The Lost Special: Family Matters (As Do Relationships)

by ShirleyCarlton

Summary

Sherrinford is not really the name of some high security prison. That was just a figment of John’s frantic coma dream. And Eurus is not actually Sherlock’s sister. That’s just something random she said to John before shooting him. Sherlock and John were never actually estranged. That was just their act to cover up what really happened to Mary – or Rosamund Moran, as her real name has turned out to be. Sherlock does have a secret sibling, though, and his name is Sherrinford.

After finally eliminating Moran – though in a rather dramatically different way than they had envisioned – and exposing the truth about Eurus, John encourages Sherlock to delve into his past and to find out whether the reasons to keep Sherrinford away from Sherlock were the right ones, and to discover what really happened in 1981. Along the way, Sherlock and John gradually, finally, stop keeping each other at a distance, and eventually become a proper family of their own.

Notes

So yeah, since we didn’t get the extra episode of BBC Sherlock (named after Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Lost Special” or otherwise) that many fans had been hoping for, and that would repair all the plot holes and answer all the unanswered questions of series 3 and 4, I
decided to go ahead and write one myself. :) I was inspired by all the amazing meta analyses that the fandom instantly produced after the airing of each of the S4 episodes, and which predicted certain narratives that made infinitely more sense than the ones we subsequently were presented with on the show. So I started writing a story that incorporates various fan theories (mostly revolving around the ‘unreliable narrator’ theory), and connected them in a way that fills most of the plot holes, while hopefully being an enjoyable read as well. :) I kind of wanted to prove to Moffat and Gatiss that you *can* write an exciting story without loose ends and with narrative arcs that actually make sense, so I hope I succeeded at that. (Please let me know in the comments!)

For posterity, I will list some of the reasons why many fans thought that what we saw in series 4 wasn’t real and that the events as presented must either be a false retelling to cover up what really happened (The Six Thatchers + The Lying Detective) or a hallucination/dream (The Lying Detective + The Final Problem). Firstly, The Six Thatchers starts with the doctored footage of Magnusson’s death and Sherlock saying “That's not what happened at all”, and ends with Vivian Norbury saying “Surprise!” when she pulls the trigger, in exactly the same way Charlie Welsborough said “Surprise!” in the scene that never actually happened – when he wanted to surprise his dad for his birthday earlier that episode, but died waiting in the car. Also, there were numerous crazy continuity errors like the changing lamp in the stairwell of 221B, one version of which seemed the same as the lamp in the Morocco scene, which magically repaired itself after Sherlock shot it (a scene where there was also a cameraman in the frame). Not to mention John writing on his blog that he’s changing nappies all the time while Mary is standing next to him still pregnant. Mary later dies with blood spurting from her wound, in precisely the way that was explicitly dismissed as unrealistic in His Last Vow (which was enforced by the fact that a bullet goes too fast for anyone to ever be able to jump in front of it). (More on TST inconsistencies [here](#).) Then there is the TD12 memory altering drug in The Lying Detective, as well as Sherlock’s own drugs (never mind the title of the episode!), which of course can make you question anything you see in that episode. Lastly, The Final Problem is so extremely unrealistic that the only logical conclusion can be that it was all in John’s head (just like The Abominable Bride was entirely in Sherlock’s mind), especially seeing as the plot of this episode is merely an unoriginal remix of several existing horror movies (mainly *The Ring, Shutter Island and Saw*), a genre John has been known to enjoy, and which could therefore definitely explain how all these film plots got jumbled up in John’s head while he was, in fact, in a coma after having been shot by Eurus at the end of TLD (and not with a tranquiliser, as the episode so nonchalantly suggested).

So I would like to dedicate this fic to all the brilliant fans on tumblr who spotted inconsistent details or wrote academic-level meta ([too many to mention by name; I tried but gave up!](#)), who proved that you could still make sense of the ridiculous mess that the narrative of BBC Sherlock had become, if only you superimpose their well thought-out theories on it. I would like to thank my army of beta readers and Brit-pickers (mydogwatson, Jonathan, mamaorion, 88thparallel, camillo1978 and Hannah) without whom I would never have had the guts to publish this, and arianedevere for her incredibly brilliant episode transcripts, which are truly invaluable when you’re writing a fix-it based directly on the show. Many thanks also to ewebie, julzann, deaflock and welovethebeekeeper for sharing their knowledge as experience experts.
Chapter 1

Partial Notes

I'll admit the first chapter is a little information-dense, but it gets better, I promise. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART ONE – THE TWELVE THATCHERS

“So, do you think they bought it?” John asked, his gaze nervously flickering over the interior of DI Lestrade's office.

Sherlock's heart broke a little at the sight of his friend.

John looked tired. Exhausted.

Defeated.

No wonder.

For a brief moment, John looked at Sherlock from the corners of his eyes, then away again.

“I think so, yes,” Sherlock said quietly.

Apparently, Greg wasn’t back from Bart’s yet, Sherlock realised. He briefly put a hand on John’s shoulder, trying a small smile, which he sensed came out forced. “Coffee?”

When John subtly shook his head, Sherlock hesitantly sat down in the chair next to him.

Sherlock felt just as knackered. He pulled in a long breath and held it for a few seconds to steady his nerves. Being interrogated as a witness to Mary’s death by Sally Donovan had taken every bit of his energy and every bit of focus from every single brain cell he possessed.

(Usually, that would have meant fun; not so much this time, though.)

Upon entering the interrogation room, earlier that afternoon, Donovan had attempted to act amicably, starting with some inconsequential small talk. Meanwhile, Sherlock had been unable to stop imagining how Mary’s body was at that very moment being taken from the Aquarium to the morgue, then photographed, probed, and documented. He could only hope that Lestrade had managed to get Molly on duty in time. Either her, or some idiot who wouldn’t look too closely at the angle of the entry wound. However, if it was Woods, everything he would try to do here could be in vain.

He’d quickly pulled his thoughts away from that direction.

“Well then. Can you tell me what happened?” the sergeant had asked, earnestly, as she cradled her coffee.

“We used to be so close. The three of us.” Sherlock swallowed. It was essential that he got this
right. Of all the times throughout his life he’d had to give it his all, this was the one time he needed to get it one-hundred-percent-right. For John. Focus.

Make your worry, shock and dread look like grief and, if you have to, let your voice wobble, he told himself.

And action. “She was so smart, and… she always used to help us,” Sherlock said, sounding appropriately taken aback. “With cases. We were always working together, having fun,” he huffed, forcing out a smile. “Like that time we tried to use a bloodhound to trace the burglar smashing the Thatcher busts.” He paused. “She was just wonderful. John loved her so much, you know.”

That last bit wasn’t even untrue, if you went back in time far enough. John had, at one point, really loved her, Sherlock thought. And even Sherlock couldn’t deny that there had been a time that he, too, had actually – surprisingly – genuinely liked Mary, and thought that she could be the person to make John happy.

The shrew had fooled so many people. Even Janine Hawkins, whom Mary had managed to get just as close to, in an impeccable ‘best friends’ act – which, when you thought about it, was at least an equally impressive feat, seeing as there’d not been any romantic seduction involved.

(For quite a while, Sherlock had suspected Janine to be on Mary’s team, but after careful research – during which the amicability he had initially feigned, once again, in order to get near her, had eventually turned into an actual mutual friendship, ironically – he’d firmly concluded that Janine hadn’t been pretending to be anything she wasn’t.)

Mary had had an impressive ability of hiding certain skill sets and presenting an array of uncannily convincing personalities, according to what was convenient to her, without any regard for the emotional consequences.

Fascinatingly, she had been a lot like himself, in many ways – both good and bad.

Something painful caught in his throat, so he tried to refocus on Donovan, slowly looking back up at her.

She was frowning. “I’ve never seen you two bring her on any cases with the Yard, though,” she said, thoughtfully. “Were things really going that well between John and Mary? I never actually had that impression.” (It seemed like more of an afterthought than an actual question, thank God.)

Sherlock sighed inaudibly.

It had been hellish.

Both he and John had seen very little of Mary indeed over the past months, which in itself wasn’t a problem, of course. But her way of vanishing without a word, and regularly even leaving the baby home alone, had been taking its toll on John, not to mention Rosie herself, while it somehow hadn’t managed to bring him and John any closer to their goal.

Since last autumn – after she’d shot Sherlock in the chest and her true nature had come to light, tearing down the fragile domestic life John had carefully built for himself – Sherlock and John had been working together practically full-time, trying to either find hard evidence on Mary’s past crimes or to catch her in the act of one of the offences they knew she was still habitually committing. They’d thought they’d have her behind bars within a few weeks. Because that was the one place she belonged.

But months of shadowing her hadn’t proved nearly as fruitful as they’d hoped.
None of this would of course have been necessary if Sherlock had actually had any damned proof that it had been Mary who’d shot him, in the first place. But to his utmost frustration, he didn’t. (Obviously, his own statement would not have been worth a penny, after he’d suffered severe internal bleeding, almost died on the operating table and spent several hours unconscious and under the influence of heavy painkillers and other medication. There was no chance in hell that a judge would have taken him at his word if he’d said that he remembered it was Mary who shot him. Besides, for the court of law, a mere statement was never enough anyway. However, as was to be expected, the idiots of Scotland Yard naturally had found nothing on the scene. And by the time Sherlock had been well enough to go back and find any specific traces that could be used as evidence against Mary, Magnussen’s penthouse had of course long been cleared.) And he most certainly hadn’t wanted to rely on Magnussen’s witness statement, as that nasty piece of work would likely have had no problem lying under oath in order to retain the bargaining value of that piece of information, so that he could blackmail Mary even further.

Yes, Mary had been good at hiding her tracks.

Naturally. Or she would have been caught a long time ago.

*And then we wouldn't have had to do this*, Sherlock thought, looking across the table at the lies Donovan had faithfully penned down in her notes.

“So the three of you spent a lot of time together,” she stated, as a summary of what he’d said. “And you got along with her, as well, then.”

Sherlock tried not to nod too eagerly. “Yes,” he frowned, with a touch of indignation, but still playing it cool. “Of course.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, which he ignored. “No tensions whatsoever,” she checked, looking at him askance.

“No,” Sherlock said wistfully, pretending once more to be upset by her passing (which he actually was, but for a very different reason), “none at all.”

The opposite was true, of course.

As he sat in the witness chair, lying his arse off – while simultaneously the realisation of Mary’s death slowly sunk in – he seemed unable to stop the real memories from surfacing, like an unending sequence of scenes from a bad film, passing in front of his mind’s eye. Although he had to avoid mentioning any of those things to Sally at all cost, there was no stopping his thoughts rebelliously jumping back to various events that had taken place over the past couple of months.

Sometimes, when Mary had actually been around, she had demanded to tag along with Sherlock and John, and it had taken them superhuman effort to get her off their tails without either offending her or arousing her suspicion – Mary being the manipulative, clever snake that she was.

Like that afternoon she’d shown up at 221B just as they had been about to go and inspect another possible victim of hers. “Time for our weekly trip to the morgue, I think,” Sherlock had suggested to John, after they’d hit another dead end in an assassination case they’d taken up the week before. Once a week, Molly let them look at any shooting victims for which the Yard didn’t have a suspect yet and for which Mary naturally had been a potential candidate, what with her being a professional sniper.

“Seems like a plan. Any excuse for some fresh air, really,” John had replied, getting up from the desk full of papers.
But as he’d started to reach for his coat, there had been footsteps on the stairs. Then, the door had swung open and Mary cheerfully stepped inside, carrying two large shopping bags full of new maternity clothes – even though she was due in only ten days. The woman was a lunatic in so many ways. (Or was she planning to become a smuggler, hiding illegal goods under a fake bump, once the baby had been born, Sherlock briefly wondered?)

“Hi! How are my boys doing?” she exclaimed.

John plastered a smile onto his face and greeted her. “Hello, darling. Er, we were just leaving, in fact.”

“Oh! Where to? Can I come?”

“Well, nothing exciting. Just the morgue, I’m afraid.”

“Yes,” Sherlock chimed in, “an unidentified, limbless body found decomposing inside a trunk in left luggage office in Waterloo station. Should be fun.”

Mary seemed undeterred, as expected. “Sounds fascinating! Anything to break the dull baby preparation routine.” She’d mock-despairingly rolled her eyes.

John had looked quietly horrified. He knew there was no such body in the morgue at the moment at all.

But Sherlock went on, “I’m sure his exponentially increased microflora and the gaseous compounds they’ve since produced can tell us something about the time and location of death. Bound to be interesting. Especially if you’re in for a nice smell.” For good measure, he’d flashed one of his intimidating grins.

That had done the trick. He’d known that her pregnancy had made Mary extra sensitive to bad odours, so she thankfully changed her mind.

“You know what, on second thought,” she said, “I’ve been thinking about getting a haircut, now that I still can. And I still need to get that incredibly cute bonnet for the christening, that I saw advertised at Debenhams.”

So she’d left, all smiles, just as quickly as she’d come.

It was frankly a miracle, though, that Sherlock had even survived said christening at all.

He’d gone so far as to create a Twitter account (and actually post a fair number of tweets on it, to make it believable) in order to cover up his continuous texting with the various UK police forces, solving crimes left and right that he suspected Mary might have been involved in, hoping in that way to eventually catch her in his net.

On the day of the baptism, he had been feverishly trying to solve a particularly ugly armed jewellery robbery in Colchester. It seemed she had been becoming more and more versatile of late. It didn’t even seem to be just about the money, although that was probably still her prime motivational factor – even when Magnussen was no longer there to extort any payments from her. Her other ‘drive’ was the one thing she and John had in common: they were both adrenaline junkies. But each in a vastly different way. He liked to help eliminate trouble, while she liked to create it.

“Do you want a tissue?” Sally Donovan asked, shoving the little cardboard box on the interrogation table towards Sherlock – her eyes wide but still frowning.
It was the one time he was glad for having a slight cold. He sniffed, “yes please,” and made a show of wiping his nose appropriately.

Sally was clearly somewhat disconcerted by him displaying any sort of emotion other than annoyance or contempt, and he figured he was probably making a bit of an impression. Which hopefully meant he was pulling this off.

As he fumblingly transferred some of his nasal mucosa’s secretion to the offered tissue, he thought back to how he’d managed to unearth the vital clue to Mary’s involvement in the Colchester case while texting about it right under her nose, as her baby was being christened. Thankfully the ceremony had managed to keep her focus on Rosie for more than ten minutes, which was more than could be said on an average day. So, although she acted annoyed at him for using his phone at his goddaughter’s baptism, she never suspected a thing.

In the end, however, Sherlock and John had decided to keep the proof of Mary’s involvement in the robbery to themselves, judging that it would earn her too little time in jail, when they knew they could make a much stronger case against her if they only had a bit more patience. So they both wilfully ignored Mary flashing around her exquisite, new limited edition watch and her ridiculous boasting about how she got it from a patient at the surgery who was so very grateful to her for having saved his life.

At least they then knew for certain that she had a partner in crime – as the robbery had unquestionably been committed by two people – although they still didn’t know more than his approximate height and the fact that it was a man owning a balaclava helmet, which had all been rather bloody disappointing at the time.

“So, ehm… You said Mary was there when you were trying to trace the person smashing the Thatcher busts,” Donovan said, prompting Sherlock to elaborate.

“Oh yes. I texted her. She’s actually better at this sort of stuff than John.” He smiled a painful smile. “We’d borrowed the bloodhound of a friend of mine to trace the blood scent on one of the Thatcher busts. Sadly, the dog wasn’t in the mood and we found nothing. Led us to a butcher’s,” Sherlock said pensively. “Although that could have been a deliberate move on the burglar’s part, of course. If he knew he was wounded and leaving a trail, passing through the butchers would be like hiding a tree in a forest. Quite ingenious.” He nodded to himself.

Sherlock had instinctively known there was a good chance Mary was somehow behind those burglaries, seeing as her chum Moriarty’s touch was so clearly all over the whole thing. And then she’d unexpectedly shown up during their sniffing expedition, belittling John non-stop and going so far as to ask Sherlock why he hadn’t called her to do this with him, remarking how she was so much better at this sort of thing. They’d actually had to slow the bloody dog down so that he wouldn’t betray what they were actually looking for.

“Which trace is Toby following, then?” she’d beamed, handing Rosie to John so that she could meddle more freely.

“Missing child,” Sherlock had lied. “Walked out of his parents’ back garden never to be seen again. Three years old. Had just hurt his knee ten minutes prior, so Toby might be able to trace the scent of his blood.”

“Oh dear. That’s what you get for not watching your child, isn’t it? But with some luck, the child will come to the dog rather than the other way round. Look at his cute face!” And she squished the dog’s head between both hands.
They had let her, buying themselves time to come up with a plan.

“You know what? I think he might be thirsty,” John said, as he spotted an empty dog bowl in someone’s front garden. He’d been carrying a small water bottle and had suddenly remembered he had a sleeping pill as well as a sachet of sugar in his coat pocket. He managed to slip both into the bowl before pouring in the water and casually stirring it with his fingers, as he splashed the water, appearing to call Toby’s attention to it.

Clever John.

“This dog doesn’t do much, does it?” Mary had said, ten minutes later. “He reminds me of you, John. Lazy and incapable, ha-ha! Not that you’re that much better, mind, Sherlock, but at least you’re good at pretending otherwise, right?” She had obviously thought this a very funny joke and had actually winked at Sherlock.

Sherlock put down the paper coffee cup on the interview table so he wouldn’t squeeze it to a pulp out of sheer frustration at the memory, and forced another display of distress onto his face. “We both loved her very much, Sally. She was… like a sister-in-law to me.”

As soon as he’d said it, he internally cringed at the idea, above all of him and John being ‘brothers’. But, well, maybe he should accept that that was the closest he would ever be to him, even now that Mary was gone.

“Can you tell me how tonight’s events are related to the case with the Thatcher busts?” Sally Donovan asked, gently steering him to the purpose of their interrogation.

“Well, that’s a long and complicated story,” Sherlock said.

Here went nothing.

He took a deep breath. “Mary used to be part of a group of four secret agents, who all carried memory sticks with their initials on it, A.G.R.A., containing the data about all of each other’s secret identities. They kept those as a kind of insurance for themselves. Then, six years ago, one of their missions went wrong. In Tbilisi, Georgia. They were meant to free a group of hostages at the British embassy, but someone had betrayed them and the rebels knew they were coming. Mary got away but thought that all of the others had died. Last month, when I ambushed the man smashing all the Thatcher busts, I found out that he was one of Mary’s team, and was looking for his A.G.R.A. stick, which he’d hidden in a drying clay bust of Margaret Thatcher while on the run.”

It was a ridiculous story, but they’d had very little time to come up with something, so it would have to do.

Sally seemed amazed, in an impressed sort of way. “Mary? A secret agent?”

“Yeah.” Sherlock thought he half-succeeded at faking a fond smile, helped somewhat by his mild amusement at Sally’s facial expression. “She had us all fooled for a long while, before we found out.”

Oops, best not to steer the conversation in that direction.

(No one would ever believe that they remained friends after she shot Sherlock, except, well, Mary herself, ironically.)

“Anyway, this old pal, Ajay, was after her and wanted revenge, because he thought she’d been the one to betray their mission,” Sherlock went on. “He was looking for the pen drive so he could trace
her. I told her this, upon which she fled to Morocco. We followed her, but unfortunately Ajay followed us. We did get to hear his whole story, so at least we were able to get the details we needed in order to find out who had really betrayed the mission, before Ajay was shot by local police.”

Sherlock briefly closed his eyes and made an effort to put some venom into what he said next. “The mole had been Mrs Smallwood’s assistant at the secret services, working from the inside. Vivian Norbury.”

“Wait. I thought one of the busts was meant to contain the Black Pearl of the Borgias?”

Sherlock briefly pressed his lips together. “Yes, that’s what I thought, too. But it was the memory stick.”

“I never read anything about any memory stick in that case file,” Donovan said, sceptically.

“No, I took it,” Sherlock said, trying to look guilty. “Sorry.”

Sally briefly rolled her eyes.

“We bugged it with a GPS tracker, knowing that Mary would somehow manage to snatch it from us, which indeed she did – after drugging me – and that’s how we followed her to Morocco.”

He rubbed a hand over his face.

John had been the one to come up with the idea of the bust containing a pen drive, when in reality it had been the Black Pearl of the Borgias, of course. With Craig’s help (the hacker who occasionally lent Sherlock a hand with particular quests on the less accessible corners of the worldwide web and whose sniffer dog he sometimes borrowed), Sherlock had found out that the busts being destroyed originated from Venice, a shipment from last November. Knowing that Mary had been in Venice exactly around that time (when he himself was still in hospital, recovering from the gunshot wound she’d inflicted on him, and she and John weren’t speaking) and knowing that the Pearl had been stolen on 10 November from Slovenia, just over the border near Venice, made it all a very simple puzzle that could have been solved by a five-year-old.

Sally continued to furiously take notes – a backup for the audio recording, Sherlock knew – as he fiddled with his coffee cup.

What Sherlock still hadn’t been able to figure out, back then, was who this man was that Mary had been working with. He had suspected Moriarty’s sibling, the genderqueer brother, whom he had shadowed for some time while dismantling Moriarty’s network two years ago. But he had seemed to be living an ordinary enough life, working as an actor, taking lots of female roles – that is, as long as he wasn’t being kicked out of theatre companies for impossible behaviour. And visiting his shrink. (Sherlock remembered him being especially peeved at not getting the role of Ophelia in a modern, partly genderbent rendition of Hamlet. The red-haired hipster had left a trail of kicked over bins on his way home.)

Mycroft had promised to keep an eye on him, but had failed rather spectacularly. His current whereabouts were unknown.

Either way, the man Sherlock had come face to face with over a broken politician’s bust in Reading had been an unexpected individual indeed. Certainly not a Moriarty, no matter how good he might have been with disguises. Seeing as the man had been wearing a necklace with the letters ‘A’ and ‘J’ dangling from it in thick gold, Sherlock had from there on referred to him as “AJ”. His
real name had later turned out to be Amit Joachim, and he’d never wanted revenge on Mary at all, of course. They were the best of pals. It wasn’t until he’d gotten shot in Morocco and his fingerprints were entered into the system that they’d started to get a glimpse of what he and Mary had been up to in the recent past. Versatile, indeed.

However, in that indoor pool in Reading, where Sherlock had ambushed the intruder, switching on the lights as soon as the man had grabbed the Thatcher bust from the artsy glass side table, Sherlock’s final piece of doubt as to who he was dealing with here had instantly vanished. All it took was a glance at the man’s rare, limited edition watch, that Sherlock knew so well from the index of stolen items in the Colchester file (besides it clearly being the manly version of Mary’s watch).

“Wouldn’t it be much simpler to take out your grievances at the polling station?” Sherlock had jested, confidently.

The intruder had whipped out a pistol and spun around towards Sherlock, who instantly slapped the gun out of his hand. The man swung the large bag he carried up and towards Sherlock’s head but Sherlock managed to grab it and threw it out of reach before punching the man in the face. They traded blows and kicks for some time, before Sherlock succeeded in pulling the man’s balaclava off.

The man stumbled back, as Sherlock triumphantly smashed the Thatcher bust onto the floor.

“Oh, Rosamund isn’t going to like this. No witnesses,” AJ had muttered, as he gritted his teeth.

Rosamund.

*She named Rosie after herself.*

Sherlock had been so taken aback by this incredible piece of egocentrism that he’d failed to prevent AJ from snatching up the Pearl from among the debris.

Sherlock wasn’t sure whether he cared. Lestrade had a team outside surrounding the house anyway. And it was just a pearl. (You could always just get another one.)

Meanwhile, the idiot just kept mumbling to himself as he rolled the pearl between his fingers.

“This is good though. Better than the Goddess of Tbilisi, definitely. Say good-bye now!”

At those last words, Sherlock had at least been quick enough to dodge the bullet fired his way — and through a stroke of luck, he’d apparently stumbled in such a manner that the man thought he’d been hit. Then “AJ” had disappeared.

(And disappeared properly, because the cordon of officers outside had not been able to catch him.)

Quick as a flash, Sherlock had texted John.

-- Mary’s accomplice escaped. She will run. Don’t lose her! SH

And John had been so clever. So very, very clever. He’d anticipated a scenario like this weeks prior and had ordered a GPS tracker online. And he’d chosen the perfect place to hide it. He’d known there was no point concealing it in her clothes or jewellery because he correctly predicted she would keep swapping and discarding those with each new identity she would assume to help her vanish. But she had one weak spot. She would get the most ghastly of urinary tract infections on such a regular basis, that she would never ever go anywhere for any length of time without her pill box with cranberry pills.
So that’s where John hid the tracker. And that is how they followed her every move, from the quiet of 221B. While Rosie pottered about contently with her toys on the living room floor, John would occasionally glance at his screen and say “Hmm… Norway” or “Oh, Poland now.”

Meanwhile, Sherlock had been working round the clock trying to figure out what AJ had meant when he’d mentioned ‘the Goddess of Tbilisi’. It had taken him days until he’d found a tiny newspaper article in an online archive that mentioned a uniquely intact ancient goddess figurine from the late Bronze Age, dug up at an archaeological site in Tbilisi back in the eighties, which for some reason had been in the possession of the British Ambassador to Georgia. It disappeared six years ago, during a hostage situation at the Embassy. The article, however, was very vague as to the specifics of the incident.

He’d contacted Mycroft, who had informed him that Lady Smallwood had been in charge of foreign crises like these at the time. Sherlock persuaded him to dig up the file, to see if Mary (Rosamund) could have been involved. Mysteriously, there had been no file, which even Mycroft found suspicious. Mycroft then interrogated Lady Smallwood, allowing Sherlock to watch from behind tinted glass.

“Elizabeth, what happened in Tbilisi in 2009?”

First, silence. Then, “Oh lord. This is so awkward.”

“Who were involved?”

“I’m sorry, Mycroft.”

“Sorry? Sorry about what?”

“I made an inexcusable misjudgement in hiring the freelancers that I did. I deleted all the files relating to the incident. Out of shame.”

“I see. They turned out to be an unreliable band of crooks. How so?”

Lady Smallwood exhaled. “The freelancers not only killed all the hostage takers, but also the hostages themselves. They ran off with an invaluable figurine.”

“How did you get in touch with them in the first place? What kind of group was it?”

“I… I don’t remember.”

“What were their backgrounds, their nationalities, age group, nicknames, anything?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. They were from all over the place. I’ve tried to forget. And I did,” she sighed. “One of them was a woman. That’s about all I can recall.”

That was hardly proof it had been Mary. (Rosamund.) Not that there was any doubt in Sherlock’s mind.

The next day, just as little Rosie had been discovering how you could make various interesting noises by banging different sorts of toys together, and the tracker signal had been blinking steadily from Morocco for a while, the indicator had suddenly stopped. They never knew if she’d found them out and destroyed it, or if it was a simple accident or malfunction.

On that same day, two other things had happened.
Mycroft informed them that Amit Joachim (“AJ”) had been shot by Moroccan police shortly after committing car theft with manslaughter.

And earlier that same morning, while roaming through London to clear his head, Sherlock had realised that Vivian Norbury, the lovely little old lady who had been present at the D-notice meeting in January as Mrs Smallwood’s assistant, might very well be able to give them exactly the kind of information on Mary (Rosamund) that they needed in order to have her locked away. Assistants like her were, after all, notorious for their infallible memories.

“Vivian Norbury.”

Two pairs of surprised eyes had looked up at him from the carpet.

“Sorry?” John smiled, still holding one of Rosie’s colourful plastic rings in mid-air.

“Vivian Norbury. We need to speak with her.”

“That’s…” John frowned. “That is… I mean, I’ve got an aunt called Vivian Norbury. Just a coincidence, I guess. So who is this Ms Norbury and what do you need to speak to her for?”

“You do? Interesting.” Sherlock had steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “Is she the personal assistant to Lady Smallwood at the secret services?”

“I… er… I wouldn’t know. I haven’t seen her in about thirty years.” He stretched out one arm to pick up the purple ring that was rolling away almost out of reach. “She didn’t want to have anything to do with my dad anymore, her brother.” While he spoke, John kept interacting cheerfully with Rosie, with whom he was building a rainbow tower. “Only about ten years ago did I realise it was because of my dad’s drinking.”

John tried to sound casual, but Sherlock had sensed the effort it took.

Donovan’s voice brought Sherlock back to the present. “So what happened tonight, at the Aquarium?”

Sherlock blinked, trying to recall the story exactly as they’d made it up just two hours prior.

“Um, well, I went to meet Mrs Norbury at the Aquarium. I confronted her about what she’d done. I deduced some private details about her life, insulted her cats. Might have pushed it a bit too far. Mary tried to warn me, to make me stop making hurtful deductions.” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t listen. It was all my fault. I don’t think John will ever forgive me. He’s devastated. All because of me. Livid, in fact.” He let out a strangled sob. “Before I knew it, Norbury drew a gun and fired at me. Mary jumped in front of the bullet. She saved my life.”

Chapter End Notes

I aim to update around twice a month. The more (nice) comments I get, the faster I write. :) ;P
They were trying to spare him, John knew. He should really be interrogated, just as Sherlock was being right now. But he had just lost his wife. His wonderful, lovely, sassy wife – an image he’d actively helped keep up in the past months.

Successfully, it seemed.

He let out a long, shaky breath.

Greg kept trying to shield him from the other constables, letting John sit in his office, repeatedly asking if he wanted more coffee. John had accepted several cups already, but was now starting to long for tea. Just a simple cup of calming tea. But for some reason, the request wouldn’t pass his lips. He just sat there, in silence, staring at his shoelaces, a half empty coffee cup forgotten in his hand.

His mind was reeling with the unexpected events of the last two hours. Mary’s dying words. Greg and Mycroft arriving at the scene. Dimmock, Hopkins and Donovan giving him their heartfelt condolences.

John felt sick thinking about it.

And Aunt Vivian. Poor Aunt Vivian, taken away in handcuffs. He prayed to God they were treating her right.

\textit{God! How could he have let her do this?}

\textit{Was this possibly the worst decision he’d ever made?}

Overwhelmed with guilt, he closed his eyes.

He remembered, as if it were yesterday, the night he’d sat at Sherlock’s hospital bed after Leinster Gardens, waiting for Sherlock to wake up. From one day to the next, he’d found out that his wife was a freelance assassin who worked for the highest bidder, acting contrary to everything he stood for. And on top of that, it had turned out that she had been the one who’d made him fear for Sherlock’s life once more, just a few days earlier.

From that moment, everything had changed. For both him and Sherlock. John moved back into 221B without a word to Mary. Sherlock had had to stay in hospital for several more weeks, where John came to visit him every single day. Often, he’d even slept there, in Sherlock’s bedside chair.

As Sherlock was recovering, he’d gradually filled John in on what he thought he then knew about Mary. How he was quite sure that she was Moran, Moriarty’s former right hand.

\textit{Moran. Great. Of course.}

Just take off the saintly ‘st’ from ‘Morstan’ and you had the most deadly assistant to the most dangerous criminal in the country. Hiding in plain sight.

(How ironic, that while Sherlock had been out there risking his life, day in, day out, one of his main
targets had been safely in John’s bed, of all places.)

“I’ve never been able to catch him,” Sherlock had told John. “I assumed Moran was a ‘him’. Stupid. Biggest mistake of my life. Well, second biggest.”

“Oh yeah? What was the biggest, then?” John had asked, lightly.

“Letting you think I was dead for two years.”

John had seen real regret in his eyes, then. He’d sensed it was there before, but hidden away, covered up behind a façade of coolness. Not like this, in a candid and open gaze that seemed to leave Sherlock’s soul bare, completely vulnerable.

John swallowed, his mouth suddenly inexplicably dry. “Yeah, well, maybe you were right about my terribly risky incorrect judgement, though.” He had smiled wryly, because he was glad Sherlock had finally shown some genuine remorse, at least. And to be fair, the situation he’d gotten himself in was almost funny – if you didn’t think about it too hard. He’d let himself be seduced by one of Moriarty’s sodding minions, of all people; fooled by her sexy smile, her clever sense of humour and her unspoken promise of a normal life. Just because she was, well, a woman.

He looked at Sherlock, who was then faintly smiling as well. The pompous git of a detective: his best friend in the world. John felt a strange but strong comfort knowing that nothing could ever weaken the bond between them, which was stronger than anybody could explain. Not even marrying an assassin wife who’d attempted to kill him had changed anything about that. It didn’t get more outlandish than that, did it?

He just couldn’t do ‘normal’, it seemed, no matter how hard he tried.

“What I don’t get, though, is why she targeted me like this,” John said, focusing on the practical again. “I mean, if the idea behind seducing me was really to be able to kill you, she’s had plenty of opportunity before last week, hasn’t she? So why did she not use it?”

“Well, I don’t think killing me in the literal sense was really the idea,” Sherlock said. The second he had spoken, though, he looked as if he wished he hadn’t. “Anyway,” he quickly continued, although he was still speaking noticeably slower because of his chest wound, and wincing every so often, “back when I was trying to find Moran, he simply seemed to have vanished from the earth. So eventually I just presumed he was dead, because I didn’t think he’d be able to lie low for that long. I did keep my eyes open, or so I thought, while chasing down and eliminating the rest of Moriarty’s network, but nothing on the radar conformed to the pattern of the most wanted sniper. Moran just seemed to be… gone.”

John opened his eyes and looked at his shoelaces again. Funny things, he thought, apropos of nothing. He drew a long breath, wearily looking around Lestrade’s empty office. He’d gone out again, apparently.

The damage that Moran had managed to cause between Sherlock thinking she was gone and her actually being gone now was… pretty fucking impressive. In a devastating way, quite literally.

John had put his trust in her, which was something he’d never done lightly. He’d loved her, the fool that he was; had thought she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

It seemed he shouldn’t have tried quite so hard to let go of his paranoia and general suspicion.

John let his head hang between his shoulders.
How were fucking shoelaces made, anyway? he wondered, in some sort of attempt not to go insane.

And then there was Rosie, of course. Fifty percent of Mary’s DNA. Fifty percent of her bloody name. Would she turn out like her, when she was bigger? With hardly any conscience or sense of accountability? No compassion to speak of? He could only pray to God she didn’t. He would have to raise her, all by himself, to be a good person, somehow. How on earth he was ever going to manage that, he had no idea.

If he was completely honest, he would want nothing more than for the two of them to move in with Sherlock, as ridiculous and unorthodox as it might sound. Whether that was a good idea, let alone whether Sherlock would even want such a thing, was another matter altogether.

John and Rosie had practically been living at 221B a good deal of the time anyway, though, in the past months; every time Mary had disappeared, sometimes for days on end. And a lot of other days as well.

(Mary had never even seemed to mind, merely making snarky comments about it, which John knew to be a source of pleasure in itself to her, rather than a sign of actual discontent – seeing also as she openly admitted to being only too happy not having to endure the baby’s crying for a while when John took her to Baker Street.)

Sherlock had been surprisingly good with the kid, giving her her bottle or playing with her when John had fallen asleep on the sofa from sheer exhaustion.

There’s no way he could do this without Sherlock, John knew. Not that he didn’t need him like air even without Rosie – although he’d be hard-pressed to admit it.

Ever since Mary had handed John that pen drive with the unfamiliar initials A.G.R.A. scribbled onto it, that supposedly contained all the information about her past, he and Sherlock had been frantically trying to find out what she had done, who she had been. Pretty quickly, it had become clear that the memory stick belonged to some random student she had no connection with whatsoever. She’d likely just found it on the street that day and picked it up in hopes of there being some sort of material on it that she could make a profit from, one way or another. In a moment of inspiration, she’d apparently just decided to use it as a test to see if John trusted her.

Yeah. As if.

“If you love me, don’t read it in front of me.”

“Why?”

“Because you won’t love me when you’ve finished.”

That was exactly the moment his last shred of love for her had vanished, quite precisely. The first very, very large crack in their bond having appeared the minute he realised it was her who stepped into the empty façade house in Leinster Gardens, mere hours before.

“John, I need you to do exactly as I tell you,” Sherlock had said. “Please. It’s of the utmost importance.”

John had looked around the strange space they were in, a corridor only just wide enough for Sherlock’s wheelchair; which Sherlock was now carefully parking at the far end. He’d had no idea what this was all about.

Still, he trusted Sherlock, as always.
“Alright.” The sooner this was over, whatever this was, the sooner he would be able to get Sherlock back into his hospital bed, where he belonged.

Sherlock had looked at him relieved, but still clearly nervous. Not like him at all.

“The person who shot me in Magnussen’s office will appear here any moment. If you sit in my wheelchair over there, the backlight will make it seem like you’re me, that is, if you turn your coat collar up and ruffle your hair a little. Like this.” Sherlock had then carefully reached up and combed his long fingers through John’s hair – a touch that had made other hairs on John’s body stand on end as well, for reasons he hadn’t wanted to think about.

“Meanwhile, I will be concealed at the other end. I need you to have a clear view of the suspect and hear what they have to say. And don’t worry. I’ve taken measures to ensure that they won’t try to kill me – that is, you – again.”

“They?” John had asked, wondering how many people Sherlock was expecting, exactly.

But just then, Sherlock’s phone had beeped and he’d quickly punched in some digits, before putting it to his ear. “Can’t you see me? People live here for years and never see it, but if you are what I think you are, it’ll take you less than a minute.”

John thought about all the shoelaces that had existed in the world, going back to… what? The Stone Age, probably. Brilliant invention, really.

What would he tell Rosie, he wondered, when she wanted to know about her mum? What she had been like? How she died? Oh God.

Well, the story that Sherlock was dishing out in the interview room right now would have to do. Maybe one day, when she was older, he could explain…

He remembered with some embarrassment the mixed feelings he’d had when he’d received the results of the paternity test he’d secretly had done on Mary’s amniotic fluid sample. After finding out she was a cold-blooded criminal, he’d almost hoped the baby wasn’t his. He hadn’t known what to do when he’d learned it was. Sitting at the hospital bed of his best friend, who had been shot by the very mother of his unborn child, they endlessly talked over all the options. John didn’t want to go back, didn’t want to ever see her again. But at the same time, he couldn’t bear the thought of a child of his being raised by that vermin.

He and Sherlock soon concluded that two things needed to be done: to collect evidence of who she really was so that she could be safely locked away, and to safeguard the baby’s wellbeing. In order to achieve the second goal, they had to postpone the first one, as it would be a lot easier to get custody over the baby if Mary didn’t get convicted until after it was born.

Trust Sherlock to do enough google searches until he’d determined that John would have a much bigger chance of getting full custody directly, rather than having the baby stay part-time with Mary in prison for the first 18 months, if he could prove that he had a proper bond with the child.

It had taken Sherlock some convincing over the course of several weeks before John agreed he would try to fake ‘talking things out’ with Mary, or whatever her name was, and staying with her for the last couple of weeks of the pregnancy and the first couple of weeks of the infant’s life. Together with Sherlock, he’d prepared what to say to her that would convince her he’d forgiven her without him actually having to utter a lie.

The problems of your past are your business; the problems of your future are my privilege.
He could easily say he hadn’t read the memory stick, as there had just been some student assignments on it, which he definitely hadn’t read.

Sherlock, on the other hand, had spent a fair amount of time on his laptop while still in hospital, trying to ascertain if there was maybe some kind of hidden code in there, until concluding that there really wasn’t. Which was confirmed upon their returning of the pen drive to its rightful owner, a second-year student of architecture, who had been hugely relieved and delighted to have it back.

Unfortunately, gathering the evidence as to Mary’s real identity had turned out to be immensely harder than anticipated, and more than a few things had gone awfully wrong along the way.

Nobody was supposed to have died.

The first cock-up had been their mission to get information from Magnussen, which at the time had seemed the easiest and fastest way to their goal of having Mary convicted. But the bastard had threatened to set Mary’s enemies loose on her family, which naturally included John and Rosie. Knowing that most of those enemies were probably relatives of people she had murdered, it was logical that their revenge would consist of murdering Mary’s loved ones.

Since Magnussen didn’t buy their bargain material (neither literally nor figuratively), they clearly weren’t ever going to get any useful information out of him, while at the same time the man was a walking time bomb full of explosive material, which he was only ever going to use to make the world a worse place. So, after adding up all those things, Sherlock had decided to quite literally give his life for John, by taking Magnussen’s life and thereby ensuring that Mary’s enemies wouldn’t ever be able to harm John.

It had been an act of utter desperation.

Thank God Mycroft had had the footage altered and slapped a D-notice on it, because John hadn’t been sure he’d had any will to live left after seeing Sherlock be taken away in handcuffs from Appledore that Christmas night.

The hug they’d shared on the tarmac had been the most overwhelmingly painful moment in John’s life – which was saying something, after having supposedly lost Sherlock to death twice before, already.

John had been a total wreck by the time Sherlock regained his freedom and was safely back at Baker Street. John had caught such a bad flu – likely from a combination of stress, sleep deprivation and heavier drinking than he cared to admit – that he’d lain on the sofa at 221B under a blanket, shivering, as Sherlock sat in front of the fire, calmly recounting the D-notice meeting to John in his soothing baritone voice, while eating ginger nuts.

(John had managed to convince Mary he’d better let his flu run its course at Baker Street, so as not to pass on his bugs to her while she was heavily pregnant. The real reason was that his nerves had worn so thin that he’d needed continuous visual proof that Sherlock was really back; that it wasn’t just a dream.)

“So I said, ’Who is supposed to have shot him, then?’” Sherlock recounted, between ginger nuts. “To which Sir Edwin replied, ‘Some over-eager squaddie with an itchy trigger finger, that’s who.’”

‘That’s not what happened at all,’ I pointed out.

‘It is now,’ Mycroft said.
Lady Smallwood was very impressed with the way the recording had been manipulated.
‘Remarkable. How did you do it?’"

Sherlock was making a show out of accurately imitating all their voices, causing the corners of John’s mouth to twitch, in spite of his fever.

‘We have some very talented people working here,’ Sir Edwin bragged. ‘If James Moriarty can hack every TV screen in the land, rest assured we have the tech to, er ... doctor a bit of security footage. That is now the official version; the version anyone we want to will see.’

‘No need to go to the trouble of getting some sort of official pardon. You’re off the hook, Mr Holmes. You’re home and dry,’ Smallwood said, then. So, here I am,” Sherlock had concluded.

The prat had probably smiled his Prat Smile at that point, but John hadn’t been able to keep his eyes open, by then, slipping away into strange fever dreams of what his ridiculous life had become.

As far as dreams went, the following months had been like a nightmare. But just as you do in a dream, John had accepted most aspects of it as a reality, in spite of how absurd it all was.

The birth of his daughter had at least given him some joy in his life. And loving her had turned out to be easier than he’d thought.

But, simultaneously, he’d had to pretend he loved Mary as well, day in, day out.

Until early spring, it had mainly been a matter of looking after her and the baby in a very practical manner, which had been doable. But after a few months – which was a much longer time than they’d anticipated they would need until having her arrested– once Mary had started expecting physical intimacy again, he’d had to play along with that as well.

The problem had not been that he hadn’t wanted to sleep with her. The problem had been that he had. Somehow, lying on top of the spawn of all evil and steadily thrusting into her as she lay there, so very willingly – and harmless – was one of the more satisfactory elements of his current life. Exceedingly satisfactory, in fact.

And he hated himself for it.

(When his mates had used to say that he liked to flirt with danger, they had been more right than they ever could have known.)

He tried not to initiate sex himself, but he often couldn’t help himself, because whenever he did, she was always up for it.

When one day, an innocent-looking ginger girl flirted with him on the bus, he saw the perfect opportunity. He needed someone else. Someone who wasn’t a psychopath, for once, thank you very much.

Absurd as it was, the mysterious ‘E’ (which was all she’d written below her number on the little slip of paper she’d given him) gave him what felt like a much healthier mental outlet for his need for intimacy than either Mary or Sherlock could provide.

Well, no need to dwell on the needs Sherlock could or could not provide for him, right now. As close as they were, the man was a lunatic, of course.

John briefly smiled at the mere thought of him, however.
Thank God he still had Sherlock.

Even though his ‘affair’, if that was even what it was, had consisted only of texting, it had proven to be a wonderful way of escaping his life with Mary occasionally.

He’d texted elaborately with Sherlock throughout, as well. Although those texts had been of a significantly more innocent nature, of course, cheeky as they might often have been. Frequently, when Rosie woke him up in the middle of the night, Sherlock would also be awake and the texts they exchanged, though inconsequential and irrelevant in every sense, had been the bright spots that made John keep going.

Like that time Sherlock had texted him at 4am to ask the chemical notation of aspirin.

--What’s the molecular formula of aspirin again?

--There’s this wonderful thing called Google, you know.

After one minute of silence, John had given in (of course).

--Alright then, you git, it’s C9H8O4.

--Just checking if you were really well awake. :) Does someone being in the possession of a 500 mg pill mean that it must have been prescribed by a doctor? (Can’t ask her myself; she dead now.)

--Yes. Now go to sleep. Doctor’s orders.

Once, Sherlock had bluntly admitted to missing John – even though they’d seen each other only three days before.

--It’s been too long.

--I know. Sorry.

--Miss you.

--You’re up late.

--Or early.

--Night owl?

--Vampire

--:)

It was at moments like these that John had felt guilty about his sexting affair, oddly enough. What was it to Sherlock, anyway? The man obviously couldn’t care less about sexual relationships. Especially if they weren’t any of his business. Or not even sexual, in fact.

(John still wasn’t sure about the nature of Sherlock’s own sex life, or absence thereof. Not that it mattered, of course.)

Nevertheless, John had ended the sexting after a few weeks, when the novelty had worn off and the mysterious ‘E’, whom he knew nothing about, had started to become a little too inquisitive about his private life. He was grateful to her for having given him a fix that he’d badly needed, but that was it. He didn’t really want her, in the end. He wasn’t entirely sure what it was he wanted, in that
respect – or maybe he did, and had decided that it was impossible anyway – but either way, thinking about it tended to make him crabby.

He sighed, suddenly remembering reading about an artist who had used light-emitting shoelaces spinning around to make long exposure photographs, that made them look just like beautiful glass vases. She’d even called them ‘Light vases’ even though they were just spinning shoelaces. The vases on the pictures didn’t exist. Much like the picture that Sherlock was now painting to Sally about the current situation, and which matched rather seamlessly with all the evidence at hand.

*What was reality, even?*

Before he had the chance to become any more philosophical, Greg agitatedly came back into his office with a bunch of envelopes under his arm, unceremoniously throwing them onto his desk before he plonked down into his desk chair himself.

“Got Molly to handle the post mortem,” Greg said. “She will let me see the draft report before making it final.” He nervously ran a hand through his hair. “I told her… not to include too much detail.”

John took a long breath. “Greg. I’m sorry.” It came out as barely more than a whisper.

Greg didn’t look up. “Well, yeah, I guess there comes a day in every copper’s life where he’s got to choose between what’s wrong and what’s right, regardless of the law. Even though it’s, you know… really fucking hard.”

“… and can cost you your job,” John finished the sentence for him. “Christ, Greg. Maybe I should just--”

“No.”

Greg’s resolute tone of voice almost startled John. “No,” he repeated, in a much lower, but still very insistent voice. “That will only make things worse. We’ll see this through to the end. It will be alright. I pray to God, at least, that it will be.”

John clenched his jaw and said nothing.

* * * * *

After Sally Donovan had stopped asking him questions, apparently satisfied that she’d heard all there was to know from his side of this bizarre story, Sherlock walked back to Lestrade’s office. He knew the building and its corridors and staircases well, of course, yet everything felt different today. He took every flight of stairs, every turn, as if he were walking through an underwater world. He didn’t hear any of the voices of the people he passed, noticed their movements only as in a blurred slow motion.

As he made his way through the dull, blue-grey labyrinth, with the occasional flickering fluorescent tube, it was almost as if he was still in the Aquarium tunnel, surrounded by the dead stares of the rays and sharks.

Random thoughts kept popping into his head, like the cyclists’ traffic sign he’d seen earlier that day that had been turned into a funny cartoon. Or the old tale of the Merchant in Samarra. Or less random thoughts, like the things Vivian Norbury had told them about the atrocities Mary (Rosamund) had committed in Georgia.

He briefly knocked, before opening Lestrade’s familiar door.
John asked how the interrogation had gone and he replied reassuringly.

Then a deafening silence fell over the room.

They sat next to each other for a while, each with their own thoughts.

“Do you know the story of the Appointment in Samarra?” Sherlock asked John, after a few minutes. He’d realised that the thought of it had not been so random after all.

“You mean Samara, from The Ring?”

“The Ring? No, there’s no ring in it, I don’t think.” Sherlock briefly bit his lip, before continuing, “It goes like this: There was once a merchant in the famous market at Baghdad. One day, he saw a stranger looking at him in surprise... and he knew that the stranger was Death. Pale and trembling, the merchant fled the marketplace and made his way many, many miles to the city of Samarra, for there he was sure Death could not find him. But when at last he came to Samarra, the merchant saw, waiting for him, the grim figure of Death. ‘Very well,’ said the merchant. ‘I give in. I am yours. But tell me: why did you look surprised when you saw me this morning in Baghdad?’ ‘Because,’ said Death, ‘I had an appointment with you tonight – in Samarra.’”

“Ah. Still a horror story,” John said, flatly.

“And very applicable to one person in our current situation, who showed up exactly in the place where she shouldn’t have been.”

John pursed his lips and looked at the floor, unreadable.

Had it been a mistake to mention Mary in this way? “So, um, what is this other story about, then? The Ring?”

“Oh, that.” John raised his eyebrows. “It’s just a far-fetched horror film with impressive special effects and a mildly interesting storyline.” A faint smile appeared on his face for a moment. “About a girl with supernatural powers who was killed at the bottom of a well, but nevertheless continued to terrify everyone, via television screens. Her name is Samara.” He cleared his throat awkwardly.

Was he embarrassed?

“You wouldn’t be able to watch it for more than three seconds,” John was quick to add.

It was clear that he had enjoyed the film, though. He’d always liked this sort of thing, endlessly going on about The Exorcist, The Omen, Shutter Island and the like, even though it was beyond Sherlock why, indeed. But he suddenly wanted to tell John he would watch the entire film with him, regardless. Just like they’d watched James Bond together – one of Sherlock’s fondest memories, with John giggling at every bit of Sherlock’s elaborate criticism of the extremely unrealistic storylines.

“I just might, you know,” Sherlock said. “If you compensate by making tea.” He looked at John from the corner of his eye.

John briefly smiled at him, before another silence settled over the room.

“Listen, er… I might actually have told Donovan that you blame me for Mary’s death and want nothing to do with me anymore.”
John frowned. “Why did you tell her that?”

“Well,” Sherlock said, speaking softly, “it seemed like something you might have done if any of this was real and you’d actually loved her. I guess… I thought it would make our story more realistic.”

John’s frown deepened. “I would never ‘want nothing to do with you anymore’, Sherlock. Jesus. Sally will never fall for that, at all,” he whispered back, frantically. “Besides, how would me blaming you even make sense? If Mary had really jumped in front of a bullet for you, that would hardly have been your fault, now, would it?” There was panic in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, John. It’s just… lying can become rather tricky, when you have to do it for ninety minutes straight.” Sherlock didn’t know where to look, afraid to see the disappointment in John’s face.

“Right.” John nodded, staring down at his hands. “It’s alright. I’m sorry.” He looked up at Sherlock. “So that means we can’t see each other for a while, then.”

Sherlock pressed his lips together, trying very hard not to kick himself. This had definitely been the stupidest idea he’d had in a while. “I guess that’s for the best, yes.”

“We’ll text, alright?”

“Of course.” Sherlock managed a watery smile.

“I’d better get going then. I’m done here, anyway. I… I need to go and fetch Rosie.”

They both stood.

Was John trembling? He had just shot and killed the mother of his child. Because Sherlock hadn’t managed to foresee Moran being back in the UK and showing up at the bloody Aquarium. He should never have sent her that bleeding text. He just hadn’t been able to resist, thinking she was still abroad anyway.

“The curtain rises. The last act. It’s not over.”

She must have somehow traced the signal back to the location it was sent from.

John definitely did have something to blame Sherlock for. Perhaps that was why that additional lie had come so naturally.

“Take care,” Sherlock said. He swallowed, trying frantically to think if there was anything else he could say. He was sure there was, he just didn’t know what it was.

“You too.” John turned and left.

Sherlock watched him through Lestrade’s office window until he disappeared out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

The Light Vases mentioned in this story are from artist Ola Lanko. I happened to come across them after I’d already made John stare at his shoelaces for several pages (which
was simply a narrative device to let the reader know whenever we were back in the ‘present’) and of course couldn’t resist adding them to the story. :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your lovely comments. Each one brightens my day!

After John had left Scotland Yard for home, Sherlock slumped back down in the chair in Lestrade's office and meekly waited for the finalisation of the paperwork that required his signatures.

He and John had been so close for the past eight months. Everything they’d done, every step they’d taken – together – had, however, culminated in the unplanned and undesirable death of their suspect, Rosamund Moran. An anti-climax covered in lies, with John’s poor Aunt Vivian now voluntarily behind bars and Sherlock and John having to act estranged. (For how long, Sherlock wondered? He would have to ask John. He knew such things. He should probably get a new phone number, Sherlock mused, so they could text a little more safely – in case the Yard would ever investigate which numbers he was in touch with. Not that that was very likely, but better safe than sorry. So he decided to arrange that first thing this evening, and then he could ask John.)

Sherlock closed his eyes. He kept seeing jellyfish when he did that, gently floating around, as if nothing had happened. The jellyfish at the Aquarium certainly hadn’t batted an eyelash when Mary (Rosamund) had fallen to the floor bleeding, just outside their tank. Nor had they the moment before, when she had appeared quite literally out of the blue and aimed her gun at Vivian Norbury, who had, of course, been unarmed and innocent of everything to which she was now confessing in another part of the same building.

(“Jellyfish don’t have eyelashes, is why,” he imagined John dryly pointing out to him, had he actually said it aloud in his presence.)

John hadn’t hesitated for more than half a second. Mary (Rosamund) had obviously overheard what Vivian had been telling them: how she quite clearly remembered the details surrounding the Tbilisi incident, including the involvement of a woman with a New Zealand accent called Rose.

“To be honest, I had a funny feeling about this ‘freelance group’ from the beginning,” Vivian Norbury had said, “but Lady Smallwood had needed to act quickly. And this team had at least been in the region already. But they’d never worked with MI5 before, and their credentials were iffy at best.” She had looked thoughtful. “They called themselves The Peppers, I recall. Funny name.”

Vivian had just gotten to the part where she was recounting the number of deaths The Peppers had caused at the Embassy that day – namely every living soul in the building, including all of the Embassy’s kitchen staff – when they’d suddenly heard the faint cocking of a gun from the direction of the tanks with the floating invertebrates behind them. The next thing Sherlock knew, he heard another gun cock and fire, and suddenly there was Mary, lying trembling on the floor, a faint trickle of blood seeping through her blouse.

