as possible, but Greg needs a ride home first.”

“I’m leaving now. Can you give me more details while I’m on the way? What triggered it?”

Mycroft grabbed his briefcase and coat and signaled Anthea to text Art. He walked quickly through the corridors, Greg’s face the only thing he could see.

“I don’t know if Greg told you that he wanted to watch the footage of the shooting. He’s been pushing for it all along, pushing himself far harder than I ever would. The site visit went so well that I suppose we got ahead of ourselves.”
“No, he hadn’t told me, but I could tell this morning that he was trying to prove something to me. I hope you know that I would never require that of him. He’s been very brave, and I’m so proud of him.”

“As am I. The main reason that I allowed it was because he had been so critical of himself. I hope that if he could see how well he did, and I had previewed the footage, well, I hoped he could forgive himself. He’s been imagining it as so much worse. I also had concerns about him watching it at work or alone. He’s his own worst enemy. He had a panic attack so severe that I had to physically restrain him.”

“How is he now? How are you? Were you injured?”

“Only my pride. I’m sorry, Mycroft. It’s my error in judgment.”

“What happens now?”

“He’s here with me, resting on the couch. We’ve had tea and done some calming exercises after a good cry. As you can imagine, it’s quite discouraging after yesterday’s success.”

Art had the car right at the elevator in a tow away zone. “I’m at the car. I can pick up his medication on the way. Will he actually take it?”

“Yes, he will. That’s how difficult his morning was. There’s a mild sedative for day time and a sleep aid for night. You both need a break from the night terrors. I have to think that sleep deprivation is driving some of this.”

Mycroft was thankful to not be driving. His hands were shaking, but then his ministry training took over. He was good in a crisis; he had experience with Greg in crisis. By the time Art pulled up in front of Gil’s building, Mycroft Holmes was ready for battle.

No one would have guessed correctly as to which of the two men was terminally ill. Greg shuffled slowly to the car; his face was gray and his eyes were swollen. He had to hold onto Gil for support. Mycroft jumped out and eased him down on the seat, reaching for the blanket to cover him.

“I didn’t want to sedate him until he was home, but get the pills in him straight away. Ring me with any questions. Please keep me posted. Rest tonight, regroup in the morning, eh? Again, I’m truly sorry, Mycroft.”

Mycroft shook his hand but couldn’t speak. He nodded. Greg needed his full attention now. He climbed in beside him and held him. There weren’t any words for pain that deep. Greg looked too ill to talk anyway. But as they waited in traffic, Greg said, “Take me away from here please.”

“We are, love. We’re going home.”

“No, I mean out of this city. I want to go away.”

“Alone or with me?”

“Just the two of us, My. If you want to come.”

His fingers flew over the mobile at his side, asking Gil’s opinion of a getaway. When he had the go ahead, he asked, “Where to, love? Anywhere in the world.”

“Dunno what I want. Some place slow and quiet.”
“Is there anything you don’t want?”

The Water is Wide

Chapter Summary

Mycroft spirits Greg away to Scotland where they begin restoration.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to frenchposie, nineorfour and LavenderVanilla who kept me company with encouraging comments.

Thank you to ghislaine who provided a ride.

Greg slept while Mycroft drove, taking his husband to a safer place. At fuel stops, Greg would wake only long enough to indicate that he understood that Mycroft was leaving the car to buy petrol and visit the gents. They had obtained his sedative at the chemist’s and he had taken it straight away.

Gil had said, “If your work permits, take an extra day. If he felt rough enough to ask for help, he needs it. A change of scene might be just the thing.”

Because Greg’s ears were still sensitive, they would have to drive somewhere. One of the security staff met them with a Range Rover. Anthea had found a remote inn, partially closed for the season but willing to negotiate. She had flown on ahead to purchase clothing, toiletries and snacks from the local shops since the men had left London with only the clothes on their backs. When they arrived at the inn, clothing in the proper sizes would already be in the room in the closets and drawers. The room had been paid for and the staff briefed. Mycroft asked her to order a light meal to be eaten in the room.

As they drove north, the traffic lessened. His legs cramped from driving and the cold settled in his bad ankle. When he thought he couldn’t take it any longer, he saw the sign for their turn. The last ten miles were always the longest. They passed through what might have been a village, but he wasn’t sure, one small string of shops. Then the road grew rougher and narrower, and he thought he might have lost their way and stumbled onto a farm track. Much to his relief, the inn rose out of the ground, a monolith well lit. Boxy but intrepid was the Stag and Briar.

The concierge spoke in somber tones. “You’ll have this wing to yourself. A bridal party had reserved it for a Christmas wedding and then eloped. We’re grateful for your custom.”

They were on the ground floor in a large room at the end of the long hallway. “Ring the desk for your supper. It’s all bubbling hot and ready at your convenience.”

“Thank you. We’ll wash up and get acclimated. Perhaps in about thirty minutes.”

“That will work.” She glanced worriedly at Greg who had remained silent and was now staring out into the black of the window. She rested a hand lightly on Mycroft’s arm. “Anything at all you need. Here’s my private number.”
She handed him a card embossed with stag antlers that twined around the border to become briars. Anthea had told the staff that Greg had been damaged in the line of duty and needed quiet for recovery. The building was beyond hospital quiet. Mycroft could hear the wind. They had a basic bed and a sitting area before the fireplace but no television. There was an electric kettle but no microwave or refrigerator.

The bath had a huge claw foot tub and the water smelled of peat. Anthea had left a basket of local bath products. The bar of oatmeal soap looked rough enough to scrub floors. “Would you like a bath, love? I always feel filthy when I travel.”

“You first.”

Mycroft hoped the sedative was not going to keep Greg so without affect. He would rather have him cursing and shouting accusations then blank. He didn’t want to take eyes off him for a minute, but it was a small room compared to what they were used to with a standard bed rather than a king. They would be on top of each other with no escape but the tundra or the lobby. Best not to play sardines unless asked.

He hurried through his bath even though he would like to have submerged himself in the swampy water until it cooled. The radiator did its best, but there was still a chill in the air when he stepped out. The soap had buffed off some freckles and the towels were equally abrasive. Greg would love it.

But Greg was face down on the bed when he stepped from the en suite. They had agreed that Mycroft would monitor the medications, and Gil had only prescribed enough for five days pending re-evaluation. The bottle was on the table, one pill gone. Mycroft was relieved to see that Greg had opened the biscuit tin and put two biscuits down before taking the strong medication. Even though he had left the bottle for Mycroft to find, it was worrisome. Ten minutes had been too long to leave him alone.

Mycroft rang the front desk and cancelled the meal with apologies. Anthea said that they were running on a skeleton crew, and he didn’t want to be changeable so soon in their stay. “Please add it to our bill and allow the staff to enjoy. I’m sure it was delightful.”

He was hungry but didn’t want to eat without Greg. One of the bureau drawers was open; Greg had found pyjamas for himself and he did the same. Anthea had color coordinated them, shades of blue and tan for Mycroft and greys and dark browns for Greg. He slid under the duvet, and Greg was right there. They would have no hiding on the other side of the standard bed.

Greg snored for an hour, louder than he ever had. Mycroft lay beside him on his back, making mental lists of all he had left undone. When Greg snorted and rolled toward him, he jumped as if he’d been attacked. Without waking, Greg pulled him close and wrapped his arms around him as if he were a teddy. Mycroft hoped he wouldn’t have a Bruce dream on a stranger’s sheets. He needed to keep watch so that Greg wouldn’t have a night terror and be too sedated to wake himself. The closeness of the bed would make detection easier but he would also be closer to Greg’s punches if it was that sort of nightmare.

He began building their model village in his mind. Knowing that Stephen could build anything that he could draw was inspiring. He had just started to add some new shops when Greg came to and sat up.

“I’m too tired to sleep.”

“After one of those?”
“I took a half. The other bit is on the nightstand. Wanted to see what it would do first. Gil promised me that it would be gentle enough for me to wake up if I had one of my dreams.”

“Do you need some water? The other half should get you to morning.”

“No, I slept all the way here. I’m done with that for awhile. Turn on the light. It’s pitch black in here.”

“Do you want to get up? There’s no one around us; we can keep our own schedule.”

“It’s nice here in the bed. Tell me a story, My.”

Mycroft, who was so exhausted his teeth ached, scanned his weary brain for ideas. *The Village* had stalled as Mycroft tried to make a decision about where Michael and Graham would go next with their relationship. It was delicate subject matter for an author with his own marriage in limbo, and he didn’t want any awkward questions in their bed.

Did he have another story in him? He began to speak without thinking, his eyes resting on the painting above the fireplace. “The Highlander’s body ached with every step, shuddering as wind blew icy gusts of rain against his warm hunting plaid. The one consolation of the heavy load he carried was that his neck and shoulders were warm. The deer was as red as his own wild curls that whipped in the wind.”

“Ginger, like you,” Greg said, wriggling closer while one hand kept up a steady stroking across Mycroft’s chest.

“When he thought he couldn’t walk another step, he saw the lamp his wife had placed in the window, a light more steady than the moon which winked at him behind the scudding clouds.” Was ‘scudding’ a word? He would have to check in the morning.

“Does it come to you that easy? Already polished like that? God, you’re gifted.”

“You have exceedingly low standards.” He was afraid of praise but he kissed the top of Greg’s head. “Thank you, love.”

“I’m glad he has someone. This is a lonely place.”

Mycroft nodded although lonely sometimes meant safe. “Because she was waiting for him, he was able to walk those last steps and hang the carcass in the stone shed. The icy wind that had taunted him would keep the meat fresh until morning. He was thankful for the stone walls and the stout door. All would be well.”

Greg’s breath was slowing; his body grew heavier. Mycroft stroked his head, wiling the silver hair to grow quickly.

“She was there with rough towels warmed by the fire and an old sack to get the worst of the wet off his collie. On faith in his hunting skills, she had made a feast of the last of their sausage with turnips and thick brown bread slathered in goat cheese. He ate his fill, the spoon shaking in his hand while she scrubbed his damp curls. The dog lay on his feet, warming them. The baby slept in the cradle. The wind would not come nigh their table.”

Greg was asleep and didn’t even stir when Mycroft reached up to turn out the light. They woke together some time later, not from nightmares but from feeling well rested. They lay in the shelter of the duvet, enjoying the promise of a free day without the Ministry or therapy.

“When will breakfast happen?”
“In winter, half past eight.”

Greg’s stomach growled in protest.

“You slept through dinner, love. We have gift baskets with local delicacies. If you manage the kettle, I’ll make a little picnic. Tap water will taste of peat; there’s bottled water in the cupboard underneath.”

Greg shrugged. “When in Rome” and filled the kettle at the sink. Mycroft found fresh fruit, an assortment of cheeses, and a loaf of oatmeal bread as sturdy as paving stones. A small cutting board, a fruit knife, and a tiny spatula were included in one of the baskets.

Greg had found a heavy ceramic pot and large white mugs with stags on them. While the tea steamed, he built the fire. Mycroft sliced the sharp cheddar and the gouda and a plum, pear, and apple and fanned the slices out on the cutting board. He tore off great hunks of bread and spread them with a soft goat cheese. Under the wheel of brie, he found a packet of short bread.

They sat on the floor in front of the fire with their backs against the low slung leather sofa, their feast spread on a towel. “You’ve done prettily, My. You’re so clever.”

“And you’ve brewed a fine cup of tea.”

“Tastes like moss in a good way.”

“You’ve tasted moss then?”

“At survival training.”

Greg ate with a sense of purpose, groaning as the sharp flavors of the cheese melded with the sweet fruit. “Oh god this is good. I’ll bet it would be a treat toasted on a stick.”

Mycroft smiled, raising his mug in salute. He took a bite here and there, and Greg fed him some particular combinations, but mostly he sipped at his tea, the warm comforting weight of pottery in his hand.

“I had a fantasy like this only you were giving me sips of brandy from your glass.”

“That could be arranged.” Mycroft breathed out and unclenched himself. Greg’s face was no longer ashen and drawn. Gil said that they had survived the worst of it. Perhaps they could begin to build a new normal presently. They had certainly earned it the hard way. He came back to find Greg offering him a biscuit.

“Were you in the village or the new story?”

“New one?”

“Last night. Your Highland tale. He had bread and cheese before the fire.”

“I thought you slept through that bit of nonsense.”

“ Heard every word and could see it as clearly as that painting. Did all of it come out of your head? It was poetry, a story but like music.”

Greg’s literary education had been limited while Mycroft knew the truth of his own attempts. He had read the great writers of many countries in their original languages, but this was a story just for them. If it pleased Greg when he was weary and sad, then it was a masterpiece and Mycroft was
proud of himself. “Shall we go exploring later? I quite fancy trodding about the heather.”

“Can we?”

Greg was taking more of an interest. Mycroft dare to hope. “Anthea has bought us kilts and jumpers knit by village women.”

“You in a kilt. I won’t need any other scenic view. No shaving either. Be my wild, red Highland man.”

“If you’ll be my silver fox.”

“I love you, My.”

Mycroft let Greg set the tone, and suddenly he was back as if the shooting had never happened. Of course he engaged in a great deal of silent self flagellation that he hadn’t brought Greg away sooner. He thought he had offered to take him on a driving holiday, but so much had happened that he wasn’t sure.

Greg enthused throughout their second breakfast. He had wanted to eat in the dining room which overlooked the grounds from huge windows. He loved the oatcakes, the clover honey, the farm fresh eggs and butter, the porridge. They lingered over a second cup of the strong local tea and watched the wind move bare branches until Greg said, “Let’s explore.”

Mycroft monitored him for signs that he was repressing the previous morning, but he seemed normal. It was the Greg of their courtship, confident and happy. He braced himself for the next fall.

They dressed in the heavy clothing that Anthea had thoughtfully provided, layers of polar fleece and ski gear. Greg loved his cable knit jumper, the dark brown color accenting his silver hair. “You look beautiful, baby. I can’t wait for your pretty red beard to come in.”

Mycroft did not say that they were only staying a few days. Whatever Greg wanted, he would do which is how he ended up tramping across open plain with a wind so strong that he could throw his arms out and lean over but never hit the ground.

“Look at the mountains! They are as blue as your eyes, love. My god, it’s gorgeous here.”

Mycroft trod on, keeping his eyes on the ground for dips or holes that would trip him.

“Look, My! It’s a little cottage.” Greg gazed at the ruin as if it was the Parthenon instead of a simple shepherd’s croft. “I want to stand inside it.”

Mycroft was glad of the rest. His bad ankle smarted from the uncertain terrain, and the cold had penetrated every inch of him. The two standing walls blocked the wind. The dead grass in the space was smooth and sparse.

“it’s a shame to see it run down like this. Looks sturdy. Would your Highlander have lived here?”

“No, I think it’s more recent than that, but possibly the first world war. The roof might have been thatch so it wouldn’t last but a few seasons of neglect.”

“Why wouldn’t they keep it in the family? Or sell it to a museum or something? As close as it is to the inn, they should buy it.”

“I don’t see a well or even a brook so no potable water source. Access is an issue. We’ve been
walking quite awhile.”

“Distance is different here.”

Mycroft thought of gloriously even sidewalk and the shelter of tall buildings. “Yes, distance is deceptive here.”

“I suppose it’s not very big either, once you got furniture in.”

“Just the one room but perhaps a sleeping loft.”

“Maybe it was for hunting or beach holidays.”

Greg squatted and looked up the chimney. “I think you could still make a fire here. I don’t see any cracks or bird nests. Wouldn’t a fire be nice about now?”

“Indeed.” All of Mycroft’s imaginative powers as a writer couldn’t conjure up the feeling of being warm again. “Shall we go back?”

“Not yet. There’s no telly. What else have we got on today? Let’s see if we can find the sea.”

“Lead on.” Mycroft was thankful for the wind that stretched his face into a grimace disguised as a grin. He wanted a fire, a book, and a three day nap.

They walked over the rough ground toward the circling gulls when all of a sudden, the sea was there. They were on a promontory, the waves crashing far below them on three sides. The water was gray with spume churned by the fierce wind. Mycroft tasted salt.

Greg was taking in great gulps of the sea air. “I always forget how much I love it.”

“We have an amazing view.” It was a bleak horizon except for the old lighthouse on a tiny isle not much bigger than its base. The beacon’s red trim stood in stark relief against the gray of the water and sky. The gulls cried, adding to the melancholy as they wheeled above.

All that water under no one’s control. Nations could pretend to own it until the next hurricane or tsunami. It was unchangeable in its unchangeableness, eroding the shore in one spot and building it up in another, working when all others ceased. The wind was also relentless and strong enough to cut through his clothes until he felt that he was standing there naked at the end of the world. He thought it might push him over the cliff. Greg moved behind him to block the worst of it and wrapped his arms around him.

“The wind cuts right through me but I could stand here forever.”

Mycroft thought that they already had. Yet Greg was calm and that was the whole point of driving to the arctic wilderness. A man could live without toes, and if his nose got frost bit, he had plenty to spare. There was no need of testicles if they weren’t having sex ever again.

“They should have a bench here.”

Mycroft thought of how the cold wind would force its way through the slats of a park bench onto his chapped arse and couldn’t see how that would be better. “It’s a lovely spot.”

“I wonder if there’s a path down to the beach.”

Mycroft ignored this, hoping for the best. “Such a lovely spot. I’m glad we’ve seen it.” He turned back toward the inn, the wind hardening his nipples until he feared that they had poked through all
of his layers.

“My? Look over the edge and see if there’s a path. I’d look but if there wasn’t, I’d want to jump. Bloody phobia.”

Mycroft felt every fragment of his love was being tested. He also felt his honesty being checked because if there was a bloody path down toward death by hypothermia, lying might be a kindness as well as a survival tactic. He peered over the edge of the cliff. There was a fucking, god forsaken shithole of a path. He shouted louder than the wind speed required. “There is a path, but it’s rocky, steep, and narrow. I think there’s ice on it.”

“I’m game if you are,” Greg said, already a few steps down before looking back like a cheeky monkey about to throw feces.

“It’s very high for you. I don’t want to trigger your phobia.”

“There’s a hand railing.”

Bloody hell, he’d let Greg’s sedatives back at the inn. “A railing made of frayed rope.”

“The cliff face blocks some of the wind.”

So would a tombstone, but Mycroft followed his husband half a league onward into the valley of death. The Ice Man was going to freeze to death in perfect irony.

Soon they reached the middle where they were fucked either way. “Christ, it’s brisk,” Greg said, shuffling along with both hands on the rope.

When had he been miraculously cured of his acrophobia. He was skipping along like a mountain goat. Mycroft was thankful for his sturdy boots that Anthea had chosen. Even so, his toe caught on a half buried rock, forcing him to hug the cliff face for a minute. He was never sure how they made it down that first time, crawling into the unknown. He could sense the metaphor and it angered him. They could be allowed some moments of certainty somewhere.

Once they were far enough down that a fall would only injure not kill, Greg increased his speed and was down on the shingle throwing back his head to laugh with relief and wonder. “Come on, love. Come see how beautiful it is. Back home was never so wild.”

Mycroft made it the rest of the way, wincing as loose pebbles crunched under his boots. He looked back the way they had come and had no idea how they would make the ascent with gravity working against them. He looked far down the shingle and could see no landmarks whatsoever. Greg had said no people; let there be none.

They had no supplies with them, not even water. They had snuck past the concierge when she was vacuuming the dining room. No one knew where they were, and the inn was short staffed. They had asked for privacy so their room would not even be made up unless they asked. How many meals would they miss before someone came looking for their blue and shriveled corpses? The salt would preserve them long enough to allow a viewing for the next of kin. Sherlock would quite enjoy the identification, calculating what had taken place in those last hours.

Greg was filling his pockets with shells and pebbles because they would want to be heavier for climbing. Had a psychotic break created this unwavering cheerfulness? Be careful what you wish for. “Sweetheart, it’s a longer way back walking uphill and into the wind. I think perhaps we should try exploring again later when we have more clothes and supplies.”

“Let’s go back another way then. I would imagine that the shore curves around. See up there. The
cliff isn’t as high. There might be a better path or it even might level out. Won’t hurt to walk for awhile and see.”

So they walked with Greg continuing to shell seek until his gloves were soaked and there were big wet stains on his pockets. Mycroft’s nose ran continually and he hadn’t brought a handkerchief. He couldn’t feel his ears. He might have to wear elf ears for life if his ears got frost bit.

The cliff did lower as they walked on but there was only a rock wall straight up. No path. Mycroft’s limp was beyond hiding. Greg should have never been out in such weather so soon after healing from pneumonia. This entire trip had been a fool’s errand.

There was nowhere to rest but endless beach and if they sat on the damp pebbles and soaked their trousers, they would never be able to walk in the wind. He couldn’t get a signal on their mobile, and Greg had left his on a charger in the room.

“I’m sorry, baby. We’d have been back to the inn by now if we’d gone back up the path. I should have listened to you. You are always right.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get this sorted. Why don’t we stand for a minute against the cliff? Get the wind off our back, eh?”

“I thought I was in good shape from running every day, but walking on these pebbles has me knackered. Are you alright, My? How’s your ankle?”

“I’m alright.” He took Greg’s salt encrusted hand in his. “Let’s enjoy the view a few minutes. It really is beautiful.”

Greg shouldn’t have to live with his lifelong anxiety. Mycroft had always been a champion worrier; there was no need to compound Greg’s PTSD with his neuroses. One potty bastard was enough in any family. He focused on catching his breath and thinking about warm things. Now that they weren’t moving, he could let the waves hypnotize him and his imagination came back. They would reach the inn somehow and have a long soak in the peaty cauldron of a tub. There would be seafood for dinner. He didn’t care for the smell of it after an unfortunate work-required tryst with a Russian whore, but Greg loved all manner of seafood. They would build up the fire and put on their new pyjamas directly after dinner. Books in bed for 5-10 minutes before he guessed that they would both be in deep sleep, Greg with his medicine, Mycroft with total exhaustion and mild hypothermia.

“My, I think we’d better get on if we’re going. You might have nodded off just then. I think it really does curve around in a bit. It’s warmer when we’re walking.” Greg was using his best copper voice which meant that he was frightened.

Mycroft stumbled. He couldn’t feel anything from his thighs on down.

“Lean on me, baby. We’ll get there.”

Did one get mirages in the cold or only the heat? Far in the distance, Mycroft saw a vehicle. He didn’t want to mention it in case this was the first stage of freezing to death.

“So you see that, My? Help is on the way. We’ll let them come to us.”

As the Land Rover Defender slowly navigated the loose pebbles, Mycroft made out a logo that was becoming familiar. A stag with its horns twining into briar just visible underneath a crust of salt.
The concierge stopped and rolled down her window. “Gentleman, would you like a ride?”

Greg had already climbed in the back. “You get in front, My. Closer to the heat.”

“Both you boys had better get in front. There’s room.”

The heat was on full blast, the hot air like an oven. Their driver was in jeans and a T shirt with an unbuttoned cardigan over it. “Sorry that I’m late. We’ve never had anyone make it all the way down the cliff.”

Mycroft’s teeth chattered so he clinched his jaw to speak. “There are other idiots besides us?”

“Every last one. Like lemmings.”

“My begged me to go back, but I was feeling very reckless. I thought if we kept walking we would curve around to the road or some other path up the cliff.”

“You were right but could you have walked another ten miles?”

“Not another ten steps.”

“If you had gone left, you would have come to our land, and if you took the path, you would have stumbled upon our farm. Tom would have brought you back.”

“We both workout regularly. I don’t know why we got so knackered.”

“Londoners are used to walking in the city. That’s true, but you don’t have the wind or the rough ground. Even though I’m used to it, the pebbles are hard to walk on. I know you’re a fair bit strong to get as far as you did.”

Mycroft watched her expertly drive over what appeared to be no road at all. She was curt, but he liked it compared to the typical obsequiousness of hospitality staff. He admired her for scolding them when they were high paying customers at nearly empty inn. Leaning his head back, he let the heat and their conversation wash over him. Greg did love people.

“I didn’t catch your name last night or at breakfast this morning.”

“Cordelia Wolcott. I cooked your breakfast this morning so Katie served you, but I’ve sent her home for Christmas. It will be me the rest of the way.”

“You’ll cook and serve?”

“Since you are the only guests left, won’t be hard.”

“If we left, could you have Christmas with your family?”

“If you left, we would have to close the place down by New Year’s.”

The Land Rover rocked and swayed over the hillocks. Mycroft’s head thumped against the back of the seat. Pins and needles were running up and down his legs, and his nose and ears burned. He started to shiver and bit his tongue.