“Un-… expected,” she rasped. “So slow, yet… so quick. Just like you’re us.” Her voice faded at those last words and then, slowly, her gaze turned vacant.

John stood stock still, though breathing heavily, with his gun arm still in her direction, eyes wide
with shock. The only person moving or making a sound was Vivian Norbury, gasping and muttering to herself “Oh dear. That’s her, isn’t it? Oh dear. Dear me.”

John slowly sank to his knees, carefully putting down the gun he’d just fired on the floor in front of him, and hid his face. Sherlock tentatively stepped closer to him and put an arm around him as he kneeled too, letting his head hang next to John’s. “It’s okay. You had no choice. She would undoubtedly have killed Vivian, if you hadn’t acted so quickly. You did the right thing,” he said softly.

“How the fuck did she even know that we were here?!” John demanded, whispering frantically. “She was supposed to still be in Morocco.”

Sherlock wanted to disappear into a hole in the ground. He’d texted her. Just an innocent, stupid text, symbolic really – not realising she’d deduce his bloody location from it. Jesus.

He decided to say nothing.

They remained hunched like that for a while.

After a minute or two, they were back to practicalities. They sat on a bench with Vivian and discussed what to do.

“Just so you know,” Vivian said, “I can confirm with certainty now that this is Rose from The Peppers. During a computer chat session in which Lady Smallwood communicated the final details to the group before they would liberate the hostages, Rose once turned on the visual by mistake, so I got a brief glimpse of her. I never forget a face. It was the face of the woman lying dead here now.”

John nodded to himself, seemingly coming to terms with that bit of knowledge.

“Listen, um, John,” Sherlock said. “While there is a chance you won’t face charges for this, as it was alter ego defence, the fact that you were married to her does make the argument of ‘trying to defend your aunt’ less believable. I’m afraid this might turn ugly, unless we call in Mycroft.”

John looked bitter. “Don’t you think he has fixed things for us in this case one too many times already?”

“I’ve only got three months left to live,” John’s aunt then suddenly blurted out.

They all looked at each other.

“Pancreatic cancer.” She shrugged. “I can take the blame,” she continued stoically. “I don’t want to see my only nephew go to jail over eliminating a horrible murderer who never deserved any better.”

It was a moment before John found his voice. “No.” He shook his head. “I’m really sorry to hear that, Aunt Viv.” He swallowed. “I was so glad to have found you again. But what you suggested is ridiculous. I mean, what would your motive even have been?”

“I was defending you.”

Sherlock had meanwhile texted Mycroft. “London Aquarium. Purple Gamma. SH” Urgent, with no immediate danger. Evacuate the building. They couldn’t very well have any cleaning ladies walk in on them now.
And he was simply not going to let John be taken away from him. He had to do everything in his power to prevent that from happening. Everything.

His brain went into full overdrive mode.

“You don’t have any reason to carry a gun, though,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Unless I was a traitor. A mole who worked from the inside.” She almost seemed cheerful at the idea. “And you came here to see me about how I sabotaged the mission in Tbilisi myself.”

“That is utterly preposterous,” John huffed, looking away, obviously still too busy processing what had just happened to seriously consider anything else at all.

“Could work,” said Sherlock.

“I have thought so many times how easy it would have been to manipulate things if I’d had any bad intentions,” she admitted. “If I had wanted to sell secrets, and then cover the tracks. I’ve done it a million times in my head.” She giggled like a bashful schoolgirl.

“You would have been aiming for me, though,” Sherlock said, thinking aloud. “Mary just got in the way of the course of the bullet.”

Before they knew it, they had the thing half figured out, in spite of John’s objections. When Mycroft arrived – clearly just back from Sherrinford, Sherlock noticed – and assessed the whole situation at a glance, he was quick to help them come up with a motive for Vivian in the little AU they’d created. “She wouldn’t be the first one to be overcome by an inclination to murder you over your impudent deductions, you know.”

Flimsy, perhaps, but it would have to do.

It was Mycroft who also suggested to involve Lestrade as well. They could only hope he would be willing to look the other way, but not involving him was even riskier, as he was sure to sense something was off, seeing as he knew them all so well.

By the time Lestrade arrived, the four of them had fabricated a rather detailed story, which – somewhat to their own surprise - actually seemed pretty watertight. They’d efficiently hidden Mary’s gun and transferred the traces of gunpowder on John’s hands to Vivian’s as best they could.

They never told the DI the real story. Naturally, he didn’t want to know. He seemed to know very well where not to look, though.

After he’d heard the short version of the story that was now the official account, he called in his team. There had been a murder, after all.

As Sherlock now sat in Lestrade’s office, waiting for the finalisation of the paperwork surrounding his witness statement, and craving a cigarette rather badly, he couldn’t help but think how one of the most baffling features of this whole case had been the fact that when Mary (Rosamund) had entered that clay workshop in Venice last November, looking for a place to hide the Black Pearl that she and her pal Amit Joachim had just stolen, there had apparently been such a large collection of various drying figurines to choose from that she’d been able to pick an actual damned Thatcher bust to hide it in. It had likely been meant as a huge middle finger to him and John, seeing as they’d had a case over four years ago that John had elaborately described on his blog under the title ‘The Six Thatchers’, in which a man had hidden a murder weapon in exactly the same way; inside a still wet Thatcher clay bust. Also a batch of six.
It was an incredible coincidence that fate had given her this opportunity for this act of mockery.

Although according to Craig, the hacker, the identical batch size had been a much bigger coincidence than the fact that there had been Thatcher busts in Venice.

“Have you heard of that thing, in Germany?” Craig had asked Sherlock, after he’d helped him trace both the origin and the destinations of the busts in question.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Craig,” Sherlock had said.

“‘Ostalgie.’ People who miss the old days under the Communists. People are weird, aren’t they? There’s quite a market now for Cold War memorabilia – Thatcher, Reagan, Stalin. Time’s a great leveller, innit? Thatcher’s like, I dunno, Napoleon now.”

Either way, Mary (Rosamund) must have been laughing her head off, thinking they would never find the Pearl anyway. (Which, to be fair, they hadn’t. AJ had taken it right under Sherlock’s nose, never to be found again. It must now lie in some hiding place somewhere in the world, where it would likely remain forever.)

Sherlock stared at the ceiling of Greg’s office and ground his teeth, as he thought back to the moment he’d learnt about the first Thatcher bust being smashed at the Welsborough’s house, and how he’d very clearly smelled the scent of Moriarty on it. Breaking into a house to steal just one item and then destroy it simply didn’t make any sense.

“What’s so important about a broken bust of Margaret Thatcher?” John had asked, just after Sherlock had solved the mystery of the son of the Welsboroughs found dead in his car in their own driveway. (Funny, really, how perfectly healthy people sometimes died of suffocation in the least expected of places – albeit fully explicable.)

“Can’t stand it,” Sherlock had replied. "Never can. There’s a loose thread in the world.”

The smashed bust had given him the strangest feeling. A very familiar Moriarty vibe.

By then, he’d already known that Mary was Moran and that she’d done a decent job running Moriarty’s empire after his death. While on the side, of course, accomplishing one of Jim’s most important missions of burning the heart out of Sherlock – by seducing John. So her being who she was, was a perfectly good reason why she could very well have been behind the uncanny mystery with the broken busts also.

Still, Sherlock had had the distinct feeling for a while already that there was someone else operating under that same flag as well. The thought just wouldn’t leave him alone. He quite simply couldn’t think of any motive Mary might have had for broadcasting the ‘Miss me?’ message across the UK the day he was being exiled. It just didn’t make sense.

On that same day, using his Victorian Mind Palace to go back to the case of Emilia Ricoletti and the vengeful brides, he’d concluded that, due to Moriarty’s similarly elusive nature, it was very easy for anyone to pretend to be him and thus keep his legacy alive.

*Once the Bride had risen, anyone could be her. The avenging ghost – a legend to strike terror into the heart of any man with malicious intent; a spectre to stalk those unpunished brutes whose reckoning is long overdue. Once the idea exists, it cannot be killed.*

The imitator didn’t necessarily need to be just a single person.

*Not just Mary.*
There could be several.

And they didn’t even need to be working together.

At the start of his hiatus, Sherlock had found out that Jim Moriarty had a sibling. And Sherlock still hadn’t forgiven Mycroft for letting him disappear off the radar. The simple fact that he’d managed to become invisible like that was extremely fishy in itself, Sherlock thought.

He’d talked about both the mysterious broadcast and the puzzlingly missing sibling to John and half a dozen police officials a great deal over the past four months, but hadn’t managed to find a plausible explanation for either. Even more perplexing had been the fact that the Miss Me message hadn’t been followed up with anything. And seeing as there had been two Moriartys, one of whom had been great at disguising himself, at manipulating people and at being in places he wasn’t supposed to be, the fact that the other one had now mysteriously vanished while his brother’s face had been on every screen in the country, was definitely more than suggestive.

So while they had now eliminated one crucial link in Moriarty’s web, in the form of Mary – though in a rather dramatically different way than they’d envisioned – there remained at least one suspect to be reckoned with, Sherlock was sure.

Sherlock looked up when Lestrade came back into his office and rummaged through his papers – cursing when he spilled some coffee over them. As the DI hastily dabbed at the brown stains with a paper napkin, Sherlock’s mind wandered to the close and virtually flawless cooperation he’d had with John over the past months. He’d had to learn how to communicate properly, as John had demanded he shared every bit of information he had at all times – or John would simply stop everything they’d been doing, sit Sherlock down and stare him straight in the eye, saying only, “You promised.”

It had worked effectively enough.

It hadn’t ensured they caught Mary (Rosamund) sooner, or in a neater way, but at least none of their cock-ups could be attributed to poor communication or lack of mutual consultation between the two of them.

They’d been a perfect team.

Better than ever before, in fact, seeing as they’d barely had any of the personal friction they’d used to have regularly in the past. Mainly because Sherlock had stopped putting body parts in the fridge and mould samples in the sink without informing John beforehand. Apparently, as long as he simply told John, pretty much anything was fine – which had been a rather astounding realisation. Information was everything, it seemed. Which made sense, knowing that John’s main reason to see a psychologist had been his ‘trust issues’. There were just certain kinds of surprises he didn’t like. Which was something Sherlock could live with. Quite easily. He would climb the highest mountain to please John, and this had merely been a tiny hill.

Despite the serious nature of their quest, Sherlock had to admit he’d secretly loved every minute of it. This ‘case of all cases’ had simply once more proven John to be his indispensable other half. It was as if they both viewed the world from a different angle, making their joint image near-perfect and complete – as long as they communicated seamlessly at all times, which they had now thankfully become rather good at.

Also, their innately different approaches and different sets of strengths and weaknesses were like two complementary colour palettes creating an entire rainbow of possibilities together, which made everything they tried to do so much more easy and comprehensive.
Just the two of them against the rest of the world, like a well-oiled machine.

And their harmonious compatibility didn’t stop at the Work.

One evening, when they’d been sitting on the sofa, exhausted, silent, John had taken Sherlock’s hand in his. His fingers had gently closed around Sherlock’s, which had been resting on his thigh. It had felt so natural, feeling John’s warmth seep through his skin.

Sherlock had kept his eyes fixed on their joint hands, not daring to look up. He was very aware that there were things he wanted, and that he thought perhaps John wanted as well, even. But not while he was still officially with Mary. Those things, if they ever came to be at all, would have to wait.

So he had pushed all those thoughts aside.

Sherlock had, however, rested his head on John’s shoulder, and they had simply continued to sit like this for a long time – until John had let go of his hand and got up to make some tea. There had been nothing awkward about it. It was as if they’d been testing the waters, which had felt very comfortable and pleasant indeed.

Sherlock sighed.

And now Mary was gone.

But John would need to play the grieving widower for a while, and besides, they were supposed to be estranged now.

The minute he was done with the red tape and Lestrade let him go, Sherlock went to the nearest phone shop to get a new pay-as-you-go SIM so he could text John, at least.

* * * * *

Eurus was on her way home from Sainsbury’s when Steve called.

“I think Rose is dead.” His voice sounded small and somewhat surprised.

Steve was never wrong when it came to the information he plucked off the supposedly secure highways of the internet.

The world seemed to stop spinning.

No. Not Rose. Those bastards.

Not Rose too!
Chapter 4

PART TWO – THE LYING DETECTIVES

John frowned at the incoming text on his phone.

*Unknown sender.*

When he opened it, a smile crossed his face.

-- It’s me. (New number, just in case.) The man with the sock index, in case you wanted evidence. (You haven’t told anybody about that, have you??) S

Immediately, a second text came in from the same number.

-- How are you? S

John slowly drew in a long breath and held it for a moment, thinking.

*How was he?*

He looked at the sleeping baby on his arm, whose mother he had killed that afternoon.

When he was quite honest with himself, he felt nothing.

Emptiness.

In one corner of that empty void in his heart, he distinctly felt a strong paternal affection for Rosie, but otherwise, nothing. Not even guilt.

He had already mourned the loss of his wife a long time ago.

He typed back with his wrong hand, careful not to wake Rosie up.

-- I don’t know. Fine. J

Was he fine, though?

Now officially a single father, running from the police.

“If they found out it was you who did it, you certainly wouldn’t be fine,” he could hear Mary’s snarky voice telling him, like a little devil sitting on a cartoon character’s shoulder.

“Kindly bugger off,” he told her back quietly.

But the thing was, even assuming they’d successfully pulled this off now, he would never know that they truly *had*. Months or years from now, any random day of his life, someone could look at the evidence and realise something was wrong. Reopen the case.

He would never truly have peace.

That’s what his life had become. Just when he’d thought it couldn’t get any crazier.
He tried to focus on his breathing to keep calm, which worked to some extent. Until another incoming text pulled his attention back to his phone.

-- Are you managing with little R? Is she alright? S

A warmth filled John’s chest. Ever since Sherlock’s return, John had gotten to know such a different side to him. He wasn’t sure whether the prat had finally learned how to care, or simply learned how to show that he cared. Either way, it had brought them closer together than ever before.

He missed him.

He wished he could just take Rosie and all their stuff and go to Baker Street. But Sherlock had probably been right that it was for the best this way.

Then a thought suddenly struck him.

Oh God.

He’d been such an idiot.

What if Sherlock had sensed that John’s feelings towards him had been becoming more… sentimental, lately? What if that was why he didn’t want to be around him anymore?

Naturally, Sherlock was nowhere near interested in any of the scenarios John had let himself fantasise about in the still hours of the night. John had never really believed that any of that could ever be real, not even now that Mary was gone. But still, he’d thought that maybe, they could become— No. There was clearly no point in even thinking about that. The Work was all that mattered to Sherlock, after all. The fact that he’d become more comfortable touching John and being physically close, like when they sat on the sofa together, leaning against one another, didn’t have to mean anything.

Or did it?

Sherlock had been showing some clear signs of sentimentality himself, lately. Just as he was now, with these texts.

-- I can arrange childcare if you like. S

John closed his eyes, trying to think of what ulterior motive Sherlock might have to be so interested and kind to him.

No, that was ridiculous. He knew that Sherlock genuinely cared for him. There was no reason to doubt that. He was just being considerate.

He thought about Sherlock’s offer. Attentive of Sherlock as it was, though, he needed Rosie with him, to stay sane.

And to keep him from drinking.

It was the first promise he’d made to himself when the reality of Mary’s death had sunken in. No alcohol. Not a single drop. Rosie needed him. And it wouldn’t make sense, anyway. He should be relieved, really. Things could finally go back to the way they had been, before he’d thought Sherlock dead. Eventually. If that was what Sherlock wanted. If that was what he even wanted.
Except, he had Rosie now, of course; so he wasn’t sure exactly what the likelihood was of him ever moving back to Baker Street even if Sherlock wasn’t in fact deliberately keeping him at a distance (and despite Sherlock having been fine with them staying there extensively on a temporary basis, which obviously was not the same thing).

-- No thanks. Kind of you. She’s fast asleep on my arm. Calming.

He looked at her beautiful little face, at her disproportionately long eyelashes.

“Just as pretty as her mum, you see?” said Mary’s smug voice in his head.

John ignored that. She was gone, after all, and he never needed to hear her egocentric, arrogant comments ever again. But it would probably take a while before all the memories had faded. The house was filled with them.

-- I’m glad.

-- How long do you think you need to stay angry at me?

John smiled in spite of himself. That was just such a ‘Sherlocky’ thing to ask. Always practical.

-- A month?

It was a while before Sherlock replied.

-- Okay.

Soon thereafter, John was asleep as well.

He didn’t wake up until Rosie kindly let him know it was time for her early morning bottle.

* * * * *

Three days had passed. John had hardly eaten. But he hadn’t drunk either. Well, only fruit juice. So that at least was a good thing, he reckoned.

He hadn’t been back to the surgery yet. Nobody expected him to, anyway.

He’d slept a lot. Whenever Rosie slept, really. And played with her when she was awake.

There was a strange calmness over him, after all those frenzied months of continuous tension and jeopardy.

On the one hand, he loved the tranquillity – to really be able to give Rosie his full attention for as long as either of them liked.

On the other hand, it drove him insane.

Not having a specific goal in his life, not feeling the excitement of uncertainty, not being around Sherlock.

Having no one to talk to.

No one to lessen the feeling of guilt that had undeniably surfaced on the second day and intermittently took hold of him, after some of the initial shock had worn off.
No one to help him figure out how to walk the fine line between trust and suspicion, on which he had recently so decisively failed to keep his balance.

He thought about therapy. (Although he would only be able to talk about his guilt in the vaguest of terms, of course). But Ella had never really been able to help him in any meaningful way. If anything, she was the one who had ill-fatedly talked him into trusting people more – which hadn’t worked out very nicely for him at all. (Although that was hardly her fault, of course.) But moreover, her practice was so far from where he now lived that it would take him longer to get there than the duration of a session. And he didn’t feel like organising a babysitter for all that travelling time. Still, he felt he needed someone to help sort out the mess inside of his head. If not, he knew it would only get worse.

He considered checking online if there happened to be any therapists near his work, so that he could go during his lunch break, when Rosie would have to be at nursery anyway. Which made him realise that he needed to contact the nursery they’d chosen and see if Rosie could start there earlier, assuming Sherlock and Mrs Hudson would not want to continue looking after his daughter the way they had whenever he’d had shifts at the surgery while Mary had been gallivanting around the world with this AJ crook.

For now, however, he decided to put both those things on his mental ‘to do’ list for later.

First, he needed to reply to an email from the funeral director regarding some painful details that needed to be set for Mary’s cremation. He’d already managed to convince the man that he wasn’t inviting anybody, and that, hence, there was no ceremony, because he wouldn’t be able to handle it. (That much was true.)

He kept the email as short as he politely could.

The second thing he needed to arrange was a false identity card, shifty as that sounded. He was determined to visit his dear Aunt Vivian in jail as often as he could, seeing as she had sacrificed everything for him. But, as it would certainly be hard to explain why he was visiting the supposed murderer of his wife, he’d figured he needed to be someone else when he went.

He texted Sherlock.

-- Would like to visit my aunt. But not as myself. Can you maybe let your brother arrange something? (Also, where is she being held?) J

He was past the point of shame of asking The Government (as Sherlock still referred to Mycroft) for help, by now.

He thought about Aunt Viv, the way he vaguely remembered her from when he was little. Always cheerful, always kind. Well, to him and his sister Harry anyway. He’d always sensed there was tension between her and his dad. But then again, there had been tension between his dad and everyone on a fairly regular basis, so he’d never really given it much thought. Until Aunt Viv had come up in conversation with Harry one day, years later, and she’d mentioned how Vivian had been the only person ever to have told their dad to stop drinking, without getting beaten up over it.

“But the day she found out that he allowed me to drink with him at the age of fourteen – behind Mum’s back, of course – was the day she became so angry with him that she broke off all contact,” Harry had told John. “That’s why we never saw her again.”

So she never actually moved to Wales, as their dad had said.
Harry had then wryly conceded that, in all honesty, Aunt Viv had had a good point, even though Harry hadn’t seen that back then and had taken her father’s side, for once. It had at least resulted in a brief revival of companionship between father and daughter. Very brief.

With that particular poor decision, their dad, it seemed, had sealed Harry’s fate as a problem drinker, resulting in a lifelong struggle with booze.

John had been more aware of the risk of heredity and had struggled to a lesser extent. But still, the minute he faced trouble or emotional hurt, or fear, his first impulse always was to turn to the bottle.

He was actively repressing it now.

Because if there was one goal he still had in his life, it was to not become the kind of father his dad had been.

“Oh, come on. On the pictures you have of him, he looks exactly like you!” he could hear Mary tease.

Yes, he had his appearance, maybe. But nothing else, he told himself.

Well, and fifty percent of his DNA. Of which Rosie had inherited roughly half again.

He sighed.

It was a consolation at least that a quarter of Rosie’s genes came from his mum. His wonderful, incredibly strong mum, who’d always been there for him, until the day she died – much too early.

If only Dad hadn’t been so excessively drunk on that particular day, when there’d been so much dirty laundry from the school trip that she’d had to keep climbing up and down the stairs to hang it all to dry. It had all been a matter of chance, really. As was true for any accident, he supposed.

Just like which genes you inherited and which you didn’t.

“Jeans are good for keeping you warm,” his mum had said – when John had tried to explain what he’d learnt at school about genes – with a twinkle in her eye and some wheat flour on her cheek, from the bread she’d been baking.

He’d loved her so much that it still hurt thinking about her.

From her blanket on the floor, Rosie looked up at him and began an elaborate soliloquy that only she could understand. But it sounded joyful enough, so John decided to crawl over to sit with her and affirmed everything she said with an interested “Is it really?” or a baffled “You don’t say!” and grabbed the nearest teddy to join in the conversation, making funny voices that made her cackle out loud.

Yes, he could definitely see his mum in her.

It then occurred to him that Rosie naturally possessed a percentage of the same genes Aunt Viv had as well, which was some more consolation. When he was mentally trying to estimate the portion, his phone beeped.

-- No problem. Expect a delivery tomorrow. She’s in Bronzefield Prison. You need to make an online request for visits, entering her prisoner number: 078615. S

And then another text.
-- Everything alright? Do you need anything else? S

John thought for a bit. Just then, for the first time in three days, he could feel his stomach rumble. He put his phone down and decided to reply later. Right now, he really needed to eat something. That, he could arrange himself.

He felt like having cereal, but naturally, the milk in the fridge (which Mary had bought last week – weird) had gone sour. He briefly considered using formula, but eventually decided to take Rosie outside and visit Tesco’s, as well as get some fresh air. The possibility of meeting acquaintances who would give their sympathy for his loss was a risk he would simply have to take.

Once Rosie was all tucked up in the pram and they were in the fresh spring air, he texted Sherlock back.

-- Thanks. We’re fine. Spending some quality time together. Going for a walk now. And you? J

When evening fell that day, there was still no reply from Sherlock.

* * * * *

The following morning, after eating another four bowls of Cheerios, John decided to open his laptop to see if Sherlock had posted anything on his Twitter recently.

There were only two new tweets since he’d last seen him – and not very informative ones at that.

“Oh, how lovely is the sound of birds bragging about their territories and telling rivals to bugger off. #spring”

That did make John snigger.

Below that, there was a very cryptically worded reference to Mary’s death, “Can Samarra be avoided?” No hashtags, no likes, no retweets.

Thank God.

He could have known that the git would still tweet, even though it was no longer necessary for his cover.

Or was it?

It then occurred to John that he should probably write something on his blog about Mary’s death, because it might be strange if he didn’t.

While Rosie read a board book – upside down – he stared at his CMS screen long and hard, trying to think what to write. Something vague but convincing. Something he would say when he was actually mourning a beloved spouse.

He tried not to think of the time after Sherlock’s fake suicide.

“Well, making something up shouldn’t be too hard,” Mary sneered, in his head. “You’ve always had such a vivid imagination.”

“Fuck off,” he whispered.

Eventually, he typed, “My wife has died. I still can’t believe it. I still see her everywhere I look. I hear her voice and I talk to her, but she’s no longer there. Words fail to express how much I miss
There. That should teach her to shut up inside of his head.

And it should hopefully do the trick for the outside world as well. Ironically, there wasn’t even an untrue word in there. Crikey, he should really try to get better at lying. Although, as long as a twisted version of the truth sufficed, he was much more comfortable with that.

The curse of an honest heart.

When the doorbell rang, he looked up to find Rosie had chewed a considerable part of the edge of one page to mush. “Devouring books already, are we?” he said fondly, as he took the book from her and lifted her onto his arm on his way to the front door.

Upon his opening the door, a delivery man handed him a small package. John thanked him politely and went inside to open it under Rosie’s watchful eye.

It was an ID card for a man named Robert Jones. The photograph showed John’s own face, but with a moustache and broad-rimmed glasses convincingly photoshopped into it. To his amazement, he found a real life version of said moustache and glasses also in the package.

“Will you look at that!” he said to Rosie, putting on the glasses and holding the moustache under his nose. “Daddy gets to dress up to visit your Great-aunt Viv. Shall we go and see when Aunt Molly has time to look after you for a couple of hours, then?”

* * * * *

Vivian Norbury had been through worse. She felt that to this ordeal, at least, there was a very clear purpose. It was the bare minimum she could do, after abandoning her nephew and niece all those years ago. She was almost glad, in fact, that she had now been given an opportunity to make up for that.

They were treating her nicely enough at Bronzefield. And truth be told, there was something thrilling about being seen as a spy, instead of the wallflower they usually took her for. And it wasn’t as if she was letting anyone down, or felt as if she had to explain herself to anybody. All of her close friends and relatives had died in the past decade, sadly – even her drunk brother (although they’d in fact not been close at all, of course). It was only Lady Smallwood she worried about. Should she tell her the truth?

“Vivian Norbury. A Robert Jones to visit you,” the warder’s voice suddenly said.

It wasn’t until she saw John sitting at the visitation table that she realised it was him. The glasses and moustache didn’t fool her for a second.

A fake identity! Of course.

Naturally, he couldn’t be seen visiting the presumed murderer of his wife.

They briefly embraced, before John took some crochet yarn and hooks and a couple of ladies’ magazines from his bag and gave them to her.

Her heart melted. He’d remembered her mentioning that she did crochet. “Oh John, that is so kind of you.”

“Honestly, it’s the very least I could do, Aunt Viv.” He looked around uncomfortably. “How are
they treating you here?” His eyes were full of concern, full of sadness.

“Oh, don’t you worry about me. They’re letting me read books and watch telly. It almost feels like a holiday!” She winked at him.

John smiled. “That’s exactly how I remember you from when I was little. Always seeing the glass half full, even if it was merely a little wet on the inside.” He leaned forward in his chair. “But how are you feeling physically? Have you seen a doctor yet, here? Are you getting the medication that you need?”

“There is no medication that can save me, John.” She put one hand over his much younger and stronger one. “I’ve lived a nice life. I wanted to give you that same opportunity. And thanks to you, I get to end it with a little excitement, too!”

When she saw his judgemental frown, she added, “Yes, I’ve already seen the prison doctor and yes, I’m getting all the medical attention I need, you numpty. Now tell me, what has little Rosie been up to, these past days?”

* * * * *

The sun seemed intent on turning 221B into a textbook example of the greenhouse effect. The stupid star was just too bloody close to this damn planet, Sherlock thought.

Frustratingly, there wasn’t much else to spend his brain energy on.

The days were long and dull, without John. It almost felt like withdrawal, he thought.

He tried to think of experiments he’d been meaning to do, that he could now finally carry out without interruption. But he couldn’t think of a single one that was worth getting off the sofa for.

Sometimes he played his violin – loudly, so that at least Mrs Hudson would hear.

Sometimes he watched telly, wondering if John was perhaps watching the same programme at that very moment.

Sometimes he texted John. But he invariably ended up feeling even worse afterwards.

His last text to John (yesterday) had said, “How about I drop round to your house and you angrily send me away? S”

It would be better than nothing.

John had replied almost instantly. “Great idea. ;) Tomorrow afternoon? Three-ish? J”

Since Rosie had been born, Sherlock had learnt about the schedules one needed to stick to with babies, if you wanted to have any peace left at all. So he took John’s time indication very seriously.

He looked at the clock. Almost two.

He decided to play his violin for half an hour and then hail a cab.

After he rang John’s doorbell, he was surprised to see Molly open the door, with Rosie on her arm. For one short moment of panic, he thought that John had started shagging her and she’d already moved in with him.

Then he realised.
John had given a specific time not just so that the doorbell wouldn’t wake up Rosie during her nap, but because he would be away. Visiting Mrs Norbury, of course.

“Hi,” Molly said, softly.

Sherlock nodded. “I just... wondered how things were going and... and if there was anything I could do.”

Seeing Rosie gave him a pang of sadness, that made him realise he’d missed her, too. Such an amazingly beautiful little creature, and so clearly John’s daughter already. He fleetingly considered asking to hold her, before deciding against it.

Looking awkward, Molly reached into the pocket of her trousers and then held out an envelope. “It’s, er, it’s from John.”

“Right.”

Molly seemed upset. Naturally she didn’t know half the truth of what had really happened. Greg had impressed upon her to tweak the post-mortem report so that the angle of the bullet trajectory would be described a bit more vaguely, but she’d never been filled in on the reasons, or facts behind the request. The fewer people who knew, the better.

She told him John didn’t want his help.

Strange. It hurt, even though he knew it was fake.

(Shedidn’t.)

Although, on second thought, how could he really be sure that it wasn’t true that John didn’t want to see him, or let Sherlock help him? Sherlock’s previous ‘help’ had been utterly useless and counterproductive, after all. Disastrous, in fact. He’d meant to help John get Mary convicted, not force him into a situation where he had to kill the woman he’d once loved. That had not quite been the idea.

“You don’t need to read it now.”

He took the letter and went back home.

In the cab, he opened the envelope. Once he’d unfolded the paper inside, it was impossible to hide his smile, try as he might, and his previous worries faded to some extent. It contained a silly drawing made by John and Rosie. Rosie had done some random scribbles, to which John had added arms and legs and silly faces in some places, resulting in two human figures standing on top of a... horse? Rhino? With a baby (or was it a little angel?) flying happily in the sky above them. The four creatures were surrounded with coloured confetti, drawn by the two of them (some dots regularly interspersed and round, others more like wildly launched caterpillars).

Sherlock carefully put it in the breast pocket of his jacket, as close to his heart as possible.

* * * * *

Warm weather. Nice.

Thirsty, though.

Get water.
Cool swallow. Eyes closed. The world gone.

Decide on colours.

Open eyes.

Exciting: open new red paint. Grape juice colour.

Time is now. Add on palette next to night sky blue.

First touch of brush, mix. New purple, with pretty patterns.

Startled.


Brush on canvas.

Beauty. Happy.
The media attention had already died down a little. That is, from ten interview requests a day in his inbox to only two or three now.

John didn’t even read them.

He didn’t care what story the media were spinning about ‘the mysterious murder at the London Aquarium of the beloved nurse on maternity leave’, committed in the presence of Sherlock Holmes. And he certainly wasn’t going to contribute one iota to it.

His phone was in silent mode – save for incoming messages from one particular number, of course (although there had been fewer and fewer of those as well).

It was just a matter of waiting till the storm had passed. Until he wasn’t expected to mourn his wife so much anymore, and his guilt over shooting her (and having allowed his aunt to take the blame) had faded a little and didn’t come crashing down over him in such unexpectedly big waves any longer – and then he could pick up his life from there.

Today, he and Rosie were visiting the nursery he and Mary had enrolled her at, in order to receive the final bits of practical information. Thankfully, it was no problem for her to start there earlier. John had decided to go back to work the following week. And Rosie was definitely ready for some more action in her life than just the same old toys and no one else to play with but her half-depressed dad.

In spite of the grey skies overhead, John had chosen to walk: one hand on the handle of the pram and a nappy bag over his other shoulder – just in case.

Somehow, it was already impossible to imagine he had once had a life without nappy supplies, baby wipes and bottle warmers. The truth was, though, that all those trite things now kept him focused on what was most important: Rosie. And they kept his mind off other things.

Whenever John saw happy looking couples on the street, he wondered how long it would be before they started hating each other’s guts. And once they did, if any of them would ever have such a good reason as he’d had for hating his wife. Her behaviour surely had to fall in the ‘exceptional’ category, even though it had become a normal fact of life to him.

But that was precisely what made it so scary. He’d become so accustomed to such strange norms of interaction between people – what with him having first lived with an eccentric, emotion-blind, wildly intelligent sociopath and then with a cruel, selfish, sassy psychopath – that he just couldn’t tell what was supposed to be normal anymore.

How was it that someone with ‘trust issues’, as Ella used to call it, managed to associate himself with so many untrustworthy people?

Looking down, he realised his left fist was clenching so hard around the handle of the pram that his knuckles had turned white. He stopped walking and deliberately relaxed his hand, stretched his fingers and took several deep breaths. He then focused on the innocent little creature that was staring up at the sky with her large, beautiful eyes. Whenever he started to feel too sorry for himself, he only needed to look at her, and his own worries faded away. Yes, he had trusted the wrong people in the past, but the main thing was that he should make sure that he would never breach Rosie’s trust as his had been betrayed. He knew what it was to be disrespected and he
vowed not to let Rosie ever feel that way.

He smiled at her and spun the little pink pony dangling above her head around for her, which made her reflexively stretch out her arms and cackle joyfully. “Da! Da!” she called out.

“Yes, your dada is right here. Not going anywhere. Ever,” John said, solemnly.

He swallowed. Thankfully, nothing about her reminded him of Mary. (Well, except her name. Sometimes he thought about having it changed.) Funnily, she had the exact same frown as Sherlock, though.

John sighed, as he thought about his crazy best friend.

Mary and Sherlock had each had their own way of tormenting him. In spite of everything, however, he’d always known that Sherlock was a good person, deep inside. Even though, yes, he had hurt John, quite regularly, from the very start. By not taking him seriously, not involving him, not respecting his personal boundaries. And then by not bothering to tell John that he wasn’t actually dead. But none of that had ever been malice.

By contrast, Mary had just seemed… sweet. And funny. Confident. And sexy. Somehow, that had made him not question her at all. He’d genuinely thought they’d loved each other. Until he’d found out that she’d been prepared to quite simply destroy John’s life by having him lose his best friend once again, just so that her lies would stay safe. And that her moral compass was basically… non-existent.

Which now left him to wonder: what is love, even, if it could turn into hate after a few additional facts came to light?

As he turned another corner, he abided when a couple of elderly ladies uninvitedly peered into the pram and made cooing sounds – much to Rosie’s (and his own) bafflement.

“Oh, look at that gorgeous little baby!” they said, largely ignoring him.

And, “Isn’t she the cutest?”

“I’ve never seen such a pretty baby girl!”

John smiled and nodded, secretly a little proud, even though they probably said the exact same thing about every other baby they encountered.

As he continued along the busy streets of London, he considered how it had been Mary’s newly revealed selfishness, dishonesty and cruelty that had made him stop loving and start hating her. Truth be told, Sherlock had also been selfish and dishonest often enough, and sometimes even cruel, but there had always been some higher cause. And you could appreciate the man for at least never having pretended to be anything different. With Sherlock, John had started hating and loving him pretty much at equal pace, he realised.

Yes, he did love Sherlock. Avidly.

(And nothing Sherlock had ever done had made John love him less – just hate him a little more, occasionally).

After they first met, it had not taken John long to realise that there had been a deeper layer to his admiration for this man from the first moment he’d laid eyes on him. It was something that had never happened to him with a man before. (Or maybe it had, just once, if he was completely
honest; but never to this extent.) Over the years, he’d tried to push it away, to love Sherlock just as a friend, to feign indifference and ignore the more profound feelings he had for him – with varying degrees of success. After he’d found Mary was when he’d managed best. But when she had turned out to be a completely different person from what he’d thought, he had very quickly gravitated back towards Sherlock and, in the course of the past months, working so closely together, he’d gradually been letting himself fall in love with Sherlock all over again.

John convinced himself that they were just innocent feelings, irrelevant and inconsequential. But nevertheless, he’d vowed to never tell a soul, including Sherlock, as the man definitely never wanted to be with anyone in that way, John knew. And even if he did, it wouldn’t likely be with John.

John cursed himself.

*Why was it so hard to just be friends? Dammit.*

Why did these outrageous thoughts keep forcing themselves upon him at every turn, when there was no use, anyway?

It felt like sacrilege.

John quickly ducked behind a bus stop shelter as he recognised one of his patients approaching; to avoid having to receive condolences for losing Mary. He pretended to check his phone, and while he was at it, deleted all his new notifications. Nothing from Sherlock.

*Why did that bother him so much?* He briefly closed his eyes.

Maybe it was good to take some distance from Sherlock. Get his life back on track first, so that he could see things more clearly and could make healthy decisions again. To make not everything in his life always be about Sherlock anymore.

But the thought of staying away from the man who gave John’s very life purpose and brightened it each time when he was surrounded by darkness – and even when he wasn’t – that idea alone made his insides twist. Also, it wouldn’t really be fair on Sherlock, he realised, after Sherlock had done so much for him: he’d turned down practically every other case offered to him since last September, just to help John pick up the pieces of the gigantic mess he’d made of his life by marrying and impregnating Mary. Sherlock had sacrificed so much for him. John couldn’t just turn his back on him.

Also, last year, Sherlock had spent weeks organising John’s wedding at the cost of his own work, like it was the most natural thing in the world to drop everything in order to help John. Not to mention he’d previously jumped off a bloody building, risking his own life to save John’s. He’d spent two years under mostly ghastly circumstances, disabling Moriarty’s network to safeguard other people’s lives.

It was as if regarding himself as insignificant had become routine for him, in the years since John had come to know him.

John would never forget the moment he’d seen Sherlock’s scars, last autumn.

He’d been sitting at Sherlock’s hospital bed for several days already, after he had been shot by the mysterious burglar – not knowing yet that it had been his own sodding wife. John had offered to help one of the nurses who came to wash Sherlock and change his bandage and gown.

John’s heart had skipped a beat at the sight of the uneven, bobbly stripes on Sherlock’s back.
His mind had raced over the options as to how Sherlock had come by them. Various sorts of accidents crossed his thoughts before settling on the inevitable.

These wounds had been inflicted deliberately.

“Sherlock…,” he’d rasped.

“Serbia,” he’d simply replied in a faint whisper, as he awkwardly leaned on one elbow for the nurse to take his other arm out of one sleeve. And then, apparently, reading John’s next question from the silence in the air, “Three days. Then Mycroft found it necessary to wade in and rescue me.” He spoke slowly, flinching every so often as the nurse eased him out of his gown. “Just when I’d managed to snatch the key to the lock on my chains from my captor.” He vaguely smirked, although that could have just been the morphine, before another painful grimace contorted his face.

Then, he’d casually changed the subject, as if undergoing torture at the hands of Serbian criminals had all been part of his day job sacrificing himself for the Greater Good.

And shortly afterwards, only a week into his recovery of his bullet wound to the chest, he’d moved heaven and earth to show John who his wife really was and encouraged them to talk about it. Which had, in fact, been followed by mainly John and Sherlock talking about it, as Mary had simply refused to apologise or even explain herself.

“How could I be so blind, Sherlock? How?”

“It’s alright, John. You couldn’t have known.”

“I loved her. I bloody married her. Why?”

“She’s smart and confident and that’s why you were attracted to her. No reason to beat yourself up over that. If anything, I should have seen it. But I didn’t, either. She’s clever, John. It’s not your fault.”

So, just like John had served as Sherlock’s social compass, his guide and translator in the past, last autumn the roles had been reversed and Sherlock had been John’s shoulder to cry on, his true friend he could invariably confide in, and his indispensable giver of advice. John had desperately wanted his child and his life back, and Sherlock had helped him and been there for him every step of the way – even when he had been severely wounded.

And only then did it hit John.

That was the one true difference between Mary and Sherlock.

The willingness to make sacrifices for someone else.

How could he not have seen that before?

His aunt had made an incredible sacrifice, too, but – as remarkable and amazing as that was – she was, of course, a blood relative.

Could the fact that Sherlock had shown his devotion and loyalty as a friend to this extreme extent mean that… he was more than a friend?

John shook his head. No. He was just imagining things again. Wishful thinking. He needed to stop this. Of all the possible hints that Sherlock might or might not have given about his true feelings for John, this was certainly the most far-fetched. They were just really good mates, was all.
He mentally scolded himself for sexualising what was a great friendship and lifted Rosie out of her pram. They’d arrived at her new nursery.

* * * * *

Fuming, Eurus stared at her laptop screen displaying John’s blog.

* John still kept seeing her and talking to her.*

As if he had any right to miss her as much as she did. To imagine her lovely smile and her ubiquitous, brilliant, humorous remarks. He probably still imagined making love to her, too.

Eurus only barely resisted the urge to hurl her laptop at the wall.

Instead, she cried.

* * * * *

How did people deal with such emotions? Loss. Loneliness. The sense of failure.

Sherlock had been caught in the same circle of despair so often by now, that he should really know how to handle it.

But he didn’t.

He couldn’t help longing for numb emptiness, oblivion. He would be able to buy it only a few street blocks away, he knew.

But he shouldn’t. He really shouldn’t.

John wouldn’t like it.

It was 5 am and Sherlock couldn’t remember when he’d last slept. Whenever he had slept, he’d had this godawful dream where he was the one carrying a gun in the Aquarium instead of John, and in his attempt to shoot Moran, he accidentally killed John instead. The bullet, meanwhile, broke the glass of one of the tanks, and the next moment, Sherlock was drowning in the water that kept flooding in, with John floating underwater in a cloud of blood just out of reach, and sharks hovering around the both of them, flashing their toothy grins as they drew nearer.

He didn’t much care to risk having to revisit that dream yet again.

At the same time, he had nothing to actually spend his energy and time on. No goal. The only purpose he’d had in the past year had been helping John. Having been useless at that was one thing, but being unable to do anything to make up for it now was even worse.

He sat cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the living room and closed his eyes. He casually strolled through the corridors of his Mind Palace, not sure where he was heading. He stayed away from John’s Wing though, where he’d spent too much time already in the past days. Instead, he opened a door he couldn’t remember being there before.

That happened sometimes.

It reminded him of the entrance to his primary school library, in the attic of the old convent, where Ms Elinor resided. He always used to chat with her – about things that often had very little to do with any of the books she was lending out.
When his MP self entered the room behind this door, he was surprised to find the attic room stylishly empty. There were just two chairs, in one of which there sat a wise looking woman, calmly smiling up at him. It was John’s therapist, Ella. (Sherlock had once followed John to one of his sessions, out of boredom, and had gotten a glimpse of her when she’d let John in.)

He sat down in the other chair, not sure what to say to her. She said typical therapist things that meant nothing to him.

“I need to know what to do. About John,” he stated.

Ella looked understanding and smiled a professional, sad smile. “You love him, don’t you?”

Sherlock felt a shiver down his spine. Then he got up and left, slamming the door tightly shut behind him.

* * * * *

The prices had gone up since last time. Not that that was his major concern, at the moment.

After pocketing the little plastic bag, Sherlock casually strolled back home, feeling more at ease already for the knowledge that bliss was now within an arm’s reach.

Technically, he hadn’t yet decided whether he was going to use it, per se. But there was great comfort in knowing that he could, and that was the main thing, for now.

John would never need to find out. And if he did, somehow, Sherlock could always claim it had simply been part of the plan, so as to make their version of Mary’s death and their estrangement more believable.

Then he asked himself what was actually worse (and, thus, a better reason to get high): John supposedly not wanting to see him and being angry at him for not having prevented that Mary jumped in front of a bullet that he had provoked, or – the real reason – John being upset over having had to shoot the mother of his child because Sherlock had been both extremely careless and extremely foolish?

See, he thought he had a pretty good reason either way. He’d fucked up, and he would never be good enough for John anyway. There just was no point in trying.

On top of which, he was well aware that he wasn’t really that different from Mary, with her clever schemes. John had every reason to shun him. And since Sherlock wanted only the best for John, maybe he should stay out of his way.

Thinking about John hurt.

How Sherlock could ever have been so naïve as to believe there was a chance of him and John ever ending up together was beyond him now.

John would undoubtedly find some new abhorrent girlfriend again in no time, and that would hurt even more.

All in all, better safe than sorry, Sherlock concluded, by the time he’d reached his front door.

He walked up the stairs as quietly as he could, to minimise the chance of Mrs Hudson poking her head around the door.
Not an hour later, as he floated away on a cloud of ecstasy, with all the laws of nature gone, he felt strong, gentle arms around him, warm and safe.

John.
This chapter was initially part of the previous one, but my new plot beta Amanda very wisely advised me to split that outrageously long original chapter in two. That’s why this new chapter was finished so quickly after the last one. :) 

Just a reminder that Eurus is NOT Sherlock’s sister in this version! That was just a random thing she implied to John before shooting him. There’s no reason to believe that’s true at all, if you assume that TFP was John’s coma dream.

The world was an ugly, empty place without Rose in it. Which was strange, really, Eurus thought, as Rose had abandoned her a long time ago. Twice.

But still, there had always been hope.

Hope that she’d leave that boring idiot Watson and come back to her.

Eurus heaved a shaky sigh, biting back tears as she blindly stared out of the window. The sun had no mercy on her feelings and shone like it was a lovely day.

For a few months, last autumn, her wish had been fulfilled. When John Watson had wanted nothing to do with Rose anymore, as she had been so stupid as to shoot his friend, Eurus and Rose had actually started seeing each other again.

Since Eurus had been spying on them quite frequently – what else was there to do, when she missed her like crazy - she had noticed, late September, that John had stopped coming home to their terraced house on Wordsworth Avenue. After another few days, she had decided to simply knock on Rose’s door.

Rose hadn’t looked surprised when she found Eurus on her doorstep, and, after fondly rolling her eyes, she’d let her in. “I guess it doesn’t matter anymore,” she’d said, rather indifferently.

She’d made them coffee and Rose had eaten an extravagant amount of Jaffa cakes while she interrogated Eurus about how she was and what she’d been up to lately.

“So how have you been? Tell me everything!”

Her New Zealand accent had become almost undetectable, Eurus noticed.

“Alright, I guess. I’ve been worse.” She’d felt a nervous smile flicker over her face, in spite of her resentment. “And you?”

“Oh, this baby will be the death of me! The worst thing is the hormones making me unable to remember anything properly, so annoying! You know how good my photographic memory used to be. And I just feel tired and worn out all of the time.” She’d elaborately rolled her eyes. “And you won’t believe how incapable my midwife is. Ugh.”
“Oh, yeah, I can imagine. That’s really annoying,” Eurus had said, internally bewildered. She had considered to get up and leave. But she’d wanted to know about Watson. “And how are things with… John?”

“Oh, he’s… well, just John, you know?” Mary had smiled her typical smile. “He’s okay, actually. Except he’s decided he doesn’t want to speak to me anymore, because that dickhead Sherlock Holmes tricked me into telling John about my other life. Well, I haven’t actually told him anything.”

Is that what she called it? Her ‘other life’?

“Wait, what?” Eurus had exclaimed. “Does he know your true identity?! How can you still be safe here??”

“Relax. He knows nothing. Just that I was some sort of agent in the past. Nothing more specific than that. And he never will, don’t worry. You know how I keep my private and professional life strictly separate.”

Eurus had only been able to stare at her.

“But he’ll come around, I’m sure,” Rose continued, unperturbed. “He just needs a little time to be pissed off. I’m carrying his baby, right? He’ll be back. And at least, for now, it gives me some peace.” She grinned. “Amit has some ideas that we might follow up on the week after next. I almost hope John won’t have come back yet by then.” She’d winked at Eurus. “Great opportunity, near the Mediterranean.” She’d then stuffed another Jaffa cake into her mouth.

Her smile had still been magic. Her beaming eyes had awoken butterflies in Eurus’ stomach, despite her anger and disappointment.

Half an hour later, they were in bed together.

It had been wonderful and weird. Like old times, except now Rose had a bump with someone else’s child in it.

The little flame of infatuation, which had been flickering inside of Eurus at variable strength in the previous months, was blown back to full force, consuming her in the most wonderful way.

The thing was, with Rose, you never knew how long you would be able to hold her attention. Eurus had – quite rightfully, as it later turned out – feared it was temporary, so she had cherished every minute, sensing Rose would drop her like a hot potato if John Watson so much as got in touch with her.

Which he didn’t.

Not until three whole months later at least, a week before Christmas, when he’d informed her that Sherlock had invited the both of them to his parents’ house for the holiday.

And even then, Rose had not kicked Eurus out. But she had accepted the invitation, naturally, and had said her goodbyes on Christmas morning, telling Eurus briskly to make sure she didn’t leave a single trace that she’d ever been there.

So she had.

Although leaving without a trace came natural to both of them – what with all the rotating secret locations they’d lived in with Jim – this time, it felt as if she had to rip her own heart out and then
make it vanish.

She was not departing with Rose. She was being forced to relinquish her to Holmes’s friend, just because Rose (like Jim) thought there was some point in that. (And the plain fact was, Rose was probably in love with both of them, Eurus thought. That was, if she was even in love at all.)

As she tried not to think back to that most painful and miserable Christmas day, Eurus stretched her legs on the sofa and stared at the ceiling, feeling empty.

It had been the last time she had seen Rose.

Now, she was gone. Shot dead.

Eurus would never see her radiant smile again. Never hear that voice. Never touch her skin.

_Gone._

And she didn’t even know who had killed her and why. Just that _Sherlock and John_ had been there.

If only she’d been able to stop Rose from starting to date the stupid doctor two years ago. But after Jim had died, Eurus had fallen into a dark depression, struggling for months, until she was admitted to Maudsley, where she had stayed until last summer. During that time, Rose had been faithfully trying to run Jim’s empire, which had been no easy task. It had taken her over a year before she had figured out why all her plans kept being thwarted: _Sherlock Holmes was still alive._

How the bastard had managed to fake his own death while taking Jim’s life, they never found out. Perplexingly, though, even John Watson hadn’t seemed to know that he’d survived, seeing as he’d been walking around like an utter wreck, still deeply in mourning. Rose had told her that much at the time.

She’d failed to mention, however, how she had decided to follow one of Jim’s last orders posthumously.

“Rose, dear, would you do something for me?” Jim had asked, shortly before his catastrophic death, with his worried puppy dog eyes that betrayed the importance of what he was about to say (and that it wasn’t a request at all but an urgent command).

The three of them had been sitting around the breakfast table in their pyjamas, eating toast and crumpets with Canadian maple syrup.

“Sure, Jim. What’s up?” Rose had replied, always chirpy and unconcerned, eager to do whatever was asked of her as long as it would generate some adrenaline.

Jim had put away the newspaper he’d been browsing and leaned on his elbows to look her in the eye. “I need you to seduce the blogger. To complete my little project of Burning The Heart Out Of Sherlock, who is so very clearly, very _desperately_ and ridiculously, _annoyingly_ in love with him.”

Rose had obviously only been too happy to oblige, seeing as she’d been going on about Watson’s cuteness ever since the standoff with Jim at the Pool (where she’d been assigned to keep John in her crosshairs the whole time, so she’d had a great opportunity to unabashedly check him out for over an hour straight).

But before she’d made any move, Jim and Sherlock had both died.

So when she found out, a year and a half later, that Sherlock was in fact still alive, she’d thrown
herself at his companion and successfully got him to propose to her within six months.

But Eurus hadn’t even known of her scheme. Rose had still come to visit her at Maudsley every Wednesday, but had only told her about John Watson when she was about to get bloody married to him.

“I’m just doing this for Jim,” is what she had said. “Don’t worry, sweetie, everything will be alright. We’ve got a lovely location for the reception, all in yellow, with delicious cake. We’ve tasted samples,” she’d beamed, completely oblivious to the fact that Eurus had wanted to disappear into a hole in the ground – no matter it was all fake. Rose was still spending all her time with him. **Sleeping** with him. And she obviously had an actual thing for him.

“John even let me invite David,” she’d laughed. “He’s such a sweet fool, you have no idea. And seeing David’s jealous face will definitely be fun.”

**Oh, David.**

Eurus hadn’t liked her dating David either, but at least they had been able to work around him, as he’d been dumb enough and only served as a relatively superficial cover for a much less important assignment. (For which Rose had first adopted the Mary Morstan identity, in fact.)

But, even after Eurus was discharged again, Rose hadn’t wanted to risk it while she was with John.

And then there had been this stupid longing for a child.

Eurus felt something painful swell in her throat at the thought.

As she continued to stare into the ever-present void that invisibly hovered in her home like a black hole, seemingly sucking in all energy and light, Eurus took her feet off the sofa and reluctantly sat up. She ran her hands through her short, spiky hair, firmly digging her nails into her scalp to distract herself from those thoughts.

She still needed to do the washing up. Her brother had always hated it when she left dirty dishes on the kitchen counter.

Forcing herself back into the present, she slouched over to her tiny kitchen. She put the plug in the basin, letting the hot water flow over her cold hands as she filled it. Tears fell from her face and disappeared into the ocean of bubbles the instant they hit the surface.

No one in the world knew her pain.

Not even Rose had known the effort Eurus had invested to try to get her back.

Like late December last year, just after Rose had dumped her once more for this idiot, who had apparently, for no reason, decided to take her back after all (although her convenient pregnancy might have had something to do with it, she supposed, bitterly). The very next day, Eurus had found out that something was up with Sherlock Holmes and had heard from Steve, her very useful hacker friend, that Holmes was about to be sent far away under mysterious circumstances.

Neither she nor Rose had been finished with Sherlock yet, so she *really* couldn’t just let him leave the stage like that.

She had then poured a considerable amount of money into pulling off a trick her brother would definitely have approved of. (And wasn’t half of what she did in her life meant to impress him, even though he was no longer there? It seemed to be a life purpose, ingrained into her DNA,
exhausting as it was.) So with Steve’s help, she had made sure that Jim’s face had been all over the country, on all screens simultaneously – with an ominous ring to it, as had been his trademark.

“Did you miss me?”

“Did you miss me?”

“Did you miss me?”

And it had worked like a charm.

Sherlock Holmes had been called back. And with that, the chances of John Watson eventually leaving Rose had at least increased to some extent again, seeing as it would clearly only be a matter of time not only before Rose would pull another stupid stunt, like shooting someone else John cared about, but also before these two idiot consulting detectives would finally realise they were made for one another.

And wasn’t it much better to wait until that had happened, before they seriously attempted to properly burn Sherlock’s heart out, anyway? Wasn’t it, in fact, much easier to burn the heart out of that stupid, arrogant, posh brat when he actually had his heart close to him?

Rose had already married his love interest, and still Sherlock Holmes was coping relatively well. What was the baby going to add to that? It was no fun merely seeing Sherlock gradually wither away with heartbreak, as had been the case until now (and annoyingly slowly, at that).

They needed a big bang.

Once Sherlock was back, Eurus had planned to convince Rose that letting them come together was the best way to begin with, and that she should let John go – if he didn’t leave first.