Cordelia cut Greg off in mid sentence. “Allow me to be your nanny for a minute. I’ve opened the room next to yours so we have two baths. The radiators are turned on high and your towels and pyjamas are warming there. As soon as we get back, I want you to pop straight into the bath and stay there until I knock. I’ll bring a nice nursery tea, good plain food. Clean your plates and then into bed you pop for a lie down until dinner. I’ll not have either one of you dying on me even
though we could stack your corpse outside for a freeze.”

“Yes, mum,” they said in unison.

Mycroft was pleased to take direction. Everything had been on him alone for too long. “Thank you for all you are doing. We won’t be so much trouble in future.”

“I should hope not. There’s a tin of salve for your wind burn on the sink. Use it.”

She pulled up to the front of the inn and Mycroft was mortified when he had to hang onto the side of the truck to lever himself out and then to the handrail of the shallow steps up to the inn. He followed blindly behind Greg and Cordelia and went to the first open door, the extra room smaller than theirs but with the same deep ancient tub. Heat waves made the wallpaper dance until he was dizzy. He turned the taps and then stripped off leaving all his damp, sandy clothes in a pile.

He sat on the edge and pulled one leg in and then the other. While the prickling pains kept him from sleeping, he wasn’t present either. The water was still comfortable when Cordelia called him to tea. She sat with them awhile, checking his fingers before curling them around a mug of very sweet, milky tea. She even looked at his toes which he felt shy about, but she was gruff enough that he couldn’t be bothered to argue.

After they ate everything that she had put on their plates, they climbed under the duvet. Mycroft knew nothing until well after dark. He wasn’t sure if he had napped or fainted.

“Alright, love?”

“Not sure.”

“Would you kiss a man with chapped lips?”

“I will if you will.”

“Like crocodile. You’ll have to wear a kilt to redeem yourself.”

“And again, I will if you will.”

“Would it be a national incident if I wore pants underneath? My balls have just come back, and I don’t care to have them climb back in so soon.”

“Whatever you like, Greg. We are lucky to be alive.”

Mycroft found that anxiety had been pounded out of him on their survival walk. “I ate my weight in toast. How am I still hungry?”

“You burned it off shivering. I feel like my ankles are going to freeze.”

“Long wool socks.”

Anthea had provided for every possible occasion. They had shoes to go with their kilts and could leave the hiking boots for outside. Cordelia was pleased with their effort. “Don’t you look fine? Too posh for the likes of us, but I’ll give you dinner just the same when it looks as if you’ll live.”

Mycroft’s seaside vision came true. After the chowder, Greg ate two platefuls of fresh caught fish, exclaiming about the quality to Cordelia’s wry delight. She had mutton for Mycroft, tender and succulent. Her cooking was adequate but nothing close to Morris’s; still they ate like rabid wolves.
“It’s the wind. I make double portions for everyone all winter long. Now, would you care for a bit of wedding cake? It was made before the cancellation, and we might as well enjoy it. I’ll bring two pieces for each of you. Do what you can.”

They walked hand in hand back to their room, stomachs puffed like kangaroos. When they were closed in for the night, Greg stuck his belly out more. “I think I felt it kick.”

“Jump more like. All that fish.”

In spite of being uncomfortably full, Mycroft felt content. He had brought Greg safely away under his own power. They’d had a bracing day of physical exercise and exploration followed by a decadent bath and nap. Now as the wind howled, they sat before a fire that warmed them and sparked colors from the aromatic bundle of herbs that Cordelia had put on it. He exhaled and let his body sink into the warm leather of the couch. He would read for a bit and then encourage early bed.

Greg began to fidget and Mycroft thought *Please, just a little longer in peace.* He sighed. “I have some movies and podcasts on my laptop that you might enjoy.”

It was early yet and the nights were long. While Mycroft felt he could sleep the clock around even after his intense afternoon nap, Greg had slept for the whole trip and had taken a sedative for restful sleep the previous night. It was understandable that he would be restless. His eyes darted around the room, and he kept licking his lips.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“Most nights I had the same nightmare. Did you know that?”

Mycroft shook his head. He couldn’t imagine the terror that waited for Greg when he slept.

“Yeah. Of the ones that I can remember, it’s usually the same. Once in awhile, it’s Dad or an actually memory from the shooting, but nine times out of ten, I’m seeing the same horror movie.”

Mycroft waited out the digression, feeling sick about where they might be headed.

“I close my eyes, and you’re there. Sick or hurt or in danger. I do everything that I know to do. I try different things each time. I even problem solve and rehearse during the day, but I can’t—”

His voice faltered. Mycroft could see veins in his neck bulging as he tried to get the words out. “I try so fucking hard, but I can’t save you.”

“You don’t have to. You already did.” He knelt in front of him and wiped the tears off his face. He felt Greg’s sigh of relief blow his hair off his forehead.

“That was a very good thing to say.”

Mycroft kissed his cheek and his lips came back salty. Greg was still struggling to express something so he sat cross legged on the floor in front of him. Greg took his hand and hung onto it like a lifeline.

“The thing that brought me low was how small I was in that room. I was scrabbling around trying to save Walt, but he was dead when he hit the floor. I didn’t even get to Rich. I looked like a fucking squirrel in a cage, so bloody stupid. What’s the fucking point of trying? All my sorry little efforts were for nothing. Where’s the meaning in that?”

Tears rained down on the carpet in a room so silent that they sounded like raindrops. Greg twisted
Mycroft’s wedding band around until he thought that his whole finger might come off.

Greg’s quiet weeping was harder to bear than all the desperate sobbing of his nightmares. He considered many things to say and spoke slowly when he did. “It’s very tempting to get trapped in existential angst, but that’s a labyrinth with no end as I very well learned in my solitary confinement. I think that it meant a great deal to Walt that you were with him at the last. I imagine that he had planned to die alone at home, but instead, he was with someone he loved doing a job of which he was very proud.”

“He always said that he wanted to die in battle. He got his wish, didn’t he?”

“He certainly did. I won’t presume to tell you what you should find meaning in, but I’ll tell you mine. It’s so twee that I can’t believe I’m saying it. If you had told me a year ago, well, never mind. All those years alone, no mates, Morris festering in a cold rage. I cared for him and Sherlock. I see now that I loved them. And vicariously through Sherlock, I began to love you and then John. That was my reason for staying.”

“Do you mean staying in this life?”

“Yes.”

“The meaning of life is loving people?”

“It appears so and if you’re ever so lucky, someone loves you back.”

Greg launched himself onto Mycroft, burying his face in his jumper. He gathered Greg in, wrapping his arms and legs around him.

“I miss him.”

“I know you do, sweetheart.”

“I’m going to lose them all. Then what do we do?”

“We mourn them and honor their memory. Then we love again. Repeat as needed.”

“That sucks.”

“Rather.”

Greg cried quietly in his arms, but it seemed to bring him relief this time. He could feel the tension leaving as the last of the poison ran from Greg’s body with healing tears. Something in his own heart gave way as he thought of Rory fondly, without remorse.

Greg finally sat up, wiping his eyes. “God, just when I think I’m done, here it comes again.”

“This was a good one though.”

“Yeah, I feel lighter.”

Mycroft got the box of tissues off the end table. “Here. I always feel better after a big blow.”

“Sounds like geese.” Greg hurled a wad of tissues into the wastebasket.

They settled into the comforting arms of the old couch. The fire had calmed, the logs sighing as they shifted.
“Do you think your Highlander lived in a cottage like we saw today?”

“Something like. I think it was called a croft.”

“As in Mycroft?”

“Probably.”

“Tell me more about him.”

Mycroft spun a dry little tale of the man planting oats and doing other farm tasks until he head Greg snore. Mycroft needed to get Greg’s sleeping pill and bank the fire for the night, but he sat for awhile, basking in the warmth that Greg had shared his feelings. His therapy wasn’t such a mystery anymore.

Greg stirred and stretched, his jumper riding up to show a bit of his flat stomach. “Do you think we could have a drink instead of my pill tonight? A small nightcap?”

“If you like.” Mycroft didn’t want Greg asking permission; he didn’t need power in his marriage. Some of Greg’s pills shouldn’t be mixed with alcohol but he had to let him be an adult again.

“There was a bottle in the basket. Could we share one?”

“Of course. Would you like a hot toddy?”

“Nothing that complicated. Just slosh some in a glass and come sit by me.”

It was excellent Scotch; Mycroft could tell by the smell. The rich deep color matched the mahogany and firelight of the room. Greg was still on the floor, leaning against the couch. He patted the rug beside him. Mycroft handed down the drink and then lowered himself, feeling every step of their walk across the frozen tundra.

Greg took a sip and sighed. “Damn, that’s good.”

He passed the glass to Mycroft and stretched his legs out before putting his arms along the seat of the couch around Mycroft’s shoulders. “Are you alright, love? You’ve been brilliant, all stoic and brave while I’ve had my head up my arse, but are you alright?”

Mycroft nodded, not trusting that he could speak without crying. He let the liquor burn away the lump in his throat. He could laugh at disparaging remarks but a simple compliment was his undoing.

“I told you I had a fantasy of sitting like this, sharing a glass. This time should have been a romantic getaway after all of our struggles instead of a therapeutic retreat for me. You’ve taken such good care of me.”

Mycroft handed him the drink. If Greg kept talking in this vein, he was going to weep.

Greg took a sip and continued, his voice calm. “I feel like we’ve been fighting an army in the dark. I can feel you against my back, covering my weakness, but I can’t see you. Promise me, when I’m all better, we’ll go away again. Maybe someplace warmer.”

His hand ran up into Mycroft’s hair and pulled him in for a kiss. They tasted of wood fires and cold wind, ancient. Fire and ice, light and dark. Now Greg would take him. Now they would find each other again.

He wanted to blame the alcohol for loosening his tongue so that he could ask Greg when he had
felt forced into sex and why he hadn’t stopped it. Greg could take him dry without preparation, and he wouldn’t care so long as they were joined together. Or he could swallow Greg all the way to the root while he tasted of the scotch, of earth and smoke. After this kiss, or the next, he might beg.

Greg was guiding him down to the floor. “Something about you in a kilt is driving me mad. You have no idea how sexy you are.”

The kisses were deep and took Mycroft’s breath. Greg’s hand slid under his jumper, moving closer to his nipple. It was happening too fast. He gasped into Greg’s mouth, feeling like he was choking on his own beating heart. His cock throbbed in time to his heart beat. There were no ambient sounds but their breath, ragged, shallow, stuttering. Greg’s thumb found his nipple. He cried out.

They were going to have sex. Greg was making all of his usual moves. But even if Greg was initiating, he had to know first. He had to make sure of consent. “Greg?”

“Hmmm?” Greg was kissing and licking up his throat. “When you say my name like that, god I could –”

“I wanted to ask you—“ Greg’s hand swept down his chest until his fingers ran underneath the waist band of his kilt and pants, rubbing low on his belly. “I wanted, wanted to—“

“I know what you want, baby. I know what you need. You don’t even have to ask.” Greg’s eyes were huge in the dim room. “You want what I want.”

“I want you, but we haven’t for so long. You’ve got to be sure, Greg. Please.”

“Shh, baby. It’s alright.” Greg pulled both hands free and held his face there. He kissed him gently on the forehead. “Let’s just see what happens. Stay with me.”

The next kiss sent him out of his head. He was mewing like a kitten and arching his hips. His cock was like a cricket bat. He had never been so full and so hard. His chest heaved as he panted which rubbed his hardened nipples against his vest.

Greg took both his wrists and pulled his arms above his head. He stayed where he was posed as Greg kissed him again. His head spun. Greg’s hands were under his vest, thumbs rubbing in his armpits, then all the way up his arms. His chest was bare. He should cover himself.

Greg’s teeth scraped across his nipple as his hand again delved under Mycroft’s waist band. An assault on two fronts. Little sucking kisses and flicks of the tongue and the rubbing, stroking so close to his cock. He would do anything to have that mouth on him anywhere. Every bit of his body was inflamed. “Please. Please?”

Above the pounding in his ears, there was music. Or was that angels singing? Greg had stopped. Mycroft’s nipple tingled as cool air blew across the damp point.

“That’s Mum’s ringtone. Where the fuck is my mobile?” Greg dragged himself up and staggered toward the bed where his mobile sat on the nightstand. It had stopped but her called her back. “Mum? You alright? It’s late for you.”

Mycroft lay flat on his back, still panting. He propped himself on his elbows and looked down at the great tent of plaid wool, feeling like a sun dial. Greg walked over and gave him a hand up. Mycroft tried to get all three of his legs in a comfortable position. “Are they alright?”

Greg nodded. “I had a rough session. My swept me away to Scotland. An ancient inn on the edge
of the sea. Mountains too.”

Mycroft’s kilt had moved high on his thighs when he sat up. Greg pulled it back down and patted his knee as if he were some dotty maiden aunt who couldn’t sit like a proper lady.

“I know I haven’t, Mum. I’m sorry. Therapy is hard; pain is selfish.” Greg sipped at their drink and then held the glass for Mycroft. “We are in the back of beyond. I can hear you just fine. Am I not clear? I suppose wind is hell on the towers. We took a long walk and then a nap. I hadn’t really checked the signal.”

He took another sip. “Yes, I know My is a better son than I am. What? Yes, Mum.” Greg leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s from Mum.”

Mycroft pictured Gigi in the kitchen, orange paisley dressing gown strobing in the fluorescent light, cup of tea at her elbow, box of chocolates in front of her as she pinched one to check the flavor. Greg rested his hand on Mycroft’s thigh. His cock moved over to greet said hand.

“We hadn’t talked about Christmas yet. Just trying to get through the day at hand. I see. Is she now?”

Greg’s thumb moved back and forth across Mycroft’s thigh as the conversation veered into family politics. “So her majesty deigns to visit the peasants and I’m to make a command performance? Not bloody likely.”

Greg took a huge gulp of Scotch and rolled his eyes. “And was she at our Christmas wedding? Or the year before that? Well this year, I’m focusing on my marriage. We’d rather have another visit with you and dad later.”

Greg looked to Mycroft for confirmation. He nodded vigorously. Greg passed him the glass and resumed palpating his thigh. “I need quiet, love. I’ve taken My to hell and back, and now we need time together without the pressure of Gwynn’s martyrdom. No, Georgie will understand. That’s why I love her.”

Greg motioned for the glass and drained it. “And how are things with you and Aunt Pam?” He rolled his eyes again. “No, that was low. I know it. I’m sorry.”

Mycroft was relieved to learn that the Lestrades weren’t perfect and that Greg wanted time with him. Greg’s stroppy rebellious side was extremely arousing. Since getting up for a refill might cause an injury, he took the glass and swirled his finger in the residue at the bottom.

Greg left off the deep tissue massage of his thigh and reached for Mycroft’s hand. He took the liquor damp finger deep into his mouth and sucked. Mycroft came so hard that he thought he’d gone blind.

Greg didn’t miss a beat. “Dad will hide down at the pub same as he’s always done. We can do that next year, Mum. There’s always next year.”

Mycroft could feel the come cooling in his pants, but his arms were too weak to take them off. Greg had an arm around him and nuzzled his neck. He drifted. Greg was making listening noises while his kisses sent aftershocks through Mycroft’s body. His cock hurt as if Greg had wanked him roughly instead of gently sucking his finger.

Then Greg was speaking loudly as one does with a bad connection. “It’s getting worse, Mum. You’re fading out. I need to ring off anyway so I can take care of My.”

His eyes flew open. Would Greg tell her what he had done? He flushed hot with shame, but Greg patted his back. “I think he’s coming down with something.”
He winked at Mycroft, pleased at the double meaning. “I will, Mummy. I’m making up for lost
time. Love you too. Good night.”

Greg put the mobile down and chuckled. “Who made you come? Hands free, I might add.”

“Smug.”

“A little but mostly glad to make you feel good again. Seems like we’re getting back on track.”

Greg kissed him then, rubbing his bare back. Shivers ran all over him. “Still, baby? It has been too
long.”

“You haven’t yet. I could—“ Mycroft hesitated, still not sure what was acceptable.

“It’s fine. Mum scared me calling so late and I lost the plot. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Anything, love. Name it.”

“Keep loving me. That’s all.”

Mycroft wanted to sit there and hold each other longer. He needed the cuddle, but Greg was
unfastening his kilt. “I’ll get a flannel and your pyjamas. Early bed, I think, in spite of our nap.”

Greg helped him clean himself, giggling occasionally and repeating, ‘He’s coming down with
something.’

Somehow he was able to stand and dress himself for bed. He glanced longingly as Greg changed,
finally going into the loo to prevent touching. When Mycroft was cleaning his teeth, Greg hugged
him from behind. “I love you, baby. I’m glad that I could make you feel good.”

Soon they were in bed, Mycoft lay there, lethargic and trying to hold onto the afterglow and how
the orgasm had blasted the worry away for a little while.

“Come here to me please,” Greg said, and then Mycroft was being held. It was some kind of
reprieve. “I’m not good at stories, but Gil keeps wanting me to form bed time rituals with these
things he calls meditations. Would that be alright?”

“Absolutely.” Mycroft was glad to have his face buried in Greg’s shoulder so that his pleasure
wouldn’t show. Greg was letting him in on more of the therapeutic process, and it wouldn’t do to
appear too eager.

“Bear with me. I’m still learning.” Greg stroked Mycroft’s hair with intense rhythm as if the
follicles could dispense inspiration. “Okay, when I pause, you’re supposed to breathe in and hold
it, then breathe out. Slow and deep. Gil is very big on the deep breathing.”

Mycroft could hear Greg’s heart beating rapidly, and he nearly said We don’t have to do this. But
he was learning to wait.

Greg let out a nervous breath and then began. “The bad times are over. There is nothing bad
happening right now.”

Greg was saying the words in Gil’s Scottish lilt. Mycroft found it adorable. He breathed as
prescribed. Greg’s hand smoothed down his pyjama top.

“You are safe now. This building is well constructed, made of stone, and has been here a long
time. It will shelter you.”
Mycroft held out his hand, palm up. Greg kissed it and placed it over his heart. The beats were slowing to a regular pace. Mycroft exhaled again.

“You are safe now. This bed is sturdy and well made. The duvet will keep us warm all through the night. You are safe now. You are in my arms, and I will hold you until morning under this duvet in this warm bed in this timeless building. Sleep deeply and peacefully. You are safe.”

He squeezed Mycroft’s hand and kissed his hair.

“That was lovely. Thank you.”

Mycroft’s parents had never believed in bed time stories, and only one of his nannies had. She had been dismissed for coddling him. He could never tell Greg that the meditation had seemed like a bed time story for wounded adults with a terrified child inside them. If he could have had something like that sooner, he might have been less needy. Nevertheless, Mycroft felt that he could face the dark.
Chapter Summary

Mycroft and Greg inch their way closer to healing and intimacy as they explore the countryside at the Stag and Briar.

Chapter Notes

I know Redbeard turned out to be a metaphor/buried memory etc. But I loved the dog in season 3. I love the way Benedict and Mark are with pets esp. dogs so in my story, sometimes a dog is just a dog.

Thank you to everyone commenting. I'll try to respond soon but I have another house sitting gig for a very short time and am trying to get updates in first.

"As a relationship matures, you start to see that just being there for each other is the most important thing you can do, just being there to listen and be sorry with them, to be happy with them, to share all that there is to share." Fred Rogers

For the first time in months, he slept the night through. He woke to Greg still holding him and knew that Greg had slept without nightmares. He hadn’t been sure that would ever be possible again.

“Good morning.” Greg's voice, extra husky from sleep tweaked his morning wood.

“Maybe a night cap was something we should have been doing all along.”

“No, I don’t want to make it a habit. Could be clean air and exercise or getting away from the city.”

Mycroft scratched at his holiday scruff which wouldn’t get out of the itchy phase before he had to go home. The sandpaper sound drew Greg’s lips. He mouthed it for awhile. There was no rush save a full bladder.

Mycroft felt he’d made a start on remedying his sleep deprivation, yet he could have rolled over and slept that much again. He was blissfully warm except for his nose and the top of his head. Without the glow of city scape and digital alarm clocks, the room was pitch black. Greg explored his face in the darkness. Mycroft wanted a long slow fuck that drifted into sleep until breakfast, didn’t matter whose cock went where. Fumbling wasn’t always a bad thing.

“Would you really do anything for me, My?”

“You cannot imagine how far I would go.”

“Alright then. Put on every scrap of clothing you have and watch the sunrise with me.”
“That is farther than I care to go.” But Mycroft threw the duvet back and surrendered to the cold. After the loo, he put on three of everything including kilts, the top one barely fastening around the bulk of layers. Greg did the same. They even put on the balaclavas which they had scorned the day before. They crept down the hall, moving from one pool of light to the next, barely able to bend for all the layers.

The wooden bar of the ancient front door proved a challenge, but then they were free. In the shelter of the porch, the cold seeped in rather than a frontal assault. Greg had brought out two plaids, one they sat on, one they spread over themselves. They clasped their gloved hands together and waited.

Mycroft drifted into the peace he used to achieve during long term surveillance. There was nothing he had to do but watch. He relived Greg’s delight in the old ruins and the sea, the air clearing talk they had had, and Greg’s bedtime story. It was going well. Greg was calmer and more himself. The inevitable step backward would be all the more jarring; nevertheless, he felt fortified. The black sky had gone gray. Of all the countries and conflicts he was managing, this one thing was true. The sun always came up in the morning. He sighed with contentment.

Two brown eyes peered at him from a gray balaclava. “Alright, love?” Greg’s voice was muffled by wool.

“Very much so.”

He tried to put his arms around Greg, but his elbows wouldn’t bend, and his arm slid down the slick fabric of Greg’s parka. Greg pressed close until their thighs were tight together and flung a hand across Mycroft’s legs, gripping his knee. Mycroft wrapped an arm around Greg’s arm and rested his chin on Greg’s puffy shoulder. He closed his eyes, counted to 100 then opened his eyes and marked the progress.

The old anxiety boiled into his stomach out of nowhere. Something was off. Something was wrong. What if there were thick clouds, and the sun was just a light grey disk in a dark grey sky? Greg needed this special sunrise and providing it was out of Mycroft’s control.

Even he could acknowledge that this was foolish. No, there was something else. Greg had said that they were back on track, but it wasn’t the same. They were affectionate, and Greg had talked about what he found sexy. But in their elf costumes, Greg had allowed looking and kissing but nothing beyond snogging. Last night, he had pinned Mycroft’s hands and stripped him while he remained clothed.

He knew that Greg could achieve and erection and because of his cursed powers of deduction, he knew that Greg masturbated regularly, if not daily. Their sex life must not turn into a one way street where Mycroft orgasmed and then Greg retired to the loo for a wank. He recalled the night with the trains when Greg had pleased himself in their bed. He would rather stay chaste than receive sexual appeasement. This normal wasn’t enough. He wanted all or nothing.

His stomach tied itself in knots at the prospect of discussing it with Greg. Was Greg adverse to his touch because of the rape? Would Greg be open to—bad pun, he thought—willing to consider non-penetrative sex? No, he didn’t want that either. When they were joined, it was the best feeling in the world, literally inside each other. He wasn’t going to settle if they could heal.

When could he talk to Greg? He was only now seeming like his old self. Would an awkward discussion set him back? But could Mycroft hold it in until after the holiday or some later date when Greg was completely well? Sleep deprivation had impaired his mental censor. He didn’t want to get in a situation where he blurted out terrible things. What if they got locked into a bad pattern before he could summon the courage for a confrontation? Why couldn’t he be more
grateful for how far they had come? He wanted to turn off his troubleshooting mind. He was jealous of simple people with very basic worries.

While he had been far afield in a mental maze, the sun had risen, but instead of delicate winter pastels, the sky was red, orange, and violet like an infected wound. The clouds looked as if the sea had set itself on fire and then climbed into the sky. Red and orange waves rolled across the heavens to dizzying infinity. “Red sky in the morning: sailor, take warning.”

“Noted.” Greg squeezed his hand. “But I feel like we’ve moved past the storm.”

Mycroft wondered if it was the anti-depressant talking and if so, he wanted one. It was all well and good that Greg was so chipper now, but all the sleep in the world wouldn’t fix the terrible weariness in Mycroft’s heart. The truth about their marriage was still out there. The other shoe would drop.

For now, all he needed to do was help Greg have a nice time for as long as possible. He thought of Graham saying to Michael, “What is required of you in this moment?” The answer to every question was ‘love.’

The red glow was fading into weak sunshine. “Let’s go in if you’re not frozen to the step.”

In the lobby, they put hats, scarves, and coats on the hall tree and were still waddling. Greg smoothed down Mycroft’s hair which was straight on end from the hat. He mouthed the red stubble. “You’re all the colors of the sunrise, baby. So beautiful.”