And then Rose might finally take her back. For good.

Where there was hope, there was life.

But Rose hadn’t wanted to listen to her. And the next few weeks, nothing had happened.

Sherlock Holmes was back at Baker Street and John Watson still remained with Rose in the suburbs. And then, of course, the damned baby had been born (whom Rose had called Rosie! Wasn’t that just a screamer?).

So Eurus had needed a new plan. It hadn’t taken her long to find a nice, perky wig, a striking deep red lipstick and a cute dress.

She had then followed Watson around for as long as it took until he noticed her.

One day – when, for some reason, he had some ridiculous flower behind his ear – John finally glanced towards her, on the bus.

He was sitting in the front section, facing the aisle, while she was sitting a little more towards the back. Once she’d caught his eye, she smiled at him shyly, then looked away and bit her lower lip. He smiled as well.

When he got off the bus, so did she.
She spotted him just taking the funny flower from behind his ear and raising his eyes to the heavens as the bus pulled away. He hadn’t actually meant to wear it, apparently. Pity.

She stood waiting beside him, smiling.

When he turned, she spoke. “Hello.” She had decided to use a northern inflection, seeing as men were always extra likely to fall for any kind of different sounding accent.

“Oh. Hello,” he replied.

“I like your daisy,” she said, in the sweetest voice she could muster. That skill was at least one useful thing to have come out of theatre school.

“Thank you, yeah. It’s not really me, though, I don’t think,” he said.

“No?”

He was definitely enjoying this, alternately smiling and looking away. “No.” He actually did look kind of cute when he was embarrassed, in an adorable-baby-animal kind of way.

She fiddled with her hair. “Shame.”

“No, it’s too floral for me. I’m more of a knackered-with-weary-old-eyes kind of guy.”

“Well, I think they’re nice.” She paused for a bit, feigning shyness. “Nice eyes.”

He laughed. “Thank you!” He turned away for a moment, shaking his head as if in disbelief that a woman was flirting with him just like that.

“Look, look... I don’t normally do this but, um...” She rummaged in her handbag.

“But you’re gonna.”

“Yeah!” She scribbled the number of her latest burner phone onto a piece of paper she’d had ready for him.

John smiled and stepped closer, looking down at the paper. “What’s this?”

“This is me.” She handed him the paper and backed away, smiling bashfully.

“Thank you. Cheers.”

She had quickly turned away then, calling over her shoulder, “Yeah. Okay, bye!” And she’d hurried off.

He’d texted her the same afternoon. Men were such pigs. And fools. How could he seriously think she liked him, when she didn’t know him at all?

Although, to be fair, she did know quite a lot about him, but without him knowing, of course. Not that any of that interested her in that way. Not like it did to Rose, who actually thought he was sexy and interesting. Nevertheless, a fake smile and strange accent had been all that was needed to make the idiot want to text with her.

The idea behind the text-flirting had been to lure John away from Rose, with the advantageous side-effect of annoying the shit out of Rose, once she would find out, of course. And Sherlock Holmes would probably not be amused, either – not even being second but third best – which was
excellent.

Also, Eurus had basically been bored out of her mind and wanted to join in the game.

But above all, she had needed to collect information, of course. She needed to know everything there was to know about Sherlock Holmes – and therefore, about John Watson – in order to be able to make the rest of his life as miserable as possible. To thwart all his plans the way he’d frustrated Jim’s and Rose’s, and to let him lose the person who was dearest to him, just like they’d lost Jim.

Of course, now that Rose was gone, too, the stakes had been doubled.

And seeing as texting John had resulted in a very poor information harvest, other than that he was definitely not gay, Eurus now decided once more that she needed another approach.

She stared at the note pinned to the noticeboard in her kitchen, that Culverton Smith had once given to Jim when they’d made this ridiculous bet. Smith had been an acquaintance of Jim’s, who had appreciated Smith for his like-minded cleverness. He had known exactly what sort of things Smith was up to, and – obsessed as he had been with Sherlock Holmes – had claimed that it wouldn’t be very difficult for someone like Holmes to find him out also.

“No way!” Culverton had said. “Some stupid consulting detective would never be able to find any proof of anything. I’m like a pro at covering my tracks. Or rather, at not leaving any tracks at all!” And he’d smiled his smarmy smile.

So they’d made a bet.

Culverton was in the strange habit of periodically confessing his random murdering to friends and relatives while they were hooked up to some memory altering drug, so that afterwards, they never remembered a thing he’d told them. One time, right after such a session, his daughter Faith had started to take notes. Before she’d written down anything relevant, however, Smith had gently taken the note from her. He had given this note to Jim, challenging him to send it to Sherlock and see if he could solve it.

The next week, Jim had died.

Eurus had found the note among Jim’s things when she’d gone through them in a bout of nostalgia, a few weeks ago. She’d stuck it on her wall, not sure what to do with it, but sensing it might somehow come in handy.


I need to kill someone. Who?’

And then it occurred to her. She could simply pretend to be Faith Smith and pose as a client as a way to get into Sherlock’s house. To get close to him. Talk to him.

She wanted to get to know him. To know the man she’d once wished was her brother; whose parents she’d wished were her parents. She had still been very young and very foolish then. Just a kid. She’d had no way of knowing how he was going to ruin her life. Or perhaps she had, and she’d just been stupid not to see it.

Using this note as an entry ticket, however, could prove an ideal way to find his weaknesses, so that she could target him in the exact spot she needed to, and would know precisely which way to twist the metaphorical knife for maximum effect.
She wanted so many things. But above all, she wanted revenge for his part in the death not only of her lover, Rose Moran, but also of her brother, Jim Moriarty.

Chapter End Notes

With many thanks to Ariane DeVere for her transcript of the bus stop scene!
Sherlock was vaguely aware that his flat was a mess. Well, a worse mess than usual, that was.

Not that he cared in the least.

There was only one thing he cared about – well, maybe two or three different things, depending on what his mood was – but they all came in a syringe, neat and straightforward. Bill Wiggins had just dropped by with another supply. Home delivery.

*Or was that yesterday?*

Afterwards, Sherlock sometimes imagined talking to him, or just hanging out together, as if Bill were still there.

As if he weren’t alone.

Although, of course, the shadows were always dancing around every object, like little monsters. Or big monsters. Or unicorns.

*Clouds, inside and out. All colours.*

And Redbeard, of course. Redbeard was always everywhere. Softly whining.

Maybe he should invite Janine, Sherlock mused. Just to hang out, with a real person. She’d never condemned his drug use and was pretty indifferent about it. They tolerated each other rather well, in fact, which was something he appreciated. He supposed she was almost like a sister to him, even though they hadn’t known each other that long (and he’d once tricked her into dating him for the Magnussen case, but never mind that now.)

Sherlock was mildly surprised when suddenly there was a client standing in the room. He hadn’t had any of those in a while.

It was a sorry looking woman, around forty years old, with a cane, wearing an ankle-length, long-sleeved red dress. Her mousy hair fell stiffly over her shoulders.

“Hello. I’m Faith Smith, daughter of Culverton Smith,” she said, timidly. “You might have heard of him. He’s on the telly a lot.”

She handed him a piece of paper.

Coordination.

He clumsily took the note from her and studied the paper, without looking at the words scribbled onto it just yet. (Those weren’t always the most interesting.)

A sharp crease ran across the middle. The bottom two-thirds of the paper had slightly faded. There was a pinprick at the top. The smell and structure of the fibres betrayed repeated exposure to steam and a variety of cooking vapours. Tiny kitchen. No visitors.

“My father has access to this kind of memory blocking drug,” she said. “He has used it on me, and several other people, when he wanted to confess something. During this session, three years ago, my father told me he wanted to kill someone. One word, Mr Holmes, and it changed my world forever.”

Sherlock looked at the paper in his hands again, noticing that his fingers were trembling.

*Why was it so dark?*

‘I need to kill someone,’ it said on the paper.

Unusual. Still, he didn’t really feel like delving into it. Too tired.

“Just one word,” the woman repeated.

“What word?” Focusing took more effort than it used to.

“A name.”

“What name?”

She walked over to where the client’s chair was facing the fireplace and sat down. “I can’t remember. I can’t remember who my father wanted to kill…” She looked down at her hands on top of her cane. “And I don’t know if he ever did it.”

Well, that was just bothersome, wasn’t it?

“So what do you think?” she asked.

“Of what?”

“My case.”

He needed to get rid of her. He didn’t want a case. He wanted to be left alone again.

(Strange. He’d craved company just a few minutes before. He guessed she was the wrong kind of company.)

“Oh, it’s way too weird for me. Go to the police; they’re really excellent at dealing with this complicated sort of stuff. Tell them I sent you; that ought to get a reaction.” He tossed her handbag towards her, which was strangely heavy, he noticed, then turned towards the kitchen. “Night-night.”

“Please! I have no one else to turn to. You’re my last hope.”
He ignored her.

Then, silence. (In which Bill uttered some phrases that hardly made sense. Probably because he wasn’t real, anyway.)

As soon as she was gone, though, something occurred to him.

*There could only be one reason why her bag was that heavy.*

He hurried down the stairs, which was quite a challenge in itself, what with none of the steps staying in place. “Stop. Wait!”

She was still in the downstairs hallway, about to step back into the rain.

“Imply your life is not your own. Keep your hands off it, do you hear me?”

She stared at him, looking confused.

He pointed his finger at her. “Off it.”

“Sorry? What? What are you talking about?”

“You’ve got all the way to the door and not made any move to phone for a taxi, and look at you. You didn’t even bring a coat. In this rain? Now, well, that might mean nothing, except for the angle of the scars on your left forearm; you know, under that sleeve that you keep pulling down.”

Looking down, Faith reached across and pulled her left sleeve down. Glancing up again, she stammered, “You never saw them.”

“No, I didn’t, so thank you for confirming my hypothesis. Don’t really need to check that the angle’s consistent with self-harm, do I?”

She flinched back almost unnoticeably when he reached towards her. “No.”

“Then you can keep your scars. I want to see your handbag.”

“Why?”

“It’s too heavy. You said I was your last hope and now you’re going out into the night, with no plan on how you’re getting home... and a gun.”

She lowered her head.

“Chips,” he stated.

“Chips?”

He took one of Mrs Hudson’s coats from the coat hooks on the wall and sighed as he handed it to her. “You’re suicidal. You’re allowed chips, trust me. It’s about the only perk.”

So they ended up going out for chips together. If he could save a life, even in this unorthodox fashion, he needed to do it.

As they wandered the streets together, rather companionably, in fact, he decided to take her case after all and ask for the gun as payment. Then at least he would have done something useful with his life this month.
He wondered whether Mycroft was still having CCTV feeds around the city monitored and would notice his little brother being utterly spaced-out.

If so, what would Mycroft do? Alert John, maybe?

That was actually an oddly comforting thought.

Strange, how this Faith woman reminded him of John a little. Well, maybe anyone might remind him of John, because he was all Sherlock thought about, really, when he wasn’t actively trying not to think about him (and even then).

On the other hand, she was suicidal and equipped with a cane and a gun, just like John had been on that first day. So maybe not so strange.

Wouldn’t it be nice if Mycroft sent John to check on him, he mused. Technically, they weren’t supposed to talk to each other just yet, but maybe…

Just in case his big brother was watching, and tracking his steps on the map of London, Sherlock decided to send a message that would get his attention, writing something familiar with the path he chose to walk through various streets.

‘Fuck off’ was familiar enough, certainly, and would have the exact opposite effect, as always.

(Basically, they were like children still playing the ‘yes means no’ game.)

Would either of them ever grow up, he vaguely wondered?

And what then?

* * * *

Rosie had finally fallen asleep.

Singing to her had eventually done the trick – which had also been more enjoyable for himself than John had ever thought it could be. He should remember that for next time. He hadn’t sung in ages.

It had actually been Aunt Vivian who had given him the idea, when he’d visited her that afternoon.

“Do you sing to her, John? You have to sing to her.”

She often gave him advice during his visits, and he often followed it. Particularly about raising Rosie.

“Babies love hearing melodies and they love hearing your voice,” she had explained. “Especially when they can’t sleep, nothing is more soothing than the combination of the two.”

She had been right, once again.

He smiled as he quietly tiptoed down the stairs and plonked down onto the sofa, stretching his legs. He reached for the remote on the side table and switched on the telly, ending up changing the channel until he arrived back at BBC One. Nothing worth watching.

He fished his phone out of his pocket and thought about texting Sherlock. He opened their text history and scrolled back up to read the last couple of texts.

(21 May)
-- How are you? S

(21 May)
-- Fine, thanks. You? Beautiful day. R has been studying the butterflies and bees. I think we saw a drone. J

(21 May)
-- Tell her that drones have no biological father, just a mother (the queen). They are like half-clones. You have to interest her in science early on. S

(21 May)
-- Their sisters use body sign language to give each other directions for finding nectar. Never let her think that bees are less clever than us. S

(21 May)
-- I’ve just conveyed the lecture to her. She says ‘ba’. :) J

(23 May)
-- Hey, how are you? J

(25 May)
-- Everything alright? The Hobnobs at Tesco’s reminded me of you. J

(26 May)
-- Hi. Rain makes an interesting sound, when you think about it. S

(26 May)
-- Lovely British weather, eh? ;) J

(30 May)
-- Everything alright? J

(30 May)
-- Sure. Every. S

That last one was rather weird, John thought. Then again, that didn’t mean much in Sherlock’s case, he supposed fondly. Sherlock was probably crazy busy solving cases left and right, now that John was no longer in the way.

John’s thumb hovered over his screen. Eventually, he typed, “Going back to work tomorrow. R is bound for new adventures at nursery. Any interesting cases on your end? J”

After he’d hit ‘send’, he stared at the wall for a while. A minute or two later, he took his phone again and added, “Btw might start therapy again. Need to get stuff out of my system. Not sure talking really helps, but might give it a try anyway. There’s a therapist near my work who’s still taking patients. J”

After staring into nothingness for a bit more, he eventually picked up the unfinished crossword on the coffee table and decided he might as well try to complete it now. Not a very spectacular way of spending his last evening before going back to work, but his life wasn’t that spectacular anymore in the first place. And maybe that was just as well.

An hour later, he was startled by the sound of his phone buzzing in the quiet of the evening.

John looked at the incoming number. Mycroft.
Reluctantly, he picked up. “Yes?”

“Sherlock has not been out of the flat for a week, but he is now. It’s not looking good, John. I’m worried. He seems determined to take his frustration out on the world.”

What the heck did he even mean by that? Surely Sherlock was allowed a little frustration, right? As long as… it didn’t involve any sort of substances, that weren't… No. He wouldn’t.

“Nice. It’s very touching how you can hijack the machinery of the state to look after your own family.”

“Sherlock gone rogue is a legitimate security concern,” Mycroft said sternly. “The fact that I’m his brother changes absolutely nothing. It didn’t the last time and I assure you it won’t with...” At that, he seemed to stop himself and paused for a long moment.

John frowned.

“... with Sherlock.”

“Sorry, what?” John asked.

“Please phone me if he gets in contact. Thank you.”

After a moment, John lowered his phone and terminated the call.

* * * * *

“Do you know why I’m going to take your case?” Sherlock asked Faith, as dawn was already breaking.

They were sitting on a bench on the South Bank, not far from Hungerford Bridge, facing the river. They each held a filled half baguette wrapped in a paper serviette, that Sherlock couldn’t remember buying.

“Because of the one impossible thing you’ve said,” he continued.

“What impossible thing?”

“You said your life turned on one word.”

“Yes: the name of the person my father wanted to kill.”

“That’s the impossible thing. Just that, right there.”

Pigeons were pecking at the ground a few feet away. Dinosaur descendants. Sherlock wished he could fly and pecks crumbs, just like they did.

“What’s impossible?” she asked.

“Names aren’t one word. They’re always at least two. Sherlock Holmes; Faith Smith; Santa Claus; Winston Churchill; Napoleon Bonaparte. Actually, just ‘Napoleon’ would do.” Or Moriarty, he thought to himself. Well, never mind him, now.

“Or Elvis?”

He smiled faintly. “Well, I think we can rule both of them out as targets.”
Nitrogen, everywhere. Undetected. Unless you were an N-fixing soil bacterium – which he wasn’t. What a comfortable, quiet life that would be, he imagined; sucking nutrients straight out of the air around you. To consist of a single cell... with no brain. Never mind flying.

“Okay, I got it wrong, then. It wasn’t only one word; it can’t have been,” Faith said.

“Yet you remember quite distinctly that your whole life turned on one word, so that happened, I don’t doubt it, but how can that word be a name – a name you instantly recognised that tore your world apart?”

“Okay. Well? How?”


She hesitated for a second, but then meekly handed over her cargo.

After Sherlock had hurled the gun into the Thames, he said, “‘Taking your own life.’ Interesting expression. Taking it from who? Oh, once it’s over, it’s not you who’ll miss it.”

He rested one hand on the railing, looking westwards to the London Aquarium. Where it all began… Or ended. He couldn’t really tell.

The world was starting to spin, images from the past bestowing themselves on him as he tried to keep his balance on the railing – sweating, trembling, his pulse unable to keep up. A tornado swelling in his head.

“You’re not what I expected,” Faith said, behind him. “You’re…”

“What? What am I?” He was shaking.

“Nicer.”

“Than who?” He was confused. Lost.

“Anyone.”

He must have blacked out after that.

When he came to, Faith was long gone, but her ‘anyone’ still echoed in his ears. And right then, the jigsaw pieces finally started to fall together in his mind.

‘I need to kill someone.’

‘Who?’

‘Anyone.’

* * * * *


Painting abandoned. Brush forgotten on palette.

Whitefoot looking at him from other side of room. Next moment upon his lap, purring.
Only animals nice. Not people.

Reliable. Warm. Sweet.

Blacktail on windowsill closed his eyes, seemingly wanting to show him everything was alright.

Yes. Calm now.

Being alone was okay. Alone with cats and paint.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Since there will be no updates for the next two or three weeks, as I’ll be away on holiday, I thought I’d give you guys one more chapter before the long radio silence. :)

The man was a maniac! A *celebrity*, wanting to kill *anyone*. A compulsive serial killer, hiding in plain sight.

Sherlock paced up and down his room. Up the walls, and back down the other side.

*Everything* was upside down.

He needed to focus. *FOCUS!* He had to stop this monster, if it was the last thing he did.

But he needed a top-up first. He couldn’t think when he was suffering withdrawal.

*Warm clouds, gentle embraces, soft wind on his cheeks. Drifting away, away...*

Millennia later.

*FOCUS*. He scoured the internet, looking for patterns. What was this Culverton Smith involved in? Charities, tv shows, hospitals, cooking commercials.

Who had died in his vicinity?

Sherlock printed out all the information he could find and stuck everything on the walls. (*Not enough walls!* No pattern to be seen. Except lots of deaths in his hospital. No surprise there. Who would ever notice an occasional extra death? Brilliant, really.

Sherlock took a journey to the kitchen in search of food. Biscuits, bread, a tin of peas, anything.

There was, however, no food to be found. Just empty containers. And unused teabags.

*Who needed food, anyway?*

He stumbled back to the lounge.

Slowly, a plan started to crystallise in his mind, like Tetris blocks leisurely slotting into place.

There was only one way. One logical approach.

Catching Mary (Rosamund) in the act had never worked, but with Culverton Smith, Sherlock was determined to make it work.

He himself would be the bait.

The plan was simple. He needed to get admitted to Smith’s hospital, which would be easy, really, with his current state of health. He was at least well underway in the right direction. He hadn’t really planned to keep up this level of drug use, kept telling himself he would soon quit, but if he
needed to crawl further down this pit so he could catch a serial killer, then why not? He could crawl out afterwards. He’d done it before.

He would need to make sure he wasn’t admitted to any other hospital, though. So he simply made an appointment. With Smith. At his hospital. He was enough of a media whore to accept an invitation to meet up with anyone moderately well-known who wanted to meet up with him.

Two weeks from now should be enough time. Friday, early afternoon, just after lunch.

John needed to come as well. But he would see to that later.

Another text to Molly and his ride there was arranged.

* * * * *

Although spending an entire evening with Sherlock Holmes had been very interesting, to say the least – especially with him being high as a kite – Eurus hadn’t really managed to gain any new information that she could see the use of just yet. But that often came later, after she’d had some time to mull the new facts over in her mind, so that was fine.

It was annoying, however, not knowing how things were going with Smith now, and whether or not Jim would posthumously win the bet.

Eurus would just have to sit and wait.

It was a bit like waiting for Rose when she had been away. Which had happened a lot. That’s what you got for being such a good shot and an efficient planner, when you worked for Jim Moriarty.

He’d liked efficiency and planning.

She missed her brother so much. She missed both of them, but his absence had burned a much deeper hole into her soul (despite her having had more time to get used to it by now, which she really hadn’t), because he’d always been around – not only for a longer time, but also on a more regular basis.

Most of the time, ever since their childhood, it had just been the two of them, even after Rose Moran had come drifting across from Europe to join them.

Chance had brought her to Europe all the way from New Zealand, where Rose had grown up on a farm with three older brothers, who had taught her how to shoot. Initially, she had just come to this hemisphere to travel abroad and have fun for a year. But she’d made some friends in Italy who’d jokingly decided to rob a bank. It had gone so well that they’d continued to do robberies across the entire continent and eventually also started to dispose of people who needed disposing of – according to other people, who were willing to pay them for it. The group had called themselves The Peppers (because they’d listened to The Red Hot Chili Peppers a lot).

One day, in Georgia, wherever that was, they’d made so much money (“through a stroke of luck in demand and supply”, Rose had used to say; something about someone wanting to have what had been exactly within their reach and no one else’s), that Rose had decided she could afford to take things more slowly for a while. She’d travelled to the UK for the first time in her life and had coincidentally wandered into Jim’s circles.

And she had not remained unnoticed.

She had been exactly the kind of right hand Jim had been looking for. A crack shot who kept her
head cool. Her being a woman had the additional advantage that he didn’t end up shagging her, like he had with most of his other drudges and which had only led to them disappearing off the stage again.

The three of them had been a brilliant team and soon became inseparable. Jim had the connections and ideas, Eurus helped devise plans and did the daily housework, cooking and cleaning, and Rose did the practical planning and execution (sometimes literally) of the jobs that actually brought in the money. While Jim had been impressed by Rose’s professional qualities, Eurus had been mesmerised by her cheery, self-assured manner and her coy smile. She’d had an instant crush on her.

It had taken a while before Rose noticed, though – or at least, before she acted upon it.

And then she’d been away half of the time.

At least, when Rose had been with John, much later (and only after Eurus was out of Maudsley, of course), it had been somewhat easier to stalk her. Although Rose had also quickly started going on adventures with Amit again, who often dropped by in the UK. Naturally, she had been bored stiff just being a nurse in the suburbs. Even when it had been just Eurus and her together, last autumn, Rose had occasionally left Eurus home alone for days on end. To Scotland, Norway, Slovenia. And Italy, maybe? Eurus wasn’t really sure. Rose had always been all radiant smiles and hugs when she came back and never really talked much about it. She was invariably more cheerful than before leaving, and that was what mattered most. Perhaps because of the loot. Or just because of her fresh adrenaline fix.

Unlike Jim, who had gradually become more and more frustrated and obsessed with Sherlock bloody Holmes as the years had passed, and who never seemed to take any pleasure in any sort of achievement at all, as long as Holmes was still out there, out of his reach.

And he’d dragged them all down with him in that obsession, just because what he said, went. Like the angry sea witch with her all-devouring vortex, trying to catch that one ship with the prince on it.

Eurus was pulled out of her reveries when her phone rang.

It was Steve.

“Watson’s made an online booking at a therapist’s on Windsor Drive. Thought you might like to know.”

“Oh, has he, really? Thank you for this excellent bit of intel. When is he scheduled to go?”

“Three hundred pounds.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Friday, at noon,” Steve informed her.

“Do you have a name?”

“Elsa Robins.”

“Great. The money will be in your account by tomorrow.”

Eurus thought for a bit. She had always wanted to be in the other chair during a psychotherapy
session.

*And now was her chance.*

All she needed to do was get rid of the actual therapist and take her place, and she would find out all about John Watson’s weaknesses and his relationship with Sherlock Holmes in the easiest way she ever could have imagined.

* * * * *

The special effects of being high were amazing.

But mostly terrifying. Especially now that habituation had been kicking in, big time. Sherlock’s body simply didn’t seem to agree with *anything*.

Of course, he deserved to suffer, so it was kind of cathartic in that sense.

*Deep blackness.*

Maybe this was his natural state, Sherlock thought. Eternal misery. Punishment for his compulsive hubris. He couldn’t stop, so it wouldn’t stop.

Filth, everywhere. Chaos.

Meanwhile, it had become increasingly difficult to keep track of time. But fortunately, two weeks ago, when his mental capacity had still been a lot closer to normal than it was now, he’d thankfully been clever enough to set various alarms for today, so that he would end up in the right place at exactly the right moment.

So. Today was the day, judging by the annoying noises being emitted by various electronic devices. After he’d managed to turn the last one off, he remembered.

He’d made a list, somewhere.

Where was the damn list?

So many papers everywhere.

After what felt like days of digging, he found it.

*To do:*

1) *Accuse CS of being serial killer on Twitter.*

Why was that again?

He couldn’t quite remember. Maybe skip that one, then.

Oh yeah, something about insurance. So John would know. And Lestrade. In case Sherlock couldn’t get John to help him after all, and he himself ended up, well, dead.

Also, it would likely work like a red cloth on a bull, should Mr Smith actually see the tweet (which he probably wouldn’t). Just in case he needed a little more encouragement in choosing his next victim.

Sherlock opened his laptop, struggling with the keys to type the right letters in the right order.
Slowly. Carefully.

‘Did you know Culverton Smith is a serial killer? #crime #hidinginplain sight #thosearethemostinterestingones’

There. Done.

2) Get Hudders to bring me to John at 46 Windsor Drive by noon.

Now, there had been some sort of plan as to how to get her to do this, but what was it again? He could just ask, right? Nah, boring. Also, why did he not simply phone John?

There was something.

*Something.*

Sadness fell over him like a winter blanket when he remembered. They were supposed to have cut off contact. And also they kind of actually had.

So that’s why he needed an indirect excuse to see John openly.

So how, then?

Then it occurred to him again. *Be annoying.* Mrs Hudson knew there was only one person who could cure that.

Time for some Shakespeare and a couple of additional holes in the wall.

* * * * *

John wasn’t even sure why he was doing this.

He stared at the strange, stripy impression of clouds on the black and white wallpaper behind his new therapist and wondered why he kept lying his arse off.

He heard himself tell her that Rosie was ‘with friends’, that he struggled to cope.

“Tell me about your morning,” she said. “Start from the beginning.”

“I woke up.”

“How did you sleep?”

“I didn’t. I don’t.”

“You just said you woke up.”

“I stopped lying down.”

“Alone?”

“Of course alone.”

She kept babbling about how things were *understandable,* and *okay,* in this funny foreign accent which he couldn’t quite place. He generally just couldn’t put a finger on who she really was, with her ash blonde shoulder-length hair, frameless glasses and her notebook on her lap.
Maybe he simply didn’t trust her. Just not yet.

She had asked him some strange, detailed questions about how Mary had died, by way of introduction. He supposed it was customary. But still. He’d simply said he didn’t want to talk about it. “An old lady shot her. It was an accident.”

He didn’t feel like telling her the official fake version, because it would take three hours to explain. Sherlock hadn’t exactly come up with a simple story that was easy to remember, either.

Besides, he wasn’t here to talk about Mary. Not really.

But she seemed to pop up in conversation again and again, like there was no avoiding her. He’d incorrectly presumed she was out of his life, when he’d buried her ashes. But she kept haunting him, it seemed, surfacing in unexpected places. Or at least, some sort of innocent version of her, who was supposed to be mourned and missed.

He strangely enjoyed the lying, though. As if it somehow gave him a purpose, a case that he badly needed after the past few very quiet and dull weeks.

When he told his therapist, full of emotion, that he was letting his daughter down, he mused that it was maybe because he did, in fact, feel rather guilty for every second he was letting someone else take care of her. But she’d only been in nursery for two weeks. Every parent probably felt horrible during those first days, he told himself. Still, he enjoyed exaggerating his feeling to his therapist just for the sake of it. Weird. He’d never really been one to twist the truth for no reason. Perhaps it was because there were so many other feelings he couldn’t talk about, so all he could do was transfer them onto something else.

John stared down at the jagged red rug on the floor between him and the woman.

“So there is no one you talk to, confide in?” she asked.

“No one.” That, at least, was true.

“Do you talk to Sherlock Holmes?”

“I haven’t seen him. No one’s seen him.” Also true. “He’s locked himself away in his flat. God knows what he’s up to.”

“Do you blame him?”

He twiddled his thumbs. “I don’t blame ... I don’t think about him.” He shook his head.

“Has he attempted to make contact with you?”

“No.” He really didn’t want to talk about Sherlock right now. He knew they would very soon end up in some very Freudian rabbit holes if they did.

He wasn’t actually entirely certain what it was he did want to talk about. Eventually, he wanted to learn to trust the right people, but that was sort of a long term goal. Maybe, for now, he just needed to wallow a little bit. He was entitled to that, wasn’t he?

“How can you be sure? He might have tried.”

“No,” he lied. “If Sherlock Holmes wants to get in touch, that’s not something you can fail to notice.”
At that very moment, a car loudly crashed into a rubbish bin on the street right in front of the house, sending it flying over the kerb.

They both got up from their seats, startled, and walked towards the front door, to see what had happened.

John stepped outside, just as a helicopter flew overhead. He looked at the expensive-looking red car, parked at an awkward angle outside the house, with rubbish bins lying on their sides near it.

When the driver’s door opened, the sound of Beethoven could be heard from the car’s stereo.

Standing in the doorway behind John, his therapist said, “Well, now... won’t you introduce me?”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

With a million, gazillion thanks to Ariane DeVere. Not only the dialogues, but a lot of the descriptions from the show in this chapter and the next four are (almost) straight from her amazing episode transcripts.

Outside the therapist’s house, the door of the red sports car opened to reveal none other than Mrs Hudson. Turning to John, she sighed deeply and walked over to him. “Oh, John...”

Baffled, John took a step towards her. “Mrs Hudson... What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Sherlock! You’ve no idea what I’ve been through!”

This didn’t bode well. He quickly ushered her into the house and closed the front door behind them.

“Culverton Smith,” John’s therapist stated, in the back room.

She was fast. She had opened her laptop on the side table and had apparently done a quick google search on Sherlock Holmes before they’d even crossed the hallway. Pushing her glasses up her nose, she bent down to the computer and ran her finger over the pad, clicking on another search suggestion. “This, I think, is relevant from this morning,” she said.

The results page on her screen showed photographs of Smith, with links to a couple of books he’d written. One was apparently called ‘How to Make a Killing’ and the other ‘Business Killer’. Under the header ‘Latest News’ there was an item headlined, in speech marks, “He’s a serial killer!” and underneath, it said, ‘Net detective blasts Culverton Smith on Twitter’.

“He’s publicly accused Mr Smith of being a serial killer.”

John leaned down to the laptop beside his therapist. “Christ!”

“You have no idea of the state he’s in, John,” Mrs Hudson snivelled. “I was terrified! You need to see him, John. You need to help him!”

John felt panic wash over him. ‘The state he’s in’? Had Sherlock actually gone back on drugs? Was that why he’d seemed to have completely lost his marbles, tweeting stuff like that? John wanted to see him, more than anything. But not like that.

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“He needs you!” Mrs Hudson pleaded frantically.

John closed his eyes. And there it was, in full detail, suddenly impossible to push away: the image of his father, drunk, no longer aware of what he was doing. Uncoordinated. Dangerous. The image he’d been living to erase from his mind.

“Somebody else,” John said angrily. He turned away from Mrs Hudson. “Not me. Not now.”
He tried to focus his attention on random objects in the room – the dark blue floor-length curtains, and the way they were tied back either side of French windows – to stay in the present, to not let any more images from the past flood in. But it was no use.

The bloodcurdling sound of his mum falling down the stairs. Then, the sight of her lying motionless on the bottom step, neck at an awkward angle. Laundry scattered everywhere around her.

Mrs Hudson stormed over to him. “Now you just listen to me for once in your stupid life. I know Mary’s dead and I know your heart is broken, but if Sherlock Holmes dies too, who will you have then?”

John opened his mouth, but she kept talking, pointing an angry finger at him.

“Because I’ll tell you something, John Watson,” she continued. “You will not have me.”

How little did she understand.

She stormed out of the house.

Reluctantly, John followed her outside.

She had her arms folded on top of her car’s roof, her head lowered onto them and she was crying.

John stopped behind her for a long moment, blowing out a breath, before stepping closer.

“Have you spoken to Mycroft, Molly, er, anyone?” he asked.

“They don’t matter,” she said, tearfully. “You do.” She straightened up and turned to face him. “Would you just see him? Please, John. Or just take a look at him as a doctor? I know you’d change your mind if you did.”

John tried to shake his head, but then paused for a second. He needed to say something. Needed to reassure her, even though, in reality, he was only too happy that he wasn’t more… closely involved with Sherlock. Because he knew he had to keep his distance from him, right now; for his own wellbeing. Which was exactly what he was going to do. So he just kept it vague. “Yeah, look, okay. Maybe, if I get a chance.”

“Do you promise?” she asked hopefully, practically beaming.

“I’ll try, if I’m in the area,” he said.

“Promise me?” she begged again, turning puppy dog eyes on him.

The woman was persistent if nothing else.

“I promise.”

“Thank you!” She instantly turned and walked to the rear of the car, making John frown. She unlocked the boot and opened it.

John followed her.

Inside was Sherlock, looking up at them anxiously.

Oh God.
John’s heart broke at the sight of him. His amazing, brilliant, dashing detective, reduced to this.

Sherlock was squinting against the daylight, his wrists handcuffed together in front of him. He looked like hell. Unshaven, grubby. High.

Turning to him, Mrs Hudson said, “Well? On you go. Examine him!”

John’s instincts urged him to turn away, close himself off. Get help for him elsewhere. He couldn’t bear seeing the manifestation of addiction up close, especially not in someone he cared about this much. Someone who, additionally, was bound to breach the iron trust he had in him, in favour of a hit. (Which junkie wouldn’t?)

He couldn’t bear it, because Sherlock was the one person John trusted most in the world. Perhaps even the only person he still fully trusted at all.

But not when he was under the influence of illegal substances.

(Heroin again, by the looks of it.)

But he also couldn’t bear abandoning Sherlock.

One tiny part of him, somewhere at the back of his mind, still hoped against hope that this wasn’t in fact real, that it was just an elaborate act. He knew how convincing Sherlock could be. This was the man who’d faked his own death in front of John’s eyes, after all.

But in this case, that really was false hope getting the better of him, he acknowledged.

Probably.

Clenching his jaw, he carefully helped Sherlock out of the car and demanded Mrs Hudson take off the handcuffs. Sherlock’s own, John noticed. (Well, ‘own’ was perhaps not the right term, seeing as he’d nicked them from Lestrade, obviously.)

John opened the front door of the therapist’s house and silently stood aside while Sherlock, rubbing one of his wrists, stumbled inside.

“The woman’s out of control. I asked for a cup of tea!” he roared.

John turned to Mrs Hudson as she walked in, anger welling inside of him. “How did you get him in the boot?”

“The boys from the café.”

Sherlock turned back crossly. “They dropped me. Twice.”

Good Lord. John could only imagine.

Sherlock then gestured towards the therapist standing in the consultation room with a phone to her ear. “Who’s this one? Is this a new person? I’m against new people.”

“She’s my therapist,” John said.

“Awesome!” Sherlock’s face lit up and he walked towards her. “D’you do block bookings?”
This was not just heroin, John realised. He’d probably taken cocaine as well. Powerballing. Jesus.

The therapist held out the phone to John. “I’m so sorry. I answered your phone. You were busy. I think you’ll want to take it.”

John took it from her and held it to his ear. Mycroft, probably. “Er, yes, hello?”

“Is this Doctor John Watson?” an unfamiliar voice said.

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“Culverton Smith. You’ve probably heard of me.”

John looked towards the open laptop which still showed the article he had been looking at earlier. “Er, well, yes.”

“I mean, I’m aware of this morning’s developments. So are we all still meeting?”

“Yes, I’m sure he was being... hilarious. Sorry, did you say all still meeting?”

“You, me and Mr Holmes. I’ve sent a car; should be outside. Mr Holmes gave me an address.”

“Well, he couldn’t have given you this one. It’s...”

Then the doorbell rang. John turned and walked to the front door. When he opened it, there was a man in a suit standing outside. “When you’re ready,” he said.

John looked to the black stretch limousine that was parked in front of Mrs Hudson’s red car, wondering what the hell was going on. He gave the man a tiny nod.

This entire situation was starting to get rather ridiculous.

Closing the door, John lifted the phone to his ear and headed back down the hall. “When did Sherlock give you this address?” he asked Smith.

“Two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks?” John feigned disbelief for the benefit of his therapist standing within earshot.

“Yes. Two weeks,” Smith said.

John quickly ended the call.

Sherlock seemed to be half asleep, slumped back in the chair John had been sitting in earlier.

“How did you know where to find me?” John asked, loudly.

Sherlock jerked awake.

His anger was actually real. Anger at Sherlock having been so stupid to take drugs again.

He was, however, not really surprised that Sherlock had known where he was, as he had practically told him, himself. But he needed to keep up the act of not having been in touch.

“How? On Monday I decided to get a new therapist. Tuesday afternoon, I chose her.” He pointed to the therapist who was just sitting down in her chair.
Sherlock leaned one elbow on the arm of his chair and supported his head with his fingers.

“Wednesday morning I booked today’s session. Now, today is Friday. So two weeks ago – two weeks before you were abducted and brought here against your will...”

Sherlock frowned and rolled his jaw, looking as if he was finding it hard to keep up.

“... over a week before I even thought of coming here,” John lied, enjoying the shouting more than he should, really, “you knew exactly where you’d need to be picked up for lunch?”

Sherlock, the git, responded with, “Really? I correctly anticipated the responses of people I know well to scenarios I devised? Can’t everyone do that?”

“How?” Mrs Hudson asked, baffled.

“Never mind how,” John said, through gritted teeth. “He’s dying to tell us that.” He’d better not say a word, John thought. “I want to know why.”

“Because Mrs Hudson’s right. I’m burning up,” Sherlock said, dryly. Then he stood. “But I need you to know, John – I need you to see that up here,” he said, gesturing to his temples with both hands, “... I’ve still got it. So when I tell you that this is the most dangerous, the most despicable human being that I have ever encountered; when I tell you that this… this monster must be ended, please remember where you’re standing, because ... you’re standing exactly where I said you would be two weeks ago.”

God, he was insufferable even when he was high.

Grimacing, Sherlock slumped into another chair, beside the table. “I’m a mess; I’m in hell,” he continued, more quietly. “But I am not wrong.” He pointed to Smith’s photo on the laptop. “Not about him.”

John cursed softly.

The man with over a hundred thousand search results on google was a bloody celebrity, for crying out loud. How in the Lord’s name had Sherlock gotten the idea that this guy was a murderous psychopath?

Also, what did he want from John? Weren’t they still supposed to not be talking? How was them breaking that rule essential to this case?

“So what has all this got to do with me?” John asked.

“Look at me. Can’t do it, not now,” Sherlock said. “Not alone.” He looked away and swallowed, his eyes slightly tearful.

Was it an act?

John unfolded his arms and held out his right hand towards Sherlock.

Sherlock stood up, sighing a little, and took his hand. Instantly, John clasped Sherlock’s arm with his other hand and turned it over. Sherlock rolled his eyes as John pushed up the sleeves of his dressing gown and shirt to reveal all the dark marks on the underside of his arm, where he’d been injecting himself.

At least that part seemed real enough. Although you could never really be sure, with this clever
bastard, who also happened to be one of the finest make-up artists as well as one of the finest actors the London theatres had ever missed out on.

“Listen, before I do anything,” John said, quietly, “I need to know what state you’re in.”

“Well, you’re a doctor. Examine me,” Sherlock teased, sitting down on the chair again.

“I need a second opinion. I want you to be examined by Molly Hooper.”

Sherlock looked down, biting his lip. “You’re really not gonna like this.”

“Like what?”

The doorbell rang again. John looked towards the sound, then heaved in a frustrated breath, before scowling down at Sherlock.

A few moments later, he opened the door to Molly, who was standing outside, wearing her white lab coat over her clothes.

*Dear God above. The insufferable twat.*

“Um, hel-hello,” she said. “Is, er... I’m sorry, Sh-Sherlock asked me to come. I didn’t know that you were gonna be here.”

Poor Molly. This was so awkward for her. She had no idea what was going on.

“What, two weeks ago?” John asked.

An ambulance was parked in the driveway of the house opposite. A paramedic was opening the rear doors.

“Yeah. About two weeks,” she meekly replied.

John nodded in resignation. It was a mystery why Sherlock had planned all this so elaborately.

Sherlock stumbled into the hall. “If you’d like to know how I predict the future...”

“I don’t care how,” John angrily interrupted him. Strange, how it felt good faking anger at Sherlock. Also, it was kind of important that Sherlock didn’t blow their cover in his current state, so it was relevant to shut him up without mercy.

Sherlock held up his hands as he continued forward. “Okay. Fully equipped ambulance; Molly can examine me on the way. It’ll save time. Ready to go, Molly?”

“Oh, well...”

“Just tell me when to cough.” He fake-smiled at her for a second and walked out the door.

John’s heart broke a little more when he saw Sherlock almost falling off the kerb as he headed for the ambulance.

“Absolutely no idea what’s going on,” Molly ventured, nervously, to John.

He looked at her. “Sherlock’s using again.”

Her slight smile faded. “Oh God. But, um, a-are you sure?”
“No. It’s Sherlock. Of course I’m not sure. Just check him out.”

Nodding, she turned and headed across the road.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

With many thanks to quietlymischeivous, julzann, monikakrasnorada, smirkdoctor and ewebie for their medical advice, which I have incorporated in the following chapters.

That said, there might still be loads of inconsistencies regarding Sherlock’s perception of reality while he’s high, simply because I’ve never used drugs in my life and didn’t have the foggiest idea what I was doing while writing these scenes (in spite of having read as much as I could about the different effects of heroin and cocaine, of course, which smirkdoctor pointed out to me Sherlock must both have taken). Please do let me know if you spot any glaring errors!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John had seemed to be taking the whole Mary debacle quite well. Better than he, Sherlock thought, lying on the stretcher in the ambulance while he was being examined by Molly. Although you could never really be sure, with John. While he was an open book in some respects, he was completely unreadable in others. He had decided to start therapy again, after all. So perhaps not that well.

Maybe he should try it too, Sherlock thought to himself, mockingly. Alternatively, he could just stop caring so bloody much.

*Caring is not an advantage.*

He closed his eyes as Molly took his blood pressure.

She would have to use the special table for patients lying down as reference. Diastolic pressure was around 5 mmHg lower like this compared to in a sitting position, Sherlock knew.

Why he bothered to remember such things, he didn’t know.

He let his head fall to one side, feeling the velvety structure of the head cushion against his skin. Familiar, somehow.

*Soft, red fur. Long, floppy ear against his cheek, supple between his fingers. A wet nose playfully poking into his face.*

*Sherrinford’s blue skipping rope.*

*Blood, lots of blood.*

“Sherlock. Sherlock!”

He jerked back to the present.

“Stop clenching your jaw and open your mouth, if you want me to examine you,” Molly said, crossly.
He obeyed unquestioningly and let her look inside his throat.

After Molly was done shining annoying lights into his eyes (to check for abnormal miosis in his photomotor reflex due to excessive parasympathetic stimulation from opioids; *yes, yes, still annoying*), Sherlock estimated they were almost there. The hospital was still a bit further away, but Smith had changed the plans in the last minute and invited them to some studio where he needed to be for the shooting of another ad he was in. But that was alright, as they would still visit his hospital afterwards.

Molly had stopped touching and probing him and the ambulance was now taking several hard turns at very slow speed.

*Funny light reflections against the ceiling, like slow-motion swords never touching.*

When they’d come to a halt and Molly opened the doors, Sherlock spotted a building marked ‘VILLAGE STUDIOS’. He lifted his back slightly, leaning on both elbows, trying to see if John had arrived yet. Probably not.

Molly went to sit on the back step, slightly hunched over, clasping her hands in her lap.

Sherlock enjoyed the last few moments of peace he knew he was going to have today.

After a while, the limo came into view and parked near the back of the ambulance. Sherlock spotted a man approaching and opening the rear right-hand door, letting John out, who walked straight over to the ambulance. “Well? How is he?” John asked Molly.

“Basically fine,” Sherlock answered for her, launching himself from the stretcher.

Molly didn’t seem to agree. “I’ve seen healthier people on the *slab*.” She sounded emotional.

“Yeah, but, to be fair, you work with murder victims. They tend to be quite young,” Sherlock jested, in an attempt to lighten the mood. He put on his coat.

“Not funny,” she said.

“Little bit funny.”

*Were the clouds really green?* Sherlock squinted.

“If you keep taking what you’re taking at the rate you’re taking it, you’ve got *weeks,*” she spat out, her voice now decidedly tearful.

Sherlock went to stand closer to the doorway and leaned out of the ambulance, holding on to the poles on either side. “Exactly, *weeks.* Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he said. He stepped down to the concrete, tottering on the spot.

“For Christ’s sake, Sherlock,” Molly cried. “It’s not a game!”

John stepped closer to him with his hands behind his back. “So this is real? You’ve really lost it. You’re actually out of control.”

“When have I ever been that?” Sherlock retorted.

“Since the day I met you,” John said.

That actually hurt.
Then, to Molly, “I thought this was some kind of ...”

“What?” Sherlock asked.

“... trick,” John said, as he turned back to Sherlock.

“Of course it’s not a trick. It’s a plan.” Surely John knew that.

That instant, they heard Culverton Smith approach, coming out of the studio building. “Mr Holmes!”

John looked past Sherlock’s shoulder to where the voice came from. Sherlock could hear more people coming through the doors behind him and spoke to John in a low voice and at quick fire speed, “Thirty feet and closing: the most significant undetected serial killer in British criminal history. Help me bring him down.”

“What... what plan?” John asked.

“I’m not telling you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t like it.” Sherlock knew John was sort of sensitive about him being in mortal danger.

“Mr Holmes!”

Sherlock turned to face Smith, who stopped a few feet away. His asymmetric face, large forehead and gnarled teeth made him look like some kind of alien monster, descending from his space ship to invade new territory. A cameraman and another man hurried around so that they could film the alien miscreant from the front, dazzled by his fame and false smile.

“I don’t do handshakes,” Smith said, as he started to walk towards Sherlock again. “It’ll have to be a hug.”

That was right: hugs!

It was only then that Sherlock remembered his Plan B. He hadn’t done all that research for nothing. But the stupid tar made it impossible to remember anything. (He should really quit soon. That’s right, today. There would be no choice after this.) “I know,” he said, casually.

Reporters holding notebooks gathered around them, as the monster, chuckling, reached out and hugged him.

Strange, how comforting a hug could instinctively feel, regardless of his repulsion for this man. Physiology over mind. Sherlock leaned down into Smith’s embrace as he stealthily fished the man’s phone out of his pocket.

Resting his head on Sherlock’s shoulder, Smith patted his back. “Oh, Sherlock!” he said, releasing him. “What can I say? Thanks to you,” he gestured, as he turned to his entourage, “we’re everywhere!”

A reporter asked, “Mr Holmes, how did Culverton talk you into this?”

Into what, he wondered.
“Well, he’s a detective. Maybe I just confessed!” Smith said, faking a startled look. The reporters and Smith laughed. He looked at Sherlock and beckoned him towards the building.

“Now, it’s a... it’s a new kind of breakfast cereal,” Smith said to the flock of reporters, walking along.

“Mr Holmes, can you put on the hat?” one of them asked.

God, would the idiots never stop associating him with that stupid deerstalker? He didn’t stalk deer, that much should have been clear by now.

“Yeah, he doesn’t really wear the hat,” John replied for him. Good old John.

Sherlock smiled tightly. Remembering how much he’d missed John made him physically unwell. Well, more unwell than he already was, anyhow. He looked ahead again.

“Kids will be getting two of their five-a-day before they’ve even left home!” Smith beamed. He led the crowd into the building and stopped to take a notebook from a woman and sign his name in it. “Breakfast has got to be cool,” Smith explained to the reporters continuing to follow him at his heels like he was the Pied Piper of Hamelin. “And you know what makes it cool when you’re a kid? Dangerous.”

Sherlock was wondering whether he should make an effort to understand what Smith was going on about, but decided he should save his energy. It didn’t really matter, anyway.

The floor disappeared under his feet with every step.

“Sherlock’s been amazing for us,” some woman said to John. “We’re beyond viral.”

Well, that was just weird.

Not long afterwards, Smith was behind a breakfast bar, smiling to one of the cameras. Sherlock stood several feet away with his hands in his pockets, watching him.

A director somewhere called, “Set; and action!”

And then, the unthinkable happened, right before his eyes.

“I’m a killer,” Smith said, contentedly, into the camera. “You know I’m a killer.” He smiled, then turned to another camera. “But did you know...” He picked up a bowl and held it up. “…I’m a cereal killer?!” He then took a large mouthful of cereal and chewed on it for a bit, before turning away and spitting it out in a bucket that was being held up for him.

Sherlock couldn’t help but chuckle out loud, properly amazed at what he was seeing. You had to admit the absolute brilliance of the whole thing. Apparently, his tweet had not gone unnoticed, by far. The level of organisation it must have taken to build an ad campaign based on the accusation, though, and turning it on its head like this, especially this fast, was truly impressive.

John turned to Sherlock. “Has it occurred to you – anywhere in your drug-addled brain – that you’ve just been played?”

“Oh, yes,” Sherlock said, still amazed.

“For an ad campaign.” John looked uncomfortable.

“Brilliant, isn’t it?”
“Brilliant?”

“Safest place to hide,” Sherlock said, unable to take his eyes off Smith. “Plain sight.”

At the table, Smith was picking a bit of cereal from his teeth while a wardrobe mistress adjusted his shirt and a make-up artist stroked a brush through her tin of powder.

“Mr Holmes?” an approaching woman said. “Culverton wants to know if you’re okay going straight to the hospital.”

“Hospital?” John asked.

“Culverton’s doing a visit,” she said. “The kids would love to meet you both. I think he sort of promised.”

Try to act casual, Sherlock told himself. The visit was the essential part of today’s exercise. “Oh, okay,” he said, off-handedly.

“If you’d just like to come this way.”

* * * * *

John had no idea what to think. He didn’t like not knowing what Sherlock was up to. And he didn’t like him being up to anything in the first place, in the state he was in. Also, he most certainly didn’t like him being in that state to begin with (and that was the understatement of the year).

He was playing some high-stakes game – that much was clear – without informing John of the purpose or the rules. Sherlock had promised last year never to do that again. And he hadn’t, until now. So the fact that he wasn’t sticking to his promise now, was either because John not knowing was somehow essential to his plan, or – and John shuddered to think of it – Sherlock had lost it to such degree that he did not really have a plan at all.

They walked to the limo that would take them to the hospital, where Smith was apparently doing some sort of charity visit. Just PR, of course. Why Sherlock had agreed to come too was just one of today’s mysteries. When they were seated inside the car, John tried to fish for information once more. “So... what are we doing here? What’s the point?” he asked, hoping to get an actual answer this time.

Sherlock was busy typing a text. “I needed a hug,” he said, without looking up and continuing to type.

What the actual...?!

Then Smith knocked on the window on John’s side of the car. John pressed the button to lower it. Smith bent down and looked in. “What do you think, Mr Holmes? ‘Cereal’ killer.”

Still typing, Sherlock said, “It’s funny ’cause it’s true!”

Smith straightened up and started to walk away. “See you at the hospital.”

“Oh, you can have this back now,” Sherlock called after him.

Smith stopped. John heard the sound of a message being sent from the phone Sherlock had been typing on, as Sherlock lowered it to his lap and tried to look nonchalant.

Of course. He’d nicked Smith’s ruddy phone, John then realised, smiling internally. But what had
he been doing with it and why? Despite not knowing, John already felt much better about this whole thing. At least there was some sort of plan, apparently, after all.

Smith turned and walked back to the window. “Have what back?”

Sherlock reached across John and held out the phone with a tight smile. “Thanks for the hug.”

_The clever bastard._

Frowning, Smith took the phone.

“Oh, I sent and deleted a text,” Sherlock added. “You might get a reply but I doubt it.” He settled back into his seat.

_Of course. To whom, though, John wondered._

Smiling unperturbedly, Smith tucked his phone into his inside jacket pocket. “It’s password protected.”

“Please!” Sherlock scoffed.

Smith chuckled. “We’re going to have endless fun, Mr Holmes, aren’t we?”

“Oh no. No, not endless,” Sherlock replied gravely.

Smith walked away, looking as freakishly confident as ever. Sherlock looked at him grimly for a moment, then hugged himself, sighing silently.

“Need another hit, do you?” John asked.

“I can wait until the hospital.” Sherlock laid his head back and closed his eyes.

Well, that was just lovely, wasn’t it? The sod was actually carrying the stuff around with him. Naturally, he had planned his own abduction really well.

Once at the hospital (after Sherlock had ‘visited the loo’), they soon found themselves in the middle of a play area in a children’s ward. Child patients and their nurses were sitting and standing around Smith, who turned as Sherlock and John entered the room. Everyone applauded. Another nurse smiled at them as they walked past.

“Right, here he comes, the internet ‘tec!” Smith called. “You all know Sherlock Holmes!”

Sherlock continued into the room, mock-gaping at the sight. “Hello!”

The children cheered and applauded harder.

“Oh, and Doctor Watson, of course,” Smith added, flatly.

Maybe he should start putting a bit more effort into his blog again, John thought. Update more often.

“Mr Holmes. I was wondering – well... we all were, weren’t we? – maybe you could tell us about some of your cases.”

Sherlock walked forward into the circle of children, going into full lecture mode. “The main feature of interest in the field of criminal investigation is not the sensational aspects of the crime itself, but
rather the iron chain of reasoning, from cause to effect, that reveals – step by step – the solution. That’s the only truly remarkable aspect of the entire affair. Now, I will share with you the facts and evidence as they were available to me, and in this very room you will all attempt to solve the case of Blessington the Poisoner.”

He had wandered back towards John while talking, who then spoke quietly. “I think you slightly gave away the ending.”

“There were five main suspects…” Sherlock went on, unperturbed.

“One of them called Blessington,” said John.

Sherlock briefly threw him a look. “But it’s more about how he did it.”

“Poison?”

“Okay.”

The kids laughed.

John cringed.

Suddenly, John involuntarily pictured Mary in the crowd, sitting behind the children. Saintly beaming at him, as if she wasn’t a ruthless murderer. “He should be wearing the hat,” her ghost said, smiling her deceptive, radiant, coy smile. “The kids would love the hat.”

*Oh, for fuck’s sake.*

John looked back to Sherlock, who was turning in a circle to look at his audience. “So, any questions?”

Smith, the shrewd snake, raised his hand, and asked – all innocence, “How do you catch a serial killer?”

Sherlock looked at Smith silently for a long moment. “Same way you catch any other killer.”

“No, but most killers kill someone they know,” Smith said.

Sherlock blinked several times.

“You’re looking for a murderer in a tiny social grouping,” Smith went on.

“Um, Mr Smith. Um, I’m-I’m just, er, wondering,” one of the nurses said. “Maybe this isn’t a suitable subject for the children.”

Without turning to her, Smith quietly said, “Nurse Cornish. How long have you been with us now?”

There was a short silence.

“Seven years,” she answered, clearly uncomfortable.

He turned to look at her straight-faced. “Seven years.”

She smiled nervously.

“Okay,” he said, finally. After a moment, he turned back towards Sherlock and the audience. His
tone was serious when he spoke, and the adults in the room were starting to look a little uncomfortable. “Serial killers choose their victims at random. Surely that must make it more difficult?”

Sherlock stared at him. “Some of them advertise,” he smirked, wide-eyed.

“Do they really?” Smith asked.

This time, when Sherlock spoke, his voice was quiet and intense. “Serial killing is an expression of power, ego, a signature in human destruction.”

Smith pressed his lips together, fiddling with a Barbie doll on his lap with both hands.

“Ultimately,” Sherlock went on, as he and Smith kept their eyes locked on each other, “for full satisfaction, it requires... plain sight. Additionally, serial killers are easily profiled. They tend to be social outcasts, educationally sub-normal.”

“No, no, no,” Smith replied. “You’re just talking about the ones you know, the ones you’ve caught. But hello, dummy, you only catch the dumb ones. Now, imagine if the Queen wanted to kill some people. What would happen then? All that power, all that money.” He squeezed the head of the doll with one thumb, crushing its face. “Sweet little government dancing attendance.”

Nurse Cornish looked around the room anxiously.

John shifted his weight from one foot to the other. This was without doubt the most disturbing thing he had ever heard anyone say. He was beginning to realise why Sherlock was obsessed with this man. Something was definitely not right here. It just remained to be seen what exactly.

Meanwhile, Smith pulled the doll’s head off its body. He smiled up at Sherlock, whose eyes were still fixed on the doll. Smith pushed the head back on and looked round at the kids. “We all love the Queen, don’t we? And I bet she’d love you lot! Money, power, fame.” He paused. “Some things make you untouchable,” Smith added, contently.

No. This couldn’t be.

Was Sherlock actually spot-on, despite the state he was in?

“God save the Queen!” Smith said, a little louder, looking round at the kids. “She could open a slaughterhouse and we’d all probably pay the entrance fee!”

Oh my God.

How could the man simply say these things? Was nobody going to do anything?

“No one’s untouchable,” John ventured, after a moment, in spite of his mouth having gone as dry as parchment.

“No one?” Smith asked, innocently.

Sherlock’s eyes turned towards John and he smiled slightly. John was sure Sherlock could tell that John was now unconditionally on board with whatever plan Sherlock had in mind. This man, if he was anything close to what he seemed to be, needed to be brought down.

Smith looked round at the children. “Look at you all! So gloomy! Can’t you take a joke?” Chuckling, he stood up. “A big round of applause for Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson!” He
himself clapped his hands while the audience applauded rather unenthusiastically. “Come on! Wonderful!” He turned to smile at Sherlock, who gazed back at him intensely. “Thank you so much for coming. Thank you.”

Sherlock’s eyes shifted to meet John’s. John returned the look. Together they would set right whatever wrong was happening here. Finally, they were working together again on a case that wasn’t about Mary – and hence about John. This was just the two of them against the rest of the world, bringing justice where it was desperately needed.

A few moments later, Smith led Sherlock and John along an empty, bright white-painted corridor, leaving everybody else behind them in the ward.

“Where are we going now?” Sherlock asked.

“I want to show you my favourite room,” Smith said, completely emotionless.

When they walked past a door with a window in it, Sherlock glanced towards it, then did a double-take. “No, let’s go in here.” He pulled the door open and went in.

A sign on the wall outside showed that this was Suite W34, Directors Boardroom B-2. There was a white, rectangular table in the middle, with three chairs on each side and one at each end. Weirdly, there were drug stands beside each of the side chairs.

Sherlock walked around the table, gesturing towards it. “So you’ve had another one of your little meetings.” He smiled humourlessly at Smith.

“Oh, it’s just a monthly top-up. Confession is good for the soul... providing you can delete it.”

John looked closely at a bag hanging from one of the stands. “What’s TD12?”

“It’s a memory inhibitor,” Sherlock said.

“Bliss,” Smith clarified.

John frowned. “Bliss?”

“Opt-in ignorance. Makes the world go round.”

He did have a point there, sadly. But what on earth was the context here?

Sherlock folded his arms. “Anyone ever ‘opt’ to remember?”

“Some people take the drip out, yeah. Some people have the same... urges. Come on.” He clapped his hands together. “Wasting time.”

“Indeed.” Sherlock looked at his watch. “You have – I estimate – twenty minutes left.” Smiling, he walked towards the door which Smith was about to push open.

Smith then turned back towards him. “Sorry?”

“I sent a text from your phone, remember? It was read almost immediately. Factoring in a degree of shock, an emotional decision and a journey time based on the associated address, I’d say that your life as you know it has twenty minutes left to run.” Sherlock checked his watch again. “Well, no, seventeen and a half, to be precise, but I rounded up for dramatic effect, so please do show us your favourite room.” He walked closer to Smith, glaring at him intensely. “It’ll give you a chance to say... goodbye.”
Smith just chuckled unpleasantly. “Come along,” he said, turning around.

Sherlock pulled a brief mock smile behind him, and followed Smith out of the room.

John also started towards the door.

“The game is on,” a voice in his head said. Mary’s voice.

*For crying out loud, when would her shadow stop giving a running commentary of his life?!

John stopped as the door fell closed in front of him. He raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“Do you still miss me?” her imaginary voice asked. What an inane question. But of course she would ask that. Moriarty’s best pal. There was no way in hell he would ever miss either of those two. Funny they should ask, over and over again. The only person John missed was the lovely, ‘normal’ wife he had once thought he had, but who had existed solely in his mind.

And Sherlock, of course.

He had missed him, intensely, deeply, desperately, the past four weeks. But John figured that they could now stop acting estranged, finally. Almost a month had passed, and to the outside world, this case had obviously brought them back together.

The only problem was Sherlock’s drug addiction now standing between them, which was no minor thing, naturally. It was, in fact, like a huge monster, lurking at him from every shadow. How they were going to defeat this demon, he still did not know, but they would, somehow. Together.

He turned to look back into the conference room. *Opt-in ignorance.* Then he turned away, thoughtful, and followed after Sherlock and Smith.

* * * * *

Chestnut colour and grass. And some flowers.

Painting hairs of fur was difficult. But important to get right.

Sunlight reflecting off the fur, making him shine like he used to.

Beautiful dog. Dark eyes full of loyalty.

What he wouldn’t give to stroke that soft fur again.

If only he hadn’t died.

Wine colour on brush. Why?? Arm in mid-air. No, not on canvas. No blood in picture.

Only good memories.

Rinse brush. Rinse it all away.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry about the next chapter, because it’s not as angsty as you might think. :)

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This is a fix-it, remember?
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

The morgue scene, but with a different ending than we were shown. I’m sure this is what really happened.

By the way, I would never of my own volition have written a character based so blatantly on the BBC DJ and presenter Jimmy Savile, who in 2012 turned out to be the most prolific and horrendous pedophile and sexual predator ever recorded in the UK (facilitated by the keys he was given of one of the hospitals he raised money for). By basing the character of Culverton Smith so closely on Savile, many British viewers felt that the writers of BBC Sherlock very crassly made light of the trauma of hundreds of Savile's victims.

To have John by his side again felt as if some sort of balance in the universe had been restored, Sherlock thought. The dull, empty pain in his heart was gone. Of course, he wouldn’t in fact have been able to do this at all without John. Because Molly had been right. He was barely functioning. But that was – naturally – essential to his plan. John’s presence gave him the strength to drag himself through the final few metres to the finish line. As did the coke, of course.

He’d taken his last hit in the toilet half an hour ago. After all this, once he had secured a place in one of the hospital beds, it would be time to detox, of course. The mere thought sent a chill down his spine. He knew he was in deep. But a man had got to do what a man had got to do. For Faith. And for her father’s victims.

He looked at John, standing next to him in the elevator. He had his head lowered and was pinching the bridge of his nose.

They were on their way to see Smith’s ‘favourite room’. Not the room that provided bliss from IV bags and unconstrained confessions for Smith, apparently.

Sherlock could feel himself getting increasingly uncomfortable and twitchy. Like a tide inevitably coming in further and further, little waves at a time. But he would be allowed to rest and lie down soon.

“Speaking of serial killers, you know who’s my favourite?” Smith asked.

There was the sound of a ‘bing’ as the lift stopped.

“Other than yourself?” Sherlock asked. It seemed that for every minute he spent in the man’s presence, Sherlock’s repulsion for him grew. Such a classic example of a creep craving an audience. But now was not the time for emotions or opinions.

Smith chuckled and led them out, as the doors opened. “H. H. Holmes,” he said. “Relative of yours?”
They walked along a blue-painted corridor. The ceiling was very high above them and pipework ran along it.

“Not as far as I know,” Sherlock replied, flatly.

“You should check. What an idiot.” Smith pushed through a set of double doors and looked around the room as he walked in.

The morgue.

“Everyone out,” the creep ordered.

A body was lying on a silver chrome examination table, covered by a sheet up to the neck. A male pathologist stood at the other side of the table holding a clipboard and pen. A woman was nearby with her hands on a wheeled trolley with medical equipment on it.

The man looked up at Smith. “Mr Smith, we’re actually in the middle of something.”

Smith stopped and looked at him. “Saheed, isn’t it?”

“Saheed, yes.”

“How long have you been working here now?” Smith asked, casually.

Sherlock leaned against the side of a cupboard, hands in his coat pocket, watching with interest. This man had some impressively simple but effective intimidation techniques.

“Four years.”

“Four years,” Smith said, softly. “Well, that’s a long time, isn’t it?” He drew his lips back from his teeth. “Four years.”

Saheed swallowed nervously, then looked round at the woman and two other men in the room. “Okay, everyone.” Clicking his pen shut, he pulled the sheet over the face of the person on the examination table.

John looked towards the other people, frowning.

“Five minutes?” Saheed asked.

“Come back in ten,” Smith replied, grimly.

Looking at him uneasily for a moment, Saheed and his colleagues started towards the door. John awkwardly stepped aside to get out of their way.

“Saheed,” Smith said.

Saheed stopped and turned to look at him.

“This time, knock.”

Well, that was interesting. Sherlock made a mental note of bringing in Saheed as a witness when the moment arrived.

The pathologists left and the doors fell closed behind them.
“How can you do that?” John asked, clearly baffled. “I mean, how… how are you even allowed in here?”

“Oh, I can go anywhere I like.” Smith took a ring with keys from his trouser pocket, held them up and shook them noisily. “Anywhere at all.”

John stared at him, appalled. “They gave you keys?”

“They presented ’em to me. There was a ceremony. You can watch that on YouTube.”

Great. Jimmy Savile’s murderous cousin. Sherlock wasn’t sure who was more evil. Christ. Hadn’t people learnt not to give psychopaths unlimited access to places with vulnerable people just because they donated to ruddy charity?

(Well, certainly the BBC had seen no reason to stop this scenario from unfolding – more than once.)

*Power, fame*, Sherlock mused. *Viewing figures.* He shuddered. He then walked over to one of the nearby cabinets and pulled open the door. Looking at the slide-out shelves in there, he said, “So, your favourite room: the mortuary.”

“What d’you think?” Smith asked.

The top shelf inside the cabinet was empty. Sherlock bent down to look at the next shelf, on which lay a sheet-covered body. “Tough crowd,” he replied dryly. He closed the door and turned around.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Smith said, pulling back the sheet on the table to reveal the head and shoulders of the corpse – an elderly woman. There was a Y-shaped cut, sewn up, in the chest. “No, I’ve always found them quite pliable.” He reached out to the body and pulled her jaw down with his fingers.

“Don’t do that,” John said.

Staring at the woman intensely, Smith muttered, “She’s fine. She’s dead.” He smirked. “H. H. Holmes loved the dead. He mass-produced ’em.”

For John’s benefit, Sherlock clarified, “Serial killer, active during the Chicago Fair.” He walked around the room, trying to focus his brain energy on calculating the chance of success for each of his two plans.

“Do you know what he did?” Smith asked, looking at John. “He built a hotel, a special hotel, just to kill people. You know, with a hanging room, gas chamber, specially adapted furnace. Stupid. So stupid.”

“Why stupid?” John asked, never afraid to ask the obvious question if the answer was not obvious.

“Well, all that effort. You don’t build a beach if you want to hide a pebble; you just find a beach!”

Sherlock had stopped at the far end of the mortuary and was leaning back against a sink. He was starting to come down hard now. From the cocaine, that was. The effects of heroin lasted longer, and seeing as cocaine countered those, being a stimulant, that made the heroin kick in doubly hard now that the coke was wearing off – but not in a pleasant way.

*Drowsiness, blackness, balancing on the edge of an invisible precipice, luring him in, pulling him down, down… into hell. Fingernails scraping, holding on, resisting gravity. Almost.*
“And if you wanna hide a murder,” Smith continued, somewhere far away, “or wanna hide lots and lots of murders, just find a...”

Sherlock noticed that Smith paused for a moment, meeting John’s eyes before finishing his sentence.

“... hospital.”

_Fascinating._

John lowered his head in disbelief for a moment, then raised it again and took a step closer. “Can we be clear? Are you confessing?”

“To what?”

“The way you’re talking...” He stopped.

“Oh, sorry,” Smith said, softly. He paused for a moment. “Yes.” He chuckled briefly. “You mean, am I a serial killer, or am I just trying to mess with your funny little head? Well, it’s true.” He walked around the head of the table while John looked at him grimly. “I do like to mess with people...”

Just a few more minutes, Sherlock thought. Just a few more minutes, and then it would either be plan A or plan B. He’d located all the necessary items for the second plan, if the first failed. If only he could stop trembling. No. No matter. Trembling was fine.

“...and yes, I am a bit creepy, but that’s just my U.S.P. I use it to sell breakfast cereal. But am I what he says I am?” Smith pointed at Sherlock. “Is that what you’re asking?” He walked past John and continued along the side of the table.

John turned to watch him. “Yes.”

“Hmm. Well, let me ask you this.” He stopped and looked at John. “Are you really a doctor?”

“Yeah, of course I am.”

“Well, no, a medical doctor, you know. Not just feet, or media studies or something.”

“I’m a doctor,” John stated firmly.

Smith snorted quietly. He seemed about to walk away, but then took a couple of steps back towards John, looking angrily at him. “Are you... are you actually serious?” He walked away again. “I’ve played along with this joke. It’s not funny anymore. No... look at him.” He gestured towards Sherlock. Looking back to John, he held up two fingers on his right hand. “There are two possible explanations for what’s going on ’ere,” he said, heatedly. “Either I’m a serial killer... or Sherlock Holmes is off his tits on drugs, hmm? Delusional paranoia about a public personality? That’s not so special. It’s not even new!”

Walking close to Sherlock, Smith said, in a stage whisper, “I think you need to, er, tell your faithful little friend how you’re wasting his time because you’re too high to know what’s real anymore.”

Sherlock realised he needed to play for time. “I apologise,” he said, quietly.

Smith turned and looked at him.

Oh, how he loved a little touch of drama. “I-I-I’ve miscalculated,” he said. And then, louder, “I
forgot to factor in the traffic!” Stepping forward, Sherlock looked at his watch and then at Smith. “Nineteen and a half minutes.”

Initially, he’d only planned to get admitted to Smith’s hospital and to then try and entice Smith into trying to kill him, so he could catch him in the act and get him arrested. But when he’d been presented with the opportunity to pickpocket him and ‘borrow’ his phone, so that he could solve Faith’s case a little more directly – and with considerably less fuss – he had grabbed that chance with both hands.

It was always good to hedge your bets.

Clearing his throat, and ignoring the strong wave of nausea in his stomach, he continued onwards a couple of steps towards the door, then stopped and dramatically cupped one hand to his ear. A soft clunking sound could be heard some distance away. “Ah, the footsteps you’re about to hear will be very familiar to you,” he said, “not least because there’ll be three impacts rather than two. The third, of course, will be the end of a walking cane. Your daughter Faith’s walking cane.”

“And why would she be here?” Smith asked, undisturbed.

“You invited her.” Sherlock smiled tightly at him. “Ah, let’s see if I can recall. ‘Faith... I can stand it no longer, I’ve confessed... to my crimes. Please forgive me!’”

“Why would that have any effect?” Smith smiled. “You don’t know her.”

“Oh, but I do. I spent a whole evening with her.” Sherlock grinned. “We had chips.” He looked down reflectively. “I think she liked me.”

“You don’t know Faith. You simply do not.”

“I know you care about her deeply. I know you invited her to one of your special board meetings.” Sherlock stepped closer to Smith. “You care what she thinks.”

Smith continued to smile confidently.

Sherlock laughed. “You maintain an impressive façade!” Then, more seriously, he added, “I think it’s about to break. She came to Baker Street.”

“No she didn’t.”

“She came to see me because she was scared of her daddy.”

“Never happened. Is this another one of your drug-fuelled fantasies?” Smith looked across to John and pulled a face while noisily sucking in a fake-nervous breath.

“Well, let’s see, shall we?” Keeping his eyes fixed on Smith, Sherlock raised his voice and called over his shoulder towards the doors, “Faith, stop loitering at the door and come in! This is your father’s favourite room.”

The doors opened and Faith walked in.

Sherlock turned to face her.

“Dad? What’s happening? What was that text?” she asked, smiling. Strangely, although she still had the same northern English accent, her voice sounded slightly different. “Are you having one of your jokes?” She chuckled, then stopped walking forward and looked enquiringly at Sherlock.
“Who are you?”

Sherlock blinked, stupefied.

It was not Faith. At least, it wasn’t the Faith who he’d spent the evening with. She looked incredibly similar in height and size; she had the same style and length of hair, although it was a very slightly different shade of mid-blonde, and she was wearing similar glasses. But this Faith looked fancy, happy, wealthy. She was beaming.

Sherlock frowned at her. “Who the hell are you?”

Smith walked across the room to the woman. “Sherlock Holmes!” he said to her. “Surely you recognise him.”

“Oh my God!” She gasped and smiled at her father, mouth still open. “Sherlock Holmes!” She looked at Sherlock. “I love your blog.”

“You’re not her. You’re not the woman who came to Baker Street.”

“Um, well, no. Never been there.”

Smith walked to stand between the two of them and gestured at both. “Well, I thought you two were old friends!”

Faith giggled a little. “No! We’ve never met.”

Thank God for plan A. This was just plan B, anyway.

Smith raised a hand to his mouth, chuckling. “Oh, dear! Oh!”

John looked very much uncomfortable and stepped towards Sherlock, saying his name, as if asking what was going on.

Sherlock hadn’t the foggiest idea what was, in fact, going on. But it didn’t really matter.

Faith let out a nervous laugh and Smith was still chuckling.

“So who came to my flat?” he wondered. Maybe he said it out loud.

“Well, it wasn’t me,” he heard Faith say.

Smith’s laughter became louder. “Oh, no!”

Sherlock tried to focus on this Faith. She looked... decidedly different, although he could not put his finger on what made him sure it wasn’t her. He screwed his eyes shut.

Who came to my flat?

Bizarre as this all was, though, he should really let it go. It was time to set Plan A into action. He had almost all the steps figured out. Basically he just had to stop pretending he was alright and add a little flavour on top.

Sherlock raised both hands and covered his nose and mouth, breathing out a trembling breath as he slowly backed away.

Smith continued to cackle delightedly. “Oh no!”
Sherlock shook his head and pressed the sides of his thumbs to his eyes as he screwed them shut. He flailed wildly, groaning and opening his eyes wide. As Smith’s manic cackling continued, Sherlock buried his head in his hands, then turned away from him, bumping into a tray on a stand. The tray rattled noisily and he pretended to flinch away, focusing briefly on the row of six scalpels lying on it.

Nearby, John looked at him in concern as he continued to spin.

Sherlock needed to get hurt. Needed to make sure he ended up in one of the hospital beds in this very building. Right now.

“Sherlock,” John said, sounding worried.

Sherlock stopped and faced Smith, who pointed at him, still laughing.

“Sherlock? Are you alright? Sherlock, are you okay?” John asked.

John. John would knock him down if he had to. If Sherlock would pose a threat to someone, John would not hesitate to defend them. Even if it was Smith.

Feigning panic, Sherlock pointed a hand at Smith. He didn’t mind that his arm was shaking. “Watch him. He’s got a knife.”

“I’ve got a what?!” Smith laughed, incredulously.

“You’ve got a scalpel!” Sherlock yelled. “You picked it up from that table.” He blindly pointed to the tray which was then several feet away from him. There was clearly a gap in the row of scalpels and only five remained. “I saw you take it.”

“I certainly did not!”

“Look behind his back!” Sherlock screamed.

“What?” Smith smiled, bringing both hands up and waving them in the air.

“I saw you take it! I saw you!” As he spoke, he pointed his right arm at Smith, brandishing the scalpel he was in fact holding himself.

Smith’s smile turned to a look of alarm as he backed away, keeping his hands in the air. “Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

What a delight to see him shocked, finally, instead of smiling his hideous smile.

Faith raised a horrified hand to her mouth.

John held out a stern hand to Sherlock. “Whoa, Sherlock, d’you wanna put that down?”

Sherlock stared wide-eyed at the scalpel in his shaking hand. Smith and Faith continued to make noises of concern while John shook his head anxiously, his eyes fixed on Sherlock’s hand. Sherlock stumbled back, glaring savagely at Smith and pointing his left hand at him. “Stop laughing at me,” he hissed.

“I’m not laughing!” Smith said, his hands still raised.

“He’s not laughing, Sherlock,” John said.
“STOP LAUGHING AT ME!” And then, Sherlock surged forward towards Smith with the scalpel aimed at him.

“Sherlock!” John yelled.

Faith let out a brief scream.

Exactly as Sherlock had expected, John seized his lower arm and turned one shoulder into Sherlock’s body, then slammed his hand down onto Sherlock’s hand and knocked the scalpel out of it. As it clattered noisily to the floor, he turned and grabbed Sherlock’s coat with both hands and bundled him backwards across the room, pushing him against one of the cabinet doors.

Sherlock let out a grunt. Not that it actually hurt. It was all about giving in now.

“Stop it!” John said loudly, angrily. He looked at Sherlock intently, before releasing his grip.

The second John let go of him, Sherlock let himself drop to the floor, deliberately falling in the most unfortunate way he could. It took all of his concentration and willpower to suppress his reflex of protecting his head as he fell with his temple against the protruding handle of one of the silver-coloured cabinets.

Everything went grey, then black.

Then nothing.

When he opened his eyes, a while later, he was still in the mortuary, but on a stretcher, nurses flocking around him.

Excellent. He must indeed have blacked out for a minute.

Mission complete.

There was just one more thing.

“John,” he whispered.

“Yes. I’m right here,” he could hear John’s voice saying, close to him. He sounded worried. He gently took Sherlock’s hand in his. “I’m right here, Sherlock,” he repeated, softly, not letting go. “You’re going to be alright, you hear me? You will stay in hospital for a while and you’re going to get better now.”

Sherlock’s head still hurt too much to keep his eyes open properly.

“John, can you please bring me your old walking cane? As soon as possible. Within the hour. It’s important.”

Chapter End Notes

With a million, gazillion thanks to Ariane De Vere once more. Not only the dialogues, but a lot of the descriptions in this chapter and several others are (almost) straight from her amazing episode transcripts.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thank God Greg had been so lenient as to allow John to postpone giving his witness statement until later that afternoon, rather than having him go straight to the Yard from the *almost-crime scene*. First, John needed to collect the cane.

If it hadn’t been for a remark by Smith’s assistant that John had happened to overhear, though – referring to another appointment Smith was heading for immediately after Lestrade was done with him – John would never have left Sherlock in that hospital unsupervised, of course. But luck seemed to be on their side.

As soon as John arrived at Baker Street and was about to put the key – which he’d never stopped carrying with him – into the lock, he noticed that Mycroft must be there. He’d straightened the knocker again.

John didn’t know whether to be relieved or annoyed that Mycroft had apparently already heard about the incident and had decided for some reason to come here. Why, though, he wondered? To search Sherlock’s flat? A drugs bust was rather beside the point, unless it was to clear out any stocks. To intercept John, then?

John crossed the downstairs hallway and went up the stairs.

*God*, he had no idea what had gotten into Sherlock. Why he’d gone back on drugs, why he’d gone after Culverton bloody Smith *publicly* and, most of all, why he had attacked the man with a sodding scalpel.

But he knew one thing. In spite of everything, Sherlock was exactly on the right trail. There was definitely something more than fishy about that creep.

Rather than going up both flights of stairs, to get his cane – which he knew was still standing in a corner inside the wardrobe up in his old room – he entered the living room first.

There was Mycroft, in his three-piece suit, pensively sitting in Sherlock’s chair, hands folded over the handle of his expensive umbrella. “Have you come to get his toothbrush and pyjamas?” Mycroft said, humourlessly.

John hadn’t actually thought of that. But he should probably take those as well. Good point. “Er… yes.”

Mycroft finally looked up at him, with weary eyes. Worry was etched onto his face. “He never called you, did he.” It wasn’t really a question.

“No,” John said. He took a couple more steps into the room. “We’d agreed to stay out of touch for a while.”

“He can’t *handle* being out of touch with you, John,” Mycroft said sternly. “Please don’t ever try it again. Unless you mean it.”

John cleared his throat, choosing not to dwell on what Mycroft said just now. “Did you know he was back on drugs?”
“I heavily suspected.”

“Why didn’t you do anything?” John demanded.

“I called you.”

“There was nothing I could have done!” John shouted. He briefly closed his eyes.

*What on earth did Mycroft expect of him?*

“There was even less that I could have done,” Mycroft responded, giving him a dead stare. He then stood, as unruffled as ever.

John realised he was probably right. Save for the occasional meal that John had managed to force onto him, no one could ever make Sherlock do or stop doing anything – least of all Mycroft.

John folded his arms in front of him. There was something else he’d been meaning to ask, and which seemed relevant in the current situation, somehow. “Mycroft, last time when we were on the phone...”

Mycroft immediately screwed up his face in distaste. “No-no-no-no, stop.” He raised a disparaging hand and turned away. “I detest conversation in the past tense.”

John stepped closer to him. “You said the fact that you were his brother made no difference.”

“It doesn’t.”

“You said it didn’t the last time and it wouldn’t with Sherlock, so who was it the last time? Who were you talking about?”

“Nobody. I... misspoke,” Mycroft said primly.

“You’re lying.”

“I assure you I’m not.”

John looked at Mycroft for a moment. “Sherlock’s not your only brother. There’s another one, isn’t there?”

Mycroft held his gaze. “No,” he spoke firmly.

John chuckled. “Jesus! A secret brother! What, is he locked up in a tower or something?”

Mycroft raised his head and looked down his nose at John, but then turned his gaze towards the door, as Mrs Hudson barged into the room. “Where is Sherlock? How is he?” she asked, clearly as concerned as they were.

“He’s in hospital. He’ll be fine,” John said. (Never mind there was a serial killer on the loose that he had provoked beyond imagination. And never mind Molly saying that he had only weeks to live in the first place – with the quantity of substance abuse he’d indulged in – unless he kicked his drugs habit. Which he would, surely. Now that he was in hospital, he had no choice.)

“What?” Mycroft said, giving John a meaningful look.

John stared back at him, unmoved – at first. And then, as John allowed Mycroft’s implications to properly sink in, it finally, slowly, began to dawn on John how important he *really* was to
Sherlock. How Sherlock would only keep off drugs if John was there. Mycroft had practically said as much. And hadn’t the exact same thing happened a year ago, after his wedding? He was realising only now that his absence might have had something to do with Sherlock’s relapse back then as well. John guessed it was a habit to keep underestimating his importance to Sherlock. “I’ll make sure of it,” he said, determinedly.

He hurried up to his room to grab the walking cane, then fetched some fresh PJs, underpants and a toothbrush from Sherlock’s room and travelled straight back to Saint Caedwalla’s Hospital as fast as he could.

* * * * *

Sherlock was asleep.

John sat at his bed, just as he had for days on end last autumn. Except that now Sherlock looked scruffy, dirty and unshaven and he had a large bulge on his head and a swollen lip from where he’d hit the floor in the morgue.

Another difference was that John now knew – almost for certain – that Sherlock had more than one brother; a bizarre revelation which still blew his mind.

What secrets was that family hiding?

John looked at the bruises on Sherlock’s face, at his chest subtly rising and falling with each breath.

He hadn’t meant to grab him quite that forcefully, but the truth was, he hadn’t known what Sherlock was capable of in that moment. And weirdly, the minute he’d released his grip, Sherlock had simply collapsed like a rag doll, completely unexpectedly. John should have seen it coming, should have caught him. But he hadn’t.

But perhaps his fall had been a blessing in disguise. At least he was in a hospital now, because of his wounds (minor ones, but not completely innocent in his condition). Here, they could wean him off the drugs; take care of him.

John let out a long sigh and screwed his eyes shut. He hated to think what the narcotics had done to Sherlock’s body, let alone to that beautiful, amazingly sharp brain of his.

He looked again at Sherlock’s face, his perfect cheekbones that were now slightly sharper than usual, his dark curls plastered greasily against his pillow. His violinist hands lying limply at his sides.

A shadow of the man he knew.

Just a few types of alien molecules added to his organism, disrupting the natural balance between thousands of endogenous biochemical compounds in his nervous system and beyond; turning him into an unreliable loose projectile. Just like John’s dad and sister, when they were on booze.

Completely against John’s will, moisture started to collect in the corners of his eyes.

He wanted to turn away from Sherlock, felt it was what he should do, for his own wellbeing. Just like he had with Dad and Harry. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t.

Also, Mycroft had made it clear to him that Sherlock needed him. Really needed him. Maybe even as much as John needed Sherlock – although in a very different way.
And besides, Sherlock might not even be in this state if it weren’t for John…

Without consciously deciding to, he took one of Sherlock’s hands in his and pressed his face against it, willing himself not to cry.

It was useless.

He sat there, sobbing quietly until his tears had run dry.

Then, feeling completely empty, he got up, leaving the cane propped against a chair next to the bed. With one last look at his best friend, he left the room.

He would come back as soon as he’d spoken to Lestrade.

John could only pray to God that Smith’s current appointment lasted more than two hours.

* * * * *

Well, that had been a waste of time, Culverton Smith grumbled, driving all the way to Stratford to find out that Cornelia had mis-scheduled the visit, which had turned out not to be until next week. But at least he now had time for a different visit; one that he was, in fact, looking forward to much more.

He entered the room with a bag of TD12 in one hand and a contented smile on his face. Plus a lovely feeling of anticipation in his stomach.

Sherlock Holmes was already equipped with an IV line. Changing the drip itself was easy.

Holmes looked very drowsy, which was a pity. But nevertheless, this was – without any doubt – going to be the best confession session he’d ever had. Telling the great detective all about his hobby, without him being able to remember a single thing afterwards. This felt almost as good as doing it.

He made himself comfortable in a chair next to the bed.

Then he talked and talked, revelling once more in all the wonderful details of each unique case as he recounted them to the barely conscious detective.

The edge of danger, that was always there both during the act itself and during his confessions, was now heightened. This was an extremely clever man. What if he remembered some bits and patches and would manage to piece them together afterwards? Not that he would have any proof at all, of course.

What if he--?

Wait.

What if he carried recording devices with him?

The thought only occurred to Smith halfway through his fifth story. He stopped talking and got up, walking over to where Sherlock’s clothes and coat were hanging. Indeed, as he rummaged through all of the garments, he found no less than three recording devices, hidden away in seams and pockets.

Grinding his teeth, unsure whether to be angry or impressed, he put them in his own pockets. “Ooh, you’re a clever little bastard, aren’t you? You had this whole thing planned,” he murmured, turning
back to Sherlock. “There must have been one or two brain cells of yours still functioning then, more than I’d given you credit for in the sorry state you’re in. Or was it your friend, Doctor Watson? He didn’t come across as overly bright to me, but who knows. Either way, you don’t mind me taking these, do you? It’s no fun if you cheat.”

Sherlock only blinked a couple of times, not opening his eyes to more than a slit. Not a sound crossed his lips.

Smith ended the session by taking away the drip bag, switching it back to morphine.

He’d been planning to postpone killing Sherlock Holmes until after he’d had a nice number of sessions with him, but he was definitely going to rethink that now. He would first go and destroy the devices. And then, he might come back for the final round later this very afternoon.

He opened the hidden door and left Sherlock in silence.

* * * * *

With considerable effort, Sherlock opened his eyes. He had no idea where he was, and only the vaguest memory of the past twenty-four hours.

It was like his head was full of fog.

Moreover, he felt like absolute hell, aching all over, nauseous, unable to focus his eyes properly on anything and at the same time, badly in need of a hit. Very badly.

He tried to look around the room he found himself in.

There was no one else there.

The side walls had white wallpaper, covered with trendy, pale blue circles. Opposite the bed, there was a large wood panel attached a couple of inches in front of the wall, curving over into the room at the top, with lights shining around the edges. A light near the bed shone on a drip stand.

He was in a hospital room.

Different hospital from last time, though.

Of course. Culverton Smith’s hospital.

He’d made it.

Tremors. Abdominal cramps. Sweat all over his body.

He closed his eyes, focusing on calm breaths, and slowly, eventually, exhaustion pulled him back into the realm of dreams.

He was holding a knife, a tiny knife, pointing it at someone. A little blond man with bad teeth, who kept laughing and laughing, doubling over laughing. Laughing at him.

Finally, as the man saw Sherlock’s knife, his smile turned to a look of alarm and he backed away.

John’s voice. "Whoa-whoa-whoa. Whoa, Sherlock, d’you wanna put that down?"

Sherlock stared at the scalpel in his shaking hand. As the sound of the man’s laughter continued to echo, Sherlock lowered his head and shook it, screwing his eyes shut.
“Stop laughing at me,” Sherlock said in a low hiss. “STOP LAUGHING AT ME!”

Finally, he surged forward with the scalpel aimed at the other man.

John called his name.

Then he seized Sherlock’s lower arm and turned his shoulder into Sherlock’s body, slamming his hand down onto Sherlock’s hand, making the scalpel clatter noisily to the floor. He turned and grabbed Sherlock’s coat with both hands and bundled him backwards across the room and slammed him hard into one of the cabinet doors. “Stop it!” John called, angrily.

John pulled Sherlock forward a little and then slammed him back against the cabinet again. It hurt. He was calling even louder, emphasising each word, “Stop It Now!” He glared furiously into Sherlock’s face. “What are you doing?!”

Then he punched him, hard.

“Wake up!”

Crying out in pain, Sherlock fell to the floor. Gasping, he propped himself up on his right arm, blood dripping from his nose onto the ground.

“Is this...” John yelled furiously, bending down to punch him in the face once more, “... a game? A bloody game?”

Again, Sherlock tried to rise up and again John punched him down.

His face twisted with rage, John kicked Sherlock’s body hard, then again. Sherlock groaned and John kicked him again.

Eventually, two medical staff came in and ran to either side of John, seizing his arms and dragging him backwards.

“Please. Please, please, please, no violence,” Sherlock heard the other man say.

The men released John and he stood looking down grimly at Sherlock for a while.

“Thank you, Doctor Watson,” a voice nearby him said. “But I don’t think he’s a danger anymore.”

On the floor, Sherlock was still bracing himself on his right arm and left hand, trembling, while the little pool of blood below him grew.

A troll-like man was hovering over him.

John, his shirt half out of his trousers, looked down at them from a distance and breathed heavily.

Sherlock briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them, the blood was gone.

The evil troll looked up to John. “Leave him be,” he said.

“No, it’s-it’s okay,” Sherlock said, shakily. “Let him do what he wants.” He raised his head a little. “He’s entitled.” He lifted his head higher and made eye contact with John. “I killed his wife.”

John stepped forward a little, breathing sharply through his nose. He stared down at Sherlock. His
"voice tight, he said accusingly, “Yes, you did.”

* * * *

“Greg, you need to investigate this man, right now, I’m telling you!” John’s blood was practically boiling, although Greg did not seem to get that.

The DI looked at John deadpan, raising his eyebrows at him over his coffee cup.

“I’m not kidding, Greg.” John paused deliberately to take a steadying breath. “Please take this seriously. This is more than a hunch. The man is a psychopath. He virtually confessed to us and then pretended it was all just a joke. But it wasn’t.” John paced up and down the interview room. “I swear to God it wasn’t. He’s a lunatic. A dangerous lunatic.”

Greg put down his cup and heaved a resigned sigh. “Alright. What do you want me to do?”

“Put one of your men at the door of Sherlock’s room, as I’m willing to bet a good amount of money on it that he’ll be Smith’s next target. And look into every single unexpected death at Saint Caedwalla’s Hospital. I guarantee you it will be a goldmine for your department.”

“Alright,” Greg said, tearing a page out of his notebook, even though the witness recording was still running. “Tell me everything you know.”

“Not before you send someone over there to guard Sherlock.”

They looked at each other.

Defeated, Greg grabbed the phone and did as John asked.

* * * *

Eurus switched off the telly and wiped a towel across her forehead as she got off the exercise bike.

Sherlock Holmes was in hospital. Smith’s hospital.

That bastard had better not lay a finger on him before she was finished with him.

Chapter End Notes

With many thanks once more to Ariane DeVere for her transcripts from the show, in this case the morgue scene.

Btw sorry for posting this chapter quite a bit later than usual. To be completely honest, I had a bad case of the writer’s blues. :( Although I am grateful for every single one of you who have left kudos and lovely comments, I had hoped to attract more readers than this. It’s just hard to keep investing around two hours a day, every day, over the course of an entire year (next to my day job), just so that a few dozen people can enjoy this story. There are some other WIPs being written right now that tons of people on tumblr keep going on about, and for the first time in my entire life, I felt jealous. Which is a crippling emotion. But in the end, I’ve decided to abandon all dignity and just promote myself more on tumblr, and in the meanwhile, to just keep writing. :) For my faithful fans. Especially mama-orion, who has become a dear fandom friend and
who cheered me up when I needed it most. <3
I have, however, decided to neglect my family a little bit less and not to prioritise this fic above all else anymore, as I have been doing for the past seven months. Therefore, I will aim for two updates a month rather than four, from now on. :)
This was taking longer than John had anticipated. He wanted to get back to Sherlock as soon as possible, copper at his door or not. But Greg wanted to know exactly what had happened at the morgue.

“You didn’t see him take the scalpel?” Lestrade asked, for the second time.

“Nobody saw him,” John assured.

“So you didn’t know what was about to happen.”

“Of course I didn’t know.” Funny thing, that, John thought. Because the truth was, you never knew what was going to happen with Sherlock, did you? But this had decidedly been a whole new category of surprise. Usually, Sherlock was the one unexpectedly protecting people, not unexpectedly attacking them. Unless there was direct danger.

Had there perhaps been any danger that John had been unaware of? Any hidden meaning?

John despairingly raked a hand through his hair.

No. The man had just been off his head on coke. Simple as that. John chastised himself for trying to explain away his actions.

“Well, there must have been some build-up,” Lestrade tried again. “He didn’t just suddenly do it.”

John leaned forward. “Look, I didn’t know he had the bloody scalpel.”

Then someone knocked on the door of the interview room.

Greg turned his head. “Come in.”

The door opened and a police officer entered. “Sir. You probably want to see this,” she said, putting an open laptop onto the desk.

Greg and John leaned over to look at the screen, which was showing a news bulletin.

“Harold Chorley reporting earlier today,” the newsreader said. “Mr Smith stated he had no interest in bringing charges.” The footage cut away to Smith, in the mortuary, talking to a reporter. A strap at the bottom of the screen showed his name. “I’m a fan of Sherlock Holmes. I’m a big fan. I don’t really know what happened today. To be honest, I don’t think I’d be standing here now if it wasn’t for Doctor Watson.”

From across the table, Greg threw John a look.

“Is it true he’s being treated in your hospital?” the reporter asked Smith.

“It’s not actually my hospital,” Smith replied, smiling eerily. “Well, it is a little bit my hospital... Er, but I can promise you this: he’s going to get the best of care. I might even move him to my favourite room.”
John’s heart skipped a beat and he felt an instant rage boil up inside, drowning out all sounds around him. “Greg. Did you hear that?” It came out as barely more than a strained rasp. “You know what his favourite room is?” he said, a little louder. “The mortuary.”

It took effort to breathe.

Greg looked at him for a second before pushing back his chair.

Simultaneously, they rushed for the door, and the world slowly pulled back into focus again.

* * * * *

Sherlock woke up feeling ten times worse than before.

Would he ever see John again? John hated him; that much was clear. The ferocity with which John had knocked him down spoke volumes. He could still feel John’s fist against his temple.

Sherlock swallowed, in a futile attempt to make his lip stop trembling. Even that hurt.

John was angry, so angry. And Sherlock couldn’t really blame him. He’d done something wrong. Something very bad. Except, he couldn’t really remember what it was…

What had he done?

What was it again John had said? Something about Mary. She was dead, wasn’t she?

How had she died, again? He tried to remember, but his memories started to fade and slip through his fingers like dry sand.

African desert sand, ice cold, under a sky full of faintly scattered stars. His almost-grave, three years ago. All alone, unable to find Moran. Unable to continue walking in the loose sand.

How come John suddenly had such bad teeth?

When he briefly opened his eyes, Sherlock noticed he was not alone in the room. There was a nurse pottering about.

When she was done doing whatever it was she’d been doing, she flicked a switch near the door and the lights above the ceiling panel went out. When she opened the door to leave, Sherlock spotted a police officer standing watch outside. Then the nurse closed the door behind her.

Sherlock was trying hard not to be sick. Such nausea.

Slow breaths.

He just wanted it to end, wanted everything to end. Just to sleep, no more. Although he definitely didn’t want to have any such horrible nightmares anymore. Surely if he were dead, he would be safe from dreams, right? Nothing or nobody would bother him anymore.

Wait, was that what it had been? Just a bad dream?

His Mind Palace seemed to have turned into a dark swamp, where he kept getting lost, struggling to see, struggling to get from one place to the next in the thick mud that kept dragging him down.

In the end, he resolved to stop making any effort to think for a moment and stared blankly ahead – even though that only made him more aware of the pitiable state of his ‘transport’ and all its pains.
and cramps.

Strangely, as he kept his eyes fixed on the wooden panel opposite the bed, it seemed to slowly swing open. Then again, the blue circles appeared to be moving all over the walls and his bed was floating around the room, so he’d better stop trying to make sense of what he saw, Sherlock thought, as he let his eyes fall closed again.

Exhaustion.

Sometime later, from the depths of his slumber, Sherlock heard someone huff out a noisy breath very near him. He opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times.

John was sitting at his bed.

No, not John: Culverton Smith. Their hair was very similar. Were they related?

“You’ve been ages waking up,” Smith said, quietly. “I watched you. It’s quite lovely in its way.”

Sherlock swallowed and looked towards him.

“Take it easy. It’s okay. Don’t want to rush this. You’re Sherlock Holmes,” Smith continued, softly.

“How did you get in?” Sherlock asked, his voice no more than a faint whisper.

Smith stood and walked closer to the bed, pointing towards the door. “Policeman outside, you mean? Come on. Can’t you guess?”

Sherlock’s gaze slowly turned to the wooden panel opposite the bed. Of course. “Secret door.” Not his imagination, after all. Not being able to tell the difference anymore was starting to get really annoying. But it would stop happening very soon.

Smith twirled a finger to indicate their surroundings. “I built this whole wing. Kept firing the architect and builders so no one knew quite how it all fitted together. I can slip in and out anywhere I like, you know... when I get the urge.”

“H. H. Holmes,” Sherlock said.

“Murder castle, but done right.” Smith looked around briefly. “I have a question for you. Why are you here? It’s like you walked into my den and laid down in front of me. Why?”

Sherlock met his gaze momentarily, then lowered his eyes. The world was still blurry. “You know why I’m here.”

“I’d like to hear you say it.” Smith smiled fleetingly. “Say it for me, please.”

With some effort, Sherlock fixed his gaze on Smith. “I want you to kill me.”

Smith had moved to the left side of the bed and rested a gloved hand very close to Sherlock’s hand on the blanket.

“If you increase the dosage four or five times,” Sherlock said softly, “toxic shock should shut me down within about an hour.”

That was not true, though. He knew for a fact that the liquid currently in his drip wouldn’t have that effect, although he couldn’t say why.
Then why had he just said that?

There was something… *something*, indiscernible in the darkness of this godforsaken, sticky bog.

Smith straightened up and started to walk around the foot of the bed, towards the drip stand. “Then I restore the settings. Everyone assumes it was a fault, or you just gave up the ghost.” He smiled.

“Yes.”

“You’re rather good at this.” He took off his jacket. “Before we start, tell me how you feel.” He reached to the shirt cuff on his left hand and took out the cufflink.

*What was his supposed course of action again?*

*A murky marshland, spooky and unfamiliar.*

*What was on the other side?*

“I feel scared,” Sherlock said softly.

Smith scoffed quietly. “Be more specific.” He chuckled. “You only get to do this the once.”

“I’m... scared of dying.”

Smith removed his right cufflink as well and put both of them onto the seat of the chair. “You wanted this, though,” he said, as he started to roll up his shirtsleeves.

“I have... reasons.”

*What point was there in living if John hated him?*

“But you don’t actually want to die,”

Sherlock was vaguely aware of the importance of saying ‘no’. Wasn’t this being recorded, somehow? He couldn’t remember. But it had something to do with Lestrade needing an incentive to investigate the beloved celebrity, so that he would finally be convicted for all the murders he committed. Even though in this case, one might argue it was actually suicide, Sherlock figured, nebulously. But no one needed to know that. “No,” he said.

He tried to focus his eyes on the strange, blond man. He did look an awful lot like John. Or had Smith left and was John standing at his bed now?

*John.*

No, it couldn’t be John. He was smiling now. Bad teeth. Not John.

“Good,” Smith said. He continued rolling up his sleeves. “Say that for me. Say it.”

The recording.

“I don’t want to die.”

“And again,” Smith said.

*What if John would stop hating him some day?*

“I don’t want to die,” Sherlock said, a little louder and more firmly.
Smith stepped closer to the bed and leaned over him, until his face was only a few inches above Sherlock’s. “Lovely,” he whispered.

If only John had ever come this close, had ever leaned over him with such a hungry, excited look. Sherlock would certainly not have felt the fear and repulsion he felt now.

Twitching a smile, Smith straightened. “Here it comes.” He reached a finger to the control panel next to the drip stand and pressed a button twice, making it beep noisily. He then reached to another button, pressing it repeatedly, before slowly walking back around the foot of the bed. “So tell me: why are we doing this? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I wanted to hear your confession,” Sherlock said calmly. “Needed to know I was right.”

“But why do you need to die?”

Just deflect the question, Sherlock thought. Change the subject. “The mortuary; your favourite room,” he said. “You talk to the dead. You make your confession to them.”

* * * * *

Greg was shouting into his phone as he and John rushed to the Yard’s underground car park. He’d ordered Stella Hopkins along with them on the way, and he was now gesturing for her to take the driver’s seat.

John launched himself into the back as soon as the doors were unlocked.

Over the noise of tires screeching, Greg bellowed, “I said: Go into Holmes’s room and check on him right now.” A short pause. “Just do as I say. I don’t care you’ve been standing watch at his door the whole time.” He rolled his eyes as Hopkins skilfully weaved through the busy London traffic, their blue flashing lights reflecting off of the cars around them. “What do you mean ‘the door is jammed’?! Jesus Christ. Hopkins, step on it!”

* * * * *

“Why do you do it?” Sherlock asked, weakly.

Smith sat in the chair next to his bed. “Why do I kill?” He had his hands together, gently rubbing his fingers against each other. “It’s not about hatred or revenge. I’m not a dark person. It’s... Killing human beings... It just makes me...” He paused and giggled, before letting out a long, contented sigh. “… incredibly happy.” He stood up and leant his hands on the bed. “You know in films, when you see dead people pretending to be dead and it’s just living people lying down?” He shook his head. “That’s not what dead people look like.” His voice and gaze became more intense. “Dead people look like things. I like to make people into things. Then you can own them.”

So that was his motive? Wanting to ‘own’ people?

Well, at least he had the courtesy of killing them first, unlike Savile.

Sherlock shuddered, but found he only barely had the energy to care, at this point. It seemed there were simply too many things to care about. He couldn’t do it anymore.

Smith huffed out a laugh. “You know what? I’m getting a little impatient.” He bent to the foot of the bed and pressed a button on the side, so that the top of the bed lowered down to the horizontal position.
Sherlock felt anxious – his primal instinct vaguely raising its head after all – and made an effort to turn his eyes to the door. Would the policeman occasionally check in on him? He thought he’d heard something earlier.

Once the bed was flat, Smith straightened up and bared his teeth as he looked at Sherlock, running his tongue along his bottom lip. Then he walked around to the other side. He straightened the medical glove on his right hand and leaned down towards Sherlock. “Take a big breath if you want,” he whispered.

Sherlock lowered his gaze to Smith’s hands. Why was he suddenly overcome with this ridiculous, intense fear? Shouldn’t he welcome the end of all misery? Panicking, he gasped in a breath an instant before Smith laid his right palm over his mouth and pressed down hard. Smith then covered Sherlock’s nose with his other hand. “Murder is a very difficult addiction to manage,” he said, pushing his hands down, as Sherlock writhed under him – oxygen deprivation already starting to gradually kick in. “People don’t realise how much work goes into it. You have to be careful.”

Sherlock grabbed at Smith’s lower right arm and flailed weakly with his other hand, trying to dislodge him. He failed. He didn’t have enough strength, not enough energy…

“But if you’re rich, or famous and loved, it’s amazing what people are prepared to ignore.” Smith’s voice shook with effort as he resisted Sherlock’s struggles. “There’s always someone desperate, about to go missing... And no one wants to suspect murder if it’s easier to suspect something else!”

Sherlock continued to struggle under him, sweat pouring out of his pores. The world was slowly starting to fade away now.

* * * * *

Painting almost finished.

Memory. Often coming back. No use trying to forget.

Sherlock struggling for air. His face becoming a strange colour; like the inside of a cherry. Not good! Poor little Sherlock. Must save him. His eyes closing. No one else in the garden. Must do something. What would Mycroft do?

Try to be strong.

Finally, he’s breathing again. Irregular gulps. Grass on his cheek.

Redbeard lying further down, oddly quiet.

His own skipping rope seemingly leering at him from the lawn, like a blue snake, about to attack.

Nanny Forsyth shouting, running.
John burst through the door leading into the hospital wing Sherlock was in – Lestrade and Hopkins a few yards behind him – and ran along the corridor, until he reached the door to Sherlock’s room.

The police officer’s cap lay on the chair beside the door, with the man himself nowhere to be seen.

John lowered the door handle and pushed forward, but the door didn’t open. He rattled the handle a couple of times, then frantically looked along the corridor.

“Fire extinguisher,” Greg pointed, panting.

That would do. John jerked it off the wall and rammed it into the door with all his might, managing to smash it open in one go.

John’s blood turned cold when inside, he saw Smith at Sherlock’s bed, who instantly released Sherlock as he turned to look at the door.

Sherlock noisily hauled in a long, painful breath.

In an instant, John dropped the fire extinguisher and stormed towards Smith, as Lestrade and Hopkins came into the room after him.

“Sherlock!” Greg yelled. “You okay?”

John firmly wrapped his arm around Smith’s neck and quickly bundled him away from the bed, shouting, “What were you doing to him?”

Smith whimpered plaintively.

“What were you doing?!” John yelled, once more. He dragged Smith across the room.

Smith flailed in the direction of the bed. “He’s in distress! I… I’m helping him!”

John hurled him into Hopkins’s hands.

“Restrain him, now. Do it,” Lestrade said.

Hopkins took hold of Smith’s upper arms from behind.

Smith gestured his wrists towards the bed. “I was trying to help him!”

John rushed over to Sherlock’s side, quickly checking his vital signs. Fast but regular heartbeat, thank God. “Sherlock, what was he doing to you?”

Breathlessly, Sherlock replied, “Suffocating me, overdosing me.” He pointed weakly towards the drug stand.

“On what?” John demanded, feeling sick to the bone.

“Saline.”

“Saline?” John frowned, relief slowly washing over him.

“Yeah, saline.” Sherlock propped himself up onto one elbow, still breathing hard.
“What do you mean, saline?” John went over to look at the drip bag.

Sherlock groaned and breathed out shakily. “Well, obviously I got Nurse Cornish to switch the bags. She’s a big fan, you know? Loves my blog.”

*Thank God and all the heavens above.*

“So you’re okay? God, please tell me you’re okay.”

“No. No, of course I’m not okay. Malnourished, double kidney failure, and frankly I’ve been off my tits for weeks.” Sherlock squinted up at John, a smile clearly tugging at the corner of his mouth. “What kind of a doctor are you?” Groaning, he settled down on the pillows. “I got my confession, though, didn’t I?” He looked across to Smith, who amazingly managed to pull himself free of the police officer.

*Why the fuck wasn’t he in handcuffs already?*

“Huh! I don’t recall making any confession,” Smith said, walking forward.

John held out a hand towards him. “Whoa-whoa.”

Smith stopped and looked indignantly at him. “What would I be confessing to?”

“You can listen to it later,” Sherlock said.

“But there is no confession to listen to!” Smith stopped and gasped, holding up his hands. “Oh, Mr Holmes. I-I don’t know if this is relevant, but we found three potential recording devices in the pockets of your coat. Um, all your possessions were searched. Sorry.”

Oh Jesus. Sherlock had let him strangle him, just so that he could record the proof and get Smith behind bars. Risking his life once more for the sake of justice. But the bastard had been onto him.

John ground his teeth.

“Must be something comforting about the number three,” Sherlock said, pensively. “People always give up after three.” He raised his eyes to Smith, who stared back at him in horror. Sherlock’s gaze moved across to John, giving him a meaningful look.


Sherlock stayed silent, a slight smile forming on his face while he waited.

After a moment, John sighed in exasperation. “You clever, brilliant, amazing git.”

“Yeah.”


“ Heard you the first time,” Sherlock smiled.

John stepped across to the chair by the door and picked up his walking cane. Turning back to the bed, he held it up. “So how… how does it open?”