Another day was another chance to be a better husband. Mycroft risked a hug. He was surprised when his stomach growled. He hadn’t noticed his hunger.

“You’re hungry, love. I smell coffee. Let’s go begging.”

“We can’t. It’s not time yet according to the schedule.”

“If Cordelia turns us away, we can go back to the room and raid the fruit basket, but I’m starving. Let’s at least try.”

Mycroft felt glued to the spot. It just wasn’t done.

“My, we are the guests. Breakfast is happening for someone. They will at least give us coffee. Pretend you’re at my mum’s.” Greg took his hand and led him down the corridor and through the darkened dining room. Mycroft scented bacon and porridge mingling with the coffee. His stomach trumpeted welcome.

Greg pushed through the swinging door. Mycroft blinked in the heat and light of the shining kitchen. While a large industrial workspace commanded the room with its mirrored stainless steel and state of the art appliances, near the back door was a pea green Aga and a scrubbed pine table with four ladder back chairs. Cordelia was at the Aga frying bacon while a balding man with a huge black beard stared into a coffee cup as if it was a telly. Next to him a whip of a boy stay with open mouth and towering bed head.

“Could we trouble you for a cup of that good coffee?” Greg asked, turning on the charm.

“You’re here. Might as well have your breakfast.” Cordelia gestured at the table with her spatula.

“If it’s not too much trouble.” Greg reached over and took two mugs from the cupboard, having no intention of walking away from a free breakfast.
“Greg’s appetite has returned after a long absence.” Mycroft felt he needed to explain. No one else seemed bothered, least of all the boy who appeared to be asleep with his eyes open.

The bearded man stuck out his hand and Mycroft was suddenly, devastatingly reminded of Bruce. "Tom Wolcott, Cordelia’s longsuffering husband and co-owner of this heap.”

“Mycroft Holmes and my husband, Greg Lestrade.”

“My sister’s boy Josh.” Tom shrugged and went back to staring at his hot beverage.

Greg handed Mycroft a cup of coffee, tan with cream from the jug. The thick pottery reminded him of their village dishes. He rubbed his hand over the table, noting how age and care had smoothed it and imagining Graham taking Michael there, too desperate to reach the bedroom. It was a morning for private thoughts and blushes.

He was thankful for the warmth of the stove that counteracted the frigid gale blowing around his ankles. The warm coffee got his insides back to a temperature conducive to human life. He again felt the peace of the place settle over him. There was nothing he could do or say about his worry until after breakfast.

Greg was chattering. “My says a red sunrise means we’re in for bad weather.”

Tom raised an eyebrow at Mycroft and nodded. Josh remained noncommittal.

“When do you think it will get here?”

“Whenver the hell it wants to.” Tom winked at Mycroft.

He glanced at Cordelia to hide his delight at being in on the joke. She had three huge skillets and a vat of something on the stove, all hissing and popping, and bubbling as she stirred each one in turn, her other hand on her hip or the spot where a hip would be if she weren’t built like a whiskerless boy. She was dressed in jeans and a long sleeved T shirt where he was none to warm in three layers.

There was something quite satisfying about watching someone cook your breakfast. He took a sip of creamy coffee and went back to his earliest memories of Cook putting him in his high chair with a wooden spoon to play with while she made his egg and toast. He had felt that way again when Gigi had invited him into her kitchen and the heart of her home. Kitchens were safe places. He had tried to make it so for Graham and Michael.

Without much response to his efforts at small talk, Greg had wound down. There was nothing but the bacon writhing in the skillet and the calendar pages flapping in the breeze. The men at the table fell into a rhythm of sipping the rich coffee and then putting their mugs down and staring into space. A trickle of drool ran from the corner of Josh’s mouth.

Cordelia came to the table with three plates along one arm and another in her left hand. She dealt them like playing cards. Mycroft looked up at her. “Thank you. I know this was unusual. I appreciate your flexibility.”

“It’s as easy to feed four men as it is two, but this is all the breakfast you get today.”

“Agreed.”

“So don’t come in that dining room in an hour or so and order a full English. It won’t happen.”

“Understood.”
Her mouth twitched with wry humor. Mycroft glanced at his loaded plate and knew that they wouldn’t go hungry if they missed lunch, tea, and dinner. He had three eggs, sunny side up, a raft of bacon, and a mound of potatoes with two little oat cakes resting on them. Cordelia came back with steaming bowls of porridge that looked like basins. Then she refilled their coffee mugs and poured a cup for herself.

Tom stood and got in one of the cupboards, bringing to the table a large, unlabelled jar. He poured the thick golden liquid onto his porridge and passed the jar to Mycroft. “Clover honey from our own bees.”

Josh had come alive and was shoveling food into his mouth as if he were being timed. Greg was not far behind. Tom ate more methodically but he did not pause for breath, it seemed. Mycroft followed, mimicking Tom who used the oat cake to scoop up runny egg. By the time the two fistied regiment of bacon in one hand and cake in the other had nearly emptied the plate, the porridge had cooled enough to be a nice dessert. Mycroft couldn’t imagine finishing such a vast quantity of whole grains, the oats as coarse as a horse’s, but his bowl was empty as soon as the others.

“It’s the cold and the sea,” Cordelia said, gathering up the nearly clean dishes. “My grocery bill doubles in winter even though we have half as many guests.

She took another tray of cakes out of the over and put them on the table with a crock of butter and several jars of jam. Mycroft ate three, licking the butter off his fingers.

Tom nodded his approval. “And how far will you fellows walk today? Back to London perhaps.”

“I want to go down to the sea again,” Greg said. “I know it’s something that you see every day but it’s special to me.”

Mycroft flexed his bad ankle under the table. He would make the trek for Greg’s sake but he was dreading it. With his stomach stretched to bursting, all he wanted was to hibernate, cuddling with Greg in a duvet cave and sleeping the day away.

“I’ll drive you down.”

“Could we go by that ruined cottage? I’d like to have another look at it.”

“The croft. Aye.” Tom looked between them, sizing them up.

“When you’re down to the sea, there’s a cove the opposite way you went yesterday. You’ll be more sheltered there.”

Cordelia was filling two knapsacks with food, and Mycroft recalled the exploding fat man sketch from Monty Python. He couldn’t imagine eating again for days.

Tom had taken a bit of brown paper from the roll to draw a map. “Just past the cove, you’ll come on a path. It’s a might long, but not as steep. It takes you to a dirt road. Our farm will be on the right. Go into the kitchen and have a cuppa. Josh and I will be along for the chores and bring you back to the inn.”

Mycroft was grateful that Tom had made a way to save his ankle all the walking on uneven ground. He would only have to manage the bit between the ruins and the cliff and then the pebbles on the shingle. Tom’s map was a tidy bit of work that Mycroft planned to put up in the train room.
Cordelia presented them with one of the knapsacks. “There’s a thermos of tea and a wee snack. First aid kit and a radio if you need anything.”

Greg sagged with the weight of it. “I doubt we’ll be hungry but thank you.”

“We did get thirsty in the salt air yesterday.” Mycroft was taking anything that was offered. It was a bloody polar expedition.

“What you don’t eat, you can feed to the dog when you get to the farm.”

“Or me,” Josh said, prevented from further comment by the stink eye from his aunt and uncle.

Greg shouldered into the straps of the backpack which made Mycroft feel like a shirker.

“You’ve got good stout boots, but why don’t you wear wellies. We’ve got plenty in the scullery. The farm’s like a bog some days, and you don’t want to be trodding in shite with your fine new boots.”

Better shod, they piled into the old Defender which had been their cavalry the day before. As they drove, Greg again tried to start conversation. “Do you know anything about the ruins?”

“No.”

Mycroft deduced that this was not rudeness so much as shyness and a need to conserve energy for a long day of working in the cold. He also knew that some tourists might have been inconsiderate and mocked accents or asked inappropriate questions.

“Been like that all my life,” Josh offered.

There was a long pause as the Defender lurched over the rough ground. “Moire will know.” Tom nodded as if pleased with his own answer and then took up the mouth piece of a radio. “Cordy? Ring Moire to pack a bag. I’ll fetch her when we go for the groceries.”

“Why?” crackled over the radio.

Mycroft could picture Cordelia squinting into space with lips pursed.

“They want to know about the croft. Maybe they could poke around the library this afternoon after the weather comes.”

“I’ll get it ready.”

Mycroft felt queasy and not just from the massive breakfast or his usual worries. “There’s no need to go to such trouble.”

“Moire will be glad of it. She stays with us in the high season but has to winter with her mum in the village. It’s a wee house.”

Mycroft imagined wintering with his mother and shivered. “Greg is quite taken with the place. We’ll pay her for her time.”

“She’ll be glad of your interest in such things more than any money. And Cordy enjoys her company.”

Josh turned his bedraggled head toward them. “Her mum’s crazy as hell. Somebody will get killed with an axe one of these winters.”
“Might be you if you don’t learn to shut your giant cake hole.”

Mycroft stared out the window to hide his pure delight. Greg squeezed his hand. They lapsed back into silence after Josh’s scolding. The journey passed quickly when they weren’t walking. Tom took them right to the ruined croft, door to door service.

He rummaged around in the back of the truck and produced a paint spattered tarp which he rolled and secured with a bungee cord. “For your picnic.”

“The rocks will be covered in gull shit.”

Tom cuffed Josh on the side of his wooly head. “That’s enough from you for today.”

Josh seemed no worse for it. Mycroft took the tarp since Greg had the knapsack. Tom shook both their hands, and Mycroft wished he’d had his gloves off so he could feel the calluses of a working man.

Tom peered into his face. “You’re pale-eyed like me. Do you have sunglasses?”

“I left them in my car, but I’ll manage.”

“Winter light is harsh. I’ve got a pair that a guest left. You’re welcome to them. Josh, you know where they are.” The three of them watched him fumble around in the front seat. “When your sister marries the village idiot, you’ll have such as these at your table. I hope you gentleman have a fine morning, and I know you’ll have a nice afternoon in the library. Don’t hesitate to radio Cordy. She’s at loose ends with our plans falling through. You’re the only egg in her nest. Kick at the shell now and then, eh?”

Josh brought out a Ray Bans case and handed it to Mycroft.

“There’s hope for you yet, lad. I thank ye.”

They waited for him to try on the glasses. Tom nodded his approval. “You’ll not go blind. I’ll meet you at the farm if not sooner. You’ve got your map.”

Mycroft patted his pocket and wondered what sort of helpless dolts they’d had as guests in the past. Tom had brought them to the very threshold so all they had to do was step inside the outline of the wee house. There was a flurry of honks as the Defender drove away. Mycroft suspected Josh.

“Should we stay here until our breakfast settles?”

Mycroft nodded. He unfurled the tarp in the corner of the two surviving walls and sat with his legs stretched out. He felt as if his stomach was resting on his thighs. He wished Greg would rub it. Behind the shelter of his new sunglasses, he watched Greg putter about, prying fallen stones out of the ground. Finally his eyes fell shut.

This is where our marriage is. It’s fallen down and the dodgy bits are buried. We are living in the ruins. I won’t talk to Greg now and destroy his enjoyment of this place. I can wait a little longer. He focused on digesting his breakfast. He must have dozed for he yelped when Greg’s cold hand moved beneath all the layers to rub his belly.

“You did that breakfast justice, love.”

“I’m paying the price for it.”
“I could distract you.”

Greg’s lips came down on his. It was wool against wool except for their lips and tongues, and Greg’s hand rubbing slow circles on his stomach. All the desire was concentrated in pinpoints that heightened his need. “We’ll come back here in the summer and sleep under the stars.”

Mycroft couldn’t imagine that far ahead. He could survive this day; anymore than that was overwhelming.

“I’m going to ask Tom for a shovel to bring tomorrow. I think I’ve found the door sill.”

“It may be a protected site. We’ll need permission for digging.” His eyes flew open. He hadn’t intended to thwart Greg.

“I promise I’ll be careful, baby.”

Mycroft’s stomach lurched. Greg seemed to be talking about more than the ruins, but he withdrew his hand, patting all the layers back into place. “I’d better stop before you run out of kilts.”

“I don’t always come in my pants.” He was thankful that his blush was hidden by the balaclava.

“No you don’t. I’d imagine it was the long deprivation.”

“I’m sorry that I don’t have more self control.” He wanted to say I’m sorry that I raped you. The words got stuck. He belched up a little bile. It was a bad idea to start a row when they had so long a walk to get away from each other.

“No need to apologize. You are one of the most controlled people I know. Gil says that the intimacy is like all the rest. It will heal with time. I’m grateful for your patience.”

Mycroft didn’t know how to respond without it all spilling out. “We should get on. Lots to explore today.”

They folded up the tarp, picked up their burdens, and marched toward the sea. Greg again wanted to stand at the top of the cliff and look out to the horizon. “There’s a whole world out there besides my little problems.”

“The death of a mentor is not a small loss. Work place violence is a huge problem.”

“But not insurmountable.”

“No. You don’t forget but you do move forward.”

“I’ve got to move on. I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have the option to stay trapped in the past. Morris and I lived that way a long time before you came.”

“I did some good in the beginning, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

Mycroft paged through the memories, all the firsts of being hugged, nursed, and celebrated. There had been happy times before the tragedy. “We shouldn’t evaluate anyone’s reign until after it’s finished.”

“Are you comparing me to royalty?”
“You are king of my heart.” He winced at how twee that sounded.”

“Royal pain in the arse, more like.”

“Sometimes.”

Greg laughed and it was easy again. The cliff side path was familiar now and not as harrowing. They took their time, and Mycroft reminded himself that they didn’t have to tackle the ascent. They walked along the shingle hand in hand, stopping now and then for a pretty pebble or a bit of sea glass. Gulls circled above, making Mycroft grateful for his hat. He consulted Tom’s map although they really only needed to keep the ocean on the right. The watery sun warmed them as they tramped on.

When they reached the cove, Mycroft was tired and thirsty. There was a flat rock large enough for both of them to lie down full length. Mycroft spread the tarp while Greg examined the contents of their knapsack. There was a thermos, the largest Mycroft had ever seen, full of good strong tea, slightly sweet. They shared a cup and kept some for later. The drink was hot enough to steam in the chilly air.

“And there’s apples and a slab of sharp cheddar and more of the oatcakes with a little jar of honey and some ginger biscuits and packets of crisps.”

“She must think we’re bulimic.”

“I can’t eat right this moment but I wouldn’t say no to an alfresco tea in about an hour.” Greg licked his lips.

“You would have to carry me up the hill on your back.”

“I would, but it doesn’t look as steep.”

“Maybe Tom has a donkey cart. My stomach and I will wait right here.”

Mycroft reclined on the tarp and felt the world spin under him. As all the detritus of the many intricate world conflicts he was overseeing swirled in his mind, he breathed slowly, remembering Greg’s words You are safe here. Surprisingly the maelstrom stopped, and he could sense his breath slowing to the rhythm of the waves. The real ocean was different than a CD on a loop. As he focused on breathing, only breathing, he became aware of the smells of the sea, wet and green, and the distinctive build and splash of each wave. Greg’s hand crept into his, and he hung on.

He wasn’t a stranger to meditation, but he’d usually gone to his village instead. Today he left Michael and Graham safe in each other’s arms and looked at the things that he had been avoiding. There had been so much striving for both of them and the hurried focus of Greg’s therapy. He let himself hurt, all the way to the bone, without the distraction of work or exercise. Putting aside explanations and rationalizations, he accepted that Greg had attacked him with malicious intent more than once. The wounds were there.

He breathed some more, feeling the pain, then pushing it out as he exhaled. His eyes were wet behind the sunglasses. He felt again the shame of being mocked and exposed by the only one he had ever trusted. Something in his posture or breathing had alerted Greg. He was in the depths of his mind and let Greg move his body until they were entwined, not an easy feat with all the layers of clothing. Greg cupped his head and squeezed him at the waist and hooked one leg over both of his. His body yearned toward Greg’s. But as Greg held him tighter, he took in the worst pain of all—he had violated his husband when he was at his most vulnerable. Worse still, he had been oblivious to having done harm. This was where he kept getting stuck, the unspeakable wrong that had lodged in his throat like a tumor. In all his reviews of their intimacy, he hadn’t found a single
time when Greg had said ‘no’ or pulled away. What was he missing? He clinched his fists in frustration.

“Just breathe, baby. That’s all.”

He had to find another way of looking at the problem or he would go mad. A Holmes never surrendered, but finally he did. Greg wanted him to focus on breath because Gil wanted it; then Mycroft would bloody well become the best breather ever. His breathing had sped up. Now he slowed it to near stillness, the zen state of the sniper.

The image of their little train came with each car bearing a word. He accepted the maddening slowness of each thought. If…Greg…had…said…’no,’…you…would…have…stopped. A rapist would have ignored a refusal. There in lay the violation Greg hadn’t communicated a lack of consent. Mycroft couldn’t hold himself to a higher standard than the law.

You…said…’no.’ In the hall after Greg had exposed him, Mycroft had covered himself, stepped away, and begged Greg to stop. Greg had stopped. There were no rapists in their family. Neither of them was a longsuffering saint or a villain. They had perpetrated benign neglect or hurled insults at each other. They were even. It wasn’t pretty or the way Mycroft wanted to continue, but it wasn’t a tragedy either, just some ugly rows. Now what? He was a diplomat; he knew how to bring about reconciliation.

Acknowledge past infractions.

Make a formal apology.

Create an action plan that included clearer communication in future.

Would it work in their marriage? Struggling out of Greg’s tight grasp, he sat up and faced the bright water. Before the disturbed their peace, he had to be sure.

“What is it, My? Talk to me, please.”

“We’ve wounded each other deeply.”

“Yes.”

Mycroft was grateful that Greg didn’t deny it or start with more apologies. They needed to be very honest with each other to get past the hurt. “Sometimes it was insults and sometimes it was withholding something that the other needed. I’ve never been cut so deeply before? Why is that?”

“I know it hurt me more because I let my guard all the way down for you. You know me better than anyone else, even my mum.”

“I never trusted anyone before.”

They started out at the water, aware of each breath. In diplomatic relations, there were frequent pauses. Mycroft let it happen.

Finally Greg said, “It never occurred to me that pain would be part of marriage.”

“I was surprised by the happiness.”

“What do we do now?”

Mycroft had to push the words through the giant lump in his throat. His voice shook. “I owe you
an apology. I let you go when I knew it was wrong. I used my knowledge of you to say the things that would hurt you most, and I took advantage of you in your most vulnerable state. I’m sorry, Greg.”

“I know, baby. Can we have these off?” Greg reached for the sunglasses and removed them. While Mycroft blinked in the grey light, Greg removed both their hats. Then he cupped Mycroft’s face. “I forgive you, just as you forgave me. I said and did terrible things. I am so sorry, love, still. But you took me back.”

“You hurt me.” Mycroft’s eyes ached in the winter light. He closed them as the tears leaked out.

“Sometimes I didn’t mean to hurt you, My. I’m sorry for both kinds of behavior. You still are quite good at seeming impervious. I didn’t realize quite how deep that I’d cut.”

“Do you really forgive all of it?” He wanted to ask Greg about the rape but he couldn’t.

“Of course, love. We did the best that we could at the time, and I think we’ve learned some things that will help us moving forward.”

“Yes.”

Greg ruffled his curls at the back where the hat had pressed them down. “Stubble kisses?”

Mycroft got lost in Greg’s rough beard and the sandpaper kisses of their chapped lips. Greg went after his neck and sucked on his Adam’s apple. “Feel better?”

“Not sure.”

Greg laughed. “Feel worse?”

“No, I’m alright. Are you sure, Greg? About all of it?”

“Even when you hurt me, I was secretly chuffed to see you stand up for yourself. You need to that more with Sherlock.”

Greg was clear eyed. Mycroft would have to accept his pardon at face value. “You have to tell me when I’m hurting you. I would stop if I knew.” That was as close as he dared to speak of it.

“We’ll work on it but for now, let’s enjoy the day. We can talk again later, okay? I feel like the ocean has scrubbed us clean. Salt in a wound stings like hell but it does clear out the infection.”

After being encased in his balaclava, Mycroft relished the wind on his cheeks. He lay back again until the sound of the waves made him feel as if he were floating. Whenever the self flagellating thoughts came, he smacked them down with the memory of being forgiven.

Greg’s voice came from far away. “You’re smiling, love. Alright?”

“I’ve paid long enough.”

“I should say you have. Christ, I was cruel to you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“If I start to sink again, would you put in your oar sooner?”

“There’s a pretty metaphor, apropos to our current location.”
“Yes, love. I’ll fight for you next time even against ghosts or your own will.”

“Could you forgive me for being hungry right now?”

“You’re making up for lost time.”

“I can’t hide behind that excuse forever.”

All food tasted better by the sea, but the little picnic was extra special. The tart juice of the Braeburn apple made Mycroft’s mouth water while the sharp cheddar challenged his tongue. Greg handed him bits of oatcake drizzled with honey which he washed down with hot tea. His eyes met Greg’s over the plastic cup, and they smiled at each other.

“I need to kiss you, My. It’s like I’m falling in love all over again.”

Greg kissed him, all the flavors of apple, cheese, and tea mingling on their tongues. He wanted to lick the honey from Greg’s fingers but felt shy.

“We should go while the tide’s out. I wouldn’t mind exploring the farm if we’re early.”

“I feel as if I can see the storm out there.”

“It’s definitely cloudier.”

They washed their hands in a tidal pool and dried them on the tea towel Cordelia had thoughtfully provided. Crumbs and apple cores were left on the rock for the gulls. With the breeze picking up and the sun hiding, Mycroft didn’t mind putting his hat on but he rolled it up so he could feel the wind.

The gradual incline of the path was child’s play compared to the other. Mycroft enjoyed looking back and forth between the waves and the native grasses. He started to feel lighter and in spite of the weight of the tarp, he felt that he’d left a terrible burden on the beach. He had come through a difficult time himself; he could justify leisure. They had a whole day ahead.

When he started to censure himself for clinginess, he ignored the personal rules that he had made. Taking Greg’s hand, he said, “I love you, sweetheart.”

Greg’s smile was radiant. “I quite like hearing that.”

When they reached the top, they could see the farm track winding toward a fence row at the horizon, but they paused to look out over the ocean where they could see the beginnings of the storm. There was still time, and they strolled toward the farm.

When they reached the fence, the farm was in sight. A small herd of long haired red cows looked up as they walked and slowly moved toward them. Out of the huddle ran two calves, tripping clumsily like human toddlers. They came right to the fence and bawled, hooking their heads over the top rail.

“Hello, pretty babies,” Greg said. The gentleness of his tone made Mycroft’s knees weak. “Do you want to be petted?”

God, yes. Mycroft hoped that he hadn’t spoken aloud. He scratched behind the calf’s ears and was rewarded with a slurpy kiss that coated his whole face in a grassy drool. The calf then preceded to ream out his own sizable nostril with it, catching some of his hair amongst the blades of grass.

“Sorry, love. I didn’t know they did that.” Greg handed him the tea towel from their pack.
The tongue bath wasn’t so bad. He’d had organic facials that were similar. Of course, the calf smelled of manure, but barnyard smells were honest, and this had an undertone of oats and seagrass. He liked the texture of their ginger fur and the faintly obscene pink of their noses. “His’ calf butted its head up under his hand when he stopped petting it.

Greg took a picture with his mobile of the head of ginger cows standing by his ginger husband. Then he reached in his knapsack and fed them each an oatcake. While the treat disappeared, the rumination went on, their jaws grinding the food, but apparently their mouths were clear enough for them to bawl in protest when Greg and Mycroft walked on.

“It’s a bloody petting zoo,” Greg said when they came to a paddock of sheep on their left at the outskirts of the farmyard. “Hello, mates, fancy meeting you here.”

A donkey came trotting toward them with a warning bray and displayed huge teeth. “What’s he on about, My?”

Greg took an apple out of the pack and started to offer it. Mycroft pulled his hand back. “That’s a good way to lose a finger.”

He showed Greg how to put the stem between his fingers and offer the apple with his palm up and flat. The donkey eyed them suspiciously and sniffed the apple before taking it, wrapping his lips around it and chewing with a grinding motion a little different from the calves’. Mycroft scratched the little fellow’s ears which went flat and stuck out perpendicular to his head like a propeller. He patted along the donkey’s back and haunches. “Wish I had a curry comb. He needs a good brushing.”

“Maybe there’s one in the barn.”

“I doubt we have time.”

They could smell the apple juice as the donkey chewed. When they turned toward the house and barn, they were met by the steely gaze of a border collie. “Isn’t he good at surveillance? Never made a sound.”

“No, but he’s shooting daggers at us with his eyes.”

The dog’s rich brown eyes reminded Mycroft of Greg’s, but they were full of distrust and warning. Mycroft shook off unpleasant memories.

“Since we’re feeding everyone, he might take a biscuit.” Greg rummaged around until he found the packet of biscuits. “Here we are, beautiful boy. Will you have one?”

Mycroft thought he saw the dog raise an eyebrow in disdain. “He’s on the job. Perhaps he won’t allow himself.”

“I’ll toss you one to sniff at, love. Your master won’t mind. We’re invited guests.”

There was a long awkward pause in which the biscuit lay on the ground near a freckled paw while the dog maintained his vigilance, his black nose giving him a scent resume’.

Feeling ridiculous, Mycroft said, “We’re guests at the inn. Tom said we could wait for him here. Tom and Cordelia.”

The dog’s ears pricked at that, one full mast, the other floppy. HE sniffed at the biscuit then edged over to examine the knapsack on the ground. His guard dropped slightly.
“He feels our story warrants further investigation. Greg squatted and held out his hand. “Maybe he’ll smell Tom on me.”

The dog’s ears again perked up at the name. He sniffed Greg’s glove all over. His ears went down and his tail started to wag. Greg took off both gloves and petted the soft head. “Hello. What a fine boy you are. What a nice boy. He’s soft, My, like velvet.”

Greg’s eyes shone as he buried his fingers in the dog’s white ruff. The dog’s tongue darted out to put a delicate kiss on Greg’s cheek.

“You like dogs.” There were still things to learn about each other. “Did you have one as a boy?”

“No, Dad said he had enough mouths to feed.”

Mycroft was reminded of their differences. Sherlock wanted a dog, and they had bought Redbeard. Money had been no object, and cleaning up after him had been assigned to the servants. Sherlock had surprised them by being quite meticulous in the feeding and training of the puppy, even the more unsavory tasks. Best not to go further down that road. It all ended in tears.

“My, get the rest of the biscuits out.”

The dog took each one carefully, waiting for permission before chomping. He cleaned up all the crumbs that fell and licked Greg’s hand.

“He’s quite fastidious.”

“He’s a miracle is what he is, but my knees are not. Give me a hand up, love.”

Mycroft helped Greg to stand. They both winded at the pop, loud enough to be heard through all the layers. “Thanks for being here with me,” Greg said, hugging Mycroft.

When they finished, the dog put his paws on Greg’s shoulders, tail wagging double time. “He wanted a hug too. Would you look at that!”

Greg’s childlike joy was restorative. “Would you give us the tour, little love?”

“Perhaps we should contact Cordelia? Tom said to give her a job.”

Mycroft got out the radio and tried not to think of missions. It squawked to life. “Guest 1 to Stag and Briar. Over.”

“Aren’t we being official?” Greg was shaking hands repeatedly with the dog.

“Are you alright out there? Walked to Norway yet?”

“We’re at the farm.”

“So you found it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mycroft felt he should genuflect. He was accustomed to conversations with strong women.

“Tom is running late since he had to pick up Moire. You can go on in the house. It’s unlocked.”

“Ask her what the dog is called.” Greg was rubbing the dog’s belly.

“What is your dog’s name?”
“Macduff. We call him Duffy. Is he giving you any trouble?”

“He and Greg adore each other.”

“Please don’t molest my dog.”

“Presently, it’s limited to heavy petting.”

Cordelia laughed. “You’ve started something you can’t finish.”

“Greg is quite persistent. Are you sure we aren’t being a bother? We could walk back.”

“You could but don’t. Tom will be along shortly.”

“Thank you. Over and—”

There was a click, and Mycroft realized after a few minutes of silence that Cordelia ended remote conversations with the same decisiveness as she did face to face. When she was done, the communication was done.

“His paws are cold, My. Let’s go in the barn.”

“By all means.” I am jealous of a dog.

They found hay bales to sit on, and Greg continued petting Duffy to their mutual delight. Mycroft enjoyed the barn smells and the fine craftsmanship of the beams of the ancient structure.

“His ears are the softest thing. Here, My.” Greg took Mycroft’s hand and placed it against the dog’s head where he could feel the silkiness.

The sensory memory took him back to the exam room of a veterinarian’s office where a white faced Sherlock said goodbye to his only friend Redbeard. In spite of his trepidation at how every dog story ended, he said, “We’ll get a dog, Greg, as soon as we get home. It will be my Christmas to you.”

“You still love me. That’s all I need. Besides a dog isn’t just for Christmas. Sure, I’m home now, and Gil wouldn’t mind me bringing a puppy to therapy. But it wouldn’t be fair to the lad when I go back to work long hours.”

Mycroft watched Greg’s gnarled fingers smooth down Duffy’s back. “Morris is home during the day. He wouldn’t mind either.”

“He would do it for us, but it wouldn’t be fair to him. He and Tuppy are getting married. We need to let him go to live full time with his husband.”

“There are dog walkers.”

“No, I wouldn’t want a nanny even for a puppy. Maybe when we’re retired, eh?”

“Or we could do it because you want one and not worry about being fair.”

“Let’s get us back on track, alright? Mummy and Daddy need to be steady before they start a baby.”

Mycroft saw then that Greg had wanted children and perhaps still did. He remembered Sherlock’s soft curls and the little arms around his neck; then the adoration turning to mockery and disdain.
He didn’t know if he could go through that with a child of his own, to have his heart broken by the damage he might do to an innocent life.

“We can table the issue for now, but I don’t want you doing without anything that would make you happy.”

“You make me happy.”

“I intend to try.”

“Don’t try. Just kiss me.”

Greg’s untroubled eyes turned to his, and he felt the absence of all the pain they had walked through. He was able to give himself up to the kiss and get the melting feeling that he thought was gone forever. When they stopped for air with foreheads pressed together, he put his hand on the back of Greg’s neck to keep him there and felt the rapid pulse. Afraid to believe they were over the rough patch, he still risked himself.

“I love you, Greg. I’ve missed you so.”

“I’ve missed you too, baby.”

They kissed again, so sweetly that it hurt. Greg was leading, gentle but insistent. Greg’s hand pressed hard on his knee and grew heavier as they kept on kissing. Mycroft reached down to squeeze it and found claws and fur. “We have a chaperone.”

“He will have to cope. I need to kiss you.”

Greg patted the dog’s head and then cupped Mycroft’s head to tilt it back. “If I’m going to pet any more fur today, it’s yours, but I’d like to start with biting and licking.”

Mycroft was pushed backward on the bale of hay. Then Greg was over him, mouthing his neck, his teeth sinking into stubble and corded muscle. He whimpered and raised his hips. Greg was initiating this. Greg wanted him.

Duffy’s claws scrabbled on the floor. Then they heard the Defender. Mycroft was thankful for the many layers to hide his erection. He put away the burgeoning fantasy of being the young master taken by the stable boy, nothing but kilts to hide their nakedness.

“I don’t know if I can walk.” Greg rubbed at his crotch. “I should never have started something we can’t finish.”

Tom had gone looking for them in the house first. Now he called for them and Greg answered. Mycroft stayed with the knowledge that Greg’s body had responded. It was still possible. They could be together all night without hurrying. Mycroft felt forgiven, but he needed the return of intimacy to prove it.

Tom was in the doorway of the barn. “Alright then? We got delayed in town. Moire’s mum made a fuss as if I were taking a wee girl from her. Moire is sixty if she’s a day.”

“My’s mum is like that about his kid brother. We understand.”

“I’ll get you a cuppa. Then after we tend the animals, we’ll be off.”

“How can we help?” Greg asked.
“Thank you for the offer but you are guests.”

“Then as the guest, I’m asking to help.”

Mycroft watched this exchange. Greg was so likable. How did he do it?

“If you could drive feed out to the sheep and cows, that would leave me free for the complicated tasks while Josh mucks out the stalls. I’ll get you a baling hook.”

Mycroft nearly swooned as he watched Greg drive this small tractor and wagon out of the yard. He would have to hoist bales over the fence, muscles bulging. Josh was mucking stalls ever so slowly with long pauses for reflection. Mycroft grabbed a rake and started at the other end. It was satisfying because a man could see where he had been. While his career involved clearing excrement, the results were less visible.

After seeing Greg off, Tom came back into the barn. “Well, this is above and beyond our usual guests. I thank ye. Mycroft, don’t let Josh move that ewe until I come back.”

Mycroft enjoyed being part of this team and not being on the bottom rung either. He liked that Tom had said his name as if they were mates. Josh was more than willing to share the shovel and Mycroft’s stall was soon empty of waste. Tom brought him a bale of clean straw to spread.

Mycroft let the scents take him back to the stables on the family estate. The grooms had always been civil to him, a little beyond what they were paid to be. He had seen to his horse’s care as what was proper but had not be able to risk his heart again. He rode whichever mount needed exercise without developing an attachment. While he cleaned his own tack and mucked out his mount for the day’s stall, Sherlock was the one they were pleased to see. It wasn’t their fault that they appreciated the pretty pictures of the dark curls and pale skin on a black stallion with a white blaze. Sherlock wasn’t vain back then and remained oblivious to their admiration. He pulled himself back to the present. If he kept delving into the past, he would miss all of the good things happening currently.

Tom closed the big doors and shut each stall but the clean one. “Ewes can’t resist running out in bad weather to lamb, and this one is especially wily. Here now, milady, come on through. We’ve changed your sheets.”

Tom guided her along, shaking a bucket of feed to prompt her. The ewe moved ponderously, full belly swinging, tiny feet picking their way like a dowager at the opera. Once she was clear of the dirty stall, a lamb skipped out behind her.

“Who’s this?”

“That’s our little foundling. Mother died birthing him.”

“Does she nurse him?” Mycroft looked down at engorged teats.

“No, he’s bottle raised, but she does keep him warm and clean, and he steadies her so she’s more content being penned. He should be weaned but we’ve let him become a bit of a pet. Would you like to feed him?”

Mycroft looked down at his own flat chest and back up at Tom.

“From a bottle, lad. You are knackered from wandering around the countryside.”

Tom pushed the lamb back and closed the stall door. The expectant mother gave a baa of protest and then settled. The little fellow skipped about before head butting Tom. “I know what you want,
ya wee bugger. You play with Mycroft while I fix your bottle.”

Since Josh appeared to be taking a break, Mycroft started clearing the vacated stall. The lamb came in with him and amused himself by getting in the way and using call and response with his own echo to annoy the cow in the next stall. He feinted and parried with the rake and tugged at Mycroft’s kilt with his teeth and pawed at the freshly swept pile of manure and was absolutely adorable in his naughtiness.

Josh came over to watch. “He’ll act up when he’s hungry.”

“As do I,” Mycroft said, offended on the lamb’s behalf.

“I slow down when I don’t eat,” said Josh, scratching at his ear with a sloth’s precision.

“Here we are, sir.” Tom had returned with the huge bottle and walked to the back of the barn. “Table for one, no waiting.”

“The trick is to keep the bottle up so he doesn’t choke. Sheep have no sense of self preservation. He’d suck the whole bottle down his gullet if you’re not stern with him.”

Mycroft thought of a tiny blue bundle of colicky dark haired baby howling with rage when they had to feed him slowly. “I’m familiar.”

“I’ll leave you to it then. I’ve got to prod wee Josh.” Tom stomped to the front of the barn, assessed Josh’s progress, and said, “You don’t have to pick it up one straw at a time, you daft prick. It’s shite, not spun glass.”

The powerful suction of the lamb’s hunger made him focus on the task at hand. “You’re going to have it all, sweetheart. Take your time. It’s not a race.”

Once he got the bottle at the proper angle to prevent air bubbles, he combed through the fluffy head, removing tangles and bits of straw. His charge vacillated between spells of calm from the petting and frantic pulls on the bottle. “Don’t be greedy, love. It’s all for you.”

Tom brought him a second bottle as the first one emptied. “Well done to the both of you. As soon as your man gets back, we’ll go.”

Tom started moving animals to their freshly cleaned stalls. “Let’s check the water troughs, Josh.”

Then Tom and Josh were gone, and he was alone with the ‘baby.’ The sucking had slowed to a reasonable pace. One little hoof and then the other rested on his thigh like a man leaning with his elbows on a bar. The lamb scrambled to get a hind leg up. “Do you want in my lap?”

There wasn’t much of a lap to offer, but by spreading his legs farther apart and wedging the kilt tightly under his thighs, he made a hammock. The lamb obligingly folded its spindly legs when he lifted it. The last drops were drained from the bottle, and a curly head rested in the crook of his arm.

The small body grew warmer and heavier. He felt pleased that he had been able to give the orphan food, shelter and comfort. “You’ll be alright, little one. This barn is sturdy and well built. It will keep you safe even in a storm.”

In the quiet of the barn, he tested Greg’s forgiveness and it held.
Mycroft Had a Little Lamb

Chapter Summary

Mycroft and Greg explore the library and gift shop of the inn. The following day, they make a day camp at the ruins of the croft.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who read and commented. I think there might be only two chapters left? It's hard to predict for sure from a handwritten rough draft, but we are nearing the end.

Mycroft and the lamb rested together, the baby animal sagging deeper into him and warming him clear through. Then there was a little sigh, a tiny fart, and he was even warmer. It took some time for the damp to get through all the layers. He didn’t even know if it was piss or shit.

One of his most carefully hoarded memories was that nearly thirty years ago, the great Sherlock Holmes had overflowed his nappy and coated his older brother in excrement. Recalling that stench helped when Sherlock was being particularly venomous. Since the stabbing, there had been less need to tear Mycroft down. John had softened him; a grateful nation bowed in praise.

Why was he thinking so much about Sherlock? He supposed it was because during Greg’s illness and their separation, he hadn’t thought about Sherlock at all, trusting that John would care and protect. There seemed to reason to take the burden back.

“Now there’s a pretty picture,” Greg said. “Let the little children come unto me.”

“He shat on me.”

“Sorry I took so long, love. I had trouble turning around with the wagon on.”

“Thanks to you, lads, we’re done in time. The snow is coming down at a fair clip. Time to go.”

Tom took the lamb from his arms and put him in the stall with his auntie. ‘He’ll let her rest now that he’s had a good cuddle. After you, gentleman.”

It was a rude awakening to step into the storm. The urine that Mycroft thought was diarrhea was soon joined by precipitation. Under cover of their kilts, Greg squeezed his hand three times and he answered.

Back at the inn, they trooped through the service entrance and took off their wellies. Cordelia laughed at them. “You look like you’ve seen the business end of a south bound cow. You’ve got a minute to change before lunch.”

“I couldn’t eat,” Mycroft said but then he thought maybe he could.
“I’ll fix you a plate. You don’t have to eat it.”

In the room, they scrubbed up to the elbow with the rough oatmeal soap, and Mycroft had a go at his leg with the bar and a flannel. They left their clothes in a pile and started over. Mycroft combed his hair and rubbed the damp towel over his beard.

“I’m glad we talked,” Greg said.

“Me too. I think it’s better.” He was pleased to walk through the dining room into the kitchen, knowing he was welcome.

“There he is. Come on through, Mycroft. Any man that’s got my sheep’s piss on him is welcome at my table.”

“And anyone that can wheedle Tom into driving his tractor is welcome in my kitchen.”

“And this is Moire. She’ll be showing you the library this afternoon.”

“Moire, I want to know everything,” Greg said with schoolboy charm.

After lunch, they climbed the main staircase. The library was three walls of books with the clever ladders on wheels that hooked to the top of the tall shelves. The fourth wall was windows overlooking the sea with a great arched bay window in the middle. A deep seat ran around the window furnished with welcoming cushions and a tartan blanket.

There was the requisite globe and a curio case of rock and shell specimens. A large table flanked the shelves on one side, a low leather couch on the other. A stone fireplace ran through the middle of the room. In spite of the dreary day, the room was well lit with track lighting above the shelves and refurbished vintage table lamps. Oil lamps and candles had been lit. Under the smell of old books, Mycroft scented vanilla.

“Should we lose power, you’ll still be able to carry on. I hope the candles cut the smell of the burning oil. It can be quite strong to some people, but at least it’s not as bad as the whale oil that they used to use.”

“How are the books organized?”

“Whatever we have about the croft would be in the section by the window. You have the history of the house from its construction to present day. Ledgers from the architect, carpenters, and craftsmen, journals of owners and residents, guest books when it became an inn and so forth. This is my favorite.” She pulled a small red book from the shelf. “Agatha MacDougal, age 12. My Life Story so Far.”

“Next comes history of the area. The village and surrounding country side. Highland traditions. Local merchants. Ship logs and ship wrecks. Archives of the local newspaper. I believe that there may be stories about your croft there. If the lines hold, I can ring some friends in the village who may remember more than I do.”

“Some of these books are very old. Are you sure that it’s okay for us to handle them?” Greg had a hand poised above one of the shelves, and Mycroft could see how much he wanted to begin research.

“Of course, dear. All you like. Don’t worry about re-shelving. It will be my joy to put them back. Not much interest in a library these days, and these books were kept here to be used.”

Greg had three books in hand and was pulling out a chair to begin.
Moire winked at Mycroft and put a hand on his arm to continue the tour without Greg. “A section on Scotland, then one on the Empire with a particular focus on Queen Victoria and the Great War. Oceanography along the back and natural history all the way to the door. You’ll find some antique school books of children who lived here. A whale is a whale regardless of the period.”

Moire closed the door so that they could see the shelves to the right of the door. “Health and medicine. I especially like a local doctor’s journal from 1903. There was an influenza epidemic. He wrote in an approachable style, something like James Herriott. Am I going into too much detail? Mother says that I ramble.”

“Quite the opposite. I’m writing a novel about a village doctor at the turn of the century.” Moire handed him the black leather bound journal. “This is an unimagined find.”

“I’m so glad. It’s a treat to have guests appreciate what we have to offer.”

“You do fine work here.”

She shied from the compliment. “The far corner is religion and philosophy. Cathechisms, family Bibles, text books, collections of sermons, dry as dust some of them. Mind yourself.”

“In the same novel, I have a young vicar.”

“God help you.” She pressed her lips together as if she could taste her wry humor. Who knew he would find a kindred spirit in the wilderness?

“And along this wall?”

“We’ve a fair collection of classic literature and then somewhat current fiction. We request that any author who stays here provides a copy of his or her most recent work. So there will be a spot for your book when it’s done.”

“I’m a long way from completion.”

“It will progress as it’s meant to and be birthed at the perfect time.”

“Thank you. That’s most encouraging.”

“I think this house is an inspiration, and the sea always brings ideas.”

“I truly believe it. The farm even sparked some thoughts.”

Greg appeared to have made a book fort on the long table. He had his tongue between his teeth as he did when concentrating. He didn’t even look up when they stopped talking to watch him.

“Allright, nearly there. By the window, you have local authors and poets. It’s a small section but growing.”

“Do you have any work there?”

A fiery blush. “A vanity publication. They thought it would be good for business to have a poet in residence, but the hand that wields the pen also plunges out the bogs and chops the turnips, with a thorough scrubbing between times, I assure you.”

Greg gave out an exasperated sigh as he held a book at arm’s length and moved it back and forth in a familiar way. “I won’t be able to see a word without my reading glasses. I left them at home, My.”
“We have reading glasses in our gift shop. Would you like to look?”

“There’s a gift shop? Yes, please. There wouldn’t be any notebooks would there?”

“All sorts of stationery. I’ll get the key from Cordelia.”

They spent a pleasant time in the shop. Greg found a leather journal with a Celtic cross on the front and a more serviceable notebook with a picture of the cliff steps down to the sea. “I want to take notes about the croft in here.”

Mycroft selected a journal with a stag on the hill for his emerging Highland story and another with a village scene in case he decided to visit Michael and Graham. Something about the inn made him want to handwrite some of his story. Although he had pens in his briefcase, he didn’t want anything from the Ministry on this holiday. He bought pens and some hand carved pencils for Greg who sometimes liked to gnaw on the wood while thinking like a school boy at his lessons.

They bought all of the postcards in the rack which made good bookmarks as well as providing the best possible photos of the area. Greg took a minute to write one to Gigi that could go out in the afternoon post, and Mycroft added a sentence for ‘his girl.’

They bought tartan scarves for Morris and Tuppy and Art and a fisherman’s jumper in cadet blue for John. Mrs. Hudson got a box of local tea and a shawl knitted in the same style as John’s jumper but in cerise. For Gigi, there was a bright red jumper with a kilt in the black watch pattern, and Rich got a matching throw, a manly blanket for his telly watching in the frigid and frugal temperatures that he preferred.

“We don’t have anything for Sherlock, love.”

Anxiety yet again coursed through Mycroft. He didn’t want to let Sherlock into this time and place to mock it. “He’s so particular. I don’t know that he would like anything from here.”

“Just look, eh? I’ll help.”

He gasped when he saw the paintings. It was a triptych. Three small ones, only a little larger than his laptop. They featured a boy with dark, curly hair and his long haired red dog. In the first, the boy was small and he had dressed himself and his dog as pirates complete with play swords made from sticks and string. In the second, the boy was older, on the cusp of puberty. His coltish legs were wrapped around the dog as they slept together by the fire. In the last, the boy was tall but not yet filled out, somewhere in his mid teens. He and the dog sat side by side, viewing an ocean sunset.

He let out a breath. Sherlock and Redbeard had been on his mind all day. Somehow, they had appeared in a painting. Sherlock had very few pictures of he and Redbeard together. He hated being photographed, and he wanted to be the one capturing his dog on film. Mycroft had a few bad candids. Sherlock hadn’t had the patience to do much better.

Greg came and stood beside him. “This is it, I think.”

“I don’t want to bring back bad memories. The loss was devastating. He never really got over it.”

“May I ask a question?”

Mycroft nodded even though he was afraid.

“When I gave you Hop, it triggered all sorts of hurt and sadness. Would you rather I hadn’t?”
Mycroft considered the matter. He had found his tears that night, and he and Greg had grown closer from the experience. The release of tears had kept him from going mad when Greg was lost. “I was glad to have him back. I was glad when you came back too.”

“It’s the perfect gift, My, whether he’s able to thank you or not.”

“I’m not sure.”

“I think he would be hurt if John got something and he didn’t.”

“I suppose. But perhaps something safer? Like tea?”

“If we send it, you don’t have to see his reaction. Enjoy the giving of it, and forget about the response.”

They worked out the wrapping and shipping with Moire. “Why don’t you two go upstairs and get started? If I have any questions, I’ll come ask.”

Mycroft sat across the table from Greg, making copious notes from the doctor’s journal, but still treating himself to occasional glances at Greg who was adorable in glasses, licking the end of his pencil as he labored over his notes. If he caught, Mycroft watching, he would smile, pleased to be working companionably.

Greg’s stubble made Mycroft’s fingers itch with need to touch his face. He thought of the villa, and a beard rubbed across his bare ass. His face flamed, and he took his books and papers to the window seat to cool off.

After another hour of note taking, his eyes burned and his fingers were sore. He had been working at the project as if it were life or death. He had never dreamed that a random location chosen by Anthea would provide him with a journal so warm and vivid that it was as if he held Graham’s writing in his hands. He hadn’t even started on the religion section yet, but Michael seemed closer. They would have to come back here. He thought there were probably drawings or even photos of the local villages.

He exhaled and put his mind on stand by. So much had happened in two days, all of it good. While he should probably go get his lap top and work on The Village, he let himself stare out the window as sheets of rain were blown in the wind. He traced the path of a snowflake with his finger, and when he grew cold as if gusts could penetrate the glass, he drew the blanket over him, stroking the rough wool, as he let the falling snow hypnotize him.

He thought he could close one eye and still check on Greg with the other. The heavy warmth of the blanket pressed him into the depths of the window seat. Held high above the earth, he was surrounded by the cold and wind, but they could not touch him in his wool cocoon.

He woke to Greg sitting beside him. There was a wall of dark glass, and he didn’t remember where he was for way too long. “We’re in the library.”

“I think you were far away from it. Are you hungry, love?”

“I’m poleaxed. How long was I out?”

“I don’t know when you dozed off, but it’s half past seven now. Cordelia has shepherd’s pie for us.”

“Unfortunately, I think I can eat.” He couldn’t get untangled from the blanket. Greg had to help. “I’m sorry, love. I said that we would do research together.”
“You were with me in spirit, and you looked very pretty with your beard coming in. My sleeping beauty.”

They went hand in hand down the wide staircase toward dinner. Greg was excited as he had been since they arrived. “I’m learning so much about this place. Moire said I could leave my things in the library until tomorrow. I think we will have to come back here, My. There’s so much that I want to learn.”