“Screw the top.”

John took hold of the handle and started to turn it, while Smith watched with a grim expression on
his face. John pulled the handle off the cane, revealing a small device inside the stick, which was glowing bright red.

Smith stumbled on the spot, staring at the recording device, his face full of despair.

John and Sherlock grinned at one another.

* * * * *

John had saved him. And he didn’t seem to be angry anymore. Perhaps he never had been?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading and commenting. :) 

One of the reasons I have been writing a lot more slowly lately is that one of my little ones isn’t doing great at the moment. He needs me more than you guys do right now, as you will understand, so that’s why I’ve been investing less time in writing. (I’ve got the whole thing plotted out till the end, though, so it’s “only” a matter of writing out the actual scenes. There’s no question about whether I will finish this fic or not! I will! Just not as soon as I had initially hoped. Ah well.)

And then some great news: one of my wonderful betas, 88thparallel, has made an amazing cover for this fic, which you can reblog from here, if you like: https://prettyrealisticjohnlockfanart.tumblr.com/post/166014475751/88thparallel-i-have-been-so-enthralled-with
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The real version of the hug scene. With actual apologies.

John lifted Rosie out of the car, baby seat and all, and carried her into the house. She giggled at the drizzle landing on her little face. John smiled at her.

They’d just come back from visiting Sherlock in the hospital, second day in a row. Tomorrow, Monday, John would go again, straight after work. Aunt Vivian would understand if he skipped one visit with her.

Even after two days, Sherlock already seemed to be improving, to John’s great relief. He was suffering withdrawal, of course, but the buprenorphine and Xanax appeared to be pulling him through rather well. He was still on a drip for most of his nutrition, because he only managed to keep a rather small part of his food down, as was to be expected for someone whose body was still adapting to functioning without heroin. But at least he was now getting all the alimentary compounds he needed to recover – from his wounds, as well as his malnutrition and the toxic drug effects.

John could tell that his cravings were bad, however, even though Sherlock hadn’t said a word.

It would just be a matter of riding them out.

John put the baby seat on the floor and closed his front door behind him, shutting out the rain.

It would take a while before Sherlock was back to normal, but he was on the right track and John was determined to be at his side the entire way.

He undid the safety straps and lifted his daughter out of the portable car seat. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?” he cooed at her. “Always eager to visit new places, see new people. You curious little monkey. And you loved seeing Uncle Sherlock again, didn’t you? Yes, you did.” He tickled her, and she laughed her loud baby laugh.

He initially hadn’t been sure whether it was a good idea to bring Rosie yesterday, but he hadn’t managed to get a babysitter, so he’d taken her with him out of necessity. And seeing as she had decidedly cheered Sherlock up and had also conveniently given them something to talk about other than all the gloomy stuff that had kept them occupied recently, he had brought her again today.

It had been rather delightful to see Sherlock react to her so tenderly and lovingly, and it had in fact made it a lot easier to come to the decision he’d made. He was moving in with Sherlock, at least until the end of summer, whether Sherlock liked it or not. Someone had to keep an eye on him 24/7 as soon as he was out of hospital, to prevent relapse. John was going to contact Mrs Hudson, Mycroft, Greg, Molly and Janine to take turns staying with him when John was at the surgery. Thankfully he only worked three days a week. He would call them this afternoon, right after giving Rosie her bottle.

He put Rosie down in her play corner in the lounge and went to the kitchen to heat the water for
Rosie’s formula. He realised that this evening, he should probably write some made-up blog post about how Sherlock had almost gotten himself killed again, but keeping in line with their ‘estranged’ façade. It was bad enough that Lestrade and Hopkins had witnessed John’s old cane being in Sherlock’s hospital room, so he would have to make up some story as to how it got there. And maybe he could include the wife he was supposedly still mourning by writing that Mary had given him advice via posthumous DVD or something, perhaps addressed to Sherlock and finding John by accident. He chuckled. He should really take up fiction writing, seeing how much he enjoyed making stuff up lately.

He carefully added the right amount of formula to the warm water and watched Rosie happily beating her rattle on the floor as he stirred the milk for her.

In a short while, when Sherlock was well enough to go home, it would be the three of them together at Baker Street again. (And who knew, maybe Sherlock would be fine with them staying there indefinitely? Although that was not what this was about, John berated himself.) John knew it wouldn’t be easy, living with a recovering junkie. (Hell, he’d been there when Sherlock had been trying to quit smoking, which had decidedly not been pretty, and that was just nicotine withdrawal.) But he just had to be there for him. He owed him that much.

And it was the one place John wanted to be anyway: at Sherlock’s side, for better or worse. In sickness and in health, his mind provided, mockingly. Yeah, if only.

John shook his head. The bottle was ready. He walked over to Rosie and picked her off the floor. Settling with her on the sofa, his thoughts drifted back to what Mycroft had said. Or rather, hadn’t said.

The secret Holmes sibling. (Maybe it was a sister rather than a brother.) Why had Sherlock never mentioned them? Some sort of family feud? Even worse than the one between him and Mycroft? Perhaps it was even the source of the strain in Sherlock and Mycroft’s relationship. Such a chasm was bound to have an effect on the whole family. Although their parents behaved in a friendly and normal enough way towards everyone, John mused.

John decided he wouldn’t bring up the sibling with Sherlock just yet, now that he was struggling with more urgent matters. But he definitely would, once everything was back to normal. Which was hopefully before autumn set in.

* * * * *

Sherlock had gotten Culverton behind bars, without getting himself killed. Eurus smiled. Jim had won the bet, posthumously. Of course. He was always right.

Eurus looked in the mirror and ran a hand through their hair. They really needed another haircut, they decided, as it had grown several millimetres again at the back of their neck. Hairstyles came in phases and Eurus was in a decidedly short phase this summer.

Eurus sighed, staring at their chest. Flat enough, they supposed. Not that anyone would notice, seeing as Eurus didn’t feel like going out in the rain.

The haircut would have to wait until tomorrow.

With a sigh, Eurus sank down onto the little stool in their bathroom. For all that they’d found out, Sherlock Holmes had turned out to be so boring. As had John bloody Watson. Their lives were just as dull and empty and uninteresting as everybody else’s. To think that Eurus had once envied Sherlock. Had wished he were part of Sherlock’s family.
He clenched his fists.

They were all just stupid puppets and he no longer felt like playing with them. He hated them.

* * * * *

Home. Finally.

John helped carry one of Sherlock’s bags up the stairs, Rosie on one hip, while Sherlock took the other one. (Books, mainly.)

Upon entering 221B, it was a few moments before Sherlock realised that there was something different about his flat.

The photos and articles on Culverton Smith were gone. The kitchen was clean. No needles and spoons to be seen.

John had tidied up.

Sherlock swallowed, trying not to show his embarrassment.

John smiled, and set Rosie down on her rug.

Her rug. Next to her box of toys.

Looking around, Sherlock spotted several tins of formula stacked on top of each other on the kitchen worktop. A packet with 54 nappies stood in a corner, unopened.

John was planning for him and Rosie to stay.

*Thank God.*

Sherlock tentatively smiled at John.

“Tea?” John asked, rather cheerfully, as he headed over to the kitchen.

“Tea would be lovely, thanks.”

While waiting for the kettle to boil, John lit the fire in the living room. It was an exceptionally chilly summer’s day, and John had rightfully guessed that Sherlock reaching for his dressing gown had nothing to do with the latest fashion.

A few minutes later, they were sitting in their chairs by the fireplace.

“Greg just texted, saying the creep apparently can’t stop confessing,” John smirked. “So. You did it again. Caught another confirmed killer by putting yourself in danger and outsmarting them.”

“Yeah, well…” Sherlock blushed, unsure what to say.

“Will you please not do that anymore, Sherlock? You almost did get yourself killed.” John clenched his jaw, visibly struggling what to say next. “You know how well I handled the last time I thought you were dead. I married an evil assassin. So please stay safe, yeah?”

They both sniggered covertly to cover up the seriousness of what John was saying.

“I will take it easy from now on,” Sherlock promised.
“Cheers,” John said, sipping his tea.

There was a short silence.

“I still don’t understand what the deal was with Smith’s daughter, though. Why did you text her that message from his phone?” John asked.

John had avoided talking about the case until now. But he apparently deemed Sherlock better enough, now that he was home, to talk about such things again. And Sherlock probably did owe him an explanation.

“Ah. Yes. The thing with the text to Faith had been my back-up plan, that I’d forgotten about until Smith reminded me he didn’t do handshakes,” Sherlock told John. He held a mug in both hands as he basked in the warmth of the lit fire. “Of course, I hadn’t really anticipated that I’d only hallucinated meeting his daughter.” Sherlock took a sip of tea, gazing towards the floor, and sighed. “Still a bit troubled by the daughter,” he said softly. “Did seem very real, and she gave me information I couldn’t really have acquired elsewhere.” He raised his eyes to John’s. He was trying hard to ignore his bone pain, which he knew would fade once his body gradually got used to the lack of heroin; same for the cold flashes. He shivered, and drew his dressing gown a little tighter over his clothes.

“But she wasn’t ever here?” John asked.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” Sherlock said. “I have theorised before that if one could attenuate to every available data stream in the world simultaneously, it would be possible to anticipate and deduce almost anything.” He sniffed and looked down, pondering how impressive it was, in a way, that his mind had autonomously put together the information he must have distilled from various sources into one plausible but fake context.

John nodded. “Hmm. So you dreamed up a magic woman who told you things you didn’t know.”

“Perhaps the drugs opened certain doors in my mind.” Sherlock looked away again, thinking about the effects that opioids and cocaine, and the combination thereof, were known to have, before taking another drink from his mug. He’d never heard of people having such detailed hallucinations, though.

“Listen, er,” John said, “tomorrow morning, when I’m at work, Molly will come here to stay with you until lunch. Then Mrs Hudson will come up in the afternoon, until I’m back, okay? The day after, it will be Greg and Mycroft taking turns.”

Sherlock swallowed and nodded. John clearly didn’t want to take any chances, which was probably for the best.

“Here’s your next dose of buprenorphine and Xanax,” John said, shaking two pills from separate bottles onto his palm. He closed his fingers around them, however, before Sherlock could take them, and looked him in the eye. “Please, please, don’t take them yourself, okay? I will give them to you at the scheduled times, ensuring the dose will be gradually reduced.”

Sherlock nodded and lowered his eyes. “Yes, of course.”

After having swallowed the pills, Sherlock noticed John flexing his hand and pursing his lips. John then put his mug on the table beside him, and grabbed the chair arms.

“Are you okay?” Sherlock asked.
“Well, yeah, sure. It’s just…” He briefly closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ll just have to accept that it is what it is; and what it is is… shit. You taking drugs… It has just.. stirred up some unpleasant memories. Of my dad.”

Sherlock looked at the floor and nodded understandably. He’d always known, of course.

John pulled in a breath through his nose and lowered his head. “It was alcohol, in his case. But the thing with any sort of addiction is, it makes people unpredictable. Unreliable. And I just can’t cope with that.” He choked on his words. “Seeing you like that. Not being able to blindly trust you anymore.”

Sherlock’s heart ached as if he’d been stabbed. He swallowed. Twice. “I’m so sorry, John. I know it doesn’t make up for anything, but I am determined never to do drugs again. Not even for a case. Just… never. I promise, John. Please forgive me.”

One corner of John’s mouth twitched. “Of course I forgive you. It will just… probably take a while before I can believe you.”

Sherlock nodded once more.

“Listen, er, Sherlock. I have an apology to make as well. I’m sorry I pushed you against the cabinets in the morgue and didn’t catch you when you fell. I should have been more careful. Should have realised exactly what state you were in. I’m really sorry.”

Sherlock huffed out a relieved breath, trying not to smile too obviously. The beating hadn’t been real, then. Just the coke messing with his head.

An enormous weight seemed to lift from his heart.

He should have just stuck to heroin, which at least didn’t alter reality.

Although, come to think of it, didn’t TD12 have a distorting effect also on previous memories? Could it be… that he had been injected with Smith’s drug? By Smith himself? Perhaps at some point before he’d come to murder him?

*Why did the possibility only now occur to him?*

Well, it didn’t matter now. Smith wouldn’t ever use TD12 again in order to confess his sins.

(It did mean that the recording possibly contained even more interesting material than he’d thought. Lestrade would be pleased.)

Sherlock looked over at John, who looked guilty and utterly miserable. Ah, he should probably clear that up. “John, I… er… actually stumbled on purpose, because I needed to end up in a hospital bed.”

John stared at him incredulously for a moment before rolling his eyes. “You *cock.*”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Utter, utter cock.” He smiled, despairingly.

Just then, Sherlock’s phone lit up and a very familiar female orgasmic voice sighed from the speaker. John’s stare intensified, as he furrowed his brow. Sherlock, raising his mug to his lips, glanced across at the phone.
“What was that?” John asked, smirking surprisingly, apparently still not done rolling his eyes.

Lowering his mug, Sherlock looked around the room, pretending not to know what he was talking about. “Mm?” He swallowed his mouthful. “What was what?”

Very unfortunate timing, this. John might think he had some sort of feelings for the woman.

“That’s the text alert of Irene Adler,” John said. “That noise.”

Sherlock raised his mug to his mouth again, embarrassingly aware that the chances of success on this path were small. “What noise?” he asked innocently, mentally kicking himself.

“But she’s dead,” John said.

Sherlock let out a resigned sigh and lowered his mug again. “Actually, she’s not. I saved her from being decapitated in Karachi. Took the place of the executioner and told her to run.” He nodded, thinking about how much detail he should include. *Ah well.* “Then she stole my suitcase full of clothes and fled to California, of all places.”

“Oh well.”

“Then she stole my suitcase full of clothes and fled to California, of all places.”

“Of course,” John chuckled, shaking his head elaborately. Then he looked at Sherlock questioningly.

“We’re still friends. Sometimes we text,” Sherlock shrugged, picking up his phone and checking the new message. “She just reminded me of something important.” Sherlock smiled. “July 7. Happy birthday John. I’m… sorry I didn’t get you anything.”

“Thanks. But you got me you back home at Baker Street, didn’t you?” His cheeks reddened slightly as he looked away, in an apparent attempt at being casual. “Tell her I say hello,” he nodded towards the phone. Then, grinning, he huffed out a breath. “*Not dead. Christ. The two of you make a fine pair.*”

Sherlock ran a hand through his hair. “Let me just arrange something,” he said, typing on his phone to send some texts.

After he put his phone away again, they drank tea in companionable silence for a bit, until John left for the loo.

When he came back in, Sherlock announced from his chair, “Molly will be here in twenty minutes. She knows this cake place that she will take us to. Greg will come as well.”

John stopped in the middle of the room. “Oh, that’s… that’s a really nice idea, in fact. Thanks, Sherlock.”

“It’s the least I could do for the man who’s saved my life so many times I’ve lost count.”

John’s gaze shifted towards the fireplace, eyes unfocused, and he pulled in a breath. Then he took another two steps in Sherlock’s direction. “Sherlock, there’s something I need to get off my chest.” He swallowed visibly. “I’m not the man you thought I was. I’m not brave or valiant. And my moral compass is… not as strong as you seem to think it is.”

“Forgive me, but you are doing yourself a disservice,” Sherlock objected. “I have known many people in this world but made few friends, and I can safely say…”

“I cheated on Mary.” John clenched his jaw. “There was a woman on the bus, and I had a plastic daisy in my hair. I’d been playing with Rosie.” He paused for a moment, then raised his eyes. “And
this girl just smiled at me. That’s all it was; it was a smile. What is wrong with me, Sherlock? I was still having sex with Mary, because she kept seducing me and I was afraid to say no, to blow my cover. And the sex was good, you know; we never had a problem in that area,” he said, ducking his chin as he raised his eyebrows sarcastically.

Sherlock quietly cringed at the thought.

“But then there was this woman flirting with me… She never even told me her name. We texted constantly, whenever Mary left the room to feed Rosie. That’s all it was, just texting.”

Sherlock gazed into the distance, considering.

“But I wanted more.”

Then Sherlock lifted his eyes back to John.

“And do you know something? I still do,” John added.

“It’s not my place to say,” Sherlock said softly. “But... it was just texting.” He’d not often seen John this emotional.

“The point is, I am weak, Sherlock. There are a lot of things I can’t handle. I mean, the absence of emotional intimacy leading to text-cheating with a total stranger is one thing, but, as I said before… you being on drugs …” He paused. “I’m sorry to say it like this, but... I have to. I have to tell you the truth. Which is, I will disappear out of your life if you ever take drugs again.” John stared ahead of himself for a long moment, then gradually lowered his head into his hand and started to cry. “I’m sorry, I just can’t…” he choked out quietly.

Sherlock carefully put his mug onto the table beside him, and got up from his chair.

John sobbed as he stood there, completely lost, tears pouring from his face and falling to the floor.

Slowly, Sherlock walked across to him. “It’s okay,” he said softly. He tentatively raised his arms, hesitating momentarily for fear of being rejected, then gently embraced him, regardless. When he felt that John let him, he moved closer, leaning into the hug properly.

“It’s not okay,” John said, tearfully.

Sherlock lowered his cheek onto the top of John’s head. “It is what it is, but things will change for the better. I’m sure of it. Not in the last place because I am going to stay clean. I promise.” Blinking against his own tears, he continued to hold his sobbing best friend for a long time.

“It’s not a pleasant thought, John,” Sherlock said, eventually, “but I have this terrible feeling, from time to time, that we might all just be human.”

“Even you?” John asked, against Sherlock’s chest.

“No. Even you.”

* * * * *

Sherlock had managed to have the pastry chef decorate a lemon sponge cake with swirling letters saying ‘Happy Birthday John’ and slap on an edible, cartoonish image of a knight on a white horse in one corner – much to everyone’s amusement.

“You came to save me, once more, John,” Sherlock said, in front of Molly, Greg, and Mrs Hudson,
who had come too. “I never even properly thanked you for that. Still working on my social skills. So this is to say thank you and happy birthday.”

John didn’t know what to say, so he just raked a hand through his hair and smiled a ridiculous amount. Greg handed him a knife and Mrs Hudson put a stack of plates in front of him that the man behind the counter had handed her. Rosie cooed happily at the festivities from her high chair.

As John started to cut the cake into generous pieces, Mike Stamford came in, too. “Happy birthday, John!” He was carrying a present. “This is from all of us.”

John sat down to unwrap it under six pairs of watchful eyes.

It was the collector’s edition DVD box of Alfred Hitchcock films that John had been meaning to buy for ages.

He looked at Sherlock, who was grinning, in spite of the physical discomfort John could tell he was in. (Nausea and cold flashes, by the looks of it.) John briefly put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Thank you,” John said softly. He thought about hugging Sherlock, seeing as the hug they’d shared an hour ago had felt so good and calming. (And so very, very right.)

So he did.

People applauded, which was kind of weird, and then they all sat down and ate the cake.

It was quite possibly one of his best birthdays ever.

* * * * *

Gradually, so slowly it was almost unnoticeable, Sherlock started to feel better.

Every moment John wasn’t at work, he stayed with him, from morning till evening. At night, John slept up in his old room, with Rosie in her cot in a corner. And when he needed to go out, John either took Sherlock with him (taking Rosie for a bit of fresh air, or going shopping) or arranged for someone to stay with him (on regular workdays, or, once, for a dentist’s appointment).

Sherlock felt a little shy thinking about everything John had done for him.

John seemed determined, and undeterred by unconventional measures. For instance, the bastard had tricked Sherlock into enjoying certain board games, by playing them with steaming mugs at their side and nice, calm but uplifting classical music in the background, so that all Sherlock’s barriers were down and he felt relatively content and at ease. As a consequence, he now kept finding himself wanting to play Carcassonne and Stratego with all his babysitters, as he called them.

The truth was, though, it was good to have something to do, inane as those pastimes might be; anything to distract him slightly from the cravings, which could still be strong and overwhelming, at times. Especially when he felt bored or useless. Rosie’s presence made a big difference as well, besides the silly board games. It was exceptionally interesting and amusing to see the world through a little human’s eyes by observing her reactions to her surroundings. Gravity, viscosity, water: it was all new to her.

John had made Sherlock responsible for her getting acquainted with solid foods. So Sherlock had drafted a possibility matrix, where he gave her two different kinds of fruit or vegetables in various stages of preparation each time: unboiled, boiled, uncut, cut, whole or mashed. He noted down all
her preferences, and investigated how those changed over the course of time. It gave him a purpose, at least. And he loved everything to do with Rosie. Raising a little one had turned out to be much more of a challenge than he’d ever foreseen – and therefore, much less boring.

With every week that passed, she changed, developed into a more able, more autonomous, more complete human being. This also meant that each time Sherlock and John had just gotten used to a new quirk of hers, it changed again.

Experiencing all of these revolutionary little steps together made it feel almost like co-parenting. On top of that, he and John often needed only half a sentence to understand one another, and they were almost always on the same page about how to raise a baby anyway. Despite their own irregular habits, or perhaps because of them, they adhered to a strict schedule for sleeping and eating times for Rosie, setting timers in both their phones for everything. They never let her play with things that weren’t designed to be baby toys (the point of safety regulations having suddenly become a lot more obvious and urgent to Sherlock). And they never, ever, left her alone in the bedroom upstairs when she cried. (They hadn’t even discussed this; they just didn’t.) Sherlock easily fell into the habits John had developed with her. There were no quarrels, no misunderstandings, no differences of opinion. There was peace, security and laughter.

If it weren’t for Sherlock’s withdrawal symptoms still wreaking havoc in his body and, to a lesser extent, in his mind, everything would be perfect.

Well, almost everything.

They didn’t lean into one another on the sofa anymore. They’d hugged twice on John’s birthday, but not since. John took care of him, which was nice, but also meant that he treated him, well…, like a patient. More distant than before – although it was subtle enough for no one but Sherlock to notice, he guessed. It all went harmoniously enough and Sherlock wasn’t complaining.

But despite Sherlock’s intention to finally act upon his feelings once Mary was removed from the equation, he now realised he was simply too afraid to get it wrong.

What they had now was too precious and fragile for experiments.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

John is not a fool. He knows something is up with this strange therapist. While he’s there, he begins to wonder many things, but one is whether Sherlock might perhaps reciprocate his feelings after all… Meanwhile, Sherlock finds the MISS ME? message on fake!Faith’s note and deduces she’s now posing as John’s therapist. He goes to the rescue.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, so sorry for the delay in updating. I really hope that I will be able to write more often again starting next month. As I said, I’ve got the entire plot planned until the end, so I just need time to sit and write it all down. Thank you so much for all the lovely comments in the past weeks. They did make me feel a lot better about the whole endeavour. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Opened tubes of paint everywhere. A mess.

A long, trembling sigh escaped his chest, while thunder rumbled softly on the horizon behind the trees.

How many summers had passed since he’d been taken away from home? Since Redbeard? More than the number of fingers and toes he had, for sure. Maybe close to those of two people.

He squeezed his eyes closed.

Image wrong. Misunderstood.

Everyone always afraid of him, hating him.

They didn’t know him.

They knew nothing.

His hairs stood on end, face heating.

He let out a roar, making his throat hurt, as he used all his energy to throw over the heavy, wooden table. Then he gave it a good kick – no longer feeling the tears on his cheeks.

Soon, nurses rushed in.

A straightjacket. A needle in his arm, draining away the will to fight.

Blackness.
John hadn’t been that sure whether he wanted to continue therapy. Or rather, whether he wanted to continue therapy with that wacky therapist on Windsor Drive.

But his trust issues had, if anything, only become worse with Sherlock taking drugs, so he felt he should see this through until he had found a proper equilibrium between trust and caution. And he was willing to give her a shot.

At least for a few more sessions.

So that’s how he found himself walking over to Mrs Robins’s house during his lunch break again on a sunny Friday at the end of July.

In spite of everything, he was in good spirits. Sherlock was doing great, under the circumstances. And he was so good with Rosie, it continually melted John’s heart. John thought perhaps she was even the reason Sherlock kept mustering the strength to resist his cravings. He hadn’t relapsed once. (John had him do a test every morning.) He ate the food John cooked for the two of them – well, three of them, as Rosie was exploring solids as well now, under Sherlock’s watch – and they spent every waking hour together when John wasn’t working: taking Rosie to the park, watching telly together or shopping for groceries or new baby clothes.

Almost like a happy family.

John noticed the eastern sky looked like rain, as he rang Mrs Robins’s doorbell.

Was that thunder in the distance?

Mrs Robins let him in with that ever-present vague smile on her face.

“I read your blog,” she said in her thick accent, as soon as they were sitting in their respective chairs. “You wrote a while ago that you still talk to Mary.”

John pressed his lips together and nodded non-committedly.

“Do you still do that?”

“Sometimes,” John lied.

“Is her ghost, as it were, perhaps a positive presence in your life? Does she, I don’t know, comfort you, or give you advice, for instance?”

“Well, yeah.” John cleared his throat. “She sometimes gives… her view on things.”

“Like what?”

Shit. “Well… the other day, she kept going on about how she loved Sherlock’s deerstalker hat.” He smiled sheepishly. He should really stop pulling random stuff out of his arse like this. Just stick to the lies he couldn’t avoid; keep in line with what he’d already written on his blog.

He tapped out a non-existent tune with his fingers on the armrest. “It turns out,” he said, “she had her solicitor send Sherlock a pre-recorded DVD message when she died, instructing Sherlock to put himself in harm’s way so that I would rescue him, and thereby would save myself from the depression I suffered after her passing. So, er… basically he trashed himself on drugs so that I’d have something to do. Something doctory.”
“Oh. And did that help?”

“Well… to some extent. Not really. I’ve told him that. I’ve told him to stop putting himself in danger. To stop doing drugs.”

“And what did he say?”

John chewed his lip, trying to think of something ‘Sherlocky’ that he might have said. “He said, ‘In saving my life, Mary conferred a value on it. It is a currency I do not know how to spend.’”

“She saved his life?” His therapist sounded taken aback. Shocked, even. “How so?”

“Well, yeah, I don’t really want to go into that,” John said. It was a stupid story, anyway. It would instantly fall apart under scrutiny.

*Just change the subject.*

“And you wouldn’t believe it,” he continued, “but right then, he received a text from an old friend, who I thought was dead. Irene Adler. You might have heard of her. She’s a minor celebrity; the scary mad one.”

His therapist stared at him blankly. “Of course.”

The silence that followed was somewhat awkward.

John had no idea what to say. Also, maybe he shouldn’t have told anyone that Irene was still alive. She obviously had enemies she was hiding from. He decided not to mention her to anyone else, just in case.

A clock ticked softly in the background.

The silence had stretched on for so long now that he felt he had to say something, anything.

“So it was clearly… his *birthday*, if she got in touch out of the blue like that. I never knew when his birthday was, but that’s how I deduced it.” As he said it, John realised he still didn’t know. He would ask him this evening, as soon as he got home.

“So. Sherlock and this woman. How does it work?” his therapist asked, somewhat snarkily. “Do they go to a discreet Harvester sometimes? Is there a... night of passion in High Wycombe?”

“No, of course not,” John said. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Well, not a lot, probably, anyway.

The idea of Sherlock and Irene together still made him feel sick to the bone with jealousy. But Sherlock had said they were just ‘friends’, right? It was just texting.

A chill ran down his spine. *Just texting.*

“*Why not?* He would be a bloody moron not to, I would say,” Mrs Robins snickered, weird accent and all.
Was she teasing him? Purposely provoking him? Making him contradict her?

“She’s out there, she obviously likes him,” the therapist went on, “and does he have the first idea how lucky he is?”

“Romantic entanglement, while fulfilling for some people...” John said.

“... would complete you as a human being,” she added.

“That doesn’t even mean anything.”

Was she talking about Sherlock or him now?

What on earth was she getting at?

John huffed out a breath. He definitely didn’t see any ‘romantic entanglement’ for himself in the future, no more than he saw any for Sherlock. It had taken John long enough to fall into that trap and he wasn’t willing to try that ever again. It had almost cost him his life. And Sherlock’s.

John was content like this, living with Sherlock, no women in his life other than his daughter. Well, eventually he would probably go out again and try to score the occasional shag, but he would leave it at that. No more girlfriends.

The only person he could picture himself romantically entangled with was one crazy consulting detective, if he was completely honest. And what were the odds of that ever happening?


The mere notion was simply absurd.

But then again, how could he be so sure? the little voice in the back of his head nagged. What if Sherlock, in spite of everything, actually did feel the same? What if there was, in fact, a tiny chance that they could have this?

John’s thoughts drifted off in a direction he rarely allowed them to.

Sometimes he’d sensed things, thought he saw a longing glance or detected a deeper meaning in a casual touch. It had happened already before Sherlock’s faked death, four years ago. So often their eyes had been all but glued to each other in this strange, magical way. And there had been so many flirtatious remarks that Sherlock had made, from the minute they’d become flatmates; one of the first and most notable instances being when he’d implied he was asking John on a date, when John had said he was already going to the circus with Sarah. And then there had always been Sherlock’s refraining from any sort of comment when people presumed they were boyfriends, which had happened a lot over the years. Even Irene had seen that there was something between them, going so far as to insist they were already a couple.

And just when John had started seriously considering acting upon his feelings, they’d had a row and Sherlock had jumped.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Hard.

After his return, when it had been too late and John had already been about to marry Mary, Sherlock had nonchalantly stated he ‘preferred his doctors clean-shaven’. What kind of remark was that? Later, at his sodding wedding, Sherlock had casually mentioned loving John in his bloody
best man’s speech, on top of which he’d referred to ‘the elephant in the room’. What was he supposed to think of that? And furthermore, there had been Sherlock’s cringeworthy, patently obvious jealousy when John had been talking to James Sholto (which Mary had not stopped giggling about for the entire honeymoon), as well as his relapse into drug use straight after the wedding.

John swallowed.

Hell, even Magnussen had noticed ‘something’ going on, calling him Sherlock’s ‘damsel in distress’.

*Just tell him*, the little voice inside John’s head said. *Do something while there’s still a chance, because that chance doesn’t last forever. It’s gone before you know it. Before You Know It, Watson.*

He shook his head and rested his temple on his fist. He was being ridiculous again and he knew it. “What were you thinking about?” the therapist asked.

He let out a long breath.

*How pathetic I am.*

“What were you thinking about?” he said, “people seem to think that I am strong or brave, or something. That I have an infallible moral compass. But I’m not the man people thought I was; I’m not that guy. I never could be.” He frowned hard.

He obviously had a sick, weak mind, having fantasies about a random woman on the bus as well as his best friend. Pitiful.

“Aren’t you holding yourself to an unreasonable standard?”

“No, I’m failing to.” Which was true in so many ways.

There was another short silence.

“Have you talked about this with Sherlock?” she asked.

Maybe just tell the truth for once. “Yes.” Well, not about all of this, obviously.

“And was it good to talk about such insecurities? Did he make you feel better about it, in any way?”

“Yeah, he actually… he hugged me.”

“That’s nice. And did he say anything?”

“It is what it is. It’s from a German poem, I think.” *Or was it something by John Locke?* Suddenly he wasn’t sure.

She looked down and nodded. “Acceptance of any existing situation is indeed the most healthy response. Although what other people think of you is rarely relevant,” she said. She then scribbled something in her notebook, which John couldn’t read. “So what happened after the hug?”

*We ate cake and hugged some more.*
He still didn’t feel ready to open up to her, though. So he fell back on lies.

“Sherlock put on the deerstalker. As a tribute to Mary, I guess. Then I had to go pick up Rosie, so I left.”

* * * * *

Mrs Hudson was rather bad at playing Uno. And Sherlock didn’t feel like playing any of the other games he’d been occupying himself with ad nauseam in the past weeks – or the violin, either – so he decided to clear up the game after this round and then start emptying his inbox on his phone.

Ten minutes later, he clicked a link with background information in a mildly interesting looking case request. When his browser opened, however, he noticed another tab there with an unfamiliar web address. He must have opened it some time ago. When he loaded it, it turned out to be an audio link. He could hear a woman talking.

“Aren’t you holding yourself to an unreasonable standard?”

Then a man’s voice. “No, I’m failing to.”

Not any man’s voice. John’s voice.

From her accent, Sherlock almost instantly realised who the woman was: John’s therapist.

What the hell…??

Why in Heaven’s name did he have an audio link on his phone to a listening device inside of John’s therapist’s house?

(An audio link, the url of which furthermore contained the name of the company where he’d ordered similar bugs himself in the past??)

With a feeling of dread growing in his stomach, he quickly switched apps and looked back to his inbox, searching for his invoice of the recording device he had installed in John’s walking cane. The Met had that one now. But on his screen, he now saw that he’d apparently ordered another one, with data connection for live streaming.

It vaguely started coming back to him then. He had only the faintest memory of ordering it and taking it with him somewhere, because he missed hearing John’s voice. To John’s therapist’s, it seemed. He’d obviously planted it there when he’d gone there to collect John for their visit to Smith.

Bad idea. Very bad.

Sherlock instantly clicked the livestream tab away.

He looked at Mrs Hudson, who thankfully was deeply absorbed in her crossword, oblivious.

Sherlock felt a deep shame creeping upon him. His resolve never to do drugs again multiplied tenfold.

To distract himself from the fear of John somehow finding out about the device, he started rummaging through the mess that was his desk in an attempt to clear away the clutter. He needed to tidy up his stuff as much as he needed to get his life back in order. Preferably with John still in it.

The thought of having breached John’s trust by planting the device at his therapist’s made him feel
sick.

He fervidly put all his energy and focus into making neat piles on his desk with things to keep, things to work on and things to throw away. It felt good. Especially because the latter pile was growing steadily.

And then, suddenly, his heart skipped a beat. Towards the bottom of the last pile of papers he was working through, there was a familiar note. It had a sharp crease in the middle and a pinprick at the top.

It said:


I need to kill someone. Who?’

Sherlock stared at it for a few moments, unable to move.

She had been real, then.

Sherlock had to make an effort to keep taking regular breaths.

Who on earth was she? And why had she pretended to be Culverton Smith’s daughter?

Sherlock hurried over to the kitchen to hold the paper up to the bright lamp suspended over the table, looking for clues he might have missed earlier.

Nothing.

He then brought it up to his nose to smell. Linseed oil. And some other indistinct cooking odours.

But then it occurred to him.

Linseed oil was not only used for cooking.

He frantically started pulling open drawers, rummaging inside them until he found what he was looking for. Then he switched off the overhead light. Shining his UV torch onto the note, two words appeared in large letters, overlaying the handwriting.

MISS ME?

Sherlock froze on the spot, his heart hammering in his chest.

There was only one explanation.

The woman who had come to his flat pretending to be Faith was somehow linked to Moriarty. Maybe to his brother – another Moriarty.

And that meant one simple thing, seeing as how the Consulting Criminal had always liked to get to him through John.

John was in danger.

“I’ll burn the heart out of you.”

Sherlock’s brain went into overdrive, like a swarm of bees on the first warm day of spring. John
was safely at his therapist’s now, Sherlock knew that much, but he needed to warn him. The session would end any minute and then he would walk out onto the street, unprotected.

Sherlock walked back to the living area in large strides and grabbed his phone from where he’d left it. He punched the screen to type out a text, fast as lightning.

-- One of Moriarty’s minions is still active. A woman. Beware. She might go after you. SH

And then,

-- Please get in touch as soon as you can. SH

He sat down, fidgeting with his phone case.

What if John didn’t check his phone? Maybe he should go over there, and make sure John stayed safe.

Don’t be ridiculous, he told himself. This woman and Jim’s brother had been at large for weeks at the least; why would suddenly every minute count now?

Still, he had a very bad feeling about this.

“I’ll be right back, dear,” Mrs Hudson cut through his thoughts. “Just popping downstairs to get the ginger biscuits.”

He ignored her.

He thought of John, talking to his therapist while she listened and took notes. How did that even work? Was she his conductor of light? Sherlock remembered her only vaguely: a rather strange woman, with a funny accent that almost sounded fake.

Then he thought of the woman pretending to be Faith, carrying around a gun and emulating the real Faith’s northern accent quite accurately. A master trickster, much like Jim had been. Great acting talent.

She could be pretending to be anyone right now. She could pose as a patient and walk into John’s consultation room any day.

What would she do, though?

Sherlock pictured John sitting opposite her, unaware.

And then something in Sherlock’s mind clicked.

The eyes. The fake accent.

John’s therapist!

He was down the stairs before he knew it.

Wait. Shouldn’t he tell Mrs Hudson? He wasn’t supposed to go out on his own.

No. They undoubtedly had some warning system in place where Mycroft was alerted as soon as he broke the rules. All the better. He could use a little help.

As he hailed a cab, he phoned John. No answer.
“Sod this,” he cursed, as he switched apps and used his browser history to tune in to the live audio connection again.

* * * * *

Another silence.

They had only ‘talked’ for twenty minutes. Still ten left.

Or should he just get up and leave early? John didn’t think he was going to continue coming here, anyway, after all. Politeness, however (and plain inertia, perhaps?), made him stay where he was.

“In spite of your insecurities about not living up to people’s expectations, you seem so much better, John.”

John nodded. “Yeah, I... I am. I think I am. Not all day; not every day, but, er, you know.”

“It is what it is?” his therapist asked.

“Yeah.”

“And Rosie?”

“Oh, beautiful, perfect, unprecedented in the history of children.” He smiled. “That’s not my bias; that’s scientific fact,” he said, nodding. It’s what Sherlock had said. And he agreed.

“Good.”

They both smiled awkwardly.

“And Sherlock Holmes?” she asked.

“Back to normal.” Well, almost, anyway.

“What about his brother?”

“Mycroft? He’s fine. I mean, obviously ‘normal’ and ‘fine’ are both relative terms when it comes to Sherlock and Mycroft.”

“Obviously.” She smiled. “But I didn’t mean Mycroft. I meant the other one.”

“Wh-which other one?”

“You know – the secret one.”

“Oh, that was just something I...” He smiled, shaking his head, and took a breath “… I said. I’m sure there’s...” He stopped, looking at her for a long moment. “How did you know about that? I didn’t tell you that.”

“You must have done.”

“I really didn’t.”

“Well, maybe Sherlock told me.”

John shifted forward in his seat. “No, you’ve met Sherlock exactly once. In this room. He was off his head.”
“Oh, no, no. I-I-I met him before that.”

What in the devil’s name was the woman talking about?

“When?” John asked.

His therapist smiled. “We spent a night together.”

John could only blink.

“It was lovely. We had chips.”

John frowned. He’d heard someone say that before. Sherlock? But when?

Who was this woman?

She took off her glasses, blinking as her vision adjusted. “Culverton gave me Faith’s original note,” she said, standing up. “A mutual friend put us in touch.”

Smith’s daughter. That’s who Sherlock mentioned having had chips with.

Oh God. Sherlock had not hallucinated the woman coming to his flat. The lady standing in front of him was a fraud. Logic dictated that she wasn’t really a therapist either.

John took measured breaths, his mind reeling.

Now the question was how malignant she was, exactly. This could still be relatively harmless, he told himself. Nothing but a prank. No reason to immediately assume the worst.

She walked across to the French windows and turned the key in the lock of the door, removing it before she turned back to him.

Not a good sign.

As she continued talking, her accent slipped slightly, sometimes sounding German and sometimes veering more towards an English accent. “Did Sherlock ever tell you about the note? I added some deductions for Sherlock.” She put the door key onto the side table, then dropped her glasses onto it as well. “He was... quite good. But... he didn’t get the big one.”

She bent over the table and gasped sharply as she took out a contact lens. Tossing her hair back a little, she turned to look at John, revealing that her right eye was now a grey-blue colour while her left eye was still brown.

John stared up at her. What. Did. She. Want?

He was sure he could quite easily overpower her if he had to, but she wasn’t actually posing a threat, even if he felt in danger. Was she? He was probably just being ridiculous again. Paranoid.

He tried to order his thoughts, but his mind had turned into complete chaos, like an indistinguishable blur of white noise, leaving him utterly unable to judge her intentions. (Which was rather ironic, seeing as he’d come here to learn exactly that: to trust his intuition and to mistrust people in apt situations and in apt situations only. That had been the whole point, for God’s sake. Was she just messing with him for that purpose?)

“In fairness, though, he does have excellent taste in chips.” All trace of the German tongue was gone, to be replaced by a well-educated southern English accent. She reached up with her left hand
and brushed her hair back.

It was then that John suddenly spotted a white plastic daisy-like flower behind her ear. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“The flower in your hair: it’s like I had on the bus,” he said, his throat gone completely dry.

She took the flower from her ear as she walked towards him. “You looked very sweet. But then...” She bent down and looked into his eyes. When she spoke again, it was with the exact same Scottish voice of the girl on the bus. “... you have such nice eyes.”

John sank back in his chair, stunned. Jesus Christ.

She’d tricked him into texting with her, telling her all sorts of personal details. And she’d obviously deliberately targeted him, repeatedly.

“Amazing, the times a man doesn’t really look at your face.” She turned and walked across the room. “Oh, you can hide behind a sexy smile, or a walking cane...” She turned and looked at him with her mismatched eyes, “... or just be a therapist, talking about you... all the time.” She rolled her eyes.

This was definitely not good.

John stood up.

Instantly, she reached to a nearby table and turned back aiming a pistol at him.

Of all things, he foolishly hadn’t expected her to have a sodding illegal fire arm.

He raised his hands and backed away a little.

“Oh, please don’t go anywhere,” she said. “I’m sure the therapist who actually lives here wouldn’t want blood on the carpet.” She paused briefly, as if thinking. “Oh, hang on, it’s fine. She’s in a sack in the airing cupboard.”

John willed himself to stay calm. “Who are you?”

The woman lowered the gun to her side. “Isn’t it obvious?” She stepped forward a few paces, smiling. “Haven’t you guessed?” Her smile dropped. “I’m Eurus.”

John shook his head. “Eurus?”

“Silly name, isn’t it? Greek. Means the East Wind. My parents loved silly names, like Eurus... or Mycroft... or Sherlock. Oh, look at him. Didn’t it ever occur to you – not even once – that Sherlock’s secret brother might just be Sherlock’s secret sister?”

John blinked, frowning. Of course it had. It just hadn’t occurred to him she might pose as his therapist and aim a bloody gun at him.

No wonder Sherlock had never talked about her.

*Or could all this possibly just be another lie?*

(He wasn’t soon going to believe anything she said about who she was at this point.)
“Huh. He’s making a funny face.” She raised her gun and pointed it at him again. “I think I’ll put a hole in it.”

John raised his hands again, definitely panicking now. Still, he stood nailed to the spot.

Then Eurus pulled the trigger.

Chapter End Notes

As you might have noticed, I like to put a lot of Easter eggs and subtle references to the show or to Mofftiss’s decisions in my fics. Usually, I don’t want to point them out and explain them explicitly, since that would kind of spoil the fun, but in the case of the “It is what it is” quote, there might be a lot of people wondering what the two references (poem and John Locke) were about, so here is a reference post: https://prettyrealisticjohnlockfanart.tumblr.com/post/155643212241/it-is-what-it-is

(This is one of those things that back then made me think that Moffat and Gatiss knew what they were doing. Now, I see it as a mere coincidence, sadly.)

Next up: PART THREE – THE FAMILY PROBLEM!
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Making sense of The East Wind… A nickname Sherlock knew well from a long time ago, but didn’t think he’d ever hear again. Especially not from her own mouth.

Chapter Notes

So after The Final Problem aired, many fans quickly came to the conclusion that there was no way the events as portrayed in that episode could be taken seriously, and they therefore had to be part of somebody’s horror dream. It was welovethebeekeeper who suggested in a tumblr post that in that case, the only reason to assume that Eurus is indeed Sherlock’s sister is because Eurus herself once implies so to John. And why would we believe her??

I then spent several weeks trying to think of a scenario in which it made sense for Sherlock and Mycroft to have referred to ‘The East Wind’ from early youth (as was stated in His Last Vow), without them having had a secret superpower sister.

I have to say I’m quite proud of the end result, as I think I managed to come up with a story that fits with everything from BBC canon up to TFP. Let me know what you think!

PART THREE – THE FAMILY PROBLEM

“I’m Eurus. Silly name, isn’t it? Greek. Means the East Wind.”

Sherlock was on the edge of his seat in the back of a cab, his phone clutched in his hands, listening to the strangest conversation he’d ever overheard, while he tried to deduce what was happening during the silences in between.

It took a few seconds before what the woman just said sank in.

Eurus. The East Wind.

An image flashed through his mind of a tall, mean girl with dark pigtails, ambushing him time and again in the street where he used to live as a child.

Her name was Eurus.

Could this really be the same woman who bullied him in his early teen years??

Sherlock sucked in a breath.
It simply had to be. The chances of it being someone else with the same name and of a similar age were negligible.

“My parents loved silly names, like Eurus, or Mycroft, or Sherlock.”

Wait. Why in Heaven’s name was she implying that she was Sherlock’s sister? That was just absurd. He had no sister, just two brothers. One of whom he’d never mentioned to John. For reasons.

“I think I’ll put a hole in it.”

Just as the cab turned the last corner into Windsor Drive, Sherlock heard the sound of a gunshot through his phone’s speakers and thought he might be sick.

No, she didn’t. She couldn’t have.

“That’ll teach those lovesick idiots,” he could hear her mutter.

Sherlock willed himself not to panic. To shut out his emotions and gauge the situation.

It didn’t work this time.

All he knew was he didn’t hear John’s voice anymore.

He then did the only thing he could do. He dialled 999, even though that meant he temporarily lost the audio connection to the consulting room.

“Ambulance needed. 46 Windsor Drive. Somebody’s been shot.”

He could only pray that wasn’t what had actually happened.

He hung up, throwing some money at the cabbie – who had just pulled up in front of number 46 – and bolted out of the car.

His debit card unlocked the front door on his first try and he swiftly slipped inside, his ears pricked, his blood ice cold.

He could hear vague rustling noises in the back room.

He got there just in time to see Eurus sneak out through the back door. He also saw John lying on the floor, motionless. For a brief second of panic, Sherlock thought he was lying in a pool of blood, but it was just an irregularly shaped, red rug.

Sherlock decided to worry about Eurus later and knelt down next to John – with his back towards the wall so as to keep an eye on the windows and doors.

John was unconscious, but breathing. Thank God.

Sherlock held two fingers to John’s carotid artery to check his pulse, which was regular. The only blood Sherlock could see were some tiny, microscopic droplets coming out of a small, red spot on his forehead, where his skin was slightly damaged.

Had she knocked him down with the back of the gun? Not likely; John would have seen that coming and defended himself. However, there was no sign of a struggle.

Sherlock had clearly heard a gunshot, though.
He quickly inspected the walls and furniture around him, rising a little from his squatting position – without letting go of John – but didn’t see any holes or damage from a bullet anywhere.

*What on earth had she done to him?*

Sherlock looked at John again and at the swelling slowly coming up below the red spot on his forehead.

Then it started to dawn on Sherlock.

There was only one logical explanation.

Holding his fingers pressed lightly to John’s neck to keep checking his pulse, Sherlock took out his phone and called Lestrade. “Greg. I need you here. Right now. I think we’re looking at attempted murder. It’s John.”

His fingers were trembling when he hung up the phone. As were his lips.

John looked peaceful, asleep. Just like when he’d dozed off on the sofa with his newspaper lying abandoned in his lap.

But in reality, Sherlock knew he was fighting for his life.

Sherlock tried to swallow away the lump in his throat. He wanted to touch John, not just with his fingertips against his neck; to hold him, make sure he wouldn’t slip away out of this world.

But he didn’t dare to.

(What if his diagnosis was wrong and there was something awry with his vertebrae as well? He couldn’t risk changing anything about John’s position and causing him even more harm.)

It felt as if an eternity passed as he waited for the ambulance, in excruciating silence. Sherlock sat, fingers holding steady over John’s pulse, unable to hold back quiet tears.

A silent mantra repeated in his mind: ‘*He will be fine. He will be fine*’ to the rhythm of John’s stable heartbeat. He wasn’t allowing himself any other thoughts.

Once the paramedics arrived, in a flurry of activity, they confirmed the likeliness of Sherlock’s hypothesis. They’d seen it often enough before.

Eurus had in all probability shot John with a rubber bullet.

At close range, and aimed at the head, this could lead to skull fracture, internal bleeding in the brain, tissue damage and oedema. John might or might not wake up. With or without brain damage.

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl, as nameless people scurried around John’s still form.

Hands putting down a stretcher beside John.

John’s head lolling slightly as he was being lifted onto it.

The next thing Sherlock knew, he was inside the back of the ambulance. The paramedic looking after John seemed capable and focused enough, so there was nothing Sherlock could do but stay out of his way.

As he continued to stare at the motionless silhouette of the most important person in his life, his
thoughts bitterly drifted back to the sick individual who had deliberately harmed John in this way.

The odious teenage girl with the unusual Greek name (“It means The East Wind!”) who’d used to hang around the park across from his old family home with her Taekwondo sports bag and shower-wet hair, together with her brother.

(Sherlock had always assumed they were twins, although he wasn’t entirely sure. He’d seen little of the brother, who mainly stayed in the shadows and watched from a distance. Sherlock could still vaguely picture his eerie grin, from under his dark, bedraggled surfer hair hanging in his eyes. Seeing as they’d been approximately the same height, the girl was probably younger, though, Sherlock now realised. In their early teens, girls grew faster than boys, after all.)

Sherlock’s mind seemed unable to stop going in all directions, not yet knowing which details from his memory were worth scrutinising.

Mycroft’s voice. “The East Wind is coming; it’s coming to get you!”

Rubbish big brother.

What was Eurus’s brother called again? Something common, like Jerry, or Joey. Probably short for Hieronymus or something.

What the deuce was the woman’s link to Moriarty, though, what with her 'Miss Me' message on Faith's note?

The pair had started loitering around their neighbourhood at the end of the spring during which Sherlock had been investigating Carl Powers’ death. He’d been thirteen.

He now knew that Moriarty had killed Powers; by putting botulinum toxin in his sodding eczema cream, paralysing him during his swimming contest and making him drown on the spot.

“Jimmy! Don’t forget to avoid Kingsland Road,” the paramedic hovering around John called to the driver.

And suddenly Sherlock’s head snapped up.

Jimmy.

Little Jimmy.

Of course.

How could he have been so blind?

Of course Eurus’s brother was Jim Moriarty!

Those eyes staring at him from under his locks. How could he not have recognised that malicious gaze when he met him again five years ago?

Stupid.

Pay attention, Sherlock.

Sherlock’s mind was racing now, catching up with what he should have seen a long time ago.

Moriarty had been in his life since forever.
He let out a long breath. He started to see the logical connections now.

Naturally, it was no coincidence that the siblings had started going to the specialised martial arts school just around the corner from where Sherlock lived mere weeks after Sherlock had almost found Jim out; it gave them an ideal excuse to hang around the area, as they waited to be picked up after training.

The perfect opportunity to spy on Sherlock.

To see how much of a threat he was, perhaps? Or to figure out how to silence him if that became necessary. That’s how Jim knew so much about Sherlock from the beginning, knew what his weak spots were. And that’s why he had been so obsessed with him in the first place. Jim had known all that time that Sherlock had almost solved his murder.

And Eurus was Jim Moriarty’s bloody sister.

Sherlock remembered her so much more clearly than him – in spite of having tried to delete her bullying from his mind.

Whenever he’d stepped out onto the street, she’d been in his face, taunting him, asking him questions, testing him. Anything to get a reaction from him, it had seemed.

And he’d never known why.

He closed his eyes, remembering one particular, sunny day.

“Freak alert!” she hollered. “Here he comes!” The sunlight bounced off her dark plaits as she ran backwards ahead of him, facing him. “I bet you’ve never even kissed a girl, have you? Ha! Do you wanna know what it’s like? Do you wanna kiss me?” She laughed boisterously.

He’d stoically ignored her and kept walking.

Then, from the corner of his eyes, he spotted her bending down to pick up some white pebbles from the neighbours’ driveway and casually throwing them at their dog, one at a time: a small Yorkshire terrier, walking free around the front garden.

Sherlock was about to tell her to stop it, but realised just in time that it would only achieve the complete opposite.

The dog wisely scurried off anyway.

“Aww, doggy, doggy. Cute doggy!” she cooed, as she took a small packet of raisins from her coat pocket. “Come on, little doggy. Do you want some raisins?”

Sherlock could then no longer manage to keep quiet. “Don’t do that! Raisins are harmful to dogs!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They’re fruits. And who cares. It’s just a stupid dog.”

Indeed, the silly animal came back towards her, and started eating up the raisins from her hand.

“No!”

He didn’t care if they laughed at him or made him trip and drop his books, but he wasn’t going to allow anybody to poison somebody’s pet. He knew what it was like to lose a dog, especially to lose a dog by malicious intent.
He still thought of Redbeard every day. And of Sherrinford, of course.

“No! If the raisins don’t kill him, he will still suffer greatly,” he shrieked. “They cause kidney failure! Stop feeding them to him!”

She continued to give him some more, giggling. “My God. They’re only raisins, and it’s only a dog. Don’t get your knickers in a twist!”

“Dogs have similar nervous systems to ours! They experience pain in the same way. Bentham, the philosopher, stipulates they feel just like we do. So stop it! You’re going to hurt him!”

By that point, when she still kept feeding the dog, he tried to take the packet from her by force.

She stretched her arm above and behind her, holding the raisins just out of reach, cackling and sticking out her tongue, as he made a complete fool out of himself.

“The owner will be upset if you hurt their dog!” he tried.

“Oh? Are you the owner, is that it? Is this your stupid fucking dog?”

“No! It’s the old lady next door! She will sue you for this. She will sue you and you will go to jail! You’re a murderer and you will pay for this!”

She was now doubling over laughing.

The dog seemed to be fine and simply trotted away when the supply of raisins stopped.

Mycroft had seen it all, from his bedroom window, and had been insufferable afterwards. “Better be careful, Sherlock. The East Wind is coming to get you; it seeks out the unworthy and plucks them from the earth.”

Sherlock looked at the paramedic checking John’s vital signs once again, and sucked in a breath.

The neighbour’s dog had ended up at the vet the next day with toxicosis, and only barely pulled through.

Eurus never knew that Sherlock had been right. Not that she would have cared in the least, of course.

Through the tiny windows of the ambulance, Sherlock could see that they were almost at the hospital.

John seemed to be stable, for now.

Sherlock took out his phone and sent a text to Mycroft.

-- John has been shot by Eurus Moriarty. The East Wind has come. SH

So was this shrew still working together with her other brother, the actor – who had so mysteriously vanished despite an MI5 Grade Four surveillance status – to continue Jim’s legacy of burning the heart out of Sherlock, as he’d so eloquently put it?

A chill ran down his spine.

Sherlock thought back to all the hours he’d spent shadowing this guy while trying to dismantle Jim’s network (before erroneously concluding he was not involved), and something started to nag
at the back of his mind. The androgynous-looking, genderqueer brother, who he’d never seen interacting with any friends or relatives. No sister in sight.

God, how could he have been so stupid?

How could he, Consulting Detective, have let his mind be blinded completely by one false assumption?

Jim Moriarty never had a genderqueer brother. It was a genderqueer sister.

An East Whirlwind.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Sherlock sits at John's side in the ICU, Mycroft is not such a rubbish big brother after all, Irene gets a new assignment and Molly feels like she's in a Bond action film.

Chapter Notes

With many thanks to ewebie, for letting me ask her questions about British ICU’s and to julzann for giving me loads of info that helped me to accurately describe John’s medical situation. I decided to take some minor literary license for the story’s sake, but overall their information did enable me to make the hospital scenes a lot more realistic.
Also, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my amazing betas once again: 88thparallel, mydogwatson and Jonathan, you are truly invaluable in the creation of this fic! :)

Once at the hospital, John was instantly surrounded by doctors and nurses and whisked away behind the A&E’s swinging doors. A nurse stopped Sherlock from following, and guided him down the hall.

Sherlock found himself standing in a waiting room, alone, mind spinning.

Sturdy plastic chairs stood in neat rows, as if this was just an ordinary day.

He chose a seat as far away from the few other people present as possible.

Sherlock’s brain was in full overdrive, like an internet browser with too many tabs open. He pressed his fingers against his temples.

John was still unconscious. Might not wake up. Might not pull through.

Each of those options slowly started to conjure a myriad of scenarios in his mind, each more horrific than the other.

His stomach felt like it had turned into solid rock.

What would his life be without John? Without John at his side?

John wasn’t allowed to die, or remain in a coma. He just wasn’t.

Sherlock focused on his own heartbeat in an attempt to stay calm. Systole-diastole. Systole-diastole.

Also, Moriarty had an evil sister on the loose. Sherlock had actually spent an entire night being kind to her and supposedly helping her. Had risked his life for her, to catch Smith. Not her father
after all.

_Stupid._

He should have realised that she was just acting, that it was all fake.

Well, not _all_.

And to be fair, he had been under considerable influence of narcotics at the time.

_Even more stupid._

At any rate, after everything that had happened – after everything that this woman had turned out to be _capable of_ – Sherlock wasn’t going to allow John to be alone for a single second, until she was behind bars.

Also, he quickly decided, he wasn’t for another moment allowing himself to think about the possibility that John might never wake up again. He just couldn’t cope with that thought; felt like his chest might be ripped open if he considered it once more.

So while IC doctors were busy saving John’s life, Sherlock called Lestrade – who he correctly expected was still at the therapist’s house, having arrived only after the ambulance had left. He paced up and down the hospital corridor as he spoke into his phone. “Greg, you need to arrange security for John. Right away. She’ll come back and try to kill him again. There’s no doubt about it. He can’t be left alone in the hospital.”

“Allright, I’ll be right on it, in a minute. Listen, this is some crazy case. We might need some of your help later on.”

“There is no case. I can tell you exactly who this was. Her name is Eurus Moriarty. Jim Moriarty’s sister. Well, if that is actually their real surname. Probably not. Anyway, you know who I mean. See? Solved.”

“What?! Another Moriarty?? Blimey.”

“Indeed.”

“Are you serious? I mean, are you _sure_?”

“Positive. Now if you want to actually catch and arrest her, have a copper sent over to Rosie’s nursery as well as to the Intensive Care Unit, for she is just as much of a target.”

“Jesus, listen, we’ll speak later. I’m arranging security as soon as I can, but I need to go now. They found something in the airing cupboard. Sorry.”

_Dammit._

Sherlock pressed the screenlock button a lot more forcefully than necessary and marched over to the nurses station. It would probably take over an hour before an actual constable arrived. And how much security could a single copper at the door really provide? Eurus would likely have no problem entering through the window, or disguising herself as a nurse or a visitor, or even a patient.

All of the rooms on this unit had two beds – she could very well manipulate her way into being John’s roommate.
It just wouldn’t do.

Sherlock ground his teeth.

She was capable of anything.

In the first place, Sherlock decided no other patient could be allowed to stay in John’s room, if only to avoid unknown visitors getting close to him.

And second, it was clear he himself would at all times have to stay in the room with John as well.

“He can’t be left alone. Security reasons. I work with the police.”

“Sir, I don’t think we allow non-patients to ever occupy any beds. You can arrange for a guard at the door, if we receive such a request through the appropriate channels.”

“Listen, this is urgent. And until there is a bloody guard, and even after that, someone needs to stay close to him, the only someone available at the moment being me.”

“I’m really sorry, but I’m honestly not authorised to approve that.” From his tone of voice, it was quite clear that the nurse was not in fact sorry at all.

“Fine,” Sherlock snapped, and strode over to the hallway, where the lift was located. After stepping inside, he punched the button for the top floor.

Once he’d found the biggest and most pompous office on the executive level, he gave two short knocks and immediately proceeded inside. “Sorry, awfully busy, I’m sure,” he said in a cheery, business-like manner, “but this won’t take long.” He quickly flashed one of his stolen police badges, while continuing, “In addition to the notice you will get of a police officer being placed outside one Mr Watson’s room in the IC, I am here to request special permission to occupy the other bed in his room, by way of extra security.”

The director looked taken aback as well as a little offended. “You can’t just barge in here like that, sir,” he said sternly. “And surely you know we can’t let you occupy a bed that is meant for someone who needs medical attention. Someone might die because you want to stay with your pal.”

_Crap, he’d recognised his face and John’s name, Sherlock realised._

“Someone might _die_?” Sherlock repeated, all cheeriness gone. “If you don’t let me stay in that room, John Watson will be murdered and you will have your death for sure. I know that for a fact, just as I know that you’ve been sleeping with at least two of the other board members and several times the amount of nurses. Also, your cat has galanitis because your wife is against immunisation, which poses a serious health risk to patients with heart failure, whom you might infect via the cat’s skin particles on your clothes. Now, if you just let me stay in that room, I will keep all this information to myself. How about that?”

So indeed, Sherlock had been right in saying this wouldn’t take long. As well as in thinking the man had no medical knowledge whatsoever and wouldn’t notice Sherlock making up a disease on
the spot. Sherlock’s correct deduction about his wife’s pet being unvaccinated – quite obvious, really, from the amount of holistic pendants she had around her neck on the photograph on the shelf, in which a cat’s tail was also visible – had naturally thrown the man off.

Once outside, after a short moment of relief, his thoughts immediately drifted back to John lying in the emergency room, and he felt what little energy he had left being sucked out of him.

He strode back to the waiting area on the first floor, while the vortex of thoughts and emotions continued to whirl in his head.

* John... Jim Moriarty... John... Eurus Moriarty... John... Rosamund Moran... John.

* John... John... John...

But there was also still Rosie. What to do about her? Even if Sherlock arranged security at her nursery, where would she stay the rest of the time? He briefly thought of Molly, or Mrs Hudson. They were Rosie’s godmothers and sometimes looked after her, he knew. But if one of them were to take care of her, there would still have to be added security in their home. Then again, wasn’t that necessary anyway? Wasn’t everybody Sherlock cared about a target right now, once again?

He considered phoning Mycroft, loathe as he usually was to do so. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Just as he took out his phone, however, it rang.

He had no time to be either relieved or annoyed.

“I’ve got twelve people of MI5 on the new Moriarty case,” his brother’s voice said. “Doctor Watson’s daughter should be sent to a safe place, preferably out of town. I was thinking with Mummy and Daddy. I can send over one of our agents who’s raised a baby herself, to take care of her and guard her at the same time. What do you say?”

That was actually a rather brilliant solution.

“Acceptable,” Sherlock said. And then, “Thank you.”

“Another agent just arrived at her nursery to stand watch until the end of this afternoon,” Mycroft went on. “I think Ms Hooper is probably the most suitable candidate to request to go over and pick up the child and take her to her temporary address, if I’ve assumed correctly. Could you call her to ask this favour of her?”

“I will. Thanks,” Sherlock said again, aggravated at how small his voice sounded.

“There’s also security personnel on their way to Ms Hooper’s, Mrs Hudson’s, and Mr Lestrade’s house, just in case. Anything I’ve overlooked?”

Sherlock thought of Irene, but she was safely out of the picture. He considered for a moment. “Janine,” he said eventually. She was in fact probably at Baker Street right now, waiting to look after him and give him his pills. It was her turn, this afternoon.

Sherlock found he didn’t need any pills now. He needed John.

John was all he ever needed.

* * * * *
Rosie let out a delighted yelp when she spotted Molly among the mummies and daddies coming to pick up their children at the nursery.

Somewhat awkwardly, Molly attempted a smile and stepped over some scattered building blocks to the corner where Rosie was playing with a plush octopus and what seemed to be a merman doll. “Hello Rosie,” she said, kneeling down next to her. “You were expecting someone else, weren’t you? But your daddy couldn’t be here, so they asked me to pick you up.”

“Da!” Rosie yelled excitedly.

“Now let’s put the toys back and then we’re going for a ride in the car, okay?”

After the friendly nursery nurse had handed her the bag with all of Rosie’s stuff, Molly stepped back into the corridor, carrying the little girl on her hip.

As instructed, Molly took off her light pink summer cardigan – while continuing to balance Rosie on one hip and then the other, which was quite a hassle – and switched it for the green one she’d been carrying with her in a flowery, orange-coloured plastic bag. Turning the bag inside out so only the plain white side showed, she stuffed her first cardigan in there. Pulling the elastic out of her hair and shaking it loose, she stepped outside, with two bags and a baby, to where an agent stood smoking a cigarette. Without inhaling, she noticed. But it gave the man an inconspicuous reason to stand there, she supposed.

Molly walked up to him. “Code word?” she asked, somewhat nervously.

“Greek pounds. How many?”

“18.95.”

The man nodded and gestured to follow her to a silver-coloured Volkswagen.

Molly got into the back and strapped Rosie into the baby seat that they had thankfully arranged to be there.

Luckily, Rosie was too small to be worried about this unusual course of events. Molly did her best to keep smiling and talking to her, which seemed to keep her happy, anyway. As long as she had the merman with her (which had turned out to be hers), everything was fine.

Once they were on the motorway, it wasn’t long before she was asleep – the toy’s glittery, purple tail clutched safely against her chest.

However, just as Sherlock had explained to her they would, they soon took an exit onto a small country road, eventually bringing them to a tiny train station in a little village.

In one of the adjacent parking spots, a plain, blue Vauxhall stood waiting for them.

After the two drivers had exchanged their own secret codes, it was only a matter of seconds before Molly and Rosie (still asleep) were in the other car, heading back towards the motorway, but now going in the other direction.

Molly sat in the front, this time, next to the female driver.

She was a very pretty woman, in her mid-thirties, with short, blond hair not reaching her chin. She had big, sparkling eyes and a pronounced jawline. Not to mention a perfect figure. She was dressed, however, in a rather dull, oversized T-shirt and faded jeans. Basically, she looked like a
Bond girl who was trying to look like an average mum.

They briefly exchanged friendly smiles, but didn’t talk.

As Molly stared at the landscape passing by, her thoughts kept turning around in circles about this whole operation and the reason for it (poor John!).

Once she was done being astonished by it all, and decided to focus on where they were heading, it suddenly occurred to her that she was about to meet the people she’d once hoped would become her in-laws. She shook her head, grinning momentarily. That had been a long time ago, when a handsome pair of cheekbones and some straining shirt buttons had been all that was needed to set her heart on fire. She’d since long realised that both Sherlock and herself could only be happy with a very different kind of person. In her case, she was hoping she might soon arrange a second date with a certain detective inspector. And as for Sherlock… well… she could only hope that John would soon wake up from the coma he was in.

She let out a shaky breath.

The sun was still bright in the evening summer sky when they arrived at a dark red house, surrounded by a low stone wall.

“By the way, I’m Hannah,” Bond girl said after switching off the engine.

“Oh! I’m Molly,” she said. “Well, I guess you knew that already, obviously. I mean. Yes. Well.”

Hannah just smiled.

They both got out of the car, and, as if they’d been lifelong friends, together they started unloading various bags, all sorts of baby stuff (a baby bath, changing mat, bouncer chair) and the baby from the car.

When the front door swung open, a friendly, elderly lady appeared with outstretched arms.

“Hannah! So good to see you!”

“Same! I’m so glad to be here,” she replied cheerfully, though not entirely convincingly.

Molly wondered if this exchange was all code as well.

The lady, who was supposedly Sherlock’s mother (and a very different type of mother than she’d imagined, at that), embraced the younger woman in an affectionate hug and then put her arms around Molly as well. When Mr Holmes appeared behind her, a similar ritual followed.

Once they and their luggage were all inside, though, the atmosphere suddenly changed to business-like.

“Hello, nice to meet you and well, er, welcome to our home,” Mrs Holmes smiled politely. “We… don’t usually facilitate Mycroft’s schemes, but this seemed a logical exception. How’s the little one?”

* * * * *

John looked peaceful. Relaxed.

The monitor next to him beeped reassuringly at regular intervals.

He was still alive.
The CT-scan had shown oedema in his head, a slight swelling caused by the blow of the bullet. So they’d put him in a medically induced coma, in order to minimise the chance of brain damage during his recovery. By reducing the metabolic rate of brain tissue, the brain was being protected from more swelling, which could otherwise constrict blood supply and destroy additional brain tissue, the doctors had explained to Sherlock. But that meant John was intubated and ventilated, and there were several monitors continually showing all sorts of readouts that Sherlock could make neither head nor tail of.

According to the doctors, there was nothing more they could do but wait and see how John came out of this after the swelling subsided.

Sherlock sat beside the bed, both hands gripping the arms of his chair. His heart rate was definitely not as calm as John’s.

He kept looking around. Out the window, where occasionally birds could be seen flying by. At the nurse continually moving about the room, carrying out her duties in cyclical intervals: checking John’s vitals, checking the equipment and tubes, turning the feeds on and off, administering medications, updating the nursing notes, occasionally disrupting the calm with suctioning.


Like an eagle, he looked at every detail, memorising anything that might turn out to be suspicious later on.

A few minutes after the regular nurse left, another nurse entered.

Sherlock sat up.

She had a similar height as Faith and thus Eurus, but a sturdier build.

_Could it be her?_

Sherlock scrutinised her every movement, as she did some more routine checks and scribbled something into John’s file.

She smiled at Sherlock.

Just like himself, she had segmental heterochromia iridum in one of her eyes. Difficult to fake with contacts.

Probably not her, then.

Sherlock breathed deeply when she left.

He looked at John again. His hair looked so soft.

The monitor continued to beep steadily.

“Did you bring it?”

Suddenly, there was a girl with bright red hair standing in the doorway, about twelve years old.

“I’m sorry?” Sherlock said, flabbergasted.

“My hairband. Did you bring it like I asked?”
“I’m not one of the...” Sherlock said hesitantly. “I-I don’t work here.”

“My special hairband.”

“I’m not one of your doctors,” Sherlock replied, more firmly this time.

She frowned. Then, thankfully, she left.

* * * * *

Irene Adler looked around the room that was her new temporary home and sat down on the bed. The mattress was not too soft, just like she preferred. On the walls, there were several faded botanical drawings in simple wooden frames. An old-fashioned cradle stood in a corner. Flowery curtains moved slightly on the breeze that came through the open window.

She closed her eyes and smiled. She’d been longing for some country air for a while.

She took out her phone, considering to text Sherlock, but decided against it. She had nothing to say, really. No riddle for him to crack. And the fewer communications she had during her current mission, the better. Just in case.

Strangely, sometimes thinking of Sherlock still made her relive the traumatic experience of her almost-execution in Karachi. The giant sword glinting in the faint light. His familiar eyes intense behind the black niqab all of a sudden. The overwhelming rush of adrenaline and relief.

However, the memory of having left him at the hotel in Mumbai with only his passport and her clothes invariably lightened her mood.

Her smile broadened, and she let herself fall back onto the bed so that a warm ray of sunshine fell onto her face.

During their ride to India, Sherlock had tried to persuade her to put her skills and intelligence to a good cause, saying Mycroft might want to recruit her if he asked.

Initially, she’d declined.

A month later, after having gotten herself almost killed once more, she’d called Sherlock after all. Pride be damned.

The training had been hard, but not as hard as some of the things she’d had to do before in her life. Especially not with Briony there, a fellow agent and single mother of a baby daughter who she soon became very close with.

She sighed contentedly.

Falling in love with Briony and moving in with her had definitely been the best thing to happen to her in a long time.

Sherlock technically didn’t know any of this. At least, he never asked or brought up any part of her current private life in their occasional text exchanges. Those were usually about little mysteries either of them was trying to solve and could use the other one’s input in. Or just plain banter.

Irene pushed herself off the bed and checked her new hair in the tiny mirror. Then she walked out of the room and down the stairs.

The kettle had just boiled.
“The cradle is too small, I’m afraid,” she said to Mrs Holmes. “For the first night, it will have to
do, but perhaps one of you can pop over to Mothercare to buy a travel cot tomorrow?”

They’d agreed that she would stay inside as much as possible, never far from Rosie.

“Is it, really? I’d thought, at six months… Yes, you’re probably right, Hannah.” Mrs Holmes was
opening cabinets to fetch tea mugs while she talked. “That store is in Bristol, isn’t it? It’s almost an
hour’s drive, but we have no choice, I think. Though, we were actually going to visit Sherrinford
tomorrow, weren’t we? That’s three hours driving to and fro already. It’s his birthday.”

“He doesn’t even know that. It won’t matter if we go a day later,” Mr Holmes said.

“But we promised!”

“He doesn’t know that.”

Irene did a quick search on her phone. “It’s only a half hour detour to the one in Swindon, once
you’re near Wantage anyway.”

“Oh, is there one over there as well?” said Mr Holmes. “Marvellous. That’s settled, then.” Then, to
Rosie, “You’re going to get your own little bed up here, how about that?”

“Ba!” Rosie yelled excitedly.

Irene smiled.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Eurus contemplates her life (and her motive for shooting John), Sherlock keeps solving cases at John’s bed (which might sound familiar to anyone who has watched TFP…), and Janine is a good friend, making Sherlock finally fully acknowledge his feelings for John.

Chapter Notes

Sorry guys, because of even more crazy (and sad) stuff going on in my life at the moment, there is only one update this month. :(  
Hope you enjoy it, nevertheless.

Eurus sighed, as she switched on the faint little night lamp in a corner of the furthest part of the derelict building, away from the busy street. She took the cheeseburger from the plastic bag she’d been carrying and sat on a broken chair propped against the wall, to eat.

Although she was used to living unnoticed, in the shadows of society, it was still bothersome that she had to make an extra effort to stay invisible to the cops at the moment.

But this was what her life had become, and she was fine with that, really. It gave her a purpose, if nothing else.

Besides, she couldn’t imagine being able to survive the boredom of a so-called ‘normal’ life. She pulled a face at the mere thought.

Having finished half of her burger, she put the other half back into the bag, for breakfast, and stretched out onto the mattress lying in a corner. She hardly noticed how filthy it was, and if she did, it didn’t matter anyway.

It had all started such a long time ago, when her brother had decided to poison that annoying little shit, Carl Powers. Or well, maybe it hadn’t really started until one Sherlock Busybody Holmes began to poke his nose into things he had no business poking his nose in.

Or perhaps, in fact, it started long before that. As funny and as fascinatingly different as her brother had been, living with him had always been… difficult.

But she had loved him. And looked up to him. Her big brother, the only person who’d ever vaguely looked out for her. She angrily squeezed her eyes shut against the tears that were about to well up as soon as she allowed herself to feel how much she missed him.

Ever since Sherlock Holmes had entered her brother’s sights, though – shortly after the Powers incident – and Jim had persuaded their dad that he definitely needed to join that one martial arts club at the other end of London (which was conveniently in the same street as where the Holmeses
lived), Sherlock had become an inseparable part of his life, and therefore of her life as well. She could safely say Jim had been obsessed with Sherlock.

She remembered, as if it had been yesterday, the endless hours they would spend spying on the Holmeses’ house and its inhabitants, who were infinitely interesting. She learnt an important lesson then. Not all parents were as harsh and uncaring as hers. Nor were all brothers as cruel.

She’d secretly (foolishly) fantasised about being one of the Holmeses, that their parents were hers too. That Sherlock was her brother. She enjoyed teasing him, testing him, to see what he was made of. It fascinated her endlessly. He was naïve, but also brilliantly clever in a very different way than Jim was.

Thankfully, though, no one listened to him, and Carl’s missing shoes, containing the poison that killed him, were never discovered.

During their uni years, Jim had found other distractions to focus his attention on, although every so often, the subject of Sherlock would emerge again. Eurus herself had studied to become an actress (but finding jobs as such was a proper pain in the arse and she didn’t ever really want to work with other people anyway, seeing as how stupidly boring everyone was). More than anything, she loved to play male roles. And even outside the theatre, she enjoyed trying to pass as a man, and had made an in-depth study of putting on make-up that subtly made her seem more manly; reveling in a feeling of exultation for days every time she actually got mistaken for a bloke. Being able to express that part of her had made her feel so much more free and alive. (And the fact that in doing so, she was messing with people’s heads, was naturally an excellent bonus, as that in itself was her second favourite pastime.)

For twenty years, Sherlock Holmes had been nothing but a story, a myth, and Jim had become steadily more and more busy running his empire from the centre of his clever web.

Sherlock himself had seemed to have disappeared off the grid completely.

Until one day, Jim read about him in the papers. Holmes had turned out to have specialised in exactly the same thing as Jim had, albeit from two different ends of the periscope. And so Jim had finally found an interesting opponent to test his strengths against whenever there was a lull in his other projects.

But it had all gotten out of hand.

Jim had ended up dead, as well as Sherlock – or so it had initially seemed. Eurus and Rose had been left feeling completely lost, like two floating rubber boats on a vast ocean.

Sadly, Rose’s presence had not even begun to fill the emptiness inside of Eurus that Jim had left behind. Rose herself had, however, soon started busying herself with keeping Jim’s business running. Which apparently had filled most of the emptiness for her.

Work was the best known antidote to sorrow, after all.

Eurus agreed with that now. She had finally found her path again these last months, and was becoming more and more focused.

Now that the heartbreak over losing Rose had faded to a dull background pain that only flared up occasionally – much like her grief over Jim had – rather than continuing to paralyse her, her brother’s and her lover’s memory now gave her the strength to do what she thought they would have done, if they’d still been there. But better.
She smiled, finally feeling a little proud of herself for the first time in a long while.

By using a rubber bullet on John, she’d ensured that John would get severely injured without him actually dying, knowing it would most certainly – *finally* – bring these two idiots together as a couple, as such events tended to do. Only for Eurus to be able to destroy their happiness *much* more efficiently afterwards.

In the meantime, while she waited for them to confess their silly little feelings, she had another wonderful problem to occupy herself with. The Woman was apparently still around, waiting to be found…

* * * * *

Sherlock had hardly slept, not trusting the guard to stay awake, or to be alert enough to see through a disguise if he did. On top of which, nobody actually knew what Eurus Moriarty looked like, but him. (Not that he had such a very clear image of her, either, but still.)

Also, the ICU was a busier place than he’d expected, bustling with nurses’ activity and noise throughout the night.

He’d spent hours just staring at John in the dim light. At the equipment keeping him alive, which was shining its eerie, faint light into the darkness of the room. At the nurses carrying out all sorts of check-ups at regular intervals.

When early morning sunlight started to filter through the canopy of a large tree outside John’s window, Sherlock began to hear new sets of footsteps in the corridor. Change of shift, change of gaits.

Different sounds, different voices.

He studied and memorised each one.

The night nurse exchanged some details with the new one who got assigned to this room and politely said goodbye to Sherlock as she left.

The shifts of the policemen at the door were shorter than the nurses’ shifts. They, too, introduced themselves at each change of personnel and dropped in to say goodbye when relieved of duty.

The current lady officer definitely looked more able than her predecessor.

Some time after the cleaning staff had finished their rounds and rolled their noisy trolleys into other corridors, Sherlock heard another set of unfamiliar footsteps approaching from the hallway.

He pricked his ears.

A woman. Late thirties, early forties, physically fit.

*Could be her.*

He straightened up, every muscle in his body tense.

Then in walked DI Hopkins.

“Hi,” she said.

He said nothing and looked back to John – partly disappointed, partly relieved.
She cleared her throat. “Greg thought I should ask you for help. We’ve got this case…” She shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “I mean, only if you’re up to it, of course.”

Without looking up, Sherlock said, “What have you got?”

She pulled up the other chair and sat. “Well… Six months ago, a man called Evans was murdered. He was shot from a distance of three hundred metres with this rifle.” She took a stack of pictures from a large envelope and showed him the top one, which he briefly glanced at from the corner of his eyes. “There are three suspects, all brothers. Nathan Garrideb, Alex Garrideb and Howard Garrideb.” She laid out three photographs of the men on the bed.

Sherlock shifted his eyes to the picture nearest to him, labelled ‘Nathan Garrideb’. “Glasses, glasses,” he muttered. He took in a long breath. “Nathan wears glasses. Evans was shot from three hundred metres. Kickback from a gun with this calibre… would be massive. No cuts, no scarring. Not Nathan, then. So it’s got to be one of the other two.”

Sherlock put the photograph further away from him and slowly picked up the second one. “Now, Howard. Howard’s a lifelong drunk. Pallor of his skin, terminal gin blossoms on his red nose… There’s no way he could have taken that shot from three hundred metres away. So that leaves us with Alex. Indentations on the temples suggest he habitually wears glasses. Frown lines suggest a lifetime of peering.”

“He’s short-sighted, or he was,” Mycroft’s voice suddenly said. “His recent laser surgery has done the trick.”

Sherlock looked up to see his brother standing in the doorway. “Laser surgery?” Sherlock repeated. “Look at his clothes. He’s made an effort,” Mycroft said.

“Excellent,” Sherlock whispered, secretly a little grateful to DI Hopkins for giving him something else to focus on, even if just for a few minutes. “Suddenly he sees himself in quite a different light now that he’s dumped the specs,” he continued. “Even has a spray tan. But he’s clearly not used to his new personal grooming ritual.”

At Hopkins’s raised eyebrows, he clarified, “That can be told by the state of his fingernails and the fact that there’s hair growing in his ears. So it’s a superficial job, then. But he got his eyes fixed. His hands were steady. He pulled the trigger. He killed Evans.”

* * * * *

Only a few hours after he’d solved The Three Garridebs case (he thought John would like the title) and he’d finished his short, awkward chat with Mycroft – who was really just trying to be kind and give him some moral support, Sherlock knew deep down (as well as a bag with toiletries he apparently thought Sherlock might need) – Sherlock got an email from Lestrade. Another case. Or really, just a picture of a coffin and a very short question: “A child’s coffin?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. Then he quickly typed out a reply, saying the words out loud as he typed them.

--A child’s coffin would be more expensive. This is in the lower price range, although still best available in that bracket. This is a practical and informed choice. Balance of probability suggests that this is for an unmarried woman distant from her close relatives. That much is suggested by the economy of choice. SH

He hit ‘send’ and leaned back in his chair, not caring about the context of the query.
John still looked the same. Calm. As if nothing at all was wrong.

Maybe nothing was, and he would simply wake up in one or two days, once the swelling in his brain had subsided, and everything would go back to the way it had been.

Although things could never be the same as long as there still was a Moriarty on the loose.

He desperately needed to come up with a plan to defeat her. Although who knew, maybe The Yard or Mycroft’s agents would finally, for once, do a proper job and get her behind bars without his help.

* * * * *

The clock ticked.

The monitors beeped.

The sky was becoming an orangey colour as evening started to fall.

Sherlock felt nauseous.

He focused on the noises from the corridor. Footsteps. Trolleys. Nurses talking.

John breathing through the breathing tube.

Then, a familiar voice outside, asking directions to John’s room.

Janine.

She smiled vaguely as she entered, tilting her head as she tentatively raised her eyebrows, wordlessly asking how he was, if it was okay to come in. “Hi there.”

“Hi.” He didn’t object.

She grabbed a chair and sat on the opposite side of John’s bed. “I’m so, so sorry to hear about what happened to John.” Her eyes were now sad.

Sherlock nodded.

“So, for no reason, his therapist just shot him? I mean, a therapist, of all people…”

He was about to say it wasn’t really a therapist; she had just pretended so as to get close to him. But that would only lead to more questions. And the less people knew, the better. He didn’t want word to get out that Sherlock Holmes was looking for a mysterious, evil woman, who was good at disguises, since all sorts of folks would start muddling the investigation.

“You think it’s a trick. You look so... unsure. You’re not used to being unsure, are you?”

“It’s more common than you’d think.” He attempted a smile. There was a reason he got on with her. She wasn’t as stupid as most people.

“Listen, er, I brought your pills…” she said.

“That’s kind of you,” he replied. “But I don’t need them anymore.” No pills would be able to make him feel better.
She didn’t try to argue.

They sat in silence for a bit.

“Tea?” Sherlock asked, suddenly realising it was the polite thing to offer.

“Oh yes, tea would be lovely. Thanks.” She smiled faintly.

He walked over to the little corner with the electric kettle and a small stack of tea cups, and boiled some water.

Only then did he realise he was terribly thirsty himself.

As they drank their tea, Sherlock asked how she was and she gave some vague, socially acceptable answer that he forgot the same instant.

“You love him, don’t you,” she suddenly said. It was not a question.

Sherlock looked up at her, shocked. She’d teased him about John before, implied things in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way. But now she was dead serious. Her eyes were even sadder than before.

Sherlock swallowed and said nothing.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay to love him and to be scared. But you’ve been scared for such a long time, and it breaks my heart. You’re so afraid to lose him, that it’s almost like… a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you don’t lose him to this bullet, then please don’t let yourself lose him by keeping your distance, as you have been doing, and killing yourself slowly inside.” She looked at him intently. “I hate to see you like this. I wish for you to be happy. Both of you. If he wakes up, please tell him.”

Sherlock cleared his throat, not knowing where to look.

But what if I lose him precisely by telling him how I feel? Wasn’t that much more likely?

He fleetingly thought back to that one time, back at 221B, when they had leaned against one another on the sofa, holding hands, months ago. A lifetime ago. Although he’d allowed himself to hope then, he simply didn’t think John felt that way anymore. Not after Sherlock had fucked everything up.

If John had ever felt like that in the first place.

Maybe Sherlock had just imagined it. Stupid wishful thinking.

“Well… So... How was your date with that guy from Tinder? Kevin?” he said, blinking rapidly, still not looking Janine in the eye.

The corners of her mouth faintly quirked up and she sighed. “Good in bed, not so much outside.” She wiggled her eyebrows and shrugged. “Listen, I need to go. You hang in there, alright?” Then, turning to John, “You’d better not dare to leave him, John.”

She seemed to swallow something away, and left.

After she’d disappeared, Sherlock listlessly got up to make some more tea with the remaining hot water.
Janine was right, he realised.

He loved John, of course he did, and that terrified him. The fear he’d been experiencing for the past twenty-four hours, fear of losing John, was in fact eerily familiar, just like she’d said. He felt it constantly, _always._

It had been gnawing at him for years.

The truth was, he could never be happy without John. He had definitely not been entirely happy in this limbo he’d been living in, having John near but _not quite near enough._ Having continuous hesitations as to whether John might perhaps feel the same or not; whether he should tell him how he felt or not.

**What if John did feel the same, but they never found out because he never woke up from this?**

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut.

‘_Somebody loves you,’ _Irene’s voice echoed from the past.

She’d made this deduction within five minutes of first meeting them.

Another memory popped into his head from a few months later: John not responding when Irene had implied to him she was in love with Sherlock – despite her usually not being into men like that – and telling John ‘_Look at us both._’

The woman whose job it was to know what people liked (and who was pretty damn good at her job).

Irene had in fact always insisted Sherlock should make a move, as she was completely sure John felt the same. Much like Janine. They both said John had been so clearly jealous when he’d thought Sherlock had been in love with them. (A ridiculous notion.)

And then there’d been Mary telling him ‘neither of us were the first, you know’ at the wedding, when John had been so very engrossed in conversation with James Sholto, much to Sherlock’s chagrin. Which had happened mere days after John’s bachelor party, where he’d drunkenly grabbed Sherlock’s knee with the words ‘I don’t mind’.

**Don’t mind what??**

If John had seriously been having feelings for him all this time, could he really have stopped having them only because Sherlock had not solved Mary’s case in a better way?

Sherlock shivered.

He had always been terrified of his sexuality. (Well, and of sex in general, he supposed. Although he’d made a craft out of hiding that little fact. Fear of the unknown was such a backward concept, after all.) He’d tried to push his desires away, each time they furtively crept in from the background, and, when that didn’t work, to just ignore them.

At several points in the past years, he’d thought about coming out to John, just to gauge his reaction. Would his response betray him being interested? Appalled? Or just indifferent?

In the end, Sherlock had not even had the courage to take that step, let alone confess that he was in love with him. In all truth, he’d only just now really confessed that to himself as a fact.
But, sitting at John’s bed, next to the machines that were now in charge of his life, Sherlock made a decision.

*If he wakes up, I’ll tell him.*
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Sherlock tells John he loves him, although John is still unconscious. In the meanwhile, John is having strange dreams, and Mycroft turns out to have been hiding a big secret for years.

Chapter Notes

Good news: I’m now no longer as hellishly busy at work as I have been the past six months, so I really hope to be able to go back to my initial posting schedule of 2 updates a month. :D
For this chapter, I would like to thank chained-to-the-mirror for her help with Sherlock’s name deduction and of course Ariane DeVere for her transcripts (arianedevere.livejournal.com), as well as my wonderful betas!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were rocks. There was a cliff. Water sloshing everywhere.

A boat. Pirates.

Someone disguised as a fisherman.

Stormy clouds.

Three men dangling from the cliff.

Everything was grey.

Usually John didn’t mind grey. Now he did.

The whole place was glum. Eerie, even, in its vagueness and absurdity.

Voices coming from nowhere.

Moriarty.

The face of his therapist, who wasn’t a therapist at all.

Sherlock, sounding emotional for some reason. “Molly, I just want you to do something very easy for me, and not ask why.”

A short pause.
“No, it’s not a game. I... need you to help me.”

Another pause.

“It’s not about that.”

A silence, broken only by the sound of waves.

“I love you.”

Of course.

Of course Sherlock loved Molly. She was a sweet girl, who clearly adored him. They would be happy. At least, if she was safe. Was she safe? No one was ever safe near Sherlock, were they?

John knew. You could be blown to pieces any minute, if you associated yourself with Sherlock. Dangerous. Yet, here he was.

* * * * *

“I love you,” Sherlock whispered again at John’s still form. How easy it suddenly was to state such a profound fact. Why wasn’t everything in life so simple?

He dragged a hand over his face and re-evaluated the phone conversation he’d just had.

Molly had reluctantly agreed to create a fake death certificate in John’s name, if Sherlock gave her the word, despite her initially being shocked at the question, which she’d briefly thought part of some stupid game.

Nothing was a game at the moment.

Sherlock wasn’t entirely sure yet whether he would actually have her do this, but he might decide to apply this approach to lure out Miss Moriarty if all else failed. He’d just needed Molly to tell him about the process and how foolproof a forgery would be. So now he could properly consider that route.

There were a million things to consider, a million approaches on how to catch Jim’s sister and eliminate her. Preferably with a little revenge. Or not so little.

He would do anything to save John from future harm by this psychopathic woman.

Anything.

Because he loved him.

* * * * *

In the middle of the second night at the hospital, Sherlock’s phone rang.

“Hello?” a little girl’s voice said.

“Yes?”

Sherlock had actually dozed off, and had to try hard to activate his brain. But while picking up, he did grogily realise that his battery was dying and that he might get cut off any moment. Bugger.
“Hi, I’m er… I’m on a plane,” the girl told him, “and, er, I’m in the loo right now so no one can hear me.” She sounded upset. On the verge of panic.

Sherlock lifted his head from the mattress of the hospital bed. “Oh, hello. On a plane, you say? Um, try-try to stay calm. Just te-tell me what your name is.”

“It’s Alice.” Then she seemed to hesitate. “My mum told me never to tell my last name to strangers.”

“Of course not. Very good. But, um, I’ll tell you mine. My name is... William Sherlock Scott Holmes. So now I’m not really a stranger anymore, you see.”

“Alright. It’s Alice Dodgson,” the tiny voice at the other end said. “My mum’s not answering her phone, and… I… er… I still had your number in my phone from back when we still lived in England, and I came to you that time about my grandfather and why they wouldn’t let us see him after he’d died. And ehm, I’m not supposed to be on this plane! I don’t want to be on it. They’re taking me somewhere I don’t want to go! Please help me…”

Sherlock vaguely remembered two young girls huddled together in his client chair, around the time of the case of the ‘flight of the dead’ (which he could safely call his biggest cock-up of all time, as far as cases went), over four years ago. The two cousins had very clearly been British, but now apparently one of them was no longer living here.

Interesting.

Meanwhile, he was frantically searching for a phone charger in the bag Mycroft had brought him. So far, he’d encountered a toothbrush and toothpaste, among various sets of underwear. As if any of those things mattered. “Yes, hello? Alice?” His voice sounded loud and hollow in the quiet of the room. “Hello. I’m still here. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” the small voice said. “You see, Cousin Tapani unexpectedly came to pick me up from school today and took me with him. I’ve only met him once before, when I was very little. Before we moved. I want my mummy! She doesn’t even know where I am. She’s going to be ever so cross.”

Such an unusual name, ‘Tapani’. Definitely not British. Sherlock seemed to remember having heard it once before. But where?

“Everything’s going to be alright. I just need you to tell me where you are. Outside, is it day or night?”

“Night, I guess.”

“What kind of a plane are you on?”

“With lots of rows of seats.”

“Is it big or small? How many seats in a row?”

“Very big. I think more than ten seats next to each other, in some places.”

“Where did you take off from?”

“I want to go home.” She was crying now.
“No, I understand; but where did you come from? Where did the plane take off?”

“Tauren… Topearson Airport, I think?”

That sounded vaguely familiar, but not quite. “And where are you going?”

“To my great aunt Tuulikki. At least, that’s what he said.”

“No, I mean what airport are you...”

“I don’t even know where she lives. I’ve never been! They speak funny though, over there. Some of the people on the plane talk like that as well. I can’t understand a single word of what they’re saying!”

Then something clicked in Sherlock’s brain.

_Tapani. Tuulikki._

_Those were Finnish names._

“And they’ve got these little red leaves in little circles all over the airplane,” the girl went on. “What are they called again? You know, just like those leaves on the syrup bottles, and the one on our school flag.”

_People speaking Finnish on a plane with maple leaf logos._

_Bingo._

He opened Air Canada’s website on his phone browser, searching for international flights that had left from Toronto Pearson within the last twelve hours, in order to look for any flights currently underway to Finland or a nearby European destination where she might have to stop over for Helsinki. “Oh. That’s nice,” he said calmly, as he scrolled his screen. “Try to tell me more about the plane.”

“I don’t know. I can’t see anything else from here.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry.”

_Why had Mycroft not packed a sodding charger, if he was trying to be useful?_

“I don’t have very long with you, so I just need you to tell me what you can see outside the plane.”

“I think I saw the sea, before I came into the loo.”

“Are there ships on it?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll just open the door a little and peep outside… I can see tiny lights through the windows.” She was whispering almost inaudibly now.

“Is it a city?”

His phone finally showed the search results with the flights she could be on. There was only one that matched the criteria.

“Are you still there?” She sounded panicked.
“Still here. Just give me a minute. We’re going to do everything that we can.”

“Please don’t go away. Please help me.”

Sherlock’s heart broke a little. “Yes. Yeah; no, I’m-I’m still here. I’m here.”

“So what will happen when we land?”

“I’m not completely sure.”

“I don’t want to go to Aunt Tuulikki.”

“Um, now, I’ll tell you what. You-you’ve got to be really, really brave for me.”

“Oh no! The plane is shaking, like we’re falling out of the sky!”

“It’s just turbulence. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Then the connection was lost.

Sherlock hurried out of the room and informed the officer standing guard that Finnish police should be contacted to stand by when flight AC 9171 landed in Helsinki at 10.45 local time, to intercept a possible child abductor and his victim.

After the slightly befuddled man had hung up from the call with his superior, Sherlock asked to borrow his phone to call back the girl’s number, which he’d managed to scribble down during the conversation.

“Hello, Alice? It’s William Sherlock Scott Holmes again,” he said to her, forcing his tired brain to sound calm and friendly. “Sorry, my battery died. I just wanted to let you know that I’ve arranged for police officers to be waiting for you at the airport where you’ll land, to take you back to your mummy, alright? Everything is going to be fine.”

“Oh god, thank you. Thank you so much.”

After he’d hung up again, he felt like his own battery had died, too, and he collapsed back onto the bed, next to John’s. However, he couldn’t manage to fall asleep anymore.

He wondered if the girl would be alright.

He wondered if John would be alright.

He wondered also if John could hear any of the sounds around him.

Could he hear Sherlock’s voice? Did he know, on some level, that Sherlock was right by his side the whole time?

If so, would he care?

* * * * *

Mycroft was probably just trying to soften his feeling of guilt over losing sight of Eurus after Jim’s death. He sat in the other chair next to John’s bed and attempted to look sympathetic.

“How was Sherrinford?” Sherlock asked, certain that Mycroft had visited him the day before. It had been his birthday, after all.
A melancholic expression passed over his brother’s face. “Same as always, I suppose. Hard to
tell.” He pursed his lips. “Why don’t you visit him yourself?”

“You know why,” Sherlock hissed.

The silence that followed was tense.

Sherlock felt like smashing something.

“He paints beautifully, you know. Really quite remarkable. We’ve had to hire another store room
for all the new works he’s produced.”

Sherlock nodded absently and heaved a long breath. “So… How are Mummy and Daddy holding
up with having a baby and an armed secret agent in the house, then?”

“Oh, wonderfully well, actually.” Mycroft smiled his self-satisfied smile. “They seem to genuinely
love having the both of them around, believe it or not. To be quite honest, I’d never have predicted
them getting along so well with Irene.”

Sherlock looked up. “Irene?”

Surely Mycroft didn’t mean that Irene?

His smirk, however, indicated that he’d guessed correctly.

“Seriously?” Sherlock chuckled softly, incredulous. He shook his head, letting this new reality sink
in.

Oddly, it was kind of comforting knowing that Irene Adler, of all people, was looking after Rosie.
As Sherlock’s friend, she would put everything into caring for and protecting her, he knew.
Although he was still having a hard time picturing her with a baby.

“She has a small child of her own as well, didn’t you know?” Mycroft said.

Sherlock looked intently at Mycroft to see if he was somehow joking.

“Well, it’s her wife’s, of course.”

Sherlock frowned even harder, feeling both baffled and happy for Irene at the same time. And
impressed, at how well she’d kept all this a secret from him, in spite of their frequent texting. He’d
known she’d been seeing a woman at some point, but nothing more. Then again, come to think of
it, he’d never asked.

Would John think it had been unkind of him not to show any interest?

“Rest assured that she’s an excellent multitasker. In her hands, Rosamund Watson is definitely safe
from ‘The East Wind’.”

Sherlock gazed towards the floor. “The East Wind is coming, Sherlock.” He looked at his brother.
“You used that to scare me. Now she’s scaring you as well.”

“She’s very clever.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re not.”

Mycroft briefly closed his eyes.
“Besides, she’s really not that clever at all,” Sherlock went on. “Thank god. We just weren’t paying proper attention. What is it that always makes us underestimate women?”

Mycroft pinched his lips together as he raised his eyebrows, staring into nothingness. “I don’t know.”

Rare words to hear from his mouth.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right.”

There was another long silence, during which Sherlock wondered why his brother was still there. He had his gaze fixed vacantly on John, appearing lost in thought.

“At least you can sit with him,” Mycroft said eventually. Startlingly, he looked decidedly… emotional, all of a sudden. A very uncommon state for Mycroft to be in, or rather, for him to allow to show.

Sherlock’s mind briefly stagnated at his brother’s obvious, intense sorrow. ‘At least you can sit with him.’

And then, suddenly, a hundred jigsaw pieces started to fall into place, sprouting a fountain of deductions in Sherlock’s head. Mycroft was envious as well as miserable. Broken hearted. Which meant he did love someone, intimately. Someone he apparently couldn’t be with. Someone he hadn’t told anybody about. A married man, most likely, whom he saw only under strict conditions. Flawlessly arranged secrecy.

But his sadness indicated there was something wrong. He couldn’t see him anymore. Of course. He was ill, in hospital. Just like John.

Trapped in a public space.

‘At least you can sit with him.’

Mycroft was relegated to the sidelines, left alone with his emotions – which Sherlock could now suddenly see, as clear as day.

It was as if the world had shifted on its axis.

Sherlock looked down at his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said. He wasn’t really sure what to do or say next. “What’s his name?” he asked, quietly.

“Marcus,” his brother answered, with moist eyes. Then, shyly, “That’s the first time I’ve mentioned his name to anyone. Even Anthea knows him only by code name.”

Sherlock nodded slowly, still coming to terms with this new bit of knowledge about his brother. The Ice Man. He did love. Deeply, it seemed. But his life had revolved around not showing it. Which actually explained a lot.

“How long?” Sherlock asked.

“Twelve years.”

Sherlock let out a long breath. “Rarely pure and never simple,” he said.
“What?”

“The truth is rarely pure, and never simple. It’s from ‘The Importance of Being Earnest.’ We did it in school.” Sherlock quirked a tentative smile.

Mycroft nodded very slightly. “So we did. Now I recall. I was Lady Bracknell.”

“Yeah. You were great.”

“You really think so?” Mycroft asked, surprised.

“Yes, I really do,” Sherlock said, truthfully.

“Well, that’s good to know. I’ve always wondered.”

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Chapter End Notes

So the thing with the conversation Sherlock had with the girl on the plane is, that I left Sherlock’s side of the dialogue virtually intact, because that was what John could hear, so that’s the same in both versions. What the girl replied in this version (‘reality’), however, is different from TFP, because that version is what John imagined she *might* have said during his dream. :)
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Eurus Moriarty is clever, but Sherlock Holmes is cleverer. Greg makes a valiant attempt to help catch her. And John might wake up from his coma soon…

Chapter Notes

Yay, an extra fast update! For all my faithful readers, who leave such lovely comments and who are so very patiently waiting until I finish this monstrosity of a fic. ;) You guys give me the energy to keep writing.

With special thanks once again to ewebie for providing me with realistic medical details for this part of the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a tiny, round window, through which John could see a ghost with his own face looking back at him from the darkness outside.

He’d had this dream before, many times, since Mary died.

In it, he and Sherlock had gone to Morocco to find her (just like in their cover-up story) and the three of them had travelled back together by plane – only for John and Mary to talk about bedtime stories for Rosie once they were back home. (Rather than Sherlock and John staying at 221B while she was in Morocco, and trying to get the evidence on her that they needed from the case of the stolen Goddess of Tbilisi figurine, as they’d done in reality, with help from Vivian Norbury.)

In every version of John’s dream, everyone around him on the plane was asleep. Oblivious to the betrayal of the woman two seats away from him.

This time, however, another face suddenly appeared in the reflection. A woman smiling at him. The woman he met on the bus? No, a girl, a little blond girl. John was the little girl. Like Alice in Wonderland, he had not just changed size, but gender as well.

In dreams, anything was possible.

She was lost, all alone in the red maple tree forest, high in the sky. Everyone around her was oblivious, asleep.

She was scared, panicked. She just wanted to go home.

* * * * *

Every time the security guard outside John’s hospital room went to have a pee, Sherlock cursed
Lestrade for having arranged for only one officer at the door. Sherlock was hyper alert each time.

For three days, nothing happened.

Then, on Monday, as soon as the afternoon guard took a loo break and the nurse was nowhere to be seen, she walked in.

Impeccable timing and audacity, like a proper Moriarty.

Despite her – once again – very different appearance, Sherlock recognised Eurus the second she stepped into the room.

She was dressed like an overly fashionable 17 year old boy and had matching short hair.
Convenient for use with wigs, Sherlock thought.

She clearly wasn’t trying to pass as a man right now, though. Everything about her posture, up to the way she chewed her chewing gum, was aggressively feminine.

Sherlock’s heart hammered in his chest. “Well, you must be thrilled to see us like this,” he said, trying to sound casual. He knew he looked like shit, after three nights of virtually no sleep. “You feed off of this, don’t you.”

She nonchalantly leaned her back against the wall next to the door, hands in her pockets.

*What did she have in there??*

“Yes, you are very cute together,” she said around her gum, her voice shrill. “Tell me, why have you two still not had sex?”

Sherlock silently, slowly got up and placed himself between her and John. “Not everyone gets what they want,” he replied quietly. Then he gritted his teeth. “Not everyone *takes* what they want.”

Collecting himself, he added, in a sarcastic mumble, “A foreign concept to you, probably.”

“Well, I’m sure the doctors are doing whatever they can to bring him back to you,” she said innocently, “so you can continue to pine over him.” Her smile was pure evil.

“What do you want?” Sherlock hissed.

Fixing him with her cold gaze, she said, “I lost the two people I loved because of you. So it would only be fair if he died.” Turning her eyes to John, Eurus’s voice was suddenly eerily flat. “Even before she died, he took Rose away from me.”

Sherlock frowned.

“She went and fucked *him* instead of me. Even got herself pregnant.”

Well, that went in a different direction than expected.

Sherlock blinked, trying to think.

“So…,” Eurus said, suddenly pretend-casual again, “now you’ve finally remembered me. At last I’ve got your attention. And you finally know who Rose really was.” She looked smug. “I guess we’re almost even now. One down, one to go.”

Sherlock clenched his jaw. “Your brother chose to take his own life. I had nothing to do with that.”
“Is that so?” she sneered. “Interesting, how you pretend to underestimate your own role.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “How about Rose, then? How did she die? Nothing to do with you or this pal of yours either, huh?”

*Just play it cool.*

“Nothing whatsoever,” he bluffed. He’d become good enough at that particular lie. It had been alter ego defence, anyway, he reminded himself. John had never planned to kill her. You could almost say it had been an accident.

“I don’t believe you.” Her vicious tone and the look in her eyes bit straight through his soul. Like a wounded animal.

Nevertheless, he didn’t look away. “You, however,” he said, willing himself not to show any emotion and to appear unperturbed, “deliberately shot John in the head at close distance.” But God, he was exhausted, and all but overflowing with an explosive mix of rage and sorrow. “We are far from even,” he spat, failing miserably at hiding his anger.

The truth was, though, if Rose had really been her lover, then they were more even than he could have known.

Eurus beamed maniacally, apparently excited at his frustration. “Oh Sherlock. We go way back, you know! It’s like our families are destined to be rivals,” she said, grinning. As if this was all just a hilarious joke. “We both have a parent who’s a mathematician, that should tell you enough. Competitive.” She blew a big, purple bubble and let it pop against her mouth. “Your Mummy even stole my Daddy’s book.” She raised her eyebrows, waiting for his reaction.

He just looked back at her.

“Plagiarised it. Didn’t you know? Couldn’t keep up her previous level of productivity once she’d had kids, I guess. The world is not fair for women.” She sniggered. “I hated my dad. God, he was furious when he found out someone had nicked his entire draft manuscript. And I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard who had stolen it. Incredible coincidence. I applauded her for getting away with it. She seemed the ideal mum, from what I’ve seen.” She said this with an actual wistful smile on her face. “Better than mine, anyway.”

Sherlock decided to say nothing, as that seemed the best way to get information out of her. So many of the blanks were starting to get filled in now.

(He’d had no idea about his mum stealing other people’s academic research, and wasn’t sure what to think now. But that could wait.)

“Oh, you had such a perfect little life. A nice family, a friend you always walked home with. What was his name again? You were inseparable. But I wanted to play too.”

Did she mean Tristan? He’d hardly been a friend, just a classmate who lived in the same street.

Quietly, but with a hint of raw anger in her voice, she added, “I never had a best friend. I had no one. And now I’m all alone once more.” She looked at John indifferently. “It’s a pity he’s not dead, but the end result is the same. You lost him. You didn’t take your chance when it was there and now you probably never will. What reason do you have? You’re just hardwired to not ever confess your silly little feelings to one another, or act upon them. Because you’re pathetic. That’s what you are. To be honest, I don’t know why my brother was so obsessed with you. You’re boring. What a waste it was to spend my energy on you.”
Sherlock pinched his lips together. He’d assessed, in the meanwhile, that she was unarmed.

Eurus was genuinely smiling now. “I’ve been so busy trying to ruin your relationship with John Watson, when there was really no need, as you were perfectly capable of doing that yourselves, over and over again.” She cackled. “Look at what you did to yourself. What advantage did your moral code grant you?”

“You are pure evil,” Sherlock growled, unable to help himself.

She raised her eyebrows. “Good and bad are fairy tales. We have evolved to attach an emotional significance to what is nothing more than the survival strategy of the pack animal. We are conditioned to invest divinity in utility. Good isn’t really good, evil isn’t really wrong, and bottoms aren’t really pretty. You are a prisoner of your own meat. All those complicated little emotions. I lost count. Emotional context, Sherlock. It destroys you every time.”

“Emotional context, eh?” Sherlock said, stepping even closer to her. “Tell me, what is your emotional context, then?” he asked, gesturing to all of her outfit. As a means of intimidation, he casually took one bit of fabric of her bright green sleeve between his thumb and index finger, and raised his eyebrows questioningly. He then went so far as to touch the bottom hem of her shirt in the same fashion as well, feigning disapproval of her choice of clothing.

She didn’t flinch, looking at him defiantly.

In one fluid, undetectable motion, Sherlock dropped the GPS tracker in her pocket.

*Mission accomplished.*

Now Lestrade could do the dirty work.

“You have no idea,” she hissed. “At. All.”

Then she turned, and left.

* * * * *

What an annoying little prat this Sherlock was.

Eurus took off her clothes and washed herself with the cold water in the tiny makeshift kitchen of one of her safehouses.

She changed location as often as possible, so that people in the neighbourhood wouldn’t start recognising her, in case anyone came to ask about her.

For the same reason, she dressed in wildly different styles each day (which, to be fair, she usually liked to do anyway).

She cursed as she noticed a ladder in her tan tights, then decided she could do without.

John had turned out to be worse off than expected. On the one hand, it would be a pity if he never woke up – which now seemed likely, from what she’d seen.

Well, her goal was pretty much achieved anyway, as Sherlock would probably be miserable for the rest of his sorry life now, which had kind of been the idea.

In the meanwhile, her thoughts turned back to the other interesting project that had presented itself.
Irene Adler.

The so-called Dominatrix, who had been stupid enough to have her phone confiscated by the authorities while she had been intensively working together with Jim. A lot of sensitive information that had been important to Jim and his clients had been on that phone and had come into the hands of the police thanks to her stupidity. Several of Jim’s major projects had flopped because of that. A number of Jim’s most trusted business partners had since disappeared; having fled or been arrested.