“I agree. We’ve stumbled on a treasure. My story is already much better for the little bit that I read before I fell asleep.”

“We need to go more places together.”

“I’m glad we’ve had the place to ourselves, but it’s a shame really. Such a nice inn. Everybody ought to see it.”

Dinner was family style again around the kitchen table with Moire added to the circle. Greg and the librarian talked nonstop about his findings. Mycroft watched her duck her head and tuck her hair behind her ear. She was as pretty as a girl when talking about her beloved books.

It was an introvert’s dream. His input was not required. Josh looked drugged but managed to shovel in the food. Tom and Cordelia were tired. He had been too self conscious to notice before, but they had the haggard air of exhausted folk. He saw it in his mirror every morning. The inn was in trouble. Their stay would only prolong the inevitable. He and Greg might not get to return.

For afters, they had rice pudding with plum compote. Suddenly, he missed Morris. “Greg, I think I’ll go back to the room. Take your time, love.”

Greg glanced up with a sheepish smile. “I’ve talked this whole time. Sorry, everyone.”

“We need a hundred more like you. Don’t apologize for enjoying our inn the way that we imagined people would.”

“I’ll say goodnight then. Moire, thanks again.”

The empty hall drove home to Mycroft how dire the situation was. He was quite glad that Anthea had picked this place. If the Stag and Briar did close, they would have the most enthusiastic guest in its history at the last.

In the room, they sat side by side on the couch, stunned by the vast quantities of shepherd’s pie that they had consumed. In spite of the long day, Mycroft had hope of sex, but he couldn’t initiate. “Early bed?”

“I think so. Would it be okay if I jot down a few notes first? I’ve had some ideas about saving the inn.”

“So you see it too?”

“Yes, they’ve worked so hard, but they need more than what they’ve got.”

“Care to share your thoughts?”

“When I get it all straight.” He kissed Mycroft gently, running a hand up and down his arm, but he was miles away. “Why don’t I draw you a bath?”

“Do I still reek of sheep?” Mycroft was mortified. “I’ll scrub myself while you make your notes.”
He wondered if Greg smelled of dog. His nose was stuffy so he hadn’t noticed his own funk, or was a bath a polite distraction? He could take a hint either way. Drawing a scalding tub full, he applied the loofah to every inch of himself, then leaned back and waited, wishing that Greg would join him. When his reddened skin had puckered and the water was tepid, he gave up and dressed for bed. He was tired of covering up like a virgin in chaste changing rooms. He wanted to show himself to Greg and sleep naked. Instead he belted his dressing gown tightly and exited the bath. Greg was writing furiously, and Mycroft thought if he’s still had his shock of silver hair that it would be on end as if his brain had ignited.

Greg reached out an arm, and Mycroft went to stand beside the desk. Greg rubbed a hand up and down the back of his thigh. “You smell lovely now, baby, all fresh and scrubbed.”

Mycroft froze, remembering the breeze as Greg had opened his dressing gown. He wasn’t hard now yet still couldn’t relish being exposed which was different than displaying himself.

Greg patted him and pulled back, a sign of dismissal. “Could I use your lap top?”

Mycroft bid farewell to his hope for sex. “Of course. I’ll just write down the password.”

“There’s no wifi, remember? I just want to type some things.”

“The small printer is in the bag as well. You have to feed each sheet individually.”

“Brilliant.”

Mycroft helped Greg get started and demonstrated by printing a page of The Village. It was ironic that Michael was having sex while he went alone to a cold bed.

“Thanks, love. I’ll be along shortly.”

He did not want to go to sleep without Greg beside him but that was the neediness Greg had complained about. He had been forgiven but he still needed to be mindful of his problem behaviors. Greg loved the new Mycroft that didn’t ask or initiate, and that was who he had to remain going forward. Moving ever so slowly, he turned back the duvet and smoothed it down, fluffed the pillows, and arranged his things on the nightstand. Greg kept typing, squinting at the screen and biting his lip. Mycroft folded his dressing gown and placed his slippers side by side under the nightstand. Still the typing did not cease. There was no Greg in the small bed. He took up the Scottish folklore book that had been in the nightstand and read without comprehension until a nod jerked his head with a sharp pain.

He put the light out and got under the covers onto cold sheets. Sleeping fitfully, he fell into horrid dreams of being mocked and rejected by everyone in his life. He woke several times without the energy to open his eyes.

Then he woke again at the townhouse—alone. Morris brought him breakfast, a cheerless poached egg and dry toast. “I’m sorry, Morris. I didn’t sleep well and things are a muddle. Has Greg gone for a run?”

Morris turned from opening his curtains with a look of horror and pity. “You are confused. Greg left weeks ago. Nobody’s fault really. Tragedy has ended many a marriage.”

“But we reconciled. We worked things out after he was ill. He came back to me.”

“He was ill and in hospital for awhile. Then Tuppy found him a nicer flat and he’s back at the Yard on desk duty until he completes his therapy.”
“There’s hope of reconciliation. We found a way once before.”

“He’s gone, Myc. I’m sorry. Best face it and move on. It’s like old time, eh, you and me? Except now I’ve got Tuppy, but I can still look after you. Why don’t I draw you a nice hot bath?”

“I just had a bath. In Scotland. Greg was coming to bed after he finished his typing.”

“There now. I’m sure the dream was quite real. You could see it as a comfort, your mind bringing back what was lost. You’ll feel better after your bath.”

“I’m telling you that I had a bath a few minutes ago!” His shouting woke him. He sat up and a chill blew across his pyjama top, damp from perspiration.

“You alright, baby?” Greg had looked up, his reading glasses like a second face atop his head.

“Did I talk in my sleep?”

“Argue more like. You were quite adamant that you’d already had your bath.”

“Strange dream. Sorry to disturb.”

“I’m the one that sorry, love. It’s probably the light that made you dream.” But instead of coming to the bed, Greg turned off the desk lamp and continued typing.

Mycroft consulted his mobile and found that only an hour had passed. He took himself to the loo and borrowed two of Greg’s sedative for himself. His nightmare had been all too real and confirmed that their marriage was still tenuous. His hands shook, making the pills rattle when he put the top back on the bottle. He drank two glasses of water, trying to quell the fiery belches of shepherd’s pie. The loo felt stuffy even though the steam from his bath had long dissipated. He stripped down to his pants and wiped himself with a cold, wet flannel. The pills were taking effect. He moved across the room in the dark, making his way to the bed by holding onto the furniture in between.

“You alright, love?”

“I’m hot,” he said, looking down at himself as the breeze hit his nipples. He sat down on the blanket chest at the foot of the bed. “Nearly there.”

The lights were on again. Greg was in front of him and tipped his face up to peer into it. “Did you take something, baby?”

“Gil’s pills. That rhymes.”

“Yes, it does.” Greg was smiling.

“I rhyme all the time. You’re so pretty.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you think so.”

“I’m resting here. The bed is far.”

“Would you like some help?”

“You’re busy. I’ll manage.”

He was clearly impaired, but there were things he must never, ever ask again. “I don’t ask for help
anymore.”

There was something else. “I don’t ask when I want to make sex either.” Was that the proper term? “I won’t ask anymore, Greg. Don’t worry.”

Greg was helping him up. The bed was tiny like a doll’s house and then huge. Greg lowered him to it as it hovered in the air. “I am on the bed but you don’t have to fuck me.”

He shoved his pants down and swatted his cock. “It’s not hard. No need for the sex things every again.”

“This may not be the best time to discuss it, sweetheart. You aren’t yourself.”

“Then who the fuck am I?”

Greg laughed out loud. “You are my husband who has pilled himself to the gills. How many did you take, love?”

Mycroft held up what might have been two fingers or four.

Greg pulled back the covers. “In you go. I’ll just put the sheet over you for now since you’re so hot. I can cover you later.”

Mycroft closed his eyes and Greg disappeared. If he had ever been there. “Greg?”

“Yes, love.”

“Just checking.”

“I’m still here like I have been the last five times.”

“I asked you before?”

“Yes, love.”

“You were away so I must be sure that—Greg?”

“Hmmm?”

“Still there?”

“You are really fighting that pill with a very wicked tolerance. Come here, love.”

“You’re on the bed.”

“I am right here.”

“Am I on the bed?”

“Your body is.”

“You’re laughing again.”

“I shouldn’t. It’s my fault really that you are high, but you are so fucking adorable under the influence.”

“I try.”
“Rest your head on my shoulder.”

“You are clothed. I am naked.”

“Almost but it doesn’t matter. Let me hold you. You can sleep now. It’s alright, baby.”

“If I hang on tight, you’ll stay? Because sometimes you go away. I have to stop rhyming.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I love you, My.”

“I won’t cry either. Not even if I’m hurt.”

“Shh. We’re done hurting each other. Sleep now.”

Mycroft woke to full daylight, gripping the duvet so hard his hand hurt. He was alone. Swallowing rapidly to get the cotton out of his mouth, he searched the room and tried to deduce where Greg was. Not in the loo, not in the hall according to the peephole. He couldn’t get a signal so that he could text—so much the better since text immediately on waking would highlight his neediness. As he shivered in just pants, he looked out all the windows even though Greg’s parka was still there. Snow on everything made the light almost unbearable. He had a hangover from the damn pills. The car keys were there. Maybe Tom had taken Greg to the airport in the inn’s Range Rover.

Had he said something last night that would make Greg leave? Things were fuzzy and mixed up with his nightmares. The panic rose as he dressed, glad that a shave wasn’t necessary. He tried to take deep breaths through a tight throat. If he went to Cordelia and asked, she would see the panic in his eyes. While they had told her about Greg’s PTSD and concern for him would be natural, she wasn’t a person you could lie to about anything. Her contempt was something he couldn’t bear with the rest.

He was fumbling with his shirt buttons when the door slowly came open. Greg backed into the room with a large tray and eased the door closed with his foot. Mycroft was weak with relief and couldn’t push any words from his dry throat.

Greg startled hard as he turned and the dishes rattled on the tray. “Jesus, My. Fucking PTSD startle reflex.”

Mycroft thought he should take the tray but he was shaking from adrenaline. He didn’t know what to say and couldn’t quite remember all that he had said the night before. He chose silence and put on his trousers.

Greg was setting the table. “Do you think we can do without a fire? I’d like to go for a walk directly after breakfast if you’re up for it.”

“When of course.” Mycroft tucked his shirt in but struggled with his zip.

“I asked her for coffee. The pills make me fuzzy in the morning, thought you might be the same although your tolerance seems much higher than mine. She brewed us a very stout pot. Called it the fog lifter. Let’s have a bit of cream in it now that we’ve met the cows from which it came.”

Greg seemed to be business as usual, chatting away. However, the thought of a walk with such urgency was worrisome. Would there be recriminations? Bits of what he had said came back to him. Then he recalled taking his flaccid cock out and waving it around. Damn.

He collapsed onto the sofa. Greg put a mug in his hands; the heat of the heavy ceramic comforted him. There were other delicate mornings that he had survived via a black and tarry brew. He
cradled the mug in his palms and rubbed his thumb over the briar design that twined around the rim. The stag gazed at him with contempt, and he wished there were real briars for him to shred his thumb on while he wove a crown.

“My? I asked If you wanted porridge. Are you ill, love?”

“No. I'll try some porridge. Thank you.” He wasn’t sure he could swallow anything.

“I didn’t know how you would feel so I’ve brought a bit of everything. There’s bacon which I know I’m in the mood for.”

Greg bit off a piece with his beautiful teeth, and Mycroft yearned for him. He wanted naked breakfast in bed with hair straight on end from a marathon fuck. Apparently he had said as much when medicated and how were they facing each other with such secrets out.

“Christ, this is breakfast of the gods. Try your porridge, love, or shall I butter you a piece of toast?”

Mycroft dutifully at a spoonful of porridge, expecting glue. It was a lovely surprise of orange zest, cinnamon, and walnuts, sweetly perfect with the strong coffee. After the huge meals of the previous day, he couldn’t have imagined eating anything beyond a spoonful of porridge but he was hungry.

Greg buttered a triangle of toast and rested it on his side of the bowl. “You’re awfully quiet. Should we have a duvet day? You might have caught cold from all our tramping.”

Greg put down his mug and wiped his hands on the rough linen napkin. “You’re quite flushed. Are you running a fever? Turn to me, baby.”

Greg eased him around with a hand on his shoulder and pressed his lips to Mycroft’s forehead. The movement was so tender that he could have wept. He wanted the clean feeling that he’d had on the beach when Greg forgave him, but he hoped there wasn’t going to be a daily confession required. These marital talks were more difficult than any peace talks that he had ever encountered in the Middle East. “I said some things last night that were inappropriate.”

He took his mug, covering the sneer of the stag with his thumb while the other thumb rubbed at the briar. “I was out of order.”

“You were delightful. I wouldn’t mind more of that side of you in future.”

He couldn’t look up to see if Greg meant it nor could he say that he hadn’t meant the things he said, as clumsily as he had expressed them. Now Greg knew that sex was off the table, and every other piece of furniture for that matter.

Greg took the mug away, replacing it with his hand, and Mycroft continued to rub his thumb now over Greg’s callused palm. “It’s alright, sweetheart. Truly. I’m glad to have a better idea of what’s going on in that giant brain of yours. Sometimes you are still so controlled.”

“I’m being careful so that I don’t hurt you again.” He couldn’t say the word ‘rape’ even if he should own up to it.

“I think we will hurt each other again, but we’ll manage better.” Greg lifted their joined hands and kissed Mycroft’s wedding band. “I’m glad to know that you still want me. I wasn’t sure that you could after all you had been through. I want to assure you that we will have sex again.”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”
“I do and we will be together again soon, I promise.”

Greg hugged him and he let himself cling. He was wrung out and the day had hardly begun. Too soon, Greg gave him three pats. “Let’s finish breakfast. We have so much to do.”

Mycroft felt like one of the Queen’s corgis as Greg fed him bits of bacon. He ate his full measure of porridge, knowing that the cold and exercise would burn it off. When they were done, Greg had him suit up and they walked around the outside of the inn to the service area where a pile of supplies waited. Two large backpacks were stuffed full and all of the many pockets and loops held tools besides canvas bags to carry by hand.

“Are you sure you don’t want Tom to drive you?” Cordelia asked as Greg cinches Mycroft into his pack.

Greg sounded very determined. “I want to do this on my own.”

“Does your husband though? The wind is going to knock him down. Besides, you haven’t hiked it in the snow. You don’t have to be a hero, Mycroft. I can drive you if Greg is going to be stubborn.”

“I’m stronger than I look, lean but wiry.”

They peered at him with the concern one might show an invalid. “I’m feeling better. I think I’ll get up and walk around a bit.”

They both laughed at the Python reference. While Cordelia helped Greg with his buckles, Mycroft could lean his burden against the wall. It weighed more than he did. The straps cut into his shoulders until he thought they would shear his arms off. His only wish was that he not tip over backwards when they started walking.

Cordelia finished outfitting Greg. He had a shovel in one hand and a bundle of metal rods in the other. She looked at Mycroft and said, “I’ve got something else.”

“What else could there be?”

She had returned with two of the odd pointed walking sticks that some hikers used. “Tourists always leave things. If you feel yourself going airborne, jam one of these in the ground and hang on.”

Greg was wriggling around, trying to get his load balance. “We’ll manage.” But he seemed less motivated.

“Last chance. Tom can drive you over and pick you up. It would be easier than a trip to the A and E.”

Mycroft could see the yearning in his eyes, but he needed reassurance. “Why don’t we see how far we get? We could radio for transport anywhere along the way. It’s not a race. Slow and steady takes the day.”

Greg was confident again. Cordelia accepted their choice which was a compliment. “Well this is quite an expedition. I feel like there should be speeches and flag waving. Next time I’ll send Duffy along to look after you.”

“I’m sure there’s a mascot in here somewhere,” Mycroft muttered. But he felt strangely lifted at taking on a physical challenge. Exhaustion might help his horniness.
They walked in silence at first, still squirming under their loads. Mycroft wondered how he would navigate the steep path down to the sea under such a heavy load. The snow squeaked under foot and he tested each step with a pole. There were dips and holes under the white.

“We’re stopping at the ruins love. None of this lot will go further.”

He exhaled and wished that he hadn’t. The strap across his chest seemed to covet the extra room and grew tighter. Still lit wasn’t his first time with a heavy pack. At present, it wasn’t raining or snowing, and they were together. Greg didn’t seem put off by his pill induced ramblings.

Somehow they made it to the ruins. When they shouldered off their packs, Mycroft thought he might fly up into the air with the weight gone. “What’s the plan, love. Just what have I been carrying?”

“I wanted to make a safe place outside the inn to share my ideas with you. It’s hard to maintain perspective so close to Cordelia. We are also field testing one of my ideas.”

“How can I help?”

Greg turned to him with eyes so full of love that he felt butterflies start in his stomach. “You always pitch in no matter how large or daft the project. It’s one of the many things that I love about you.”

He shrugged. “You have good ideas. It’s easy.”

“My? Promise that you won’t humour me because it’s not just about my ego today. There are people’s hopes and dreams here and ancient traditions. I need you to be quite firm. You are my voice of reason.”

“I promise. We’ll do what’s best for everyone. Discussing ideas never does damage.”

He was struck by how positive he had become. Then Greg hugged him hard, and it was good to hold each other with aching shoulders while the bitter wind searched for chinks in their armor. Greg was more confident than he had been with Walt’s project, and Mycroft enjoyed being directed. So few people had the courage to do so.

“We’re going to have a city boy’s version of camping. Tom gave me a section of wedding tent that’s been torn beyond saving. We’ll make ourselves a shelter and have a wee fire in the chimney. Cordelia packed lunch and tea. We’ll make a day of it if we want to.”

It seemed a good distraction for the last day of their minibreak. Mycroft didn’t want to think about returning home and how he might lose enthusiastic Greg. “Give me a job.”

“While I’m unpacking, could you dig for fallen stones along the half walls. Tom says we can dig anything up as long as it remains on site. We’ll need plenty of weight to hold the canvas in place or it will billow in the wind.”

Mycroft set to work. The rocks were just below the surface where they had fallen gently with the passage of time, encouraged downward by rain, wind, and frost. It was easy to pry them up and carry them around to the outer side of the tallest remaining wall. He got warmer as he worked and felt his mind quite as his body was challenged. It was pleasing to see the snow tamped down by his feet, and the collection of rock grow.

Greg was fun to watch as he worked with his tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth in concentration. Mycroft wished it was summer and Greg was working shirtless, muscles bulging under tan skin. He would have to live on Greg’s promise that they would be together soon. He
needed to touch him. Right or wrong he needed to be naked with him, the sooner the better, before he went mad with it.

Greg had finished bracing the metal frame against the bit of wall opposite the tallest one where Mycroft had piled stones. “Tom said the chimney is sound. We’ll be able to have a proper fire for our lunch and a roof over our head while we eat it.”

“A lot of work for one afternoon.” Mycroft bit his lip. That had sounded like whinging.

“True, but we can leave it. It’s all junk to them from the scullery. We’ve helped by clearing it away.”

They worked in tandem, Greg roping his side of the tarp to the frame and Mycroft reaching up to put the big stones over the canvas atop the wall. He tied rope to grommets along the edge and jammed his walking sticks along the wall for stakes. The ground was frozen but had pulled away from the wall enough to leave a space to get the poles deep into the earth.

They had a roof. It snapped and rose up some with the wind, but it held. Inside the shelter, it felt warmer in seconds.

“It reminds me of the blanket fort Georgie and I would make under the kitchen table. I felt safe as houses under there and all for free.”

Greg had spread the ground sheet and they sat in their hut for a break, passing a bottle of Orangina back and forth. “I’ve brought some wood with me, but I want to see what we can find down at the beach. I think I saw some drift wood pushed far enough back to be dry. I need to put our lunch things out. We’ll be hungry when we get back but at least we’ll be out of the wind.”

Mycroft dreaded the trip, but when Greg offered to go alone, he couldn’t stay behind. He watched Greg set out a metal coffee pot and long skewers. He hoped there was other food if the fire didn’t cooperate. The perishable food was placed against the outer windward wall. “No danger of spoiling today. I’m looking forward to sausages. Cordelia helped me with the menu while you were sleeping it off.”

They shouldered their empty packs and walked into the teeth of the wind toward the sea. The path down was treacherous, but they knew what to expect this time. If Greg could conquer his fear of heights, then Mycroft was going to be as stalwart. There was far more usable wood than one would think. Greg’s delight in scavenging was good to see. He had lost the haunted look that had been his default for so long. In their search for fuel, they found a corked bottle, etched opaque by grit and waves. Greg rinsed it and filled it with sea water. “For the washing up. We don’t have reliable plumbing in our cottage yet.”

Greg again collected bits of sea glass, pebbles, and shells. He cut some reeds and dune grass for kindling. The sun never joined them in their task. When they were thoroughly chilled and their packs were full, they trudged up the cliff.

Greg stopped at the top, scanning the horizon. He said as he had the first day, “There ought to be a bench here.”

Walking against the wind, their boots dried and the sand was blown away. The rough shelter seemed like a palace. “I’ll get the fire started. Could you lay out the lunch, My? The sausages go on the skewers. It’s going to take them awhile to cook.”

Mycroft remembered the time at the villa and all the meals they had prepared together in companionable silence mixed with kisses. They had come full circle and were by the sea again but
scarred, sadder and wiser. Then he put regret away and focused on the meal. Cordelia had been generous again. After their building and foraging, he thought they could eat it all. He cut and buttered thick slices of bread to be toasted too.

Greg shouted, “It draws, My. The chimney still draws.”

The tinder had caught and the flames grew, brightening the space. It licked the logs as Greg fed it, and Mycroft imagined that he was warmer.

“I’ll let it settle for a minute,” Greg said as he spread his hands out before it. “We’ve got a miniature camp stove if you need to eat straight away.”

“I can wait.”

Greg jumped up from his crouch. “I forgot about the lantern.” He jammed a leftover tent peg into a crevice and hunted it high on the wall. Its glow changed the space.

“What a lovely spot! We will definitely leave it better than we found it.”

“Thanks for doing this with me, My. You’ve been patient all morning.”

“You said that you had some ideas to share?” He hoped that he had set the right tone of encouragement.

Greg pulled out several sheets of paper folded into quarters. “It’s still rough because I couldn’t search out specific magazines or prices, but I think it’s a good starting point. I mean I didn’t have internet so it could all be bunk, but at least maybe they could know that somebody wanted to help even if it doesn’t work out.”

Mycroft held the paper close to his face since he had come away without his reading glasses, but Greg seemed to want to talk it through anyway. He was nervous and took a sausage to grill as he spoke. “Clearly they can’t rely fully on an aging customer base although that still will be a significant profit as they transition.”

The room was infused with the smell of sausage cooking over an open fire. “God, I could eat this half raw. I’m starving.”

“We’ve earned every calorie today.”

“So the picture is grim, innit? If you look at all the people who won’t come here without internet, but for other guests that would be a plus. Millennials, celebrities, business executives, they can’t stop their texting and such, glued to their mobiles, eh? But there’s people that are trying to heal. Just a few days here have helped me.”

“I’m so pleased, love.” Mycroft wanted to kiss him but decided to make toast instead. It would be nice to wrap around a sausage to soak up the juice and prevent burned fingers.

“That’s coming up a treat. Slow but steady, you said.” Greg turned the skewer to cook it evenly. “I’m getting warm in here.”

“You’re still working hard.” Mycroft had scanned the sheets before he started to make toast and they were forever imprinted in his memory. “You’ve brainstormed people that need quiet so there are some needing a rest cure.”

Greg looked up and bit his lip. So he didn’t like that term. “Grieving, healing from treatments or surgery, recovery from substance abuse.”
Mention of drugs always brought Sherlock to mind. He wished they were the sort of brothers to ring each other. They hadn’t played their favorite games in months. “We’re always looking for places to hide our field agents for rest and de-briefing.”

“Everything is easier for me here with less people.”

“But if we fix it, love, there would be a great deal more people. It won’t be a private hideaway anymore.”

“That’s true. Hand me your toast, My. Time for the first sandwich.” Greg used the toast to slide the sizzling meat off the skewer. He offered it to Mycroft.

“No, you first.”

“Share then,” Greg said and tore off a huge bit. “Careful, I burned my tongue.”

Mycroft held it for a bit, letting the anticipation build while Greg started roasting the next one.

“You’re right that it will get busier, but it’s never going to be Trafalgar Square. And if you advertise as a quiet hideaway, most of your customers will be people who strive to keep it like that.”

“You had creative people on your list. Artists, especially landscape painters, I would think.”