It had all caused Jim to increase his obsession with Sherlock, since he had been the reason the phone had fallen into the wrong hands, of course. (Irene herself no longer being a target of his revenge, as she had cleverly led them to believe she was dead.) And with all those flopped projects, Jim had suddenly also had more actual time on his hands to obsess over Sherlock in the first place.

Eurus clenched her jaw.

If it hadn’t been for Miss Adler, well, maybe Jim would still be alive. She was almost as much to blame as Holmes.

Eurus’s eyes were burning with anger.

This lady definitely needed to be taught a lesson.

Time to track the woman down.

She still wanted to continue burning the heart out of the arrogant posh brat at some point, but only once he’d properly found it. That was, if John survived.

Until then, she would at least have something on her hands to pass the time.

* * * * *

Once Greg had the abandoned warehouse surrounded by his men, he gave them the signal to enter.

Corridor by corridor and floor by floor they searched the derelict building, slowly but surely closing in on the source of the GPS signal.

Within three minutes, they were in a grubby room that was clearly illegally inhabited.

There was a mattress on the floor, a tiny table in the centre and some magazines lying scattered around. Next to a wash basin, there were some tins of food and a camping stove. A box in the corner held some clothes. Among which, one pair of trousers containing the tracker.

* * * * *

“Great work, Sherlock,” Greg said on the phone. “We’ve found the place where she’s staying. She wasn’t there, unfortunately. But I’ve put four officers on a stakeout near the building to maintain constant watch over the place: two for each entrance. I’ll let you know as soon as we’ve got her.”

“That’s good to hear.” Sherlock dragged a hand over his face, unable to keep his eyes open.

Would Eurus Moriarty be clever enough to avoid going back to the same safehouse? She probably had a dozen of them.

Sherlock hung up and reclined on the hospital bed next to John’s.

After having finished hanging a new bag of enteral feed, the nurse was humming some ridiculous
song as she washed her hands. She rushed out of the room, however, when a girl’s voice called from the corridor, “Help me! Help me, please!”

Sherlock wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay on the ICU without going insane from all the continuous noise and hassle.

He let out a slow breath. He should really get some sleep, but he just seemed unable to.

Earlier that day, they’d taken John for another CT-scan, on which the swelling in his brain thank God had appeared to be reduced sufficiently to start pulling back on the sedating meds. So they had.

Just minutes ago, a member of the medical team had removed John's breathing tube, because she estimated he could now breathe on his own. Which he indeed seemed to be doing fine.

That meant John could wake up tomorrow or the day after. Should wake up, if everything was alright. If it wasn’t too late, and John didn’t have irreversible brain damage.

“No it’s not. It’s not too late,” Sherlock said aloud, determined, ignoring the surprised look of the nurse, who had apparently returned and was now once again pottering about the room. Then, in a whisper, he pleaded, “Open your eyes. Please, John. I’m here. Can you hear me?” From his bed, he reached out one arm to touch John’s hand. “Don’t leave me. Not like…” He swallowed. “Redbeard. Please. I need you, John.”

Chapter End Notes

I sometimes wonder if I should maybe explain some of my narrative decisions from my fix-it writer’s point of view every now and then?

So, at the risk of being too obvious: the plagiarism thing (just in case you missed that) was something I added to fix another (albeit tiny) plot hole in BBC Sherlock, namely Mummy Holmes apparently (according to the show) having written a book that in ACD canon was written by Professor Moriarty. The book was shown in the scene where Sherlock, John and Mary visit Sherlock's parents for Christmas, in HLV, and Mary commented on it. (It’s called ‘The Dynamics of Combustion’, whereas Moriarty’s book was called ‘The Dynamics of An Asteroid’, but still.) And everybody on tumblr was like ‘What?! Is she secretly professor Moriarty?! Why did she write a book with such a similar title?’ So yeah, I just thought that needed some sort of explanation. :D

I hope it's not too annoying having SO MANY fix-it elements all over this story, but then again, that was the entire purpose of this fic... :)

I just want to fix ALL THE PLOT HOLES!!! Because they still make me angry. Me making up for Mofftiss's lazy writing is just a form of therapy for me, I guess. ;)

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

After some more strange dreams about a well, an old manor house and children on a beach, John finally wakes up.

Chapter Notes

Yay! I managed to stick to my resolution of posting three chapters this month. :)

A gazillion thanks once again to Ariane DeVere (arianedevere.livejournal.com) for her transcript of The Final Problem; the dialogues as well as the scene descriptions, which I’ve sometimes copied almost literally to describe John’s dreams.

Also, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my amazing betas once again: 88thparallel, mydogwatson, camillo1978 and Jonathan, you are truly indispensable in the creation of this fic! :)

It was dark and still. And cold. Horribly cold. No wonder, John realised, as there was water up to his waist. He felt around him. There were walls. Rough walls. Rock, he guessed.

He tried to lift one foot, but there was something around his ankles restricting his movement. Shackles? He tried again, but his feet seemed to be chained to the bottom of whatever he was standing in. Bizarre.

He bent down and moved his hand blindly through the water, until his fingers touched something floating there. Clasping his hand around what he’d found, he straightened up and ran the fingers of his other hand over his discovery. Bones. Small bones. Probably an animal’s. A dog?

Sherlock’s voice. “Redbeard.”

“Sherlock?” John said.

High above John’s head, clouds in the night sky drifted past and the full moon came into view. He gazed upwards. He could only see a small patch of the starry night. It was like staring up a narrow tunnel.

A well. That’s where he was. At the bottom of a well.

He called Sherlock’s name again. And again.

He could hear a woman singing.

A girl, in the distance, “Help me! Help me, please!”

John could hear the sound of water pouring down. The well was flooding.

Meanwhile, the singing continued.

“Try as long as possible not to drown,” Sherlock said.

John laughed. That was funny.

“I’m going to find you. I am finding you!” Sherlock called.

“Well, hurry up, please, because I don’t have long!” John replied. He was starting to panic now. He turned and tried to get handholds on the rocks lining the well, in an attempt to hold himself above the rising water. But the chains tugged at his feet and his fingers slid off the slippery stones; so he ended up falling backwards into the water with a loud cry of frustration.

Suddenly, he was in an old manor house. Sherlock was running through the hall, seemingly looking for something. Or someone.

It was dark here, too.

“It was a clever little puzzle, wasn’t it?” a woman’s voice said. She didn’t sound nice. “So why couldn’t you work it out, Sherlock?”

Suddenly, John was back in the well. He looked at the bones in his hands. Not dogs’ bones, as he thought earlier. A small human skull. A child’s.

He should tell Sherlock.

Then he was on a pebble beach. There was Sherlock, as a child. John smiled. The same unruly dark curls, the same eyes he knew so well. Further down, a little girl was running in front of a dog with a purple bandana tied around its neck. As she trotted away, the dog was suddenly gone. In its place, a red-haired, young boy with a thick checked shirt was kneeling on the beach. He was the one who was now wearing the purple bandana around his neck. He also had a black, plastic eye patch over one eye. He stood up, wielding a plastic sword. Young Sherlock turned to look at him. An older, chubby boy was trying to skim pebbles on the stepping stones, some distance away. Was that Mycroft? The little red-headed boy enthusiastically ran towards Sherlock. Together, they trotted away across the beach. The girl watched them, and the red-headed boy unexpectedly stopped and turned back to her. They looked at each other for a long moment. There was no friendliness in their expressions.

John shivered.

“Victor,” he heard Sherlock whisper. His voice was shaking. “Victor Trevor. We played pirates. I was Yellowbeard and he was... he was Redbeard. Oh. Oh God.” He cried softly. “What...” He pulled in several breaths before he could continue. “... What did you do?”

Who was he talking to?

It was John’s fake therapist, dressed in a strange, white gown.

What was she doing here?

Oh yes, that was right. She’d said she was Sherlock’s sister. She must have been the little girl on
She sang a nonsensical song with a melancholic melody. “I that am lost, oh, who will find me, deep down below the old beech tree.”

Young Sherlock was running across a graveyard towards the old manor house.

And then, John saw the little boy standing in a well filling with water. His toy sword was floating beside him. He stared upwards and called out desperately.

Then John became the boy in the well. He struggled to keep his footing, the water now up to the top of his chest as more poured down. He tilted his chin up out of the water as he strained with the effort of trying to pull the chains free.

Why was Sherlock still not here to help him? Was he too busy saving his sister, Eurus? John knew she needed help. But was he just going to let him drown?

Then a light shone down from the top of the well and a rope was thrown down to him. Gasping with relief, he took hold of it.

Suddenly, the chains were gone and John was being pulled up into the light. There were people talking. About him. He couldn’t quite catch what they were saying.

With incredible effort, John opened his eyes. To his surprise, he was lying down on a comfortable mattress, under white covers, with drips and tubes connected to his body. Sherlock was sitting right next to him, staring blindly at John’s bedsheets. He seemed sad. Then John realised Sherlock was gently holding his hand. That felt nice.

Sunshine was coming through the window.

A monitor beeped.

John was tired. He closed his eyes again.

It was night-time. The fake therapist was being led away from the old manor house by two police officers. She looked tearful. Police cars and vans were parked all around and a helicopter’s rotors could be heard nearby. John and Sherlock were standing some distance away, watching what was happening.

Greg Lestrade walked over to them. “I just spoke to your brother,” he said, to Sherlock.

“How is he?” Sherlock asked.

“He’s a bit shaken up, that’s all. She didn’t hurt him; she just locked him in her old cell.”

“What goes around comes around,” John said.

John opened his eyes a crack. It was night. But he could clearly see Sherlock’s face hovering in the darkness, illuminated by his phone. He was probably on a case. Solving mysteries. Saving people.

John should help him, but he was too tired. He couldn’t help it, and slipped into another dream.

Their flat was a mess. Soot everywhere. Had there been an explosion? Sherlock’s crazy sister trying to kill them?

Sherlock walked across the room, stepping over ruined books and debris. He picked up the bison
skull from the floor, which was usually on the wall between the windows. John turned around from
where he was standing near the fireplace and held up what he’d just found – the headphones that
usually adorned the skull’s head. Sherlock lifted the skull so that John could put the headphones
back onto it and then looped the cable over the top. Sherlock turned away with it and looked for
somewhere to put it. He lifted his overturned chair with his free hand and set it upright.

Then, suddenly, John was standing in the living room of the house he’d used to live in with Mary.
He was sorting through his post and stopped when he got to a white padded envelope sent by
Special Delivery. He took out a clear plastic sleeve, containing a white DVD. Handwritten on the
disc were the words ‘MISS YOU’.

Sherlock came in and they looked at the DVD together. Mary’s face eerily smiled at them from the
screen. “I know you two; and if I’m gone, I know what you could become... because I know who
you really are. It’s all about the legend, the stories, the adventures.”

Crazy cow.

They threw the disc in the bin and drank tea.

Somewhere far away, a woman wearing a white gown, safely locked away in a large isolation
room, was playing the violin.

Sherlock stood outside her cell, playing his instrument as well. Quite beautifully.

John knew it was important to have good family relations.

Back in 221B, most of the burnt debris was now gone. They were redecorating, turning the flat into
a baby-proof version of itself, with furniture with rounded corners. At the sofa wall, John sprayed
a circle of yellow paint onto the new wallpaper and then added two dots and a curved line inside,
restoring the smiley face to its former glory. This was a happy place, after all. His one and only
true home. For the finishing touch, Sherlock raised his antique, long-nuzzled pistol, spinning the
chamber and dramatically flicking it into place. Then he aimed towards the spray-painted face and
fired twice. Smiling, he lifted the muzzle to blow across the top like they did in old western movies,
which made John giggle.

Rosie had grown to toddler-size and was sitting in John’s lap in his chair next to the fireplace.
Something disagreed with her and she threw up. Thankfully, Sherlock was there to pick her up
while John got rid of the grubby tissue in his hands.

Sherlock seemed to always be there. Helping John with Rosie, looking after her, playing with her.
It gave John a warm, fuzzy feeling.

Greg and Molly kept walking in and out, smiling, apparently happy to be there as well.

Then Sherlock and John hurried out of a building, exhilarated. Their most hellish case finally
finished. Free at last.

They ran outside, into the bright daylight.

John blinked against the sun and opened his eyes.

He saw a hospital room. Intensive Care, by the looks of it. He was in a bed.

Why?
Sherlock was holding his hand.

“John!” Sherlock said, looking at him in alarm. “Oh God, John, you woke up. John, please, please say something.” He sounded distressed. “Do you… do you know where you are?”

John frowned.

Of course he knew where he was. Well, more or less.

He wanted to say the words, but they wouldn’t come. His mouth was dry.

He tried again. “Hospital,” he whispered.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, sounding ridiculously relieved. “Yes, that’s right. Do you… do you know my name?”

“Sherlock, what’s going on? Why are you asking me all this?” His voice sounded like sanding paper, as if he hadn’t talked in days.

Sherlock smiled intensely, and momentarily looked down, seeming to collect himself.

“Where’s Rosie?” John suddenly panicked. “She needs to be picked up from nursery!”

“She’s fine, don’t worry. Er… Molly took care of that.” Sherlock seemed unable to stop smiling, which seemed odd.

“Oh. That’s good,” John whispered. Molly was always good with Rosie. But he should really have just collected her himself. “Why am I even here?” John asked.

Then he remembered the well. The cold water up to his neck. “Did I get hypothermia?”

Sherlock looked at him, apparently puzzled. “No. Not hypothermia.” He seemed to hesitate, uncomfortable.

The bastard.

John felt anger rise inside him, as he remembered how he’d ended up in that well in the first place.

Sherlock had been withholding stuff from him again, despite his promise. And he damn well knew John would be upset about that, once all the action was over.

In spite of his sore throat, John spoke. “You left me at the bottom of that well. I was drowning, and you wanted to save your sister, who was in no immediate danger.”

Sherlock frowned. “John, I don’t have a sister.”

“Stop lying to me, Sherlock! Why do you always lie?!”

“I… I…,” Sherlock stammered, taken aback.

“You’ve been hiding things from me. Important things. Don’t deny it. She was dangerous and you never told me. You were the last person I still trusted. How can I ever trust you anymore?”

John felt his eyes prick. He was so angry. And dizzy. So very dizzy.

Damn all this.
Sherlock weakly reached out his hands to John. “John, you just woke up from a coma. You must have been dreaming.”

More lies.

John looked away, wishing Sherlock would just leave.

Just then, a nurse hurried inside.

John tried to send her away, but his “please leave” came out somewhat garbled and was cheerfully ignored.

“He’s awake,” Sherlock said to her. His voice sounded very unlike him; a mix of emotions. Relief, hurt, fear. Disbelief?

The nurse seemed happy. She checked John’s vitals and made notes. John faintly decided to let her, as he had no energy to resist.

He vaguely became aware of the presence of more people. They said things that John was too tired to follow. He had no idea who they were talking about, anyway.

What time of year was it, even? He couldn’t remember.

When the room was quiet again, Sherlock spoke. Very slowly. “John, I know you’re probably confused right now. You’ve been unconscious for five days. You were shot by the woman who was pretending to be your therapist.”

_Ah, yes, the scary lady with a knack for strange accents. John remembered._

“No, John. I’ve told you, I don’t have a sister.”

The rage continuing to swell inside of John was now threatening to become a proper storm. “No need to keep lying about it, Sherlock. Mycroft as much as admitted it to my face! And she told me herself.”

Sherlock swallowed. “She lied. We do, in fact, have a sibling I’ve never told you about. But it’s a brother. And he has nothing to do with any of this. I will tell you about him, if you want. But not now. He’s not important right now. You are.”

Sherlock sounded very unlike himself. Weak. Pathetic. Like when he was faking a different persona. John had seen this little performance often enough.

John felt miserable. Unsafe. Not in control. He needed to protect himself. Set boundaries. “No, no, no. Don’t you think I will ever believe you or trust you again, Sherlock! This is just one of your schemes again, I just know it. Now get me out of here. I want to go home.”

“There is no scheme, John. You were shot in the head with a rubber bullet. You’re still recovering.”

John’s head did feel painful, especially the area above his eyes. Then, an image came back to him of his therapist pointing a gun at his face. But how about the well? How and when had he ended up down there?

Surely that had not just been _a dream?_
“I promise you can trust me, always,” Sherlock said, intently, his eyes wide. He looked… scared.

John turned his head, glaring out of the window.

“You can always rely on me, John.” Sherlock’s voice was trembling. “I swear.”

John looked back at him.

Sherlock appeared upset. Desperate. Even his hands were shaking. “You’ve got to believe me,” he pleaded. “I know- I know lying and deceiving comes easy to me, especially for cases, but I promised you last year that I would always be honest with you in future, and I have been. I am.”

John shook his head, clenching his jaw.

“Because… because you are everything to me. John. I love you.”

John’s breath caught in his throat. Was this a dream too? Sherlock telling him he loved him?

Tears were welling up in his eyes and there was nothing he could do about it.

Was this just Sherlock manipulating him for some purpose? Like he had done with Janine: proposing to her just to get into Magnussen’s office?

Seriously, how could he play with people’s feelings like that? Had he still not learnt?

Tears were streaming down John’s face now, his emotions overflowing in one big, chaotic jumble.

Sherlock scooted closer, with a look of increased panic in his eyes, and asked, almost inaudibly, “John, John, are you upset because you didn’t want to hear me say what I just said? Or because… you did?”

John turned his gaze back to Sherlock and he looked so afraid, that – with an electrifying shock – John suddenly realised it must be real. It couldn’t be an act.

It felt too real to be a dream, too.

It was like the world started crumbling down around him: all the ugliness, evil, misery and gloom fading away to reveal just Sherlock, his soulmate, sitting at his bed in the golden light, waiting for his reaction. Loyal and honest, and completely vulnerable.

“Because I did,” John choked out in a tiny voice, scrunching up his face.

They looked at each other.

Sherlock grabbed his hand again, desperately holding onto it with both of his.

John gently squeezed Sherlock’s fingers.

Sherlock loved him. For real.

John closed his eyes tightly and let his head fall back onto his pillow. A dull thunder rumbled and lightning flashed inside his skull, but it was all fine.

When he felt Sherlock’s grip on his hands loosen, John held him tighter, with the little force his muscles could muster, making sure Sherlock stayed exactly where he was – like a lifeline – while John drifted off again.
Sherlock still couldn’t believe it.

John had woken up and he seemed fine. No signs of brain damage at first glance, at least.

Sherlock thanked the Heavens and all the gods he never believed in.

And he’d said it.

He’d actually said it.

He hadn’t quite meant to say it the way he had. But in the end it hadn’t mattered how or when he said it. Just that he had.

And John had cried and held his hand, refusing to let go until he’d fallen asleep.

As confused as John had obviously been – just as the doctors had warned him beforehand would be the case upon his coming out of his coma – Sherlock had not doubted for a second that his words were true.

“Because I did.”

Sherlock looked down at the man he loved, still fast asleep. The man whom he was allowed to love, miraculously.

He still couldn’t quite wrap his head around it.

What did this mean? What would happen now?

He took John’s hand in his again, and smiled a careful smile.

For how long had John been feeling this way, he wondered? Could Sherlock have made this move years ago?

How much time had they both wasted being miserable without the other?

He closed his eyes, focusing on the feeling of John’s warm hand in his.

John had seemed so upset when he woke up, believing that Sherlock had lied to him about having a dangerous sister. About Sherlock apparently even choosing to save her over him.

And Sherlock couldn’t really blame John for dreaming such things.

He’d let him down so often in real life. Even though he’d told himself he’d never ever lie to John again, John naturally still hadn’t forgiven him for all his previous lies in the past. And on top of that, Sherlock realised, he had not even kept his promise. He’d never told John about Sherrinford.

John had been bound to find out Sherlock had another brother sooner or later. He really should have just told John. Just like he should have told John he loved him, ages ago. Surely John hadn’t started feeling like that just last week.

Sherlock had been so stupid. So blind.

It was as if a shadow passed overhead, casting a darkness that suddenly highlighted how misunderstandings could ruin relationships. How silence could change the course of people’s lives.
Just because they’d been too stubborn to talk about the things that actually mattered.

*Never again*, he told himself. *Never again.*
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

John finally starts to realise it was all just a bad dream.

“New information: she’s out.” John’s voice still sounded a little raspy.

Now that he was properly out of his coma, he talked in his sleep. A lot.

“Shot me during a session. Mm. We still had ten minutes to go.”

Sherlock shifted uncomfortably in his chair, not sure whether he should perhaps say something back. Tell John he was dreaming.

“You might want to close that window. There is an East Wind coming.”

Sherlock frowned. Then he realised. Of course, Eurus had told John what her name meant, just before shooting him. Sherlock had heard it through the listening device.

“Sherlock. Vatican Cameos.”

Sherlock cringed. “Not now, John,” he said quietly. “It’s okay, we’re safe. We’re at the hospital. Everything is going to be fine.”

“You are a good man, and you are doing a good thing,” John mumbled.

After that, John was quiet for a while. He frequently scrunched up his face, though. Was he having a nightmare? Should Sherlock wake him up?

“I’ll spend the rest of my life telling myself that.” And then, “No!” followed by a loud, furious “Why? You promised not to kill her!”

Sherlock carefully put a hand on John’s arm. “John, wake up.”

“She’s going to make you kill one of us, Sherlock,” John said through clenched teeth. “Your brother or me. Just choose me and get it over with.”

This really sounded like a proper nightmare. “Wake up, John, it’s just a dream.”

“Mycroft, we know.”

Sherlock tried gently shaking his shoulder. What on earth was he dreaming, if Mycroft was in it?

“Distract me?” John spat. And then, “Sherlock?”

“Yes, I’m here. Don’t worry,” Sherlock said softly.

At that, John seemed to relax a little.

“I’m here, John, and I’m never leaving.”
When John opened his eyes once again, Sherlock was still by his side, sitting in a chair next to his hospital bed. Just like the previous couple of times. Always there.

He was leaning his head on his hand, eyes closed.

John remembered the eerie high security prison with the screens showing Moriarty making train noises. The ridiculous, cruel assignments they had to finish in order to get off that ghastly island. The horror clown in the stately manor. And the well with the bones. Something with a little girl’s song and a garden full of fake Holmes gravestones.

Insane stuff.

He remembered Sherlock telling him his fake therapist had shot him and that she was not Sherlock’s sister at all. That John had been dreaming.

John had not believed him at first.

Now, as his head began to clear, bit by bit, and he considered all the jigsaw pieces, he realised there was no way they fitted together into one coherent story. It started to dawn on him that Sherlock might have spoken the truth after all: that none of all that could have been real.

He let out a slow breath.

What was real, however, was Sherlock sitting at his bed every single time he opened his eyes.

Slowly, very slowly, as he stared at the patches of shade from the tree outside dancing over the objects in the room, he started to dare to believe that maybe Sherlock did respect him, want him and need him in the same way John did the other way round.

That’s right: he’d said he loved John, after all, John suddenly remembered through the curtain of haziness in his head. That had not been a dream, right?

John felt his heart swell. God, how he’d longed for them to finally be together. Even though they already kind of had been, in so many ways but one.

“I love you,” John said, groggily. The words just slipped out of his mouth all by themselves. Much too easily, he realised, the instant he’d said it.

What if Sherlock’s love confession had just been another crazy dream after all?

But before he had time to panic, Sherlock’s eyes shot up to him and his face instantaneously broke into a shy, radiant smile.

“John,” was all Sherlock said. He sounded relieved.

The nurse interrupted them with her check-ups, but John didn’t mind. He and Sherlock kept looking at each other while she was busy, stealing furtive glances and smiles.

Then John noticed a Thank You card sitting on the window sill. “So, did you make any clients happy while you were here – bored to death, undoubtedly, by my side?”

“Oh yes,” Sherlock admitted, “I did do some cases that could be solved quite easily without legwork. This card is from a very relieved mother in Canada. Her little girl called me from a flying plane while being abducted and I managed to deduce where she would land.”
“A girl on a plane?” John said. “I had a dream about a girl on a plane. I dreamed she was all alone and everybody else on the plane was asleep. Although it then ended up being a metaphor for something… I think. According to someone in the dream. I can’t remember. All I know is it was rather unsettling. A proper nightmare. Although it seemed so real.” He thought for a minute. “So apparently,” he said, “my brain made all that up because I heard you talk to a real girl on a plane over the phone?”

“It would appear so. And yeah, I noticed you’ve been dreaming rather a lot.”

“Did I talk in my sleep?” John asked, not sure if he should be embarrassed.

“Sometimes,” Sherlock said, smiling tightly, not quite looking at him. “It sounded a bit like you were in the middle of an action movie. And a pretty scary one.”

John chuckled, which he regretted instantly, as it hurt his throat. “I might have watched one too many horror and Bond films lately.”

“That would in fact explain a lot,” Sherlock said drily.

“So I gather I wasn’t making much sense?”

“Well, you were dreaming. But yeah, it sounded somewhat… disturbing,” he admitted. “Then again, your own therapist shooting you during a session would have that effect on you, wouldn’t it?”

“Probably, yeah,” John half-smiled.

When the nurse was gone, John sighed and added, “Dammit, I feel so dizzy, and so bloody confused. Like my brain isn’t working properly. I’ve had to tell so many lies these past months. First, to Mary. Then, after she was… gone… to everyone else, about what happened with her. To Molly, Mrs Hudson, to my co-workers, my therapist, and on my blog. I’ve been repeating all those lies in my head, over and over, to try and make sure I had a consistent story, adding and removing details until I reached a point where everything in my mind became garbled up so much that even I now sometimes don’t know what is the truth anymore. Like my actual memories have been corrupted. Overwritten.” John heaved a long breath. “On top of which, people have been lying to me all the while as well. This Eurus woman, mainly, and Mary of course; making me question everything I knew. And the cherry on top of all this is, I’ve been having all these totally bizarre, really intense dreams here in the hospital.” He put a hand over his eyes, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with despair. “What I’m trying to say is, I just don’t know what’s real anymore. Whether I can trust my own memories.” He looked helplessly at Sherlock.

“We’ll figure it out,” Sherlock said, gently putting his hand on John’s thigh. “It’s just you and me now. Together. We’ll figure it all out. Don’t you worry, okay?” Sherlock’s voice was trembling again, as if the new emotions he was no longer repressing seeped out in every pore of his being. He looked vulnerable. And also the most beautiful he’d ever looked, John thought.

And he loved John.

And John loved him.

“Would you like me to tell you about Eurus? The true version?” Sherlock asked. “Are you ready for that?”

“Yes.”
Seeing as they kept getting interrupted by medical staff, it took the entire afternoon before Sherlock had finished telling John everything he knew about the woman who’d targeted him with a texting affair, before posing as his therapist and shooting him. That she was in fact Jim Moriarty’s sister; how she and her brother had used to hang around Sherlock’s house over twenty years ago; how she’d apparently been sucked into her brother’s obsession with the boy who’d almost solved his murderous crime; how she and Mary (Rosamund) seemed to have been lovers, as Eurus had implied when she’d come round to the ICU to gloat; how she had managed to stay off MI5’s radar by flawlessly changing her apparent gender; and how she was now avenging Jim and Mary’s deaths by means of pretending to be other people. “Which is something she seems to be incredibly good at,” Sherlock concluded.

John’s mind was reeling. Of course someone that nasty and devious was a Moriarty. How could he ever have believed she was a Holmes? And Mary’s lover, for Christ’s sake. Flip-flopping between genders. “I’m going to have even stranger dreams now, you know,” he remarked drily.

Sherlock smiled in spite of himself. “Sorry about that.”

“Well, I suppose the question now is: what do we do next?”

“Wait until the Yard finds and arrests her, of course,” Sherlock replied.

John laughed.

Sherlock grinned.

There was a short, comfortable silence.

“To be fair, they almost had her a few days ago,” Sherlock said.

John raised his eyebrows.

“When she came here, I dropped a GPS tracker in her pocket. Inspired by a certain friend of mine.” He gave John a meaningful smirk. “Lestrade’s team found the trousers with the tracker in an inhabited corner of an abandoned building in Clapham.”

“Well, that sounds like an amazing job Greg did there.” John lowered only one of his eyebrows, unimpressed. “No trace of her, of course.”

“Naturally. So all we know is the location of one of her safehouses. Most likely one of many. It might be weeks before she returns. Long after Lestrade withdraws the stakeout, probably.”

Sherlock sighed.

“Hm. So what do we do: find a way to lure her out, somehow?”

“Precisely my thought. Not yet sure how, though.” Sherlock chewed his lip. “There’s only one option I managed to come up with so far:”

“And that is?”

Sherlock thought for a moment before speaking. “Faking your death.”

“What?”

“That would at least get her attention. Molly can provide a fake death certificate, the digital copy
of which Eurus is probably clever enough to find online. We could then also place an obituary in one or two papers – which the media will presumably latch onto as well – and eventually of course organise a funeral. She’d be bound to show up.”

“No.” John shook his head. “No, Sherlock.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

“No more fake deaths, no more fake gravestones. Just no. There’s actually some people out there who care about me, and who would be genuinely upset, believe it or not. Do I seriously have to explain this to you?”

Sherlock looked small and guilty. He averted his gaze. “No, no. It’s fine. I knew it was a bad idea. It’s just… the only thing I could think of. I’m sorry.” He was blinking furiously. “I can’t seem to think up any proper ideas anymore. I’ve been trying practically full-time to come up with a way to catch her for days, but nothing.”

John sighed. “While hardly sleeping at all for almost a week, you mean?”

Sherlock looked at John. “I did sleep last night,” he said indignantly.

“Which was undoubtedly a good start of getting back into the habit,” John smiled. “But we need to think this through. No rash decisions.”

“Yes, John.”

Then, a sudden realisation hit John, like a stone landing in his stomach. “Your detox medicines. Have you been taking them?”

“No,” Sherlock simply said, blankly. “I didn’t feel like I needed them anymore. Nor did I take anything else, in case you were worried.” Sherlock cast him a meaningful look.

“Seriously? You just went cold turkey the minute I landed in hospital?”

“Well, yes. I didn’t want to leave your side, and…” His voice trailed off, not finishing the sentence.

“That’s – That’s very brave of you.”

They fell silent again.

“You know,” John said, after a while, “in the middle of all this mess, what I feel really bad about?”

“What?”

“I missed my weekly visit to Aunt Vivian this week. She must really be wondering why I didn’t come.”

“Ah, I see. Yes. How has she been, of late?”

“Gradually getting worse, but taking it rather well. They’ve got a good medical team at Bronzefield Prison, thankfully.”

“I would go there myself and visit her on your behalf,” Sherlock said, “if I didn’t think it extremely unwise to leave you here alone with just one guard. But what I can do is call her, if you like.”

“Thanks. I’d really appreciate that,” John said. “I think I’m too drowsy still to do it myself. It
would be great if you could.”

“Good. I will, first thing in the morning.”

They looked at each other.

“I love you,” John said intently, proud to finally be able to express the feeling he’d kept bottled up inside for so long. And he secretly adored the way it made Sherlock go all shy.

“I love you too,” Sherlock whispered back, still a little awkward, but very cute awkward, John thought.

Christ, how John ached to be closer to him. To not just hold hands, like blushing pre-schoolers, but to hold him, properly. To kiss him.

“Come here,” John said, stretching out his hands toward Sherlock’s.

Sherlock scooted closer and entwined their fingers.

John wished he was physically able to simply take the initiative and just kiss Sherlock already, and cursed the fact that he was still too weak to sit up and go for it.

He decided to give Sherlock five seconds to deduce what he wanted.

They passed while Sherlock just gazed at him.

John smiled at how insecure Sherlock was with these things. He probably didn’t have a huge amount of experience. “Please kiss me,” John whispered.

Apparently, Sherlock had been thinking the same thing after all, because he all but launched himself at John.

Still, the kiss was the most gentle kiss John had ever received. A very careful touch of lips, lasting several wonderful seconds. (Minutes? Days?) It was as if his whole life had led to this point in time. This moment, their love finally being sealed with a kiss, after so many years of trying not to think about this, trying not to want this, when this was exactly what he wanted. The only thing he’d ever truly wanted, really.

John was half afraid the heart monitor would sound an alarm that would send the nurse rushing in.

When Sherlock eventually pulled back, his face remained close to John’s, hovering above him as their eyes locked. John had drowned in Sherlock’s gaze so often in the past, not capable of reading his intentions, yet unable to look away. It had always felt like they stared straight into one another’s soul, without fully understanding what they saw there, but still being captivated and mesmerised by each other’s hidden depths. But now, John knew exactly what it was he saw in Sherlock’s eyes. And he knew that Sherlock could finally, flawlessly read him as well.

It was the deepest, purest, most desperate kind of love.

“God, I was so scared you weren’t going to wake up anymore,” Sherlock whispered. “I love you so much.”

At that, John grabbed Sherlock’s neck and pulled him down into another kiss.

Honestly, nothing had ever felt so good in his life. Ever.
Kissing Sherlock gave him the same sensation as seeing fireworks and champagne bubbles and freshly fallen snow and early spring blossoms and the sea, all at once, and then multiplied by a hundred.

It also gave him the feeling of being wanted, of having a reason to exist and of never needing to be anywhere else but here, right in this moment.

Letting go again was almost painful.

They smiled bashfully at one another, as Sherlock tried to casually sit back in his chair as if nothing was out of the ordinary. And perhaps nothing was. Perhaps this was exactly the most ordinary, most natural thing to ever happen between them.

John huffed out a breath, still unable to believe how lucky he was.

All the rumours and misassumptions from people presuming they were together, that they’d endured for years, were now finally true.

Mrs Hudson implying they probably needed only one bedroom.

Mycroft’s ‘May we expect a happy announcement by the end of the week?’

Angelo and his romantic candle for them on the table. All within two days after they’d first sodding met.

And later, one of John’s girlfriends saying she didn’t want to ‘compete with Sherlock Holmes’.

Sally’s ‘Opposites attract, I suppose’.

The innkeepers at Grimpen Village apologising for not having a double room for them.

They had all been right. Just a little too fast.

In the doorway, someone cleared their throat.

John had to look twice.

It was Mycroft. He looked like a ghost. His suit was all crumpled up and dishevelled. He seemed to hesitate, before he spoke. “Marcus didn’t make it.” His voice was thick.

“Oh god,” Sherlock breathed, as he got up and walked towards his brother. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Then, a strange thing happened.

After staring at each other for a few moments, Sherlock put his arms around Mycroft, and Mycroft let him.

They remained standing there, in a tight embrace, for several minutes, as Mycroft softly sobbed into Sherlock’s shoulder.

Sherlock gently patted his brother’s back until his breathing became steady again.

John felt a strange mix of sadness and pride. He had no idea what was going on, but seeing that Sherlock was capable of this, John felt his last tiny shreds of doubt about their new relationship vanish.
He just hoped Mycroft was going to be alright.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Finally, the boys go back home to Baker Street. They have an honest chat about their… preferences. Irene helps them come up with a plan to catch Eurus.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I think this is the fastest I’ve ever produced a new chapter! Also, this is the first chapter beyond series 4, so from here it’s all made up exclusively by yours truly. :)

This last part of this fix-it fic explains why Sherlock has never mentioned his other sibling and why ‘Redbeard’ has had such a big impact on him. By the end, I hope to have given a sensible ‘explanation’ for almost all of the loose ends that the writers of BBC Sherlock have left scattered around in the course of four seasons!

(By the way, I have seen people call this an AU, but it really isn’t, as far as I’m concerned. It’s meant to be 100% canon compliant, that’s the whole point. The happy crime solving trio was just a false picture Sherlock painted during his witness statement to protect John, the hug scene we saw on the show was the version John told his therapist, etc.)

The following days passed with John being more and more awake and Sherlock getting more and more sleep – now that he worried less about John.

John was soon moved to a general ward with fewer machines, fewer nurses and less noise.

The doctors said he’d made a miraculous recovery, with only his headaches and dizziness remaining from the blow. That, and his occasional disorientation, and fatigue. But all those things would pass with time, as long as he got enough rest, they’d assured.

Just like John had sat by Sherlock’s side as he recovered from his chest wound in hospital last autumn and also while Sherlock got better after the Culverton Smith case only last month, and entertained Sherlock with unsolved crimes from the papers, Sherlock now reciprocated by bringing John crossword puzzle books from the kiosk down the hall, which they would solve together. Also, Sherlock read him the new comments on his blog or the occasional breaking news article from his phone.

Sometimes, John asked Sherlock whether a certain memory was real or just part of his coma dream, and Sherlock would tell John everything he knew about the matter until John was comforted. Several times, Sherlock found John staring at him with eyes full of apprehension and bewilderment, refusing to say what was wrong. Then Sherlock would tell John he loved him, after which John always sighed in relief, and admitted to Sherlock he’d been afraid that had not been real.
Every day, they talked about Eurus Moriarty, and how to get her behind bars.

They silently held hands.

They kissed.

It was a sunny afternoon in mid-August when John was discharged and they took a cab home. Through a very unfortunate – not to say hellish – combination of a broken cab engine in the middle of Tower Bridge – where it was impossible to get out and hail another cab – and a subsequent gridlock, it took three hours before they finally arrived at Baker Street.

John was beyond exhausted.

Since he wasn’t meant to exert himself, Sherlock carefully helped him up the stairs, reminding him repeatedly to take it easy while he supported him on one side.

As happy as Sherlock was to have John back home again, he was also more than a little nervous about what it would be like, now that their relationship had shifted into something new. Once they reached the landing, it was decision time. John’s bedroom was another flight of stairs up, while Sherlock’s was right around the corner.

“Would you like to sleep in my room?” Sherlock asked. He could only hope John didn’t think he was being presumptuous. “I mean, it’s closer than yours, and--”

“Of course, yes. Of course I would like to sleep in your room. If that’s… if that’s alright with you.” John was still a little out of breath from the stairs.

“It’s definitely alright with me.” Sherlock smiled nervously. “More than alright, in fact.”

“Good,” John breathed. “Let’s go.”

They manoeuvred through the kitchen and the little hallway beyond, until they’d reached the bedroom. Sherlock carefully helped John undress, focusing on ways in which John didn’t need to strain to keep his balance or exert himself in any way.

Then Sherlock lifted the covers for him and helped him into bed.

As soon as his head hit the pillow, John closed his eyes and let out a long, satisfied groan.

Sherlock looked at the sight before him. There was John. Lying in his bed.

“You’re not just going to stand there, are you?” John asked, keeping his eyes closed.

“Right. Sorry. I’ll go.”

“Go?” John opened his eyes again. “After all these days sitting by my side in a hospital room, you’re not going to leave me alone here now, right?”

Sherlock noticed the corner of John’s mouth twitch a little.

“Eurus might climb in through the window, you know,” John went on, drowsily, but with a decided hint of cheek. “Come. You can do your kitchen experiments later, or whatever you had planned.” John’s voice trailed off as he let his head fall to one side.

Sherlock didn’t actually have any experiments planned at all.
So was it okay to lay down next to him, Sherlock wondered? He had no idea about relationship etiquette.

“John?” he tried softly.

There was no response.

Stifling a yawn, Sherlock took off his own clothes as well and climbed into bed next to John.

* * * * *

Almost 4 am. Sherlock still hadn’t slept.

He’d spent the night staring at John in the faint light of his bed lamp, as he was sleeping right next to him. Lying in his bed.

Sherlock still couldn’t quite believe it.

It was like there was a happy bubble inside his stomach that was growing dangerously big, bound to burst.

(But since it wasn’t a real bubble, it couldn’t burst, right? Right??)

Was this truly what it would be like from now on? By each other’s side, day and night? The hours of darkness spent together in the same bed, sharing each other’s warmth? Not feeling alone anymore? Or jealous of John’s dates? Ever?

The idea was surreal.

And during the day? What did it even mean to be in a relationship? Except the kissing, that was. He knew now what kissing John was like. It was better than crime scenes and cold case files and locked room murder mysteries. Better even than John telling him he was brilliant. Better than anything in the world.

But the rest? ‘Being a couple’? Although deep down, he’d always wanted this, with John, he hadn’t the foggiest idea what it would actually be like.

Also, they didn’t actually live together, seeing as John still had the terraced house he’d lived in with Mary.

Sherlock turned onto his back and let out a slow breath, trying to ignore the symptoms of withdrawal that he was still suffering. They’d become mere background noise now, but he was still aware of them most of the time.

But he needed to be well, for John, so that made it easier to block those sensations out. John was worse off than him, and needed him.

They were both going to be in recovery mode for another couple of months. But since Sherlock had started recovering first, he reckoned he should be better first, as well.

He stretched and turned back to his side.

Soon, they would both be fine.

Especially once Eurus was caught.
It would just be a matter of time.

Sherlock looked at the way the sheets wrinkled around John’s body. At all the little hills and shadows his presence conjured up in his bed.

Apropos of nothing, he didn’t think there was much of a chance of them ever ‘doing’ anything in particular in this bed, except sleep. And talk, or kiss, of course. John likely wouldn’t want any ‘gay stuff’, seeing as he’d always so loudly proclaimed being ‘not gay’. But that was okay. Of course, it was totally fine.

Then, without warning, John suddenly blinked his eyes open in the semi-darkness, finding Sherlock staring at him. “Have you been up all night just staring at me?” he asked sleepily.

A bit not good.

“I… I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock stammered. “It… It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“No, it’s alright, love.”

John called him ‘love’.

“You can stare at me all you like. I’m yours now.” He yawned a smile. “Come on, give me a kiss.”

An unexpected, but definitely pleasant reaction.

‘I’m yours now.’

Sherlock scooted closer to John and kissed him. They wrapped their arms around each other. They hadn’t kissed like that yet, with full body contact, and it felt incredibly intimate. A whole different level of wonderful from their relatively chaste kisses at the hospital.

After a minute, though, Sherlock pulled away, uncomfortable. He was starting to get hard and would rather die than have John notice. “Listen, John,” he said, sitting up. “I think… I think we should maybe talk about what we want and don’t want out of this… relationship… that we’re in now. Please tell me if there’s, er… certain things you don’t want to happen.”

“You know what I don’t want, Sherlock,” John said, giving him a look.

“No… gay stuff, correct? No… um… activities of a sexual nature.”

“What?!” John looked like he’d eaten a whole lemon. “What in Heaven’s name gave you that idea?”

Sherlock could feel his ears go pink.

John chuckled.

“Well… er… you always made it very clear that you’re not gay.”

“I’m bisexual, Sherlock. That means that I’ve got no problem at all with what people have incorrectly labelled as ‘gay stuff’.” He bashfully smiled a crooked smile, making him look twenty years younger.


Neither of them seemed to know where to look for a moment.
“So can I deduce from this,” John asked, “that you have no objections against engaging in ‘gay stuff’ yourself, then?” John grinned tentatively. “Because, to be honest, I thought that perhaps that wasn’t your thing. That kind of intimacy, I mean.”

“Well…” Sherlock swallowed. “I think it is. But I’ve never been intimate with anyone, so in a way, I can’t really be sure.” He nodded slowly. “But I really do want to.”

“You’ve never done it with men, you mean? You’ve been with women.”

“No, I haven’t.”

*Why on earth would John think that?*

“I’m not bisexual, John. I’m very much gay.”

*Seriously, how could John not have noticed he had no interest in women, whatsoever?*

“How about Janine, then?” John asked. “I literally saw her come out of your bedroom, remember?”

*Ah, of course.*

“We… er… we just kissed,” Sherlock said.

*Seriously?*

“As you know, it was for a case. My interest in her was entirely… fabricated. As I’ve told you, I--I apologised to her, profusely, and she forgave me.”

John was silent for a moment, apparently trying to solve some puzzle. “So I’m… your first?” he said eventually.

Sherlock nodded awkwardly.

John then gently cupped Sherlock’s face with one hand and looked at him like he was something extremely precious, which somewhat dissolved Sherlock’s shame at his lack of experience.

“You know what the thing is I don’t want in our relationship?” John asked, his voice incredibly soft. “The withholding of information.” He smirked and raised an eyebrow like it was a joke referring to Sherlock’s fake relationship with Janine, or his apparently unknown sexual orientation. But Sherlock knew it was much more than that, of course. He’d understood since a while now how important honesty was for John, in all aspects of their lives, and he’d slowly started to see the point of it himself as well. He’d been working hard to get better and better at not withholding stuff, even when he thought the matter at hand was quite obvious (which he apparently wasn’t a very good judge of, he’d found out by trial and error). For both their sakes. “Yes, John. I promise I try very hard not to do that anymore. I’ll try even harder.”

“Good.”

They kissed again.

Sherlock knew that John might any moment be able to feel his arousal and he started to feel awkward about it again. Even if they were possibly going to have sex at some point, now was not the time.

“I don’t mind,” John said.
“But…”

“It flatters me, you know. As long as you don’t mind not doing anything about it right now.”

“Of course not.”

“We’ll just take it slow, yeah?”

“Excellent idea,” Sherlock agreed. “Also, you should sleep.”

“I think I will. And so should you.”

And they did.

John fell asleep first, in Sherlock’s arms, which was even better than merely having him asleep next to him. Soon, however, Sherlock wasn’t aware of that anymore, as he’d gone out like a light himself.

* * * * *

John woke up feeling cold.

It wasn’t that it was actually chilly (it was the warmest month of the year, after all), but he was vaguely aware of the absence of a pleasant warmth that had been there before.

He opened his eyes.

Sherlock’s room.

Of course. After two weeks in hospital, he was back at Baker Street. And he’d slept in Sherlock’s bed. With Sherlock.

A different sort of warmth settled in his stomach at the thought.

He smiled as he studied the unfamiliar cracks in the ceiling of the room, and the view out of the window from here. Judging by the angle of the shadows on the neighbouring building, it was about midday.

Lifting his head a few inches, he noticed that the blanket that was supposed to lie on top of his sheets was in fact in a heap at the end of the bed. He was getting a little chilly, after all.

John started to move to a sitting position so he could arrange the blanket properly, but halfway his movement, he was reminded why he was in a bed in the first place. Even after this small shift in position, his head felt like it might explode and he fell back onto his pillow with a frustrated groan.

He lay very still, eyes closed, waiting for the pain in his skull to subside.

Only then did he become aware of the sound of the shower running.

He imagined Sherlock under it: the stream of droplets flattening his curls, and running further down in all directions over his ivory pale skin. John was glad he could now think such things without feeling guilty. What he’d never thought possible in a million years had happened after all. They were together now. They’d even talked about sex. A smile tugged at his mouth. Although John had been right in thinking Sherlock didn’t have a lot of experience, thankfully he’d been wrong about him not wanting intimacy. (Which was actually a bigger relief than he cared to admit.)
His jaw turned slack and he vaguely considered touching himself. It had been a while, after all.

But as soon as his feelings started to take shape in his body, his headache came creeping back in to remind him of the state he was in. He sighed, rolling onto his stomach and pressing his face into the pillow.

He was going to have to take things very slowly.

Cursing his bad luck, he wallowed in his frustration and self-pity for a while. It had been easier to accept his fate when he was still in hospital. Back home, it was weird being an invalid.

John started when Sherlock sat down next to him, making the mattress shift.

“John,” he said quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” he replied, shifting slightly to rest on his elbows. “Weak.”

“It’s only a matter of time before you get better,” Sherlock said, softly carding his fingers through John’s hair. “Patience, John. Listen, Rosie will be here in an hour. Just thought I’d let you know. In case you want to get dressed or eat first.”

John turned to his side. “Oh! Great, yeah.”

Sherlock had explained that Rosie had been staying at Sherlock’s parents’ house, with a female MI5 agent looking after her who was also an old friend of Sherlock’s. (At the time, John had wondered whether ‘old friend’ might mean ‘ex-lover’, but now he was glad to know it didn’t.)

“Also, I’ve talked to Mycroft,” Sherlock said, “and Hannah, the agent, will stay with us for as long as we need her. Because you need to rest as much as possible for a while yet, and even after that, she might come in handy, as long as Eurus Moriarty is still out there.”

John nodded. He positively ached to see Rosie again and desperately wanted to look after her himself, but he knew he still needed a long time to recover. Having the secret agent nanny around was the best solution.

Although… there was one downside.

“Sherlock?”

“Hm?”

“Can she know about… you know… us?”

Sherlock gave him a blank stare, clearly not getting the point.

“You know, can we still… kiss and cuddle when she is around?” John asked, feeling rather awkward. “Or would you rather…?”

“Oh! No, don’t worry, she already knows.”

“What?”

A kitchen timer went off down the hall, calling away Sherlock’s attention and sending him darting out of the room.

Why on earth would Sherlock have already told Rosie’s nanny that he and John were together
John hadn’t even told Harry or Mike yet, or Greg. He wasn’t even sure whether he wanted people to know already. Didn’t it make more sense to wait a little bit, until they’d found their feet?

A few minutes later, as soon as Sherlock reappeared, John asked him, “Who else have you told?”

“What?”

John rolled his eyes. “About us.”


“Oh, okay. I guess.” There was a silence.

“And Mycroft probably knows. He saw us together at the hospital, after all.”

John managed a smile. “Yeah, okay. I was just wondering, you know, whether we wanted to tell people already or not. Whether it would be okay for the public to know, things like that. Stuff we should probably discuss.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right.” Sherlock thought for a minute. “No one else can know until we have Eurus. If she finds out, I shudder to think how she could use it against us.”

“Right. Just Hannah, then.”

“Just Hannah,” Sherlock nodded. “And Mycroft. For now.”

* * * * *

After Sherlock had helped John get dressed and had supported his arm walking to the kitchen, he served him the best jam on toast John had ever had.

Although maybe that was just because he was famished.

Or because Sherlock had made it especially for him.

They both smiled as they sat across from each other at the kitchen table.

Bright sunlight streamed in through the windows.

Sherlock seemed to fiddle endlessly with the spoon in the honey pot before he finally spoke. “We’ve sat here so many times, having breakfast together, yet this time it’s totally different.”

“It must be,” John said conspiratorially, “because we’re having breakfast at the ungodly hour of…” he checked the clock on the microwave, “… 1 pm.”

Sherlock laughed. “That must be it!” Then, fondly grinning, he reached his hand towards John’s across the table and John took it, gently rubbing his thumb over Sherlock’s knuckles.

“It’s true,” John said softly. “Everything is completely different, yet the same.”

Sherlock looked him in the eye for a long while. “Will you move back in with me?” he asked, subdued.

“God, yes,” John said.
Sherlock’s face broke into a smile. “Thank god.”

“Were you seriously worried I was going to say ‘no’?”

Just then, the doorbell rang, giving Sherlock a convenient excuse not to respond.

While Sherlock let Rosie and the Wondernanny – as John had started to call her in his head – in from the street and showed them up the stairs, John slowly, carefully, got up from his chair to wait for them in the lounge. Before the two sets of footsteps had reached the top of the stairs, he could already hear his daughter’s excited cooing.

A lump appeared in his throat when, upon entering, Hannah handed her to him and he finally held Rosie in his arms again. He carefully sat down on the sofa with her, closed his eyes and pressed his nose against her fluffy hair as he held her close.

“Da! Da!” she yelled gleefully.

“Oh, my little pumpkin. Yes, I was gone for much too long, wasn’t I? Daddy had to stay at the hospital for a bit. But thankfully Sherlock and his brother arranged for this lovely lady to look after you. Did you enjoy that--?” Only then did he actually look at the woman, and he fell silent, dumbstruck. Her hair was blond and in a bob cut and her style of clothes was, well, somewhat different from when he’d last seen her, but it was unmistakably her. “Irene Adler?!” he exclaimed. “You’re the MI5 agent?”

“Oh, it’s Hannah now,” she replied cheerfully, as she was setting down various bags in a corner. “Please don’t ever use my old name. Security reasons. Irene’s dead, remember?”

“Oh. Yeah, okay.” John closed his mouth, which he realised had been hanging open rather ungracefully, and squinted at Sherlock. “A dominatrix looked after my child all this time?”

Sherlock displayed a non-committal pout.

“Never mind. Sorry, I didn’t mean…” He guessed her past profession didn’t really matter. Then something occurred to him. “Of course. That’s why you told her about us!” John fondly rolled his eyes and shook his head. “But hang on, I thought you said she was in California?”

“She was, initially.” Sherlock said. “She came back. Mycroft turned out to be the only one who could provide sufficient excitement and security at the same time.”

Hannah (Irene) acknowledged this with a shrug.

And then it hit John. “Oh God,” he said.

Two pairs of questioning frowns were directed at him.

“Right,” Sherlock said.

Hannah grabbed her phone and started to type furiously, her jaw set. “I’m letting Mycroft know I’m compromised. There will be some decisions to be made.”
Sherlock went to sit down next to John. “It’s just as much my fault. I should have told you not to tell anyone.” He put a hand on John’s shoulder. “Look on the bright side. Seeing as she’s staying with us anyway, the additionally required security that MI5 will now undoubtedly provide will benefit all four of us at the same time. It’s extremely efficient.” He smiled a rueful smile.

“I’m so sorry, Irene. Hannah.” John swallowed. He rested his forehead against Rosie’s. “Your daddy has been a giant idiot. Once again,” he said. “Thankfully, Uncle Mycroft knows a lot of nice people at the secret service;” he added, faking a cheerful tone, “who will hopefully clean up the mess your daddy made, once more.”

Sherlock gently squeezed his neck. “We’ll figure it out. It will be alright in the end. We just have to find a way to catch Miss Moriarty,” he sighed. “And then we will all be out of this imbroglio.”

* * * * *

The following days passed in peaceful domesticity.

Hannah did stay with them, and thankfully, she and John turned out to get along just fine. (John had been a little wary at first, but Sherlock being his lover now did help to avoid any rivalry.)

Another agent, a big guy called Daniel, was assigned to work undercover at Speedy’s Cafe, right below their flat. Sherlock, John and Hannah each carried a small device with an emergency button to summon him – and each other – if necessary. The four of them debriefed every afternoon in Mrs Hudson’s kitchen, but so far, nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

John spent most of the time lying either in bed or on the sofa, which, however, didn’t prevent him from playing with Rosie. She especially liked to look at her board books while sitting on his stomach, and often fell asleep there, lying cosily on top of him, together with her merman toy.

Hannah fed, changed, bathed and dressed Rosie, although Sherlock helped more and more often with those things as well. When she was busy with the little one, she was often singing to her at the same time, which she could do quite beautifully.

“So that’s how you stole her heart,” John had said the first time he’d heard her. “You might just as well have become an opera singer.”

Hannah had merely given him one of her mysterious smiles.

When Rosie was asleep, or was being entertained or taken care of by Sherlock, Hannah would sit at the little desk in John’s old room upstairs (which she now shared with Rosie), or at the desk in the lounge, in front of the window – with the net curtains always closed, of course. There, she would read novels in Russian, a dictionary at her side.

John and Sherlock spent a good deal of time comfily entangled on the sofa – John often reclining against Sherlock’s shoulder or chest – while trying to devise plans to catch Eurus, reading the papers, or doing nothing at all but enjoy the relative peace and quiet.