“And writers like you.”

“Actors needing to learn long scripts or that need to rehearse for stage. You could shout into that wind without bothering anybody.”

“Academics if they don’t need to do research.”

“Professors on sabbatical or students trying to finish their dissertation.”

“Seminars and trainings. The Yard has sent me on them to some pretty dodgy places. It would be nice after a day of lectures on the criminal mind to go sit by the sea and gain some perspective.”

“Any number of classes would work here. Meditation, yoga. Perhaps rescue workers could practice rappelling on the cliffs.”

“Right. The old ballroom would make a fine classroom if the view didn’t distract you. I never get tired of looking out there.”

“The Ministry has some trainings that might be better served at a more remote locale.”

They continued brainstorming while they roasted and shared the roast sausage and apple. They passed a bottle of lager back and forth. Mycroft spread soft cheese on bread, and they worked their way through the loaf. “I want to roast every bloody thing in our packs. That was fucking amazing! Why does food taste better outside?”

“I don’t know, but it does. Shall we try a whole apple?”

Roasting the fruit was worth the smell alone. Mycroft made tea on the paraffin stove while Greg worked on the apples. Some of the camping things were quite clever in design with eth pot made to fit the ring and a built in strainer in the spout. He liked the scent and texture of an unfamiliar tea and the added warmth of the small burner was enough for him to shed his coat.
Mycroft had promised to be the voice of reason so he said, “We’ll have to be gentle with them, Greg. We haven’t had the wolf at the door as they have. It’s easy to come in with a fresh pair of eyes and see solutions. But they’ve managed without us thus far.”

Greg slid the apples off on a dish to cool. Mycroft handed him a cup of tea, and they leaned against the rolled sleeping bags, wincing as sore muscles shifted. Wind found a gap in the wall where mortar had crumbled and jammed a finger of cold at Mycroft’s left shoulder. With his hands around a hot mug of tea, he could cope.

“They don’t have the time, do they? I couldn’t do any real research without an internet connection. Even my mobile was sporadic. Nothing would load. If they want help, I’ve got the free time to do more research back in the city. The right ads in the right places to attract our kind of people. I don’t want any arseholes in our spot, love.”

“You’ve been happy here. You seemed to take to it immediately.”

“I like holidays. I’ve always meant to spend more time in Scotland.”

“We can.” Mycroft thought there might be other holidays now, but it was still prudent to bask in the present.

“I keep thinking of your Highlander, hunting and fishing to feed his family. Growing crops by chipping away at the land. Tending his red cows. Then coming home to a simple meal, cooked directly over the flames. Real food on plates, not wrapped in plastic parcels.” Greg threw a paper wrapper on the fire in disgust. “Taste this apple, baby. I cooked it for you.”

Greg fed him a spoonful. It was warm and rich. The roasting had concentrated the flavor. “So you can speak to them at dinner? Or after?”

“If we can help, I’d like to stop their worry straight away. How do you think they will take it? They’re proud in the best sense.”

“I think you should start with how you’ve been helped by the place, and we would like to make sure that it’s always here for us to come back to.”

“What else is there to eat?”

“Biscuit tin.” Mycroft pulled it from the pack and opened it, the satisfying weight of it promising good things. “All sorts of treats. She’s made them herself.”

“We were to have tea out here. I told her we were spending the day.”

Mycroft dug at the foil wrapped packets along the sides. “Chocolate. I need it.” It was perfect after the fruit. Even more perfect was Greg’s slow, sweet kiss.

“Tom said there was still some of the roof when he was young. It used to be the prime spot for young people to snog.”

“It could be again.” Mycroft’s heart pounded with a mix of fear and desire.

“That’s another idea I had—marital retreats. Gil used to do them and maybe he and Laurel would like to again. He’s worried about leaving enough for her and the boys. He could make a lot of money in a two day seminar and have the rest of the month off.”

“Tuppy and Morris could honeymoon here.”
“Brilliant. He has to be careful of the sun since he already had some melanomas removed. A tropical locale is out. Maybe a stay here could be our gift to them.”

“They wouldn’t be outside much anyway. Tuppy is good at sales and marketing. I need to ask his thoughts. Even if they don’t want to honeymoon here, we could give them a mini break some other time.”

“I wish we could keep our room all the time. Just for us. Knowing that it was here would help a lot.”

“We can do a time share if you like. As cold as your Dad keeps the house, they might not mind the cold here. John might like it here, but Sherlock would go mad.”

“We could send them here right after a case. It’s a good place for eating and sleeping.” Greg rubbed his eyes at the mention of sleep. “There’s so much to think about. Keeps spinning in my head.”

“Did you sleep at all last night?”

“I’m not sure. I think I dozed a bit when I was holding you but the ideas kept coming.”

“Again, my apologies for last night.”

“Stop. It was nice to not be a fucking invalid for a change.”

Mycroft hadn’t thought Greg could be more hoarse but his voice was cracking and rasping. “You’ve talked yourself hoarse. Why don’t we have a lie down?”

“Could we?” Greg patted his stomach. “I need to sleep off my food baby. Or maybe I’m like a python?” He waggled his eyebrows. “The sleeping bags zip together.”

Greg banked the fire while Mycroft prepared their bed. They took off their muddy boots and climbed in, using their coats as pillows. Greg was cross eyed with fatigue but kept trying to plan. “I thought of how to use the attics. Did I tell you?”

“I didn’t see it on the list.”

“They can turn it into one of those places where kids stay. It’s a word that means angry but it’s spelled different.”

“Do you mean a ‘hostel’? A youth hostel?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Kids that were hiking wouldn’t mind a tiny room or a communal bathroom. A bed for the night, a shower. Dinner and breakfast. Keep the cost on the low side. You’d make it up in volume.”

Greg’s jaw cracked when he yawned. “They could work it off washing dishes. Upstairs is full of rooms from back when they had an army of servants.” Greg’s eyes were closed, and he whispered as his voice gave out. “They wouldn’t be bothered by all the stairs and there’s a ballroom between them and the rest of the house to buffer the noise.”

Mycroft watched the dark lashes flutter on his cheeks as the lines disappeared from his face. There was a smudge of soot on his forehead. He left it here when he pulled Greg against his shoulder. He placed his hand over Greg’s head to make sure the wind wasn’t chilling that vulnerable spot. The wind howled around them, thwarted by the shelter. They were safe.
Will Ye Go, Laddie, Go?

Chapter Summary

Greg shares his plans for saving the inn. Encouraged by his success with Tom and Cordelia, Greg initiates a sexual encounter with Mycroft.

Chapter Notes

This is the penultimate chapter. The next chapter is the conclusion and is about half length.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting. It makes such a difference for me.

Greg slept hard for three hours without movement or nightmares. He had talked himself out. Mycroft was thinking that he should wake him when the radio squawked to life. “Base to hikers. You alright?”

Mycroft fumbled searching for the device by pinpointing its ‘on’ light. The lantern and fire had both burned down. “We are fine.”

“Are you at the croft?”

Mycroft fought the feeling that he was being scolded. “Yes, we’ve spent the day here.”

“Tom and I are coming to get you. We’d like to see what you’ve done with the place.”

“It will take awhile to pack.”

“No, leave it there. We can collect it later.”

“Are you sure?”

Cordelia wasn’t one for reassurances. “We’ll be there in an hour.”

Mycroft was relieved that they wouldn’t have to hike back in the shadows. Greg was sitting up, looking around him at all they had brought, clearly overwhelmed. He rinsed his face with what was left of the seawater as Mycroft rolled up the sleeping bags. Greg refilled the lantern while Mycroft stirred up the fire and put the last of the driftwood on to burn.

“Do you think we could have tea and biscuits, My? I could eat my boots.”

He made more tea while Greg methodically sampled every kind of biscuit in the tin. “I’m thirsty as hell but if I drink too much of this, I’ll have to piss into the wind. My cock does not enjoy a breeze.”
“I wouldn’t care to have mine seen in their head lamps either. What a welcome, side by side with our cocks out. Waving to them with no hands.”

“Might be best to avoid humourous subjects.” Greg gave him a dirty look and eased himself to a standing position by hanging onto the wall. He took the torch and set off into the night but returned quickly. “Bloody fucking hell, it steamed and then froze in mid air. Little yellow hail stones all over the turf like canary diamonds. And I’m shrunk down to the size of a cherub. Your turn.”

Greg held the torch while Mycroft shuffled outside, trying to keep his thighs pressed together. Afterwards, he found some hand sanitizer and wipes in an outer pocket of the backpack.

“So we’ve discovered a drawback to outdoor life.”

“No, we could fix that with a wide mouthed jar.”

“How wide, love? Because once the cold air hits, I could piss into a straw.”

They were still laughing when they saw the head lamps. Mycroft felt a frisson of fear that their building skills would not be up to Tom’s standards. He had never passed muster with his father. Greg licked his lips and glanced at him before putting out a hand. Tom shook it but his eyes were on their make shift structure. Mycroft had been spoiled by Greg’s willingness to be enthusiastic about anything. In the past he had prized understated reactions where now he cursed them. The darkness and Tom’s full beard did not help in the reading of his reaction.

“This is alright, lads.”

The temporary room was brighter when viewed coming in from the cold and dark. Mycroft could detect their cooking smells and a bit of the sea from the drift wood.

“Brings back memories, eh Cordy?”

“Memories of you coming on like an octopus.” But she quirked up her mouth in what looked like a grimace but was actually a grin.

“We thought we could run you boys home and then have our own picnic since you would be sick of the cooking out. I left dinner for you in the warmer. Can you manage?”

Greg looked over at Mycroft, his eyes huge in the shadows. They had planned to talk to the couple over dinner, but it wouldn’t do to interrupt a nostalgic tryst. Yet Mycroft would get Greg whatever he needed. “Could we stay for starters? Greg has something that he would like to share with you.”

“You’re quite welcome for dinner if you aren’t tired of camp food. Cord packed enough for an army.”

“We’ll help you unload then.”

Suddenly there were plenty more logs for the fire and wool rugs and magnificent kabobs to roast. When all of the supplies had been brought into the space, Mycroft watched Cordelia and Tom work as a team. The vicious gibes were their way of playing with each other. He doubted he would ever get that comfortable with Greg.

Tom had a grill that he set up in the uncovered part of the structure for auxiliary cooking and an extra heat source. They roasted most of the kebabs in the fire place and washed them down with lager. Tender chunks of beef and chicken mixed with pretty pieces of onion, parsnip, potato, and
beet. There was minimal talk and all of it related to the roasting process. Cordelia had tomatoes, baked beans, and thick slices of sharp cheddar cheese as sides along with the ubiquitous oat cakes which were taken up a notch by toasting and slathering with butter and honey.

Mycroft was pleased that Cordelia sat in a camp chair and ate hardily. Tom kept her furnished with kebabs. Greg supplied everyone with fresh bottles of lager. Mycroft helped with the cooking, proud to be at Tom’s side even when he singed his fingertips. He went back and forth to the grill to turn the ones that were cooking more slowly and savoured the picture of a circle of friends where he was accepted. He was literally out in the cold and then stepped into warmth and light.

“There’s chocolate cake with raspberry sauce for dessert,” Cordelia said, her thin arms pushing her up from the low chair.

“Could we wait a bit? I really want some cake, and it won’t fit in my belly yet.” Greg patted his stomach which truly bulged a bit.

“Right. Let’s hear what’s on your mind.”

Greg had the haunted look of a celebrity caught by paparazzi. Cordelia should have been a barrister. Mycroft rushed to support him. “Greg stayed up all night working on a plan. There’s no pressure or obligation, but we would like to help with the inn if you would let us.”

Tom drained the last can of lager and crumpled it in his big fist. “Speak up, lad. We’ve got to hear you over the breeze.”

Greg told it all, his voice hoarser than ever, but his gaze unswerving. He passed over the typed pages, wrinkled now from the day. They sat as still as the stone ruins. Mycroft was afraid of all the fragile hopes that lay between them and their strengths that were also liabilities—Tom’s pride as a provider, Cordelia’s need to control, and Greg’s need to save. He thought of his own many weaknesses and how it might cripple the venture before it began.

He remembered his birthday which seemed like years ago. Greg had an elaborate plan then too. Even Sherlock had honored him that night, but afterwards at Baker Street, he had still been outside the circle, clueless of the inside jokes. He could feel that way again and go to his village until the evening was over, but Greg kept looking to him for reassurance. He stayed present and let Greg see how proud he was.

There was an arse clinching silence when Greg finished. Even with the wind doing its best, Mycroft heard Tom clear his throat. He couldn’t tell if Tom was moved or infuriated. If the inn didn’t survive, he could have a fine career as an agent.

Glancing away from Tom, he saw the whites of Greg’s eyes and attempted the smoothing over that was his greatest strength. “There’s no need of a decision now. We are at the information gathering stage, and no one is under any obligation to—”

“Mycroft, give me a minute, will you?”

Few men had the courage to shut a Holmes down when he was demonstrating his prowess. John Watson was one. Apparently Tom was the other. Cordelia had the exact same expression that she’d had during their entire stay. His stomach churned at the possibility they had offended one of the few women he could respect. The nape of his neck soon had the same tight pain that he got on sniper duty. He blew out a breath, afraid to shift more as Tom pinned him in place with a glare.

Then Cordelia removed her glasses and wiped her eyes. “Now that you’ve seen me cry, I’ll have to kill you.”
Tom patted her knee. “There now, girl. You prayed for a miracle.”

“But you don’t really expect one, do you?”

“It’s a self made miracle with a great deal of elbow grease required.” Mycroft wanted to help them save face, and it was true that he and Greg would provide the collateral, but Tom and Cordelia would have to do most of the work.

He realized now that the news was out, that it might put awkward space between them just as they were getting comfortable. There was another gap in the conversation. He let it lie, listening to the wind and keeping his breath steady.

“I feel like a fucking idiot.”

“You are, but why tonight?” Cordelia punched his shoulder.

“There was a way out the whole time, plain as the nose on your face. Why didn’t I see it?”

“Next one on the left syndrome.” They all turned to look at Greg. “When I was at the Yard and working a case, we might look at the evidence for hours, testing all sorts of theories. Then some bloke wanders in, usually eating a sandwich, and points out a little detail that cracks the case wide open.”

“Sherlock.” Mycroft was the only one to find this hilarious.

“Mycroft’s brother. He came in with fresh eyes and no context, but I did all the groundwork. You’ve built something worth saving. I want to make a way for you to keep going. I’d like to help other people the way you’ve helped me.”

Cordelia catapulted herself out of the chair. “I’ll start dessert now.”

The smell of warm raspberry sauce soothed them. The cake was bitter sweet chocolate and dense, able to stand the tongue tingling sauce. Mycroft communed with his serving as the conversation flowed around him. They were already on board, and Greg was fully capable.

The silences got easier and were filled with the small noises of eating a decadent dessert. Mycroft caught Greg watching him lick the spoon. Tom drained another bottle, belched and was rebuked with a ringing smack from Cordelia.

“Oi, woman, if we’re in business together, they’ll have to take me as I am.”

“Even I can’t take you as you are.”

Tom started bussing the area. When he had all the empties gathered in a box, he took one and winked at Cordelia. “Shall I introduce them to our ghost?”

She shuddered. “Years later, I still get chills.”

Tom held the bottle up. “Gentlemen, when you want to make progress with your lass—or lad, as the case may be—and it’s all uphill, find a crack in the mortar. Cordy, it’s still here, love. Slide an empty bottle in like so, and let the wind do the rest.”

There was a faint wail that rose and fell with each gust of wind. “You’ve got to set the stage with a story.”

“I found out at my hen party that he had two stories in rotation and was successful with both.”
“But you’re the one that won me, Cord.”

“There’s a cruel prize.”

Mycroft didn’t like insults even in jest. “What were the two stories?”

“One was about a girl whose lover died at sea. She walked the cliffs, keening for him. The other was a little boy that the fairies took. He came back years later, not aged a day, but his family had gone, died of the fever.”

“Oh, he was a fine story teller to a starry eyed girl. I knew it was an empty bottle making the racket, but I got my cuddle just the same.”

He leaned down and kissed her without rushing it. Mycroft licked his lips and yearned for Greg’s kiss.

A low moan came from the ground near the fallen wall.

“Jaisus,” said Tom. “Was that one of you?”

Greg pulled out the larger bottle that they had found on the beach. “Cordie’s revenge.”

Cordelia nodded. “You might do.”

“Oh, I see how it is. My new business partner is a trickster. I’ll have to keep my eye on you from now on, mate.”

Mycroft felt anxious even though he knew they were playing, but Greg shrugged. “She feeds me. I’m in her corner.”

They spent the next few minutes putting bottles and jars in all the cracks. There was a horrid cacophony of ghosts like a poor man’s pipe organ. Mycroft resisted holding his ears, but the noise made him stupidly afraid in a visceral way. It sounded like Mummy shrieking while Father berated her and the nanny right by his cot in the nursery. He gritted his teeth and bore it, wondering how Greg could tolerate the noise with his ears barely healed and loud noises being such a trigger.

Tom and Greg laughed, looking like pirates with eyes that flashed in the dark and scruffy dark beards. Cordelia shook her head and rolled her eyes, her terse comment lost to the din. They put the bottles back in the box, one by one, letting the drama fade until they pulled the first one that Tom had placed. The silence was transforming. “All our ghosts are at rest now,” Tom said.

A sweet sadness came over them. Tom kissed Cordelia on the forehead. Her fingers were knotted in his coat. Greg gave Mycroft a loaded glance, and they both stepped outside. “Can you manage the walk back, My? I’d like to give them time alone out here. It seems to be working for them.”

“I think I can if we have plenty of light and take it slow. It’s not that late really and we had a nap.”

Greg didn’t even go back in the shelter but said, “My and I are going to walk back. The stars are out. Can we help with the washing up before we go?”

“We’ll deal with it in the morning. No harm in leaving it here.” Tom and Cordelia came out holding hands and grinning sheepishly. “Sure you want to do that?”

“The moon on the snow is quite romantic. We’re in no rush.”

“Let me give you my big torch from the truck. Then you’ll have one each.”
They shook hands all around. Mycroft thought that one day they might give reluctant hugs the way he did with John. With a soft good night, they left them. He knew they were going to make love in the double sleeping bag. He wished that he and Greg could too in the old way they’d had before the shooting. They walked slowly in the path of the torches until they were far enough away for propriety’s sake. The night was clear, and the moon was a beaming face among the stars. They didn’t speak at first but felt connected as they both turned to look where the croft was pulsing with lantern light.

“Thanks for helping me with that, love. I’m feeling quite pleased as a match maker.”

“I think we gave them a lovely evening like they haven’t seen in a long time.”

Greg was walking very slowly to allow Mycroft to feel his way. “Do we really have to go back tomorrow? I’ve told mine that we aren’t coming. You aren’t expected. We’ve got clothes. What are we going back for?”

“I’ve got some things that I can’t take care of here with the absence of wi fi. How would you feel about a quick trip back? You can meet with Gil; pack a few more things, and then we’ll come back for all of Christmas week if they will have us.”

“I don’t want to go back, My, not even for a day. I’d like to keep building on the momentum that I’ve gained here. There’s another project I’d like to get started too.”

“Then we’ll make it happen. I’ll go back alone and have my meetings and all as quickly as possible and fly back to you. Tell me about your project.”

“I want to build a cairn on the cliff. It would be a memorial for Walt.”

“But the Christmas charity you kept going is Walt’s tribute.”

“I don’t mean it like the whole big thing would be for him. I mean that he’s my inspiration. The memorial, the cairn would be for the shipwrecks and the village boys killed in the war. People like me who came here for healing would have a symbol for it. They would remember anybody they liked when they saw it.”

“That sounds like a fine idea based on the sort of guests we talked about attracting.”

“You could help me write the story of it. I read about all sorts of shipwrecks and local heroes in the library. I think I can design it if you will help me make a sketch.”

Mycroft had hundreds of questions about Greg staying on alone. He seemed fine now but they hadn’t been separated for more than a few hours since they reunited. The whole reason for coming to the inn was because Greg had been in crisis. It seemed a lot to ask of Tom and Cordelia right before the holiday. “I’m so glad that you are having this burst of creativity. Should we consult Gil at all? You’ve been doing splendidly, but you’ll be on your own far from help.”

“I could ring him when we take you to the airport. If he says it’s unwise, I’ll come with you. But I really want to stay, My. I needed watching for awhile, but you can’t coddle me forever. It’s not fair to you.”

“I haven’t minded.”

“You are an excellent carer. So it’s settled?”

“Alright, love.”
“Do you have a terrible load of work to do?”

“There are several Christmas cease fires to negotiate. Temporary respite unfortunately but an excellent time for regrouping. My attendance will be required on the board of advisors for the Queen’s speech.” He felt suddenly shy as if he had been bragging.

“Aren’t you clever?”

“Last year was our wedding, and she excused me with her good wishes, but I never missed before and don’t want to two years in a row. Only Her Majesty would take me from you, love.”

“It’s only a few days.”

“I miss you when you’ve gone to the gents.” He wished he could take it back. His great chasm of need was showing.

“I’ll miss you too, sweetheart, but I’m proud to be steady enough to manage. I’m quite looking forward to our reunion.”

Their plans had brought them to within sight of the inn, and they hurried to the service door. Greg pulled on his arm before he could open it. He reached up for a kiss that lasted until Greg was dizzy. He kissed him again, nudging his lips open further and tipping him back over his arm until he was unable to stand on his own and had to cling to Greg, fully surrendered. If only another project had Greg amorous enough to go all the way because the snogging and false starts had left Mycroft exhausted and frustrated. He was vacillating between feeling unworthy and forgiven.

Greg rubbed their fledgling beards together. They walked into the back of the silent building. Only Moire was in her room far above them. At their room door, Greg kissed him again. Mycroft was sure that they had reached the final step for full reconciliation. Greg had promised that it would be soon. His heart pounded and his palms got sweaty.

When they had shed their coats, he wanted to keep going. They had waited long enough, but Greg went to the table and poured one drink. He would have to follow Greg’s lead. He had absolutely no control over what happened next. It was exhilarating and infuriating. If Greg tried to seduce him again, he would do whatever it took to make things happen.

“We are a great team, sweetheart,” Greg said, passing the glass to him.

Mycroft would never have guessed how intimate it would be to share a drink. Wanting but fearing an advance, he tried to keep his body language open. His cock stood at attention on the airfield, waving an orange torch to direct planes straight to the groin.

After building up the fire, Greg leaned back with a sigh. “It was good to come here, but I think we help people wherever we go.”

Mycroft took another sip. “You see the need.”

Greg smiled and looked down at his hands. Mycroft wanted to kiss each finger. He watched Greg’s dark eyelashes dampen, but Greg was still smiling when he looked up. “The medication must be working. I’m happy.”

“I think you are rather easy to please.”

Greg turned to face Mycroft, drawing his legs up on the couch. “I’ve spent my life on work that doesn’t mean anything. I used to tell myself that I was giving the family closure, but their loved one is still dead. It’s a small and empty justice, innit?”
“It does have meaning, love, I’m sure of that.”

“Not anymore. I need a job, but I’m not sure how hard to fight for my old position. Maybe I’ll let Sullivan win.”

“You know that I’ll support you whatever you choose. You could do anything, Greg. You’re brilliant.”

“You’re a bit biased but I’m glad you think so. A year ago I thought I knew how it was all going to be. Now I’m not sure of anything.”

Mycroft thought Greg could have been sure of their marriage. He absorbed the unintentional blow.

“I do know that I want more of this. You and me making things better.”

Mycroft nodded. “We can do that.” He would spend his last pound saving every failing business in the kingdom if it made Greg smile.

“I guess I don’t have to decide my whole future tonight. I know that I want more philanthropy, and I know that I want you.”

Mycroft blinked at the sudden turn. Greg took the glass from his hand where it had tipped and pulled him in for another knee weakening kiss. His ear tickled when Greg whispered into it, “I want you spread out before the fire, all red and gold, in nothing but your kilt.”

“Then have me.” Mycroft felt chills run over him. He could feel Greg wanting sex; there seemed to be heat coming off his body, and he had that determined set to his jaw.

Greg stepped to the chest of drawers and pulled out Mycroft’s last clean kilt. It was cinnamon colored with aqua and brown accents. He whispered in Mycroft’s ear, “Go and wash yourself then put this on. No vest, no pants. Just this.”

Mycroft shivered as he scrubbed himself, paying particular attention to his genitals. Should he prepare himself? Had they brought any lube? It had been so long since they’d had sex that he didn’t bother with supplies anymore; the let down was too heartbreaking. If Greg wanted this, he would have to make a way. He tried not to meet his own gaze in the mirror. His chest was cold and the kilt felt strange against his bare cock.

Greg had lit candles and spread a throw in front of the fire. He came over to Mycroft and kissed him, rubbing a hand up and down his bare arm. “You look so beautiful, baby. Absolutely gorgeous like that.”

He was led to the throw. Greg eased him down on it and posed him. “Can I take your picture? I want you to see how pretty you look.”

“Anything you like. I’m in your hands.” He resisted the urge to cover himself as Greg snapped pictures with his mobile.

It felt like elf night again. He was tired and had a headache coming on. Greg joined him on the floor, and he was again being kissed with purpose. Greg’s hands were everywhere, rubbing his arms and chest. He needed to touch Greg too, but when he put a hand under Greg’s jumper, it was pushed away. “Tonight is for you, baby. I want to make you feel good. You’ve been so patient. Let me focus on you.”
Had Greg said that before? It seemed a familiar situation. “Greg, please? Let me touch you.”

“We’ll get to that. Right now, I need to pleasure you. Let me do this for you. This is what I need.”

Mycroft surrendered. He couldn’t deny Greg anything, and the last action he wanted to take was pushing a physical agenda. They hadn’t been specific about what was acceptable. He was confused.

Greg kissed down his jaw until he reached an earlobe and suckled it. Mycroft felt it in his nipples and cock as if they were all connected. He was panting, trying not to cry out. His hand fell empty to the floor. Touching Greg wasn’t allowed. Maybe it never would be.

Greg’s tongue circled his ear and then delved inside. It squelched Mycroft’s arousal enough to clear his head. Why couldn’t they touch each other simultaneously? If Greg wanted to bring him off first, that was fine, but it didn’t mean he had to lay there like a landed trout.

“Does this feel good, sweetheart? Do you like this?” Greg whispered in his ear.

He groaned noncommittally, hoping Greg wouldn’t read his truly feelings about a tongue in his ear.

“I think your nipples need attention. Look at me, baby. Do you want me to suck your nipples?” The monologue was terrible, like bad pornography. He was even more conscious now, his cock lowering slightly.

“If you like.” He blinked and made eye contact with Greg, whose eyes were clear as day. It came over Mycroft like electric shock. Greg wasn’t feeling sexual at all. He had the same look that he got with any project, honor and duty. He was trying to do the right thing.

“You don’t have to tonight. Maybe we could cuddle instead?” Sex seemed like such a bother if it was a one way street. He would prefer to be held.

“You need this and I’m going to give it to you. Don’t be stubborn.”

A log shifted and the room was suddenly brighter and hotter. “Is the fire under control?”

“Not for long.” Greg bent to his nipple and scraped his teeth across it. Mycroft cried out in spite of himself. “That’s more like it.”

Greg’s tongue was wicked, moving hair aside and flicking across the peak. “Sometime I’ll make you come just from this, but tonight I plan to be hands on.”

Maybe if Greg would stop talking, it wouldn’t be so awkward, but announcing his intentions only made Mycroft aware of how bloody awkward it was. He risked a look at Greg again when he came up for air. Still honor and duty. He wasn’t getting anything out of this except the grim satisfaction of a job well done. He had seen that look another place, a sadder one. Oh god, literally. Greg had that face at church. Walt’s funeral during the mass. Greg was doing penance tonight with his husband’s body as the rosary.

Mycroft thought he might weep, but he put his arm over his eyes and pressed his thumbnail deep into his finger. Greg was trying and would be devastated if Mycroft called attention to it. He might be reluctant to initiate some other time when they weren’t so self conscious. The best thing that he could do was to respond because it was the intention that counted, not the skill.

Greg was doing more licking and sucking so there was less odd dialogue. Mycroft couldn’t see his Christ like face with his eyes covered. He went to his fail safe fantasy, one that he hadn’t had to
use very often since their marriage. He’d been using it since puberty.

He would be in a crowd of people, thinking that he was part of the group. They had asked him there to accept an award or give a speech or something. The tension in the room would shift and suddenly, a man in the crowd would be his handler. His clothes would be cut or torn off. They might threaten his family, his life, or his balls if he didn’t cooperate, and then he would be displayed to the crowd, sometimes standing, sometimes on all fours like a dog.

His handler would keep up a patter like a circus barker as he pointed out various freckles and whorls of ginger hair. He had to show his teeth like a horse. Then his nipples would be stimulated to show their color and shape. His cock would be lifted so his balls were better on display. He was hard as soon as they stripped him, of course. His minder would invite people in the crowd to come and touch him as they liked. He was to stand docilely and take it.

Sometimes his cheeks were spread so that they could see his anus. An adventuresome audience member might stick a finger in. “Now watch how big he gets when I give him a rub. He makes the funniest noises when wanked especially when it’s been a long time. Look at the face he makes when I press my finger into the slit.”

Greg was sliding a hand under his kilt and rubbing his thigh while kissing down his chest to his belly. “Still with me, baby. Still feeling good?”

He whimpered, so sad to be using a degrading fantasy to stay hard. Greg unpinned his kilt and he was completely naked while Greg had on all his clothes. It was almost as bad as the time Greg had exposed him out of spite. He cried out his hurt with another whimper. Greg shushed him as he lifted his hips and pulled the kilt out from under him.

“It’s your last clean one, baby. Thought we ought to save it.”

Mycroft felt as if his nappy were being changed. As Greg had told him during the bad time, he was a nursing baby. He sighed.

“I know, love. You need to come. Your cock is so big and hard that it looks painful. I’ll take care of you.”

Mycroft pressed his ear against the floor so Greg’s voice was totally muffled. As Greg grabbed hold, it actually hurt from being so distended. He allowed himself any noises that he wanted to make as he returned to his fantasy.

“He will come quickly, ladies and gents. I’ve deprived him intentionally for your viewing pleasure. He makes an obscene amount of come. Hand me a tea cup to catch it in. Thank you kindly. If someone would care to pinch his nipples, it will speed things along. Don’t get impatient. If need be, I can milk him.”

Mercifully, Mycroft came once Greg speeded up his strokes. He hoped it wasn’t a trend that became a habit. He had had more stamina and self control in the past, but lately he seemed to pop off at the slightest things.

Greg moved his arm away from his eyes. “Better now, love?”

“Mmm, thank you.” A few tears had leaked out. Greg brushed them away.

Mycroft looked down at his body, seeing his flushed, sweaty skin and bony knees. He felt dirty and ugly, feelings that were better suited to being debased. He felt farther than ever from Greg and truly ashamed of his own depravity.
Greg seemed pleased with himself. “I’ve wanted to do that for you for so long. Now we are all the way back to normal.”

Not even close. “Could I touch you now?”

Greg kissed him. “Next time, ok? It’s later than I thought, and we’ll have to leave early for the airport. But now when you go back, you’ll have something to remember me by.”

The only reason that he would have to remember Greg is if Greg were gone. Now that he had regained his confidence, was he considering moving on? He had no endorphins from the release. His cock actually hurt when Greg took tissues to wipe him off.

“You really have been depriving yourself. Look, it sprayed everywhere.” Greg rubbed at his belly and chest with the tissue. “You’ll have to go ahead and use Big Purple when you’re home, ok? I don’t want you getting blue balls.”

That’s all he would have now, a silicone replica of his ex husband to top himself with. When Greg went to wash his hands, Mycroft slunk into the bed and curled in a ball. His mortification was complete. He wanted to vomit, but the emotional pain was so intense that his body hurt. He was afraid to move.

Greg sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his hair. “Alright, baby?”

“Sleepy.”

Greg kissed his forehead. “You rest then. I’ll be along shortly.”

When Greg came to bed later, he spooned him and Mycroft felt the press of skin on skin. Greg was naked, but he felt too disgusted with himself to do anything about it. Greg had probably wanked in the loo once he had fulfilled his husbandly duties. Mycroft lay awake most of the night, trying to memorize everything about sharing a bed. He doubted if he would ever get to do so again.

The next morning, they had a quick breakfast of left over snacks in their baskets. Fruit, bread, and cheese had palled for Mycroft. He ate enough to prevent a headache. Shaving his beard was a cheerless task, and putting his suit back on felt like donning a straight jacket. The trip to the airport was long, and he missed the convenience of a driver. On narrow, unfamiliar roads, he had to concentrate. Greg was lost in his own thoughts, staring out the window. “Sorry, I’m not good company, baby. I’m full of plans.”

Mycroft should have been glad that Greg was moving forward. Instead he felt threatened and a ball of dread lodged in his stomach. The old fear came back that Greg would find someone younger and prettier or even a woman who could give him children and a dog. Greg had glowed during the Walt project gift deliveries, and the children had responded in kind, gathering around him for a hug or teasing joke. Everybody responded to Greg. He would not suffer being trapped with a misanthropic hermit forever.

He’d had the first bad sex of his life since the terrible fisting episode when he was young. Greg had said, ‘Something to remember him by.’ Their last sexual encounter had been a bad one, and that’s what he would remember when he was once again in a cold bed. He was startled out of his morbid, cycling thoughts by Greg’s hand slipping over his on the gear shift. “I’m not sure I can bear letting you go.”

Mycroft wanted to say, ‘So come with me’ but what if Greg was referring to a divorce and not this trip back to London. He tried to say the least needy thing. “I’ll miss you desperately, but it’s only a
few days. Then we’ll have a whole week together between Christmas and New Year’s. I’ll have Anthea inquire if there might be a cottage for rent near the inn.”

“It could be like the villa.”

“Only with more clothes,” they both said at once.

A few happy minutes were spent reminiscing before they lapsed back into silence. Greg began fidgeting as they neared the airport. “I can have staff drive you back to the inn, love.”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

When Greg rifled through his pockets for the third time, Mycroft had to ask. “You seem anxious, sweetheart. What are you thinking about?”

“I need to ask a favor.”

How many times this week had he said it? “Anything, Greg. I’ll do anything for you.”

“I need to borrow your ring.”

“If you wish, but I don’t understand why.”

“It’s a piece of you to have with me while you’re away.”

He winced as Greg took it from his finger. It was like an amputation. He had misjudged the distance under snowy conditions so there was only time for a quick hug and kiss before he was striding quickly toward his gate. He focused on the pre-flight instructions given in a charming Scottish accent. There was the novelty of flying on a public plane. He was distracted but not nearly enough.

His hand felt light without the ring as if it might fly up in the air like a loosed balloon. He had become used to twisting it on his finger, the cool metal a reassurance that he was loved and wanted. What would people say when they saw his finger empty?

I knew it wouldn’t last. Thrown over for someone younger, I’ll wager. He’s had his bit of rough, and now it’s over.

Greg had definitely been lying about his reasons for taking the ring. Fear thudded in Mycroft’s throat and stomach. Greg was well now; he would move on, his near death experiences prompting him to seize the day with someone prettier.

The flight was long, and flying commercial even in first class was uncomfortable. As soon as he deplaned, Mycroft had the ministry chauffeur take him to a jeweler. He wasn’t ready to face anyone with an empty finger, but he did have to face the clerk. “I need a reasonable facsimile for travel in unsecured areas.”

“Of course, sir.”

When had he developed the habit of twisting it on his finger? He schooled his agents against such tells. Even while the replacement was being sized, he fidgeted with the knuckle, hair worn sparse from friction. Was Greg throwing the old one into the sea? Even if the marriage was dead, he wanted to keep the ring as a symbol of having been loved once.

Within the hour, he had the replacement which would fool anyone but Sherlock. As he caught
himself twisting it on the way to the ministry, he noted that it wasn’t as smooth on the inside as his own. He hoped it wouldn’t see enough use to set easy on his finger.

He went straight to the Ministry and was thrown into it as if his holiday had never happened. Meetings, interminable discussions with persons too high ranking to be rushed. Meetings that required his full attention when all the while Greg was alone in Scotland possibly slipping into despair or having a relapse of pneumonia or injuring himself in rough terrain or falling from the cliff. During the occasional breaks, his frantic calls did not go through or went unanswered. After the tenth attempt and with two meetings left, he rang the inn.

Moire’s voice was different, more formal. “Mr. Lestrade has been out all day, sir. He just came in moments ago. Shall I ring your room?”

“Yes, please.”

There was a screaming in Mycroft’s head during the pause. Greg was alive but what if he fell in the bath or took his sleeping pills and while disoriented, hit his head.

“He’s not answering, sir. He did mention wanting a long, hot bath. Would you care to leave a message?”

“No, I’ll try again later.”

His mobile vibrated when he was in the next meeting. The voice mail was hopelessly garbled. He considered having it unscrambling by the cryptics department but worried it might be intimate. When his work day was finally over, he repeated the cycle of dropped calls and endless ringing. It was too late to ring the inn. Moire would likely be in bed if she had stayed; Cordelia and Tom probably had gone back to the farm for the night, having only Greg as a guest. It was also too late for him to take back a desperate amount of attempts that could be characterized as smothering and needy. He had done it again. After shivering through his nightly rituals, he dug out the worn sleeper and prepared to climb in the cold bed. He fell into an uneasy doze with dreams of an angry Greg scolding him for harassing phone calls.

Knowing it was wrong, he woke to repeat his behavior of the previous day. Greg didn’t answer. Cursing his weakness, he rang the inn even though it was early. There was no answer. He would have welcomed a curt response or even a hang up from Cordelia. Any word at all.

There were many explanations for Greg not answering—sleeping, showering, running, an early breakfast, but Mycroft’s mind supplied images of Greg with the young, dim Josh, falling over each other in a hay mow. His mobile ran, startling him out of the contemplation of Josh’s mouth breathing being put to good use.

“Did….phone….love? …. loo.”

“Didn’t mean to disturb. I couldn’t decipher your message from yesterday.”

“Glad you ... I miss ….”

“I miss you too.” Mycroft was catching a few words here and there but didn’t want to stop Greg whose tone was upbeat.

“Wish….baby….sorry….sleep…."

“It’s alright. I’m glad you are getting good rest.”

“….okay?”
“Very busy but I’m managing. I only wish that I was there with you. I’m moving as quickly as I can.”

“…..here too. Cairn….is….along. Charley….stonecutter….plans….brilliant.”

“A local artist is helping you?”

“Yeah….design….better….imagined.”

“Sounds wonderful, love.” A lump formed in his throat. Greg was making plans that didn’t include him and healing himself, making progress daily. This was good news, but he felt left out.

“….Morris….care….you?”

“Of course.” He hadn’t even told Morris that he was back. The panic had killed his appetite so there was no need of dinner.

“….eating….sleeping?”

“I should be asking you that. I hope Cordelia is looking after you properly.”

“….lovely….I needed….glad….came.”

“I’m so proud that you asked for what you needed.”

“Me too.”

“I love you.” He clapped his hand over his mouth, hoping that Greg’s connection was as muddled as his so he couldn’t hear the desperation.

“….too…..breakfast….early start.”

“Right. Carry on. We’ll speak again soon.”

The line went dead, and Mycroft told himself that it was the poor connection and not Greg terminating the call abruptly. He had learned two things. Greg was happier without him, and he now had a rival for Greg’s affection. There wasn’t time to ponder the ramifications. He would process this new horror while waiting on other peoples’ minds to catch up with his during the next string of meetings.

After another endless day, victorious in not making any more calls, he worked all the way home in the car, having Art stop to get him a sandwich for his dinner. He ate just enough to stave off a migraine, typing furiously while he chewed. Weeks behind, he was just short of panic over how much needed doing even after two full days of catch up. Anthea was coming along as a top administrator, but there were still some tasks that were his alone. He tidied his desk in the library and had a delicate Skype conversation with Tokyo, then two diplomacy checks that left his stomach churning. He didn’t have his prey drive anymore.

His skills as a diplomat were still there or he would have stepped down; however, every time he had to politely threaten, he would see Gigi’s proud smile or Greg’s sad eyes at the way his chief had exploited him. He was starting to hate his work. He used to tell himself through all the lonely years that he was saving lives. Manipulation could be used for good. Every time he headed off one of Sherlock’s binges or helped him get clean afterwards, he was using his observational power for good. Lately, he wondered if Sherlock might have been stronger if he had found his own way through.
Finally he reached 3 a.m. and the small window of time when very little was happening anywhere in the world. He had done all the work that he could without input from others. Before he shut down his laptop, he checked his email but there was nothing from Greg. He took a minute to type a message for Gigi who would be up in two hours. How he wished that he was there in the cluttered, cramped house having a lie down on the swaybacked sofa under the yellow afghan full of holes. Gigi would fuss over him, making him a bracing cuppa and whipping up a calorie laden breakfast. So he typed just that, how much he missed her and wanted to be with her, recounting his memories of her cuisine and that he was going to sleep under the quilt that she had made for him.

Sleep didn’t come. He found himself wandering the house in pyjamas and dressing gown which had seemed pointless to put on for a three hour nap. The house was empty, and he hadn’t bothered to program the thermostat for habitation. He couldn’t take a sleeping pill which required a full eight hour window to work properly.

His anxiety mounted as he thought he might not be capable of all his duties on this last day. Before Greg, he had managed for days on three hours sleep, but that was when he was well rested in general. His deficit was still there. He would have to at least rest his eyes which were bloodshot and puffy. Not wanting to get in the cold bed, he prepared a hot water bottle, wrapped it in a pair of Greg’s boxer briefs, and spritzed it with that damn cheap cologne Greg still wore.

The warmer bed wasn’t enough. Greg’s familiar scent made him miss him more. He shouldn’t have brought his mobile to bed, but he checked all of the security reports for the people he loved, Greg, his parents, Morris and Tuppy, John and Sherlock; and the people that he did not love but was responsible for—Mummy, the Tillottsons, Gil and his wife.

He wanted desperately to at least text Greg. In his weakened state, he would only ruin things by being needy. Besides, Greg might not get the text for days and an awkward situation could arise if he was with Charley the stonemason by then. The security report told him that Greg was safe but not what he was feeling or thinking. Mycroft reminded himself that even if they were together, he still didn’t know what Greg was thinking anymore. He was haunted by the horrid kilt sex and the faux wedding band he now wore.

His whole body was telling him something. Itchy eyes, stiff neck, roiling stomach, aching back. Greg was preparing himself to go. He had seen how flawed and damaged his husband was when they were alone in Scotland without a buffer. His near death experience had given him the courage to make a change. All of their talks, all of that business about forgiveness was Greg’s way of releasing him. He twisted the fake ring and braced himself for the inevitable.

While he should have been grateful for the year that they had shared and held fast to the knowledge that he had been loved, albeit briefly, he was bereft in advance. He thought he might scream or vomit. Finally, under a cloud of self hatred, he texted Gil.

Have you spoken with Greg today? Is he alright?

Gil had assured him that it was acceptable for him to check in, and Greg had said that he was comfortable with it, but Mycroft was still ashamed. He hoped that the rudeness of an early morning text would be lessened by the extent of his desperation. Gil and Laurel had promised that they would be candid if Gil was having a rough day. They would see his text when they woke and respond, but Mycroft would perhaps be able to rest, knowing that word would be there before he left for the ministry.

He got under the duvet and went to the village, but his mind skittered to images of Greg in trouble—slipping on the cliff path, stumbling on frozen feet, going off his medication and reverting to despair. It had only been a few days but time expanded out there. How far would Cordelia go in
her care giving? What if Greg stayed true to form and didn’t ask for help?

He gasped when his mobile rang and snatched it up without looking at the caller identification.
“Greg? Are you alright?”

“It’s Laurel Hoffman. Greg is fine. I spoke with him this evening.”

“Thank you. I’m so sorry to have disturbed. Between my irregular hours and the lack of a proper
connection, I’ve been on technology black out. I hope you’ll be able to go back to sleep. Again,
I’m sorry for interrupting your rest.”

“You didn’t disturb any rest. My insomnia is in full force, and I’m quite thankful for a break from
the dreadful essays I am marking. The future of our country is bleak indeed if these papers are any
indication.”

“You said that you spoke with Greg. Is Gil alright?”

“Yes, he’s fine. He was in the loo when Greg rang so I spoke with him until Gil was ready. Greg
is also frustrated with the dodgy internet and mobile service. He’s missing you terribly but very
busy with his new project.”

“Busy but not manic? He seemed very keen.”

“I leave the diagnoses to Gil, but he seemed steady to me. You were wise to get him away. The
change of scene seems to have invigorated him. Do they actually have him feeding cattle and
lambs?”

“It’s remote but pastoral. I bottle fed a lamb so I’m sure that Greg had his turn.”

“You’ll be back for Christmas? Good god, today is Christmas Eve.”

“I’ve got a full day of work yet, but yes I hope to get to him by nightfall. Dreading the holiday
travel. I didn’t want to leave him you know, even for an hour, but I had obligations beyond my
control.”

“You can’t refuse the Queen.”

“Indeed.”

“Greg is fine. How are you doing, Mycroft?”

“I’m fine.”

“I rather doubt it.”

“I’m managing.”

“As am I, but as my students would say, ‘It sucks.’”

Mycroft knew that she taught composition and literature at a boys’ school. He wished that he
might have had a jolly and sympathetic teacher like her. One kind word might have made all the
difference. He thought talking with her a bit might not be an imposition if she couldn’t sleep
either.

“Is your husband a difficult patient?”

She laughed. “I think you know the answer to that, and nice try at diverting me from the topic at
hand. Are you doing pleasant things for yourself? Because we’ll have to for the duration.”

“I’m eating properly for the most part to insure that Greg does, and I do a bit of writing for relaxation.”

“Lovely. What are you writing about?”

“It’s a little story about a young vicar who is assigned to a village where he meets a doctor. They become friends.”

“And more than friends, I hope. What period is it set in? Doesn’t matter really. I would buy that book in any setting.”

“Turn of the century. Still lamp light and rustic plumbing.”

“I so admire you for carving out time to write. I’ve always wanted to but by the time I read hundreds of pages of bad student work each term, I’ve nothing left of my spirit for more words on a page, even my own.”

“That’s a shame.”

“You’ve diverted me again, naughty boy. What I wanted to say is that I’m worried you might run yourself into the ground looking after Greg, but you mustn’t. He will recover in time, and you’ll want to be ready for him when he does so you can resume a normal life together.”

“I think that’s gone for good.”

“Why would you say that? You’ve let yourself get rather low.”

“Many marriages don’t survive tragedy,” Mycroft said around the lump in his throat.

“And many do. Your in-laws, for one. Greg said his mum went through a rough patch when his dad’s partner was killed. Greg has a model to follow in his parents who have a long, stable marriage. He will gravitate toward commitment.”

He rubbed his hand across his forehead, grimacing at how much more of it there was. “I ruined our marriage with my neediness. Greg’s forgiven me, but I’m not sure he can forget.”

“No, if you did ask for help, it means that you had the courage to admit that you were in pain without any model for doing so and without a therapist to guide you. That’s a major achievement. If Greg has said anything different, I know he didn’t mean it.”

“The truth came out when he was too wounded to edit himself.” He gritted his teeth. She couldn’t see him through the phone.

“Oh, sweetheart, I was afraid you might be struggling. Our culture has played a cruel trick on little boys. None of this is your fault. When I give Greg his tea, all he can talk about is how proud he is of you and how hard you’ve worked on yourself and the marriage. You’ve done very well since you never had anyone in your corner until now.”

If only she hadn’t been kind. The tears tracked down his face, tickling him. He scratched at them and exhaled noisily. The lump in his throat blocked his words.

“I’ve been through vicarious loss. I’m there again now. You can’t be strong all the time. Nobody expects it but you. Please know that I’m there for you. We can worry about our husbands together.”
"You are in my corner."

"Yes, dear, and so is Gil. Being a carer is exhausting work in the best of circumstances. Then Greg fights anyone trying to help. We know that you’re doing the best you can."

He treated himself to a fortifying snuffle since the tissues were on Greg’s side of the bed. He didn’t even press mute. She probably knew that he was crying.

“I know that you’re crying which is the best thing for you. Take this time away to regroup. Has to come out sometime.”

“Greg hates it when I cry.”

“He will have to cope. I assure you he’s done his share of weeping in this flat.”

“He’s earned the right to.”

“As have you. Now you need to rest a little while. If you can’t sleep, at least do something comforting. I know you’re bloody busy, but if you find a window, come round for tea. You aren’t alone.”

Mycroft had rolled across the bed for the tissues, holding one under the tap that his nose had turned into. “Is there anything that I can do for you and Gil? Money is no object. I have some connections in the medical field too.”

“We’re managing at present, but there may come a time when we need help. I won’t hesitate. I’ll ask for anything on Gil’s behalf.”

“It doesn’t have to be dire. Consider a holiday or some other treat. Not just needs but wants.”

“From what Greg says, you could have a pony here within the hour if I asked.”

“Not quite, but definitely by the end of the day.”

“I’ll make a list, but now finish your cry and lie down. Text me if you’re still feeling blue later.”

“Thank you so much for your kindness.” He had scorned kindness before Greg.

“Thank you for the respite. We’ll talk soon. Good night.” She rang off.

He held the mobile for awhile as if her support could be transferred by osmosis. Greg’s scent wafted from the pillow. He allowed himself memories of Greg comforting him. His body took over, and he slept deeply nestled in Greg’s scent.

The alarm caused a full body startle. Although still weary and sore in his heart, Mycroft felt capable of facing the day. He made tea, extra strong. “Builder’s tea,” he said, raising a mug to himself in the mirror. “A little hiccup last night, but overall, I’m coping quite well.”

He maintained this assessment until he had washed his hair and scrubbed himself alert. The grief washed over him in waves of sobs. He ended up in a heap on the floor of the shower unable to muffle the terrible sounds.

Finally, there was just a keening as the shower spray went tepid. He levered himself onto the seat and turned off the taps.

Completely empty, he finished his grooming ritual. The tears still leaked, and he had to give up
concealing his freckles when the makeup streaked. Even his hair rebelled after the extra exposure to the humidity of the shower.

“This time tomorrow it will all be over.” This mantra was the worst thought yet. But he had promised Greg that he would return, and he owed it to Greg to end their marriage properly.
Chapter Summary

Expecting the worst, Mycroft travels back to Scotland and finds his best case scenario.

Chapter Notes

After almost seven years, I'm able to keep my promise and give these two a happy ending. Thank you to everyone who was part of this journey.

Traveling to Scotland on Christmas Eve was like one of those dreams where one was trying to get somewhere but was constantly thwarted. He had them the night before each new term at uni and before every mission. The torment of being expected and then appearing tardy and scattered would wake him in a cold sweat.

Still Greg might not be waiting. There was Charley now; a fresh start with someone less needy and of his own class, a working man, sturdy with muscles rippling as he brought down his sledge hammer on solid rock. Charley would be even younger with a doting family like the Lestrades, and the love and care of his family would mean that he was never needy or smothering with Greg.

When the plane finally departed and the seat belt sign was off, the attendant came to his seat and put her hand on his shoulder, “Sir, you can’t make it go any faster.”

Sheepishly, he leaned back in his seat. He hadn’t even realized that he was leaning forward with his jaw thrust out. All his work had got done somehow, and he’s gone from frenzied multitasking to full stop. He had brought a book, but the words didn’t make any sense. Even though he needed it, sleep would bring nightmares and he didn’t want to scream on a plane, even in first class.

He tried the village. The only scene he could picture was Michael and Graham sleeping peacefully in each other’s arms. He had carried them to a safe place and didn’t want to disturb them, not at Christmas. Besides, they were ever connected with Greg now. Their future difficulties didn’t interest him anymore.

Finally, he pawed through his well worn memories of patient, gentle Greg. They would always be there even after the divorce. He remembered how overwhelmed he had been to have a beautiful man in his bed every night, a constant presence so that he could not let his guard down. Sex was the only way he knew how to interact in the beginning. He was constantly worried at how his ritual would be perceived by Greg’s observant eyes. He thought that he was always being scanned and found lacking.

Then Greg helped him start over from the beginning by planning a first date. After the disaster of that ridiculous restaurant, they had shared beer and pizza like mates. Greg had become his best friend, something he had never had. But Greg has also been his tender lover. He recalled the feeling of the staged first kiss by the kitchen door, the icy air blowing down the back of his neck.
as Greg’s chapped lips brushed his.

Greg had undressed him in the library and prompted him repeatedly until he had learned the lesson that in Greg’s eyes, he was beautiful. Under Greg’s tutelage, he had learned to hug and hold hands. He had become a better lover instead of only focusing on getting to a climax. He was spoiled for any other kind of sex.

Greg had nursed him when he was injured, washing him and warming him with his own body. Then finally, Greg had healed his mind, releasing a life time of grief with the sweet gift of a wee stuffed rabbit. Mycroft could never have imagined trusting someone enough to cry in front of them, but Greg had been the calm center in his hurricane of anxiety. For a little while, Mycroft had felt safe.

Greg had showed him how to play, something that he didn’t even know he needed. They had private jokes and games that were fun and eased the pressure of work. He could laugh with Greg and know that there were no hidden barbs in their humor. They had played with the train set like children. Now it would have to be torn down and installed wherever he settled with his new lover.

A new, more well-adjusted partner could heal Greg the way that Greg had healed Mycroft. And if he could let Greg end the marriage easily with a parting of mutual respect, then perhaps with time, he and Greg could become friends again and sometimes he might get a hug or kind word. Love meant letting go so the other person could be happy.

Greg had taken the first step by asking for his ring back. He would expedite the rest of it. He wouldn’t have had the courage before, but now he loved Greg enough to put him first even if it meant permanent isolation. He would never be able to find another partner that could tolerate his parasitism. Morris was going to move in with Tuppy and Mycroft suspected that he would start a catering business. Tuppy was enjoying a lucrative career in private security. Even if Morris wanted to keep running Mycroft’s household, the sight of his happiness would be a constant reminder of losing Greg.

As they prepared to land, he organized the papers Anthea had given him. He had a Land Rover waiting and would have to go through the same process as anyone to rent it. In some circles, he could bypass the ridiculous paperwork, but eventually even royalty might run into the same snags as the common man. Anthea had argued with him that he needed a car and driver, not for convenience but for safety. He was exhausted and would be on unfamiliar and remote roads. But he hadn’t wanted to take someone from his family at Christmas anymore than he had wanted to have a companion for several hours as his dread built. The dissolution of his marriage was painful enough without having an audience. Even though he was weary, he felt better for having his own means of escape at the ready. Once Greg had dispensed with him, he would be able to scream and cry in the privacy of his car as he drove back.

The delay made him itch, but he took the time to fill the tank and purchase and fill a large auxiliary can. He brought sandwiches and biscuits and a thermos of hot coffee. Prices near the airport were shocking even to him but he bought an audio book, a biography because those always compelled him to see the subject safely into the present day.

It might as well have been white noise for what he retained of it. His thoughts were still with Greg and scenes of how he might be cuddled with his new lover Charley. He cast Charley first as blond then raven haired but couldn’t bear to make him a ginger. At first he imagined the man touching and kissing Greg’s body in the way that aroused him best before it occurred to him that Greg might not like that at all. Mycroft couldn’t assume that he knew anything about the way Greg liked to be touched.

He tried to block out the clips of that last night where Greg had brought him off without any
realization of how ashamed Mycroft was or how his body needed and repelled touch at the same time. He blinked until the burning in his eyes stopped. Some of his memories were too dangerous to peruse while driving.

He took a few bites of the sandwich but the bread was like glue and stuck in his craw. The coffee was easier to swallow, but after drinking it all, his bladder nearly exploded, and he lost time stopping by the side of the road to piss, the frigid wind shriveling him and making it nearly impossible to force out a stream like yellow tears.

Finally, he was turning on the road to the inn, the Land Rover lurching in the ruts of hard packed snow. He began to see an odd flickering and after rubbing at his eyes, it remained. He couldn’t risk going any faster. What had happened? Were they emergency flares?

As he drew closer, he realized that the road was lined with luminaries. Perhaps there was a holiday tradition. Then he saw between the rows of candles, a familiar figure in a tuxedo, evening coat and scarf. Mycroft stopped the car and turned off the engine. He had come to the crossroads; now Greg would choose their path. When Greg didn’t come closer, he got out on shaking legs and went to meet his fate.

There was a rug on the ground. Greg knelt down. Mycroft tried to read his face in the flickering candlelight, but he couldn’t deduce a thing. Greg reached out for his hand. “Mycroft Holmes, with all the stars above as witnesses, will you take this ring and be my husband?”

His mind tried to catch up. They weren’t over at all. Greg wanted them to stay married and was asking of his own free will. Braced for the worst case scenario, Mycroft didn’t know how to process an outcome better than his fondest hope.

“Baby? You’re making me nervous. Will you stay married to me?”

“Yes, please.”

Greg had his ring and went to put it on but was stopped by the substitute. “Did you find someone else in the past few days?”

“I couldn’t bear the empty finger.” Mycroft moved the faux ring to his other hand. “I’m sorry, love. All better now.”

Greg kissed the ring, restored to its proper place. “Help me up. I’m going to kiss you.”

Greg kissed him until he couldn’t breathe, his insistent tongue delving deep. When they broke for air, a wail escaped Mycroft’s lips. He put a hand over his mouth to block the ugly sound but it was beyond stopping. He had to stop or it would ruin everything. Greg would take back the proposal. He must never be needy. Gasping out an apology, he gritted his teeth and turned away, but the grief was too big.

Greg grabbed hold and held on. “Let it all go, My. You’ve been brave long enough. I’m back now. You can let go.”

Mycroft cried, savoring the feeling of surrender. Greg was in charge. Finally he was done and feeling embarrassed at the outburst with his head on Greg’s shoulder. “I’m truly sorry. I know how you hate it when I cry.”

“I hate it when you’re sad and it’s my fault and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“I’m feeling better,” he said, hating the quaver in his voice.
“I think I’ll get up and walk around a bit.” Greg made it alright with a Python quote.

Then he wanted to kiss Greg without second guessing himself. As he cupped Greg’s face, his hands met wet beard. Greg had cried too and rather a lot. He rubbed his lips in it and tasted salt. In a land where the wind never stopped, it was still. In the distance, they heard church bells. “Merry Christmas, love, and happy anniversary. Let’s go home before we freeze.”

Greg drove, his black gloved hand easy and competent on the gear shift. Mycroft wondered what would happen next as he filled tissue after tissue and dabbed at his eyes. He didn’t really want to see anyone. “I’m underdressed for a party.”

“You’re overdressed for what I have in mind.”

A thrill went through Mycroft at the lust in Greg’s voice. He hoped that this time they would both be naked, but it didn’t matter because they were going to stay married. They could keep on trying.

They stumbled into the lobby, thoughtfully empty, and locked themselves in their room. “We need to be naked immediately.”

“I concur.”

Greg laughed, cheeky and sure. “I love you, My, and I want you.”

“Me too.” Whatever Greg could give would be enough, but oh how Mycroft wished that they would find release together. Greg was toeing off his shoes while his fingers flew over his buttons. All Mycroft could do was tremble, his arms too weak to lift.

“Shall I help?”

He nodded and looked his fill of Greg’s bare torso while being undressed. Greg got their trousers and pants off by pulling them straight down around their ankles. They didn’t make it past the pile of discarded clothing. Greg took them both in hand right there.

Greg’s eyes were closed. He was panting with an open mouth as their cocks rubbed together. Mycroft’s toes curled until he thought he might cut the soles of his feet. Nevertheless, he had to know. “Greg, look at me.”

Greg could barely get his eyes open they were so heavy lidded. “What?”

“Do you want this?”

“Hell, yes.” His eyes were glassy with need. “You take over, My. Your fingers are longer.”

Mycroft would always remember the feel of Greg’s cock slippery and growing in his hand. He would not take it for granted again. He used all of his best moves and somehow, held himself back until Greg came. He heard the familiar grunt, saw his body stiffen, and a little trickle of drool seep out of his mouth. It was real. Only when Greg’s whole body was quivering, did he let himself go over. He was still holding them both when he came to.

“Damn, I’m sticky.”

Mycroft felt around on the floor until he found his shirt. “Here, use this. I wore it on the plane. I’m going to burn it later.”

“I don’t want to stay on the floor, but I’m not sure I can walk.”
Mycroft moved his legs but they seemed to be bound together. “I think I still have my shoes on.”

“If I strip you starkers, do you think you can roll over?”

Greg managed to get Mycroft’s shoes off so that his trousers and pants would slide off. Once Mycroft rolled over, he could push with his legs and help Greg. Holding each other up, they made it to the bed. Mycroft desperately wanted to hang on to Greg, afraid it hadn’t been real or that Greg would change his mind. “Spatula.” He didn’t even know if Greg remembered their code word, but he did and climbed on top of Mycroft, the sweet weight pressing down as lethargy took them both.

When Mycroft woke, he was perspiring from hard sleep and confused about where he was. Location didn’t really matter because Greg was there. He did all the things that he had been denied, rubbing his hand down Greg’s spine to cup his arse, rubbing a finger tip lightly in the cleft.

“If you keep doing that, I might be able to go again. Christ, it’s been a long time.”

“So it really happened? I’m not dreaming?”

“It really happened. I made an honest man of you and then seduced you.”

Mycroft held his hand up for the firelight to catch his ring. Then he put his nose against Greg’s neck and sniffed in all of Greg’s scent that he could hold which was quite a lot with his giant beak. He had hard again from it, his cock swelling uncomfortably between them.

“Seriously, My? It’s only been an hour.”

“I’m sorry.” He tried to roll over to escape but Greg’s weight pinned him.

Greg raised himself up on his elbows so they could make eye contact. “Don’t apologize for wanting me, baby. I’m glad you still can after what I’ve put you through. And I’m impressed. We’re not kids anymore.”

“Just because it’s there doesn’t mean we have to address it. I’m content, Greg, as long as I can look at you and touch you.” His stomach growled between them.

“Let’s feed you up and then see what happens. I forgot all about the midnight feast that Cordelia put out for us.”

Greg took care of him, and he allowed it, resting in bed until the food was laid out before the fire. He ate two bowls of soup without looking up. Greg supplied him with buttered bread and slices of fruit and cheese until finally sated, he leaned back against the couch.

Only one thorn niggled in his paradise. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather make a fresh start with Charley? Because I was prepared to give you up if you had a better offer.”

Greg looked stern as he put the last of the dishes back in the basket. “Charley is short for ‘Charlotte,’ a happily married, seventy year old lesbian.”

He took Mycroft’s hand and eased the ring off. “I had an inscription put in this. “All my heart.” He passed the ring to Mycroft who couldn’t see a thing but could feel that something was etched there.

“All of me, My, for the rest of our lives. I would never cheat on you. You are all the man I want or need.”
He had fished for reassurance and received it. All of his worries were unfounded. They kissed, savoring the last hints of cheddar and Satsuma on each other’s tongues. Greg’s hand wandered into the V of Mycroft’s dressing gown, and he obligingly untied the belt so that Greg could have free rein. Greg straddled him and ran his fingers over hair and nipples with his full attention. As he watched his hands stroking Mycroft’s chest, he asked, “Did you like my letter? You never said.”

“Letter?”

“We were having trouble getting a signal for a proper conversation so I emailed you a love letter.”

Mycroft was embarrassed as if the technical difficulties were his fault. “I checked my messages incessantly the entire time I was gone. Nothing from you, sweetheart. I’m sorry. I would have responded.”

“No wonder you were gobsmacked when I proposed. I made a paper copy. Would you like to hear it now?”

“Of course.”

Greg kissed Mycroft’s chest before levering himself up to dig through the papers on the desk. He came back with reading glasses in place, looking criminally lovely.

He cleared his throat but his voice was still husky as he read:

Dear My,
Near the beginning of our lives together, you wrote me a letter, sharing your deepest hopes and fears. Your vulnerability was the greatest act of courage I’ve ever seen and that letter is my most prized possession. It’s bloody well past time for me to return the favor.

I love you, My, with everything that is in me. You are brilliant, a genius, highly skilled at your job but what you bring to your life together is an open and generous heart. You are kind, even to those who return that kindness with cruelty, myself included.

You kept the faith for our marriage when I lost myself. You carried me when all hope was gone. You were so brave. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, baby.

I’m chuffed to see how amazing you are, and how hard you’ve worked to grow and change for us. You are my inspiration.

The paper shook as a tear rolled down Greg’s cheek. “I couldn’t make the words say what I felt. I’m not a writer like you, My.”

“You’re doing fine, love.” Mycroft had thought he might cry but instead he felt powerful.

You are my beautiful English rose with your soft fair skin and your blushes. When you come to me, I want to kiss every inch of you.

You are a gifted writer and I hope you will finish your village story and share it with the world. I have so little to offer you in return but you can have it all. I will work hard for you every day, I promise.

It’s time for our anniversary, and if you had any sense, you would leave me. Would you consider it for your own sake, please? I am so flawed and I will fuck it up gain no matter how hard I try. If any part of you—

Greg stopped to wipe his eyes. Mycroft wondered if he should offer to read the rest himself but he
thought this was something Greg needed to do. He handed him a tissue.

Greg took a shaky breath and continued.

If any part of you wants freedom from all of the pain that I have caused, I will do my best to let you go in friendship. But in my selfishness, I hope you will stay. I know we can have an easier time of it in our second year. We have been through so much, but we have also learned so much. I want to build this marriage into something that we can both be proud of.

You proposed the first time. God, again you are so brave. But I want you to have the experience of being asked, and knowing that you are loved and desired. Give it some thought, love, and do what is best for your battered heart. When I see you next, I will go down on my knees with the question. If you answer is no, then I will receive the rejection I deserve. But if you accept me, I’ll never ask for anything else. Either way, I will always love you.

All my heart,

Greg

Greg buried his face in Mycroft’s chest. Mycroft kissed the top of his fuzzy head and rubbed his back. “It was a beautiful letter, sweetheart. Thank you.”

“I do love you, My. I swear it. So much, God, you have no idea how much.” Greg hugged him tight. “I know how much I’ve hurt you over and over since the shooting, but I am sorry. Say you believe me, baby. Please?”

“I believe you. It’s alright. We don’t have to keep going over it.” Mycroft realized how much Greg had risked. He’d had days alone to plan the proposal and fret over the answer with no response via mobile or email. His body shook with what Mycroft hoped was relief.

Finally he lay still, one hand resting against Mycroft’s heart. “Did I do the right thing? Did you feel wanted and loved?”

“Yes, I did.” Mycroft still felt the flood of surprise that Greg had chosen him. “Thank you for asking. I needed it.”

“Thank you for saying yes.”

The room had grown chilly so they moved back to the bed. They kissed and touched under the duvet until weariness overtook Mycroft. As he drifted to sleep, he could feel Greg’s hands still caressing him. He woke to Greg’s kisses on his shoulder.

Already knowing the answer, he enjoyed asking the question. “Is there anywhere we have to go today?”

“No. We don’t have to move out of this bed.” Greg slipped the covers down to kiss along Mycroft’s spine.

“Is there anyone we should phone?”

“It’s no one but us today. We have the entire inn to ourselves.”

Mycroft sighed. For one day he would give himself grace and forego hypervigilance. Greg was better; it was time to accept him as healed. From the window, open just a crack, the smell of the sea and peat wafted over him as well as a stiff(no pun intended, he chuckled) breeze that hardened his nipples and did nothing to flag an impressive erection.
“We can take this day as it comes,” Greg said, licking a stripe across Mycroft’s left buttock.

“Or I can take you as you come.” Then Mycroft was flipped over and straddled.

He blinked up at Greg. “Good morning, Mr. Top.”

“I’m going to storm you tower.” Greg took him all the way in.

At first he was aware of being spread out like DaVinci’s Vitruvian Man, then he was falling through the bed as Greg sucked his cock relentlessly. A spit slicked finger entered him, and he meant to tell Greg to get off before the volcano erupted. What if it broke Greg’s palate? What if it shot through the top of Greg’s skull? He came to in the recovery position with Greg’s arms around him. Greg was trembling and he felt anxious until he heard a suppressed giggle.

“What?”

“You shouted “There she blows.””

“Bloody hell. Do you think anyone heard?”

“I don’t know, cap’n. Should I scan the horizon or batten down the hatches?”

Images of Greg as a sailor, shirtless and darkly tanned, sent his cock into aftershocks. “Is the building still empty?”

“As far as I know. Tom took Moire back yesterday. Cordelia said they would all be on the farm unless we rang them. We’re invited for Christmas dinner with them but she also left things that we could heat up.” Greg hopped up and pulled on his dressing gown, tiptoeing over to open the door. He returned with a large basket, steaming in the chilly room. “Whoever delivered this got an earful.”

Greg laughed. Then he fell down on the bed, kicking his legs and laughed some more. “It’s the great white willie, Moby Dick.”

Mycroft wasn’t quite as sure that he wanted Greg’s sense of humor back, but he was too mellowed by his explosive orgasm to think it through.

“Do you need a cuddle before breakfast, baby?”

“After, I think. I’m hungry.”

They fell to without much chit chat. They ate mini quiches and cranberry walnut scones and croissant dripping with herbed butter washed down with several mugs of tea. Somehow they made room for mince pies because it wouldn’t be Christmas without them.

When Greg was licking the butter from Mycroft’s fingers, he became quite sleepy. “I’m relieving you of your duty, Cap’n. Time for a lie down below decks.”

“How long are the naval jokes going to continue?”

“Thursday week.”

“Carry on then.” Mycroft snuggled under the duvet, enjoying the soft weight of it settling on his bare arse so long since they had slept naked. He stretched, wincing as the movement pulled on his full stomach. “I ate too much.”
A cool breeze ran up his spine as Greg lifted the duvet and pressed against his back. “You need me to rub your belly.”

“I’m not a spaniel puppy,” he said, a mock protest because he wanted Greg’s hands on him more than anything in the world.

After a nap, they had a quick wash and went for a walk. The day was frigid but sunny, and they moved briskly to warm themselves, gloved hands clasped. Greg led the way, eyes sparkling, taking them past the ruined croft. “We’ll stop on the way back.”

At the cliff, there was a rough wooden bench. “This is temporary, of course, to get a sense of scale. As you walk toward the cliff, you’ll see a proper cairn but come around and the circle of stones will shelter a stone bench. I’ll either design it with an indentation for a wooden inlay or see if we can start some kind of moss for a pad. Stone lasts forever but it’s hard on the arse.”

Mycroft shivered as the wind blew against his back, trying to push him out to sea, but the view was amazing. It would be a fine spot for writing. Greg came and stood behind him, blocking the wind. “I’ve finally decided what to put on the plaque.”

He was silent then Mycroft turned to find him fighting tears. “For the broken, the fallen, and those lost at sea.”

Mycroft hugged him, rocking them back and forth.

Greg gave a great sniff and continued, “That includes everybody, even the shell shocked, blokes like me, and the fallen could be soldiers who died or men like Rich who fell from grace.”

“It’s perfect, love. You’ve put so much careful thought into it.”

“I like this sort of work, a mix of mental and physical labor with a visible result. I’ve felt satisfied at the end of the day.”

Mycroft hoped that there would be a career change in Greg’s future. His career had taken a heavy toll on his spirit. What if he could find something that fulfilled him and come home happy at the end of the day? He was wasted on the dead when he was so gregarious. Mycroft wasn’t certain he had ever seen Greg this passionate and tamped down the disappointment that he wasn’t the source.

They fought the seaward wind all the way back to the croft. Within the rough L of the two remaining sides was another rough bench which they were glad to collapse on, slightly out of the wind if not the cold. The shelter that they had built together was still there but without the fire, it was less a haven.

“I’ve gathered all the loose stones nearby and stacked them up, but they’ve been worn or cracked by weather. We’ll have to wait on a permit from the planning commission before we take it further but I’m enjoying the process.

“Even as it is, with a proper bench like the one at the cairn, it will be delightful.” He felt sad that his enthusiasm didn’t match Greg’s but he was trying.

Greg paced between the walls. “If I could just dig, I know there are more stones and even artifacts here. In such an isolated place, there must be all sorts of treasures. Time enough for that in the spring. You’ll come with me, won’t you?”

“We’ll come back as often as you like.” Mycroft gingerly rubbed the tip of his nose which appeared to be frost bitten. If it blackened and fell off, it could only improve.
“This is a croft. A croft has so many meanings, a word that encompasses so much.” Greg sat down on the bench and made a circle with his hands. “It’s a building but also a home and a farm.”

Mycroft nodded. They had spoken of it when Greg was first inspired by the ruins but Mycroft preferred discussions on etymology to be conducted inside.

“Your name is Mycroft.”

He nodded, wondering if Greg was having a reaction to his new medication.

“You are Mycroft.”

“Yes, I am.” He bit back a snide response. *That’s my name. Don’t wear it out.*

“You’re not seeing it.” Greg stood up and removed his gloves. He took Mycroft’s face in his hands, the warmth stinging the wind burned skin. “You are my croft. My home, my shelter, my work, and my future.”

Then they kissed with a passion so deep that Mycroft was glad of stone walls which could not catch fire.

When the shops were open, they took Greg’s ring to have it engraved. It read ‘All My Forever.’ The double meaning pleased them.

The End

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