During the nights, they snuggled together in bed, politely ignoring each other’s occasional erections, knowing that their time would come. Whenever things did tend to get a little more heated and their kisses would deepen, John would instantly get the most ghastly of headaches, so they quickly learned not to do that. Although John was rather frustrated about not being well enough to do much just yet, Sherlock’s lack of experience was another good reason to take it slow anyway, John thought.

Whenever Sherlock wasn’t looking after Rosie, cooking dinner, or cuddling up with John (or
Rosie) on the sofa, he was working on his Moriarty Wall above the fireplace. There were pictures, newspaper clippings, as well as his own notes, stuck to and around the mirror, connected with threads in various colours with different meanings. Sometimes he would pitch ideas to John and they would discuss hypotheses as to Eurus’s plans and how to thwart them.

Eurus had returned only once to the safehouse where she’d left the GPS tracker. But by then, Lestrade had long tired of waiting and he’d reduced the number of officers on the stakeout to just one. The lone lookout hadn’t been able to catch her when she’d shown up. “Gone like a shadow,” the constable had told Greg. “Like a witch who can turn herself invisible.”

“You need to lure her with something that she wants,” Hannah said one morning. “Something not related to you two. Or me. Maybe make a list of her interests besides, you know, threatening and harming people.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock said. “I don’t know. Crossdressing, pretending to be other people? Acting? She’s trained as an actress. Not sure how any of that gets us anywhere, though.”

“Didn’t you once tell me,” John said pensively, “when you still thought she was a man, that one time she was really upset about being rejected for a certain role? Something Shakespeare?”

Sherlock sucked in a sharp breath. “Ophelia!” he said, as an idea apparently started to take shape in his mind. “She wanted to play Ophelia in Hamlet. Oh, this is good, this is very good. Last week, in the hospital, I happened to overhear one of the nurses mention that there were soon going to be auditions for a small production of Hamlet by some award-winning amateur theatre group that her son was going to have a go at. Oh! This is brilliant!”

“Hmm, so you’re just assuming Eurus knows this and will show up there, so we can have her arrested on the spot?” John asked.

“Well, no, we would have to bring the audition to her attention, somehow,” Sherlock said.

There was a short silence.

“Good thing you know a street in Clapham she occasionally passes through,” Hannah said, from the kitchen, where she was preparing Rosie’s bottle. “When she visits one particular safehouse.”

“What,” John said. “You want to go stand on a corner and give her a flyer when she walks by?”

“You could do that,” Hannah said. “Or you could hang up a few posters near the building.”

“That is actually a rather brilliant idea,” John said.

Sherlock steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “It really is,” he agreed.
Finding the name of the theatre group that was going to hold auditions for Hamlet turned out to be a rather bigger challenge than expected. Searching for ‘Hamlet London’ or ‘auditions Shakespeare’ led absolutely nowhere. But eventually, after a whole morning of frustrated google searches, Sherlock found the website of a small local theatre showing an image with an audition announcement for Hamlet in a corner of their “next projects” page. They would take place on 23 September at 7 pm. No need to sign up in advance.

All Sherlock needed to do was have that announcement printed on small poster size and put it up near the warehouse that Eurus occasionally squatted at.

He quietly went to the bedroom, where John was having another rest. Sherlock stood in front of his disguise wardrobe – containing a large and varied collection of stuff from all sorts of charity shops – and tried to choose an appropriate outfit for someone of his age illegally putting up posters around the city. He picked a checked shirt that was too big and a pair of red jeans that had seen better days. Then he took out a wig with short, spikey, white-blond hair, holding it all in front of him as he looked in the mirror.

“Lovely,” a voice from the bed said.

Sherlock turned around to see John smiling at him. “Hello, sleeping beauty,” Sherlock said, smiling back as he sauntered over to him, and bent down to give John a soft kiss.
He hadn’t yet stopped being amazed that he could just kiss John like that. Swarms of butterflies erupted in his stomach every time their lips touched.

“So, what’s the outfit for?” John asked, after they broke apart.

“Well, during your beauty sleep,” Sherlock said, fondly teasing, “I have managed to find the theatre group, as well as their audition announcement for the Hamlet play, which luckily turned out to be in image format and made in sufficiently high resolution to be printed out on a small poster.”

“Bril. Still, what’s the outfit for, then?” John asked.

“Well,” Sherlock began.

“No wait, I see,” John said, slowly, “you need to be in disguise to put up the poster, in case Eurus runs into you near the warehouse where she’s hiding.” John looked contented when Sherlock’s expression let him know he had it right.

“You do realise I’m not letting you go there by yourself, don’t you?” John asked, slowly, “you need to be in disguise to put up the poster, in case Eurus runs into you near the warehouse where she’s hiding.” John looked contented when Sherlock’s expression let him know he had it right.

“You do realise I’m not letting you go there by yourself, don’t you?” John asked.

“No wait, I see,” John said, slowly, “you need to be in disguise to put up the poster, in case Eurus runs into you near the warehouse where she’s hiding.” John looked contented when Sherlock’s expression let him know he had it right.

“You do realise I’m not letting you go there by yourself, don’t you?” John asked.

“You do realise I’m not letting you go there by yourself, don’t you?” John asked. “I’m not trusting you to just put up a poster near that place without going in to explore the dragon’s lair, so to speak.”

“John, I--”

“I’m just not, and that’s that. I’m going with you. Also, I need the fresh air. I’ve been locked inside for almost a month. It’s starting to drive me mad.”

Sherlock knew there was no point in arguing. Also, he understood only too well that John wanted to help catch Eurus and be part of this. Although John still needed to rest a lot and take it easy generally, he was probably indeed better enough to go out by now. And Sherlock reckoned they might as well have some fun while doing it.

“You’ll need a special outfit,” was all he said.

Within five minutes, John was trying on wigs and shirts and the two of them were being completely silly, doing funny voices and impressions.

John eventually ended up wearing a leather jacket, cowboy boots and a wig with long, greasy black hair.

Sherlock couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen John giggle like this. Nor the last time he had himself.

After a quick chat with Hannah about their plan, Sherlock grabbed a pen drive from his desk and saved the poster image on it. Then they went downstairs and left through Speedy’s.

First, they headed for a little copy shop on Melcombe Street to have the announcement printed out as a poster.

“Five should be enough, I should think,” Sherlock said, before entering.

Once they had the posters printed and went back outside, Sherlock explained, “We can’t just hang one on her front door and leave it at that. She might notice it’s the only one, and get suspicious. We will put up one more in the same street and the rest a bit further away. We’ll start with those, so we can get a little practice.” He took a pot of wheat paste from the canvas bag on his shoulder and wiggled it in one hand. “Have you ever done this before?”
“Nope.”

“As I thought. Hence, we need to try out how to plaster these things to sodding walls so that we won’t draw too much attention to ourselves being all awkward near her building. John, are you alright?” Sherlock quickly grabbed John’s arm, just in time. He clearly wasn’t steady on his feet and had been about to sink to the floor, despite their taking it very slowly.

“Jesus, sorry,” John said, holding on to a lamp post with a faint smile. “Perhaps I slightly overestimated myself.”

“We can go home, if you want,” Sherlock said.

“Just give me a second. I just need to… concentrate… is all.”

Suddenly, as Sherlock looked at John holding on to a lamp post in his wig and leather boots and jacket, he couldn’t help bursting out laughing. “You look like you’re absolutely plastered!”

John let out a squeaky giggle. “I suppose I do, yeah. I sort of feel plastered, even. Except, I get the headache simultaneously, rather than the next morning.”

“It’s the posters that should be plastered, John, not you!” Sherlock wheezed, unable to help himself.

They stood there together, laughing, until they were out of breath.

“Alright, enough of this,” Sherlock said eventually, trying to school his features back to normal. “Let’s go home.”

“Bugger this,” John said. “You know what? I’m not ready to give up. Exercise is supposed to be good for me, you know. And I really like finally being out again. Doing something. Having a purpose. Literally the only problem is I look like a drunk. Is that really so bad?”

At this, they both burst out into giggles again.

“We could buy you a can of beer to complete the picture,” Sherlock said. “Just for congruity’s sake.”

John snorted. “You’re a total git, aren’t you.” His eyes smiled in a way that reminded Sherlock of their first year as flatmates and it made him want to kiss him on the spot, weird outfit and all.

Instead, they went into the nearest corner shop and bought John a can of beer.

John had no trouble acting in character in the shop, slurrily ordering Sherlock about and talking slightly too loudly. Sherlock quietly told him to cut it out, as it only made him laugh, which sort of ruined the whole act. Reluctantly, John toned it down a bit.

They took the tube to Clapham North and John gratefully closed his eyes during the ride, resting his head on Sherlock’s shoulder, beer can on his knee.

When they arrived in Clapham, they hung up a couple of posters on unused doors and derelict walls, before heading to the location where Eurus was known to squat.

In the vicinity, they hung up the fourth one. They could already see the old warehouse a little further down the road.

Sherlock quickly scanned the building from where they could oversee most of it. “Around that
corner, near the lamp post. We want her to actually be able to read it if she comes here at night.” So they went over, he produced the wheat paste one more time and they plastered the fifth poster on one of the side entrances.

“All done. Let’s go home.”

“There’s a little park over there,” John pointed, as they started walking. “Shall we sit on a bench to rest from our efforts for a bit?”

“Alright, yes, let’s.”

Once they arrived at the bench, under a giant old oak tree, John inelegantly plonked himself down and closed his eyes again. He let out a satisfied sigh. “God, I’m exhausted.”

“We have all the time in the world,” Sherlock said, his voice soft. “We can sit here as long as we like.”

“Good.”

It was decidedly enjoyable being out with just the two of them again, Sherlock thought to himself, so he didn’t mind lingering a little.

“Shall I get us coffees from that stall over there?” Sherlock asked.

“That is, in fact, a lovely idea, yes.”

Once Sherlock was back with two lidded paper cups, John ceremoniously put down his untouched beer and they drank in silence for a while.

“Sherlock, do you think we should have ourselves tested for STDs?”

Sherlock almost spit out his latte. Then he cleared his throat, and said, “Well. That might be… Yes. That is actually a very sensible idea. It’s what people do, isn’t it? Just to be sure. I mean, even though I’ve never… I could theoretically still have been… you know, when I used… Yes, well. We should make an appointment.”

“Alright.”

There was something decidedly cheeky about the little smile on John’s face. Now that he was apparently – to an extent – better enough to be out and about like this, did that mean he was also better enough for other… physical activities?

Sherlock was quite sure his own face had changed to a colour resembling that of a tomato.

It was essential he changed the subject. Quickly.

“Finish your coffee. We need to arrange things with Greg for the 23rd. And he needs to coordinate things with the director of the theatre group.”

“What things, exactly? No wait, I know. You don’t just want the building surrounded in case she shows up,” John said, pensively. “You are the only one who is able to recognise her, which will nevertheless be tricky, with her chameleon abilities. You want to sit on the jury to be able to observe her up close, so you can call in the Yarders when you’re sure it’s her.”

“Precisely.”
John really was getting better at deductions, Sherlock thought, pleased.

“Listen,” John said, his face more serious, “as much as I like getting it right when I deduce things, I really prefer to just be told what’s the deal.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to reply, but John hushed him. “I don’t just mean about this. Actually, I meant something else entirely.” He sighed. “A year ago, we agreed it was important to have complete openness and honesty, after… after Mary shot you. But to me, that is not only essential for case-related stuff, but also on a personal level, you know?” He turned towards Sherlock. “I love you, and I want to keep loving you for a very long time. But for that, I need to know you completely, Sherlock.” John looked at him one long moment with his lips pressed tightly together. “Like stuff that happened in your past.” He looked away at the floor. “Of course, I don’t need to know everything, but right now we hardly know a single thing about each other’s family, and that just feels… wrong. We can’t be close, and intimate, and not know any of that kind of stuff.”

Sherlock just nodded silently.

“I was hoping,” John went on, “you were willing to tell me about ‘the other one’, as Mycroft referred to him. Your other brother.”

Sherlock swallowed. “Alright,” he agreed. “I’ll tell you what.” He squinted at the trees in the distance. “Let’s go home, take off these ridiculous disguises and then we can sit down and I will tell you everything.”

“Deal.”

An hour later, after having arrived back at 221B and changing back into their regular attire, John gingerly sat down on the sofa.

Sherlock could tell that the headaches were getting worse again, as John tilted his head backwards, closed his eyes and scrunched up his face, sitting very still.

Maybe they shouldn’t have gone out today after all.

Sherlock cautiously sat down next to him.

“Just one more minute,” John whispered, without moving.

“Are you sure you don’t want to lie down and rest a bit, first?” Sherlock asked quietly.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Would you like tea?”

“Yes, please,” John breathed.

Secretly glad he could postpone telling John about Sherrinford for a little longer, Sherlock went over to the kitchen, and filled the kettle. He wasn’t particularly looking forward to sharing this painful memory. But John was right. He needed to know.

When Sherlock returned to the sofa with two steaming mugs, John’s sympathetic smile told him that John could see how uncomfortable he was.

When Sherlock sat down, John took Sherlock’s hand in his, letting him know it was all fine.

“Alright then.” Sherlock cleared his throat. “As you’ve now gathered, Mycroft and I have another
brother. His name is Sherrinford. He's two years older than I am, five years younger than Mycroft. He’s always been… difficult. He’s deaf, to begin with.” Sherlock stirred his tea.


“Yes. But he was never able to learn sign language, or lip reading. Or any other form of communication with others, except the occasional drawing he used to make in his notebook to tell Mummy what it was he wanted. His limited mental capacities presented another difficulty. That, combined with the impressive tempers he used to display…”

Sherlock fell silent for a bit, considering how to cut to the chase. He took a long breath. “He tried to kill me by strangling me with a skipping rope when I was five.”

“Oh. God,” John said, eyes wide in shock.

“He almost succeeded,” Sherlock added. He hesitated, as a lump appeared in his throat. “What he did succeed in doing, that same day, was killing our dog. With an axe.”

“Jesus,” John breathed.

“I’d been playing with him, in the garden. It was an Irish setter, named Redbeard. We were inseparable.” He swallowed, trying not to let the associated emotions resurface.

“God.” John stared blindly ahead of him, his mouth agape. “That must have been… an incredibly horrific trauma to process.”

“Well, I’m not sure I ever really did, to be honest,” Sherlock said. He pressed his lips together, thinking. “My parents just never talked about it. Never gave me any sort of context, or explanation, or any room to grieve my dog. Never comforted me in any way that I can remember. Sherrinford was simply sent away to a special facility for children with behavioural problems and from then on they just sort of pretended it never happened.”

Only a few years ago, Sherlock had realised how strange it really was that they hadn’t been there to support and guide him with his emotions.

“I did talk about it with Mycroft, occasionally,” Sherlock went on. “He wasn’t there when it happened, but he’d heard the nanny tell my parents. She’d seen it all from the other end of the garden, and was the first to arrive at the scene and pull Sherrinford off of me.” Sherlock blew over his mug to cool down the hot liquid. “I have no memory of it myself. I was unconscious when she found me.” He took a sip of his tea. “I’ve never seen him since.”

“Christ,” John said, stunned. “If she hadn’t been there…” He swallowed, then shook his head. His grip on Sherlock’s hand tightened a little. “So you haven’t seen your brother in, what, 34 years?”

“Indeed.”

“Blimey. I see. Has he lived in a special home like that ever since?”

“Um. Well, no. Eleven years later, he killed again. On his 18th birthday, for reasons unknown, he lost it, threw over some tables in the common room at the facility, opened the gas and managed to run outside, locking everybody in. They all died in the explosion that followed and he was convicted for multiple murder. He spent the next fifteen years in prison.”

John let out an audible breath and briefly closed his eyes, as a pained expression passed over his face.
“After serving his time,” Sherlock continued, “he moved to a residential care home for adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities, in Wantage, Oxfordshire. Mycroft and my parents still visit him.”

John nodded as he absently cradled his tea, staring into space. “But you don’t.”

“Oh obviously.”

“Wow.” He appeared to shake pieces away. “Why don’t you?” he asked.

Sherlock’s eyes flew wide open. The same words Mycroft had uttered a few weeks ago.

“Why would I?” he frowned. “He tried to kill me, John.”

“True. But he was seven. I mean… doesn’t it feel strange having a brother who you don’t know at all?”

Sherlock chewed his lip. “My entire childhood, my parents seemed to actively keep me away from him. Never took me with them when they went to visit. It was as if they were trying to simply make me forget I ever had a second brother. They removed his photos from the living room. As if I could forget a sibling, especially one who’d been terrorising the household since before I was born.” He scoffed. “Initially, they even used to make up pretexts when they went to see him. It didn’t take me long, however, before I realised that ‘poor old aunty Jane’ didn’t actually exist.”

“That’s… a little weird, to be honest,” John said.

“Yeah. Well, they were probably trying to protect me, in their own, strange way.”

“But don’t you want some answers?” John asked. “Don’t you want to know what he’s like, now, as an adult? He’s still your brother, after all.”

“No really. He probably doesn’t even know who I am anymore.”

“Well, I think maybe it would be good for you to go and see him, now that you can decide for yourself,” John gently insisted. “This is a huge thing that happened to you. You can’t just push it away and pretend it doesn’t really matter. I’ve tried to do that sort of thing in the past and it doesn’t work, in the end, trust me.” John tentatively took Sherlock’s hand in both of his own. “Assuming he’s no longer dangerous, seeing as other people visit him, I don’t see why we couldn’t go and get to know him a little. Both of us.”

“John, he doesn’t speak. There’s nothing to know.”

John raised his eyebrows at him and ducked his chin.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, letting out a sigh. “Alright.”

If that was what John wanted, there couldn’t really be any harm, he guessed.

Still, he regretted it the moment he’d conceded.

Chapter End Notes
With many thanks to Mamaorion, who beta’d this chapter for me as a last minute sick-replacement.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John’s visit to Sherrinford goes somewhat differently than they’d expected.

Chapter Notes

Just FYI, the bloke from Crimson Peak who is mentioned in this chapter is Tom Hiddleston. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was an overcast morning late in August when John and Sherlock took the train from Paddington station to go and visit Sherrinford, having left Rosie in Hannah’s capable hands for the day.

During their previous little outing putting up the audition posters, John had grudgingly realised that he needed his cane again. Not for his leg, but for his blasted spells of dizziness. So he had – albeit unwillingly – taken it with him this time.

They spoke little during the journey, instead watching the towns, meadows, forests and fields slide past.

When they were passing a particularly pretty village, John remarked, “This is really quite a picturesque area, isn’t it? Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to live in a charming old cottage like that one.” He pointed at a quaint thatched house on a country road leading away from the small group of houses surrounding a little old church.

“Do you know, John,” said Sherlock, “that it is one of the curses of a mind with a turn like mine that I must look at everything with reference to my own special subject. You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there.”

“Good heavens!” John exclaimed, with a half-chuckle. “Of course you would associate crime with these lovely old farmhouses.”

“They always fill me with a certain horror,” Sherlock admitted. “It is my belief, John, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

John considered for a minute. “Horrifying as that sounds, you might very well be right,” he eventually said, still absorbed in thought about the matter. “Might very well be.” He squinted at another group of similar cottages, which had taken a desolate tinge after Sherlock’s observation, and tried to imagine the hidden wickedness which might go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.
He thought about the incident with Sherlock’s brother when Sherlock had been only five years old. That, too, had happened in a big garden of a house with no direct neighbours. If it hadn’t been for the nanny who by chance was outside at that same moment, John wouldn’t now be sitting here opposite a brilliant detective. He would likely not have lived.

A chill ran down his spine.

Ever since he’d learned about the horrendous incident, a few days ago, he felt overwhelmed with gratitude towards the nanny. He’d even contemplated sending her a special Thank You card or flowers on his behalf, but sadly, she’d passed away a few years later, Sherlock had informed him.

John watched the people milling about on a busy marketplace they passed, each with their own personal history, unknown to most others.

Still, as upsetting as Sherrinford’s deeds had been – or precisely because of that, in fact – John felt the urge to know him, understand him. Had it been raw anger, base aggressiveness, that Sherlock had had to live with during his infant years? Uncoordinated spasms of fury? Or had it perhaps been a rage provoked only by frustration, born out of a certain despondency?

What character was behind these acts?

To slaughter a dog like that… John couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for Sherlock at the time, little as he was. Was that why he’d decided later on to fight crime, John wondered? Because he’d experienced the deep wounds of injustice?

John had spent the last couple of days pondering whether the incident might also explain why Sherlock didn’t form bonds with others as easily as most people. Betrayed by his own brother. The dog he loved taken away from him in such a brutal way, right in front of him. John could see how that might have taught Sherlock that it was better not to care too much about anything, for horrible things could happen even within the safety of your own home.

Of course, John knew all about that, as well. He’d responded differently to it, although maybe not altogether so very differently after all, if you really thought about it.

Either way, he’d always suspected that there was some trauma in Sherlock’s past that had made him ‘like this’. He’d even dreamed up some far-fetched explanation while he’d been in the process of waking up from his coma, about a murderous sister. (Turned out it was a murderous brother. Not that far off the mark, in hindsight, although this one at least didn’t seem in the habit of committing arson and setting up elaborate murder mazes with fancy television screens, as far as he knew.)

The question of how Sherlock’s mysterious, unknown past had influenced him had occupied John for a long time, and now he had his answer. And it was every bit as shocking as he’d feared.

He looked up to find Sherlock staring at him with a frown etched onto his face. “Alright?” Sherlock asked.

John nodded. “Yeah, fine,” he replied, with a little smile. “You?”

“As long as you’re here with me, yes.” He put his hand on John’s knee and softly squeezed it.

They had coffee at Reading station and a muffin at Oxford, where they waited for a cab to take them to their final destination.

After a half hour drive through a rather dull and flat landscape, they arrived in a lush, green village.
The Georgian estate building where Sherrinford lived was surrounded by old beech and pine trees, which were softly rustling in the breeze. Several of the residents were sitting outside in their wheelchairs or wandering about the lawn for some fresh air. One man, who was transporting logs in a wheelbarrow, kept stopping to wave elaborately at everyone he saw, including them.

They politely waved back.

Inside, a nurse named Eric came to collect them from the central hall and took them into one of the wings of the closed unit, chattering away all the while. About how nice it was that they’d come to visit. About how lovely the weather had been the week before.

John could tell that Sherlock was making a valiant attempt not to smother him.

He was nervous, John could see.

John felt a little uneasy as well. Usually, he’d feel confident that, if it were necessary, the two of them could easily overpower an aggressive lunatic. But John was still a patient recovering from a serious head injury, who couldn’t even walk or stand for more than two minutes without his cane.

Eric stopped and pressed a button outside one of the rooms. “The door-light,” he explained. “Instead of a doorbell, which he wouldn’t be able to hear. He startles if we just barge in.” After a few seconds, Eric opened the door with a key card and let them in.

The first thing John saw was paintings. Dozens and dozens of paintings: a few hanging on the walls, but most of them standing on the floor, stacked behind one another against the walls. All sorts of different worlds displayed hyper-realistically and in lively colours. At first glance, some almost looked like photographs.

There was one of a horse galloping through glistening snow, one of the building they were in, with the trees casting spotty shadows on the lawn in different shades of green, one of a vase with wilted flowers, and several very realistic portraits of people, among which John spotted an astoundingly truthful younger version of Sherlock’s mother.

At the far end of the spacious room, a slender man sat in front of the large window, on a wooden stool covered in paint stains. He stiffly turned his head to them, his eyes widening at the sight of the strangers.

“It’s alright, Sherrinford,” Eric said. “This is your brother Sherlock and his… partner, John.” At the word ‘partner’, he looked at them as if to check that was the right word. John wasn’t entirely sure it was. Too ambiguous. Then again, seeing as no one was supposed to know the true nature of their relationship just yet, it was just fine, really. John gave a polite smile in acknowledgment. “They decided to come for a visit,” Eric said, looking back to Sherrinford.

*Why was this Eric speaking to him, if he was deaf and couldn’t read lips*, John wondered. Wouldn’t it be annoying for someone who can’t understand anyway?

They stepped into the room, as Sherrinford cautiously stood up and took a few steps toward them. He laboriously avoided looking at them directly, instead letting his eyes jump around the general direction they were in. His face was virtually expressionless, except for his eyes.

He reminded John of that bloke from *Crimson Peak*. Tom Something. Quite good-looking. Just like him, Sherrinford had sharp cheekbones (no surprise there), wavy dark-blond hair, and piercing blue eyes.

Those eyes, despite avoiding direct eye contact, inquisitively scanned the both of them in that fast,
casual way that John was so familiar with. Still, his gaze appeared magnetically drawn to Sherlock’s, and for one magical moment, they looked straight at each other.

There was no malice in his gaze, no threat. Just neutral observation.

Sherlock then carefully took out an old photograph from his inside pocket, which he’d shown to John on the train: of the three Holmes brothers as kids, sitting together on a park bench, each clutching an ice cream. Taken a year before the tragedy, with no hints of the trouble that was to come – at all. They were smiling and seemed completely comfortable in each other’s presence. (Which had just been a snap of the moment, according to Sherlock.)

Sherlock tapped his finger on himself in the picture and then briefly pointed at his own chest.

There was no doubt in John’s mind that Sherrinford instantly understood what Sherlock was telling him.

Sherrinford’s breath fluttered. Then his face subtly softened. He stared at the photo, and then at his brother, clearly touched. A shy, hopeful smile flickered across his face and he reached out to briefly touch Sherlock’s shoulder as he looked at him (once more avoiding his eyes) – almost as if to check if he was real.

It was only a fleeting moment.

The next instant, he turned away with a pained expression and he went back to sit on his stool near the window, staring intensely at the half-finished landscape painting on the easel standing beside it. He took one of the tubes of paint that lay in a neat row on the window sill and fidgeted it repetitively between his fingers.

Sherlock sat down in the nearest chair, which was at a small dinner table covered with stacks of magazines and photo books, and John did the same.

A blue light flashed in the room, briefly making John wonder if there was a police car by the window. But the source was a light near the door, announcing the arrival of Eric, who was bringing tea.

As he put the mugs on the table for them, and handed one to Sherrinford over at the window, he continued to chatter away where he’d left off.

“Here’s some tea for you. That’s lovely, isn’t it? Especially with this weather. It’s proper chilly! It’s not even September yet! Crazy stuff. Although it will be, by the end of the week. But still! Here’s some milk and sugar if you want it. Well, I’ll just leave you to it, then. Call me if you need anything, alright?”

“Yes, thank you,” Sherlock said, visibly tetchy.

As the three of them drank their tea in silence, John’s eyes were once more drawn to the paintings all around them – at least the ones he could see. They were so very intricately done, with lots of details, shining surfaces and complex shadows and reflections. Truly beautiful.

He caught Sherlock staring at them as well, and he wondered what he was thinking.

Meanwhile, he sensed that Sherrinford was not just watching them from the corner of his eye; he was deducing them.

Despite whatever intellectual disability he was supposed to have, this man was not stupid.
Also, he seemed so calm and composed, that John had a hard time imagining he had killed a dog and several people, and almost did the same thing to his very own little brother. But then again, that was the case with so many murderers. He’d seen it often enough in the investigations they’d helped Greg with. Nobody was mean and vicious all the time. Legend had it even Hitler had been lovely with his dogs, after all.

Immediately after that thought occurred to him, a cat strolled across the room and went to sit at Sherrinford’s feet. When John looked around to see where the feline had come from, he spotted another pair of little, pointy ears perking up from behind a stack of paintings. Ironically, the canvas at the front of that very stack was a portrait of two cats, he then noticed.

He could hear Sherlock’s voice in his head, ‘*You see but you do not observe*’.

When they had all finished their tea, Sherrinford got up and restlessly rummaged among the artworks standing along the walls, apparently in search of something. After a while, he pulled a small canvas from behind one of the stacks, and walked over to Sherlock, solemnly handing it to him.

It was a close-up of an Irish setter.

Sherlock looked taken aback, wary. He only barely seemed able to keep his emotions in check, while also clearly trying to read his brother’s intentions, looking from the painting in his hands to him and back.

There seemed to be fear and hope in Sherrinford’s eyes. He was blinking rapidly. And when John looked again, he saw the beginning of tears.

Sherlock handed the painting to John, who took it and looked at it, nodding appreciatively, before handing it back to Sherrinford.

Then it became clear that it was a present. Sherlock was meant to keep it.

Sherlock momentarily looked like a fish gasping for breath.

*Was this Sherrinford’s way of saying sorry? Of giving him Redbeard back, as well as he could do?*

Sherlock eventually nodded and awkwardly put a hand on Sherrinford’s shoulder.

Then the light flashed again and Eric came to tell them that visiting hours were over.

So they left.

They still didn’t speak when they walked through the corridors back to the entrance hall.

Only once they stepped outside, John said, “Well, that went differently than expected.”

“It did, indeed,” was all Sherlock said, deep in thought.

* * * * *

Something amazing today.

Little brother came. Hardly recognisable. Big now. Still alive, then.

Happy to know. So glad.
With small blond man.

Friendly.

No pointless mouth moving at him. Or at each other.

They showed interest. Respect. In a calm way. Not intrusive.

Redbeard painting for them. To put in their home.

Hopefully they like it.

Hopefully they'll come back.

Find new blank canvas. Open paint. Start new painting. Of them.

Chapter End Notes

With many thanks to deaflock for letting me ask her a million questions about being deaf and for proofreading this chapter! And also once more to Mamaorion for the beta, as well as my long time betas mydogwatson and Jonathan, of course.

Btw I stole Sherlock’s quote about crime rates in the country from Arthur Conan Doyle’s original Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Adventure of The Copper Beeches’. Because I just couldn’t resist. And maybe because I miss no longer having quotes from the show that I can use in this last part of the story! :D
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Sherlock tries to figure out Sherrinford, while John starts to understand more and more about Sherlock’s background. In the meantime, Molly makes a shocking discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock sat and stared at Redbeard. Or rather, at the lifelike painting of him, made by the man who’d murdered him 34 years ago.

Unable to decide what to do with the unexpected gift, he’d put it on the back of the sofa for the time being, from where it was now lovingly staring back at him across the room.

Folded up in his chair near the fireplace, Sherlock looked at the fine hairs on Redbeard’s snout, the shiny patch on his healthily wet nose, the two large, dark, loyal eyes. All captured so naturally. So perfectly. Sherlock thought he could almost smell him again, so clear and vivid was the memory this painting evoked. As if his pet could jump off the canvas any minute, right into his arms.

How had Sherrinford been capable of this? Of painting something so beautifully, that he himself had so brutally destroyed?

*(How was he able to paint so beautifully at all?)*

It didn’t make sense.

All this time, Sherlock had pictured his middle brother as a madman, locked away like a wild animal, not capable of compassion, empathy, or any sort of intelligence. Yet reality seemed totally different. To Sherlock’s utter astonishment, Sherrinford had appeared genuinely glad to have Sherlock visit him. And those paintings… They were clearly made with deliberation and insight. As was the decision to give Sherlock this particular one. Although what his motive was, Sherlock could only guess.

Had he perhaps completely erased the memory of what had happened from his mind? Or did he regret his actions? Had he genuinely changed, somehow? He certainly seemed very different. Then again, he had also grown up.

What would Sherrinford tell him, if only he could speak?

His phone’s ringtone cut through his contemplations.

Mycroft.

“You visited him,” his elder brother’s familiar, icy voice stated.

“I did.”

“And?”
“And what?”

“How was it?”

“Well. We drank tea. He gave me a painting of Redbeard.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Mycroft? Are you still there?”

“Yes. Sorry. I’m just…”

“Surprised? Yes, so was I.”

“He’s never given away a painting before,” Mycroft said. “To anyone. And of Redbeard, no less. Interesting.”

“Hmm.”

A loud, indignant baby cry from upstairs momentarily pulled Sherlock’s attention away. At the same time, it reminded him of something he’d been meaning to ask Mycroft.

“Mycroft?”

“Yes?”

“I was wondering. Does he still get tantrums?”

“Only very sporadically. As long as he can paint and he has his cats, he’s happy, it seems.”

“I see,” Sherlock said. “Just out of curiosity: since when has he had cats?”

“He got them about a year after he came to live where he is now. So that’s, let me think… seven years ago. We were a bit wary of the idea at first, as you can imagine, but they seem to calm him.”

“And he’s never… I don’t know, tried to kill one?”

“It seems he hasn’t, no.” There was a short silence. “He was very young, Sherlock. He’s no longer the little, angry boy who liked to torment his baby brother. I’ve been trying to tell you, but of course I respected your reluctance to… reconnect with him.”

Something was definitely off, and Sherlock couldn’t put his finger on what it was. He realised that part of the problem was, he’d deleted almost everything to do with Sherrinford from his memory.

“Can you explain why he’s never learnt sign language? I presume Mummy and Daddy tried to have someone teach him.”

“Oh yeah, they did. We used to think he wasn’t able to learn. Now I tend to think he just didn’t want to.”

“Hmm. So do I,” Sherlock said.

He could sense Mycroft looking smug on the other end of the line.

“So does this mean you’re finally letting the past rest?” Mycroft asked complacently.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “When have I ever done a thing like that? Goodbye, Mycroft.”
The minute he’d hung up the phone, Sherlock heard Hannah come down the stairs with Rosie, who looked and sounded decidedly unsatisfied with the service provided.

“I think she wants her bottle,” Hannah said with a weary smile, as she headed for the kitchen with Rosie on her hip.

It seemed Rosie was entering some sort of new phase, which included getting new teeth, and she was intent on letting the world know about how unfair everything was – especially Hannah, and preferably around three o’clock in the morning. Which accounted for Hannah’s weariness.

Sherlock got up, pulling his thoughts away from Sherrinford and into the present, and took Rosie from her, mock-seriously telling the infant off. “Hey there, you cheeky little primate. How are you ever going to grow into a proper Watson, if you behave like this, hmm? Keeping Hannah awake in the middle of the night, and screaming at all of us?” He lifted her in the air and gently wobbled her to the left and right. “There should be a law against it. Yes, there should!”

Thankfully, his friendly tone lulled her into quietness for a few minutes.

When the bottle was ready and Hannah made to take Rosie back from him, he instead took the bottle from Hannah and went to sit with Rosie in his chair, supporting her little head in the crook of his arm, so she could drink. “You need a rest,” he said to Hannah, his eyes still fixed on Rosie. The little girl’s closed eyes signalled her approval of having been given her milk, while she diligently sucked at the teat.

Sherlock loved the way Rosie’s eyebrows repeatedly travelled up and down in the process.

“I think I do, actually. Thanks,” Hannah said. She gratefully collapsed onto the sofa and, with a relieved sigh, took out her phone.

* * * * *

Hannah stared at the picture on her phone screen and smiled. Briony had sent her a lovely selfie of her and little Imogen.

She missed them. So much.

She could only hope that Eurus Moriarty would soon be arrested, so she could finally go back home. She hadn’t expected this mission to become the longest one away from home that she’d had up to date. Especially not since she was so maddeningly close to home. One month and counting. Still, it was definitely one of her less stressful assignments. Even though she had to be on standby for possible murderous intruders at all times, carrying her gun in every waking moment, while simultaneously working as a nanny of sorts (which, to be fair, was a task that Sherlock was now taking over from her more and more), the atmosphere was relaxed enough. Almost cosy.

She absolutely adored little Rosie, with her big eyes, sometimes inquisitive and often twinkling with joy. Looking after her brought back happy memories of when Imogen had been that age, when she and Briony had just gotten together.

Also, actually spending time around Sherlock, who she’d long considered a dear friend, was a blast. They often understood each other with half a word and they both appreciated the other’s witty remarks and the sort of obscure references that no one else ever seemed to get. And despite Hannah’s reservations, John had turned out not to be so hard to get along with at all, now that the two of them were happy together.

She glanced over at the two subjects she was providing security for. The brilliant detective, who
many people thought to be a cold, reasoning machine, cradling the infant and carefully giving her her bottle. It was one of the loveliest contrasts she had ever witnessed.

Rosie, thoroughly content, didn’t even look up when John came into the room – in pyjamas and dressing gown – and sat down next to Hannah on the sofa.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

A misty smile came over John’s face when he looked at Sherlock feeding his daughter.

Hannah was so happy for them. She had begun to think she’d never see the day they would finally find one another. But they had. (And she was actually here to see it, too.)

Although Sherlock hadn’t lost his sharp edges, exactly, she’d never seen him this soft and tender. Simply another side of the same person, that had been hidden until now. Both sides were equally a part of him, of course, as were so many other sides she would likely never see. But as much as it was only natural for people to have hidden sides to them (which she’d experienced first-hand in her previous work, more than anyone), she was convinced that Sherlock finally being able to nurture his caring side would literally save his life.

Much like the same thing had saved her own.

Only since falling in love with Briony had she really understood the importance of having a home filled with love to come back to. To keep you grounded.

The way Sherlock tenderly looked after John, as well as Rosie, often hit her right in the feels in a way she couldn’t quite explain, but which probably had something to do with the still relatively recent change in her own life. It was quite an exercise to discreetly ignore the intimacy between them, and she regularly couldn’t resist sneaking a peek from the corner of her eyes when they were showing affection towards each other. Somehow, it gave her a feeling of great relief and reassurance that there was still good in this world.

“He was so lovely just now with Rosie,” Hannah quietly said to John. “She was being rather impossible again, I’m afraid. Nothing seemed to be able to calm her down.”

“So I could hear,” John said with a meaningful look.

“Woke you up, did she?”

“Yeah. It’s their purpose in life, isn’t it?” he joked.

“It will pass, I promise. But yeah, Sherlock undeniably has a magic touch with her. You definitely chose the right bloke.” She winked.

“I most certainly did,” John said, lifting his chin with a grin. “For so many more reasons than that.”

They both smiled.

“I must say,” Hannah said, in a low voice, “he keeps managing to surprise me. Especially after experiencing what his parents are like.”

“Oh? How so?” John asked, surprised.

Sherlock merely smirked lopsidedly in the background.
“Well,” Hannah said, “they would not tolerate Rosie crying and did not contribute to her stopping
to cry in any way, either. Sometimes, they even made it worse, by startling her in all manner of
ways, without realising it, apparently. Although they were lovely, helpful and friendly in many
ways, they would promptly send me upstairs with her whenever she was unhappy.”

John’s mouth fell slightly open. “Seriously?” he frowned.

“Hmm. I’d expected a similar approach from Sherlock, but he’s the exact opposite, isn’t he? He’s
really good at comforting her, listening to her.”

“Yeah, he is,” John smiled proudly, still a bit pensive.

Sherlock, meanwhile, seemed to be happily ignoring the conversation, instead carefully making
sure Rosie wouldn’t swallow air at the end of her bottle.

“Sherlock,” Hannah asked cautiously, “I hope you don’t mind me asking you, but while I was
staying with your parents, I couldn’t help but wonder: are they, by any chance, um, on the autistic
spectrum?”

“Yeah, I think we can safely say they are.” Sherlock nodded, with his lips pinched together. Then
he raised his eyebrows high. “For years I thought I had it, until I realised it was just them.” He put
away the empty bottle and held Rosie up against his shoulder. “People always thought I was a little
odd, but they raised me like this. They are perfectly nice and kind people, of course. Always
pleasant and generous towards others. But at the same time, they were always all about focusing on
facts and figures. Not adhering much value to social context. Not automatically taking other
people’s feelings into account. Concentrating on your own needs rather than anybody else’s. Hard
traits to unlearn. But I’m slowly getting there,” he said, smiling at John.

“You never told me,” John said, a little baffled.

“Yeah, well. I was kind of hoping you’d figure it out yourself when you got to know them a bit
better,” he said, a little uneasily. “People don’t tend to respond kindly to someone unofficially
diagnosing their own parents with a mental disorder.” He took a long breath. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I
should have told you of my suspicions, John. Please forgive me.”

“I do. Don’t worry about it. It’s just… it sounds tough.” John went to sit across from Sherlock, next
to the fireplace, and put a hand on his knee.

“You’ve come a very long way,” Hannah said. She knew it took courage to change your familiar
ways, especially when imprinted by your parents.

“I think I have, yes,” Sherlock said, pensively. “It’s rather impressive how children are
programmed to copy their parents’ behaviour, in so many ways, and how they automatically
approach the world in the same way they do. On top of which, if parents aren’t able to properly
recognise their child’s feelings, nor to tune in to those feelings, let alone communicate about them
in any meaningful way, it will naturally influence a child’s emotional development.” He looked
down at Rosie in his arms and gently stroked her back. “It took me decades to see what had
happened.” He was silent for a bit, as if reminiscing. “Sherrinford has it too, of course. In fact, I’m
starting to think that might be all that is wrong with him, besides being deaf. I mean, he has been
diagnosed with low IQ and a severe form of autism, but I’m not so sure anymore how severe it is,
exactly.” Sherlock squinted into the distance. “Or how low his IQ is, for that matter.”

“What are you planning?” John asked. “I know that look.”
“I’m planning to find out the truth.”

* * * * *

One more autopsy and then Molly could go home and watch the new episode of Pretty Little Liars that she’d been looking forward to.

She closed the report she’d been working on and walked from the office area into the morgue, two doors down the corridor.

The last body was of a woman who’d been shot on the street outside her home in Soho, according to the file. A police form was attached for her to return to NSY with her findings.

When Molly removed the sheet that covered the body, she started.

The beautiful face with strong jawline and fine nose, the shiny, dark brown hair, the near-perfect ratios of her measurements… This looked just like that woman… The one Sherlock called The Woman, and who he had recognised (or so he’d thought) by ‘not her face’. Molly had been heartbroken.

But she couldn’t be her, right?

She was dead.

The first time she had supposedly died, it had all been a setup, of course. Molly still remembered the night the body had been brought in. Christmas 2010. Almost five years ago. (A horrible evening for so many reasons, the least of which being the Christmas party at Sherlock and John’s getting cut short by that lady’s body having been found. Molly had been glad to get away, really, after the horrible way Sherlock had humiliated her with the deduction about her present earlier that same evening.) That time, the DNA records had been forged and the lady on the slab had only been a cleverly selected lookalike (with a conveniently bashed up face), fooling even Sherlock.

But later she’d been killed for real, in some country far away. Pakistan or Iran, or something. Or so John had told Molly.

But had she, really?

Or could it have been a scam, once more?

Because here was someone who looked exactly like her. Again.

She should contact Sherlock.

As soon as she was done with the pathology report, Molly went over to Baker Street.

The sun shone brightly in the September afternoon, as she walked to 221B from the tube station. She was even sweating a little by the time she arrived. When she rang the bell, it took a while before Sherlock appeared downstairs.

“It’s Molly!” he called back over his shoulder. And then, in a gentle voice, “Molly, do come in. How are you?”

She noticed how he quickly scanned the street behind her after he’d spoken. Although he looked tired, he seemed well. Infinitely better than last time. She was glad.

“Oh, I’m, er, fine! I’ve just got some, well, potentially bad news, although I’m not really sure. Um.
I just thought I should talk to you about it.”

“Come on up,” he said and guided her up the stairs.

In the lounge, she was greeted by the blond woman who had brought little Rosie and her to Mr and Mrs Holmes’s a little over a month ago. (What was her name again?)

What on earth was she doing here? Surely she and Sherlock weren’t…

“You’ve met Hannah, I believe,” Sherlock said.

“Oh! Yes, hello!”

There was a short, awkward silence. Best to cut straight to the chase, Molly thought.

“It’s Irene Adler,” she said.

Hannah’s eyes went wide.

Sherlock frowned.

“I… er… just had a body at the morgue that I think was hers. So, what I’m trying to say is, if she wasn’t actually dead last time, you know, with her record of faking things, she might be now.”

“Oh!” Sherlock exclaimed.

Why did he sound so relieved?

He was actually bloody smiling, the sod.

Molly felt her face heat with anger.

“No, don’t worry about Miss Adler,” Sherlock said, rather patronisingly. “She’s fine. She’s dead, I mean.”

Hannah tried to hide a smile. Unsuccessfully.

“Well, I’d better go, then,” Molly said, feeling increasingly uncomfortable. “Just wanted to let you know, is all.”

“Wait,” another voice called.

Molly looked up to see John appear from the kitchen.

So that was why this Hannah woman was here. Apparently John and Rosie were staying here?

“Molly, can you tell us a bit more about the lady who looked like her?” John asked. “How and where did she die?”

“Well. She was shot in the left thigh, from behind. Right through the femoral artery. Distance of no more than ten feet, small calibre gun. She then apparently fell and hit her temple against the pointy corner of one of those metal electricity boxes beside the pavement. Between the head injury and the considerable blood loss from her leg, it was hard to tell what killed her. Either way, by the time an ambulance finally arrived, it was too late. I suppose the traffic must also have been crazy in that area. Soho. On Frith Street,” Molly said.
Hannah went pale. “That’s our street. Briony is in danger!” She dived for her phone and punched in a number, while she hurried out of the room.

Sherlock and John looked at each other in shock.

What the hell was going on here, Molly wondered.

“Oh god,” Sherlock stammered. “Molly, thank you so much for coming here and telling us. I understand that none of this makes sense to you, but you gave us some very important information. Even though the body was not, in fact, Irene Adler’s, I assure you.”

Then why was it relevant?

Hannah’s voice sounded agitated from across the hall as she spoke on the phone. “It must be that woman who you said was my doppelganger, who lives across the street!”

Molly’s mouth fell open.

Sherlock and John looked defeated.

“We’d better just tell her,” John said.

Then Molly understood. “That is Irene Adler?! Isn’t it? That’s why you both smiled when I said I thought I had her in the morgue.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, clearly uneasy. “Please, for the love of god, don’t tell anyone she’s here, or that she’s alive at all, for that matter. Do you promise?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course. I promise.”

Clearly someone was after her and had killed the wrong lady. This was serious stuff.

“Briony and Imogen are being relocated this instant,” Hannah said, barging back into the room.

Even now that Molly knew she was the famous Dominatrix, she still had to look hard to recognise her, with her different hair and outfit.

Hannah (Irene) fell silent the moment she spotted Molly, apparently having forgotten that she was there.

“Miss Adler,” Molly said. “I know.”

Irene’s eyes anxiously shot towards Sherlock, who gave her a resigned look.

“Your secret is safe with me, don’t worry,” Molly said. “Please let me know if I can, you know, help in any way.”

Irene studied her for a moment. “Thank you,” she then said. “You have already saved the lives of my wife and our daughter.”

Her what? Oh. “Oh! Yes, you’re welcome! Your wife, whom you have married, and is therefore your wife, is very important, of course. And your daughter, too!”

Stop talking, you daft cow.

“I’d better go now. Bye!”
She ran down the stairs, cursing herself for her inability to just think before she opened her mouth.

Time for a full evening of telly and a large bag of chocolate chip cookies. And possibly a bottle of wine. No, definitely wine.

* * * * *

In the course of the next week or two, all was quiet on the East Wind’s front.

Hannah’s family was securely relocated to an MI5 safe-house.

While they waited for the date of the auditions for Hamlet to roll around, Sherlock and John tried to devise alternative plans to catch Eurus, in case she never showed up there. But, to their frustration, they came up with nothing viable.

Sometimes they played Cluedo. Sometimes Sherlock cooked three-course meals for John and Hannah and they would sit together at the dining table, simply enjoying each other’s company.

It was a kind of quiet, familial cosiness and companionship between the four of them (including Rosie), that Sherlock had only very rarely experienced before. He realised that this was what happiness felt like. Just being together with people who accepted you, and who were hardly ever annoying, really. Hannah’s practical stoicism and dry humour often lightened their glum situation, as did Rosie’s spontaneous, unrestrained cheeriness and wonder, and, of course, the marvel that was John’s unconditional love and affection.

For the first time in years, Sherlock felt at peace. His withdrawal symptoms had faded into the background, and John was visibly recovering day by day.

Summer slowly started to give way to autumn, with colder winds and the occasional tree starting to change colour. Meanwhile, as there was still no other sign of Eurus except Hannah’s dead neighbour, it was almost as if none of that was real. As if it were all just a game. They were safe and comfortable in 221B with the four of them.

Of course, Greg regularly informed them of the progress on the case from the Yard’s end. He actually worked together quite closely with Mycroft and his team now. But they were only taking baby steps, it seemed. How two teams of professional investigators weren’t able to outwit one capricious woman with a taste for revenge, he would never understand. It was probably just going to be a matter of waiting till she struck again (or until she turned up at an audition for Hamlet) and hoping to catch her then.

So wait they did.

John found a real estate agent and put his house on the market.

In the course of September, as John’s headaches and dizziness slowly subsided, there gradually came more room for intimacy between him and Sherlock. They started to become more familiar with each other’s close presence, and their touches and caresses gradually grew more passionate and less innocent – with fewer layers of fabric between them. Timid groping had turned into proper hand jobs on several occasions.

Each time, they left Sherlock in a state of complete awe and bliss for days. He was on cloud nine.

Also, he’d never seen John smile this much.

Sherlock spent a good deal of his nights simply staring at the sleeping miracle beside him.
Being with John had taught him more than he’d ever thought possible. Everything revolved around coordination, consent, communication – which had turned out not to be half as tedious as it sounded. Sherlock was starting to understand more and more why John said honesty was so important in relationships. Not only was it a prerequisite to feeling at ease and trusting someone completely, which in turn was a prerequisite for enjoyable physical intimacy. Also, the expressions of pleasure and discomfort were strangely similar, so there was nothing for it than to always ask, “Is this alright? Do you want me to continue to touch you like this?” That, combined with the strange desire not to let the other one down, the inclination to pretend something was fine when it wasn’t. Revelations only done when asked.

So they asked, constantly; even though the answer was almost always ‘yes’. Or even, quite often, ‘Yes, God, please, don’t stop.’

It was as if they were explorers in an unknown land, mapping each other’s bodies as they journeyed on, as well as newly discovering their own.

Sherlock found out that he especially liked neck kisses while John touched him. And that John preferred when Sherlock pressed close to him from behind and nuzzled his hair.

Through his evolving relationship with John, Sherlock changed. And to his own surprise, he was happily aware of it. The effect that John had been having on him ever since they met, of making Sherlock want to be a better person, kinder, and less closed off to other people, was now accelerated through their increased intimacy.

After having lived in solitude for so long and being accustomed to only the most surface level type of communication, the wonderful effects of unrestrained, open dialogue were like a mystery revealed. Having everything stated openly turned out to make so many things so much easier. No energy spent on guessing or deducing the other one’s thoughts, feelings or motivations.

Though he was still a beginner in this field, of course.

Sometimes, when he was lying in bed next to John, staring at the ceiling, he had no idea how to take the initiative. Then John, with his maddeningly smooth manner, would just turn to him, wrap an arm around him and smile, as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

It was not yet for Sherlock.

But he was intent on getting there.

While he’d always been convinced of the exact opposite, he now realised that strong relationships in fact bring you closer to reality. They don’t cloud your judgement, but enhance your understanding. Of everything.

It was clear to him now, that he’d simply been too narrow-sighted to see the damage done by miscommunication back when meagre two-way monologues had still been the only way he knew. Now that he’d successfully begun to repair that damage between him and John, by listening, and by talking about personal matters and feelings, in proper dialogue, he resolved to do a similar thing with his brother, Sherrinford.

He was determined to reconnect with him, in order to understand him.

Although instead of listening and talking he would have to find another way… Somehow.

* * * * *
It was an uncharacteristically warm September day when Sherlock got out of a cab in Wantage for the second time.

He’d decided to go and visit his brother alone today.

He had brought a plant that he remembered Sherrinford used to have in his room. It was one of the very few memories Sherlock had of him. His difficult, deaf brother meticulously running his fingers over the soft hairs of every individual leaf of this plant, that looked like it carried its own babies on its leaves.

It had taken Sherlock some trouble to look up its name – which had turned out to be ‘pick-a-back-plant’ – and to purchase one, but he felt he needed to give something in return for the painting he’d been given last time. Also, it was his way of opening a conversation without words. Of communicating, ‘I remember what you liked and thought you might enjoy having this’.

Upon Sherlock entering his room, Sherrinford looked just as surprised and wary as he had the first time. But there was a definite hint of a smile in his gaze as well, subtle as it might have been, and he looked Sherlock in the eye for no less than two seconds.

When Sherlock gave him the plant, wrapped in cellophane and adorned with green ribbons, Sherrinford stared at it intently for a while, before gently touching one of its hairy leaves through the opening in the plastic. He looked back at Sherlock with something that Sherlock thought might be gratitude, although he couldn’t be sure. Then Sherrinford went back over to the window, put the plant on the window sill and sat back down on his stool.

Sherlock sat at the table and looked around the room. He spotted two paintings he hadn’t seen before.

One was of Sherrinford with Redbeard: a little blond boy lying on his belly on the sofa with a colouring book and pencils, and the dog lying curled up peacefully on the floor beside him in the warm, sunny room.

The whole scene screamed ‘my idyllic life when Redbeard was still alive’.

The other painting pulled even harder at Sherlock’s heartstrings. It showed Sherlock at pre-school age in the garden, studying the grass with a magnifying glass, in the rain, while Sherrinford held an umbrella over him. In the distance, Nanny Forsyth came running towards them, looking absolutely furious.

Sherlock looked up at the sound of purring. It came from one of the cats sitting contently in Sherrinford’s lap. He was gently stroking it.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Sherlock willed himself to think logically. Analyse the facts he had.

Sherrinford had suffered horrible tantrums when he was little. He’d used to throw toys and food around the room in his frenzies, terrorising the entire household. He’d used to scream so loudly it almost gave the rest of them hearing damage as well. One day, he’d swung an axe at Redbeard, and then put a skipping rope around Sherlock’s neck, almost choking him to death.

Although… were those last two things really facts? Nobody had actually seen it happen, had they? The nanny had seen part of it, but only from a distance.

Was it possible… that perhaps… that hadn’t been what had actually happened, at all?
Sherlock played over the supposed events in his head.

Could it somehow have been *an accident*?

Naturally, Sherrinford himself hadn’t been able to explain, or to defend himself.

But surely, his parents must have ruled out any sort of mishap beyond any sliver of doubt.

Still, it would definitely explain why he painted Nanny Forsyth the way he had... Had she somehow drawn the wrong conclusion from what she’d seen?

Sherlock looked at the second painting again, of Sherrinford so very carefully shielding his little brother from the rain. The running nanny was a caricature of fury and anger.

*Whose anger? Why?*

But how about Sherrinford’s second crime, at the first facility he’d been in? He’d opened the gas in his residential unit and locked everyone inside.

A blue flashing light tore Sherlock from his contemplations.

“So sorry that took me so long,” the nurse said, carrying a tray with tea. “There you go.”

“Thank you.”

Thankfully, this one didn’t start mindlessly chattering, but left as quickly as she’d come.

Sherlock and Sherrinford drank their tea in what felt like companionable silence.

Strange, Sherlock thought, occasionally glancing over at his brother, how one tended to attach certain meanings to the vaguest of eye movements, comportments and demeanours.

Why did he feel that their silence was ‘companionable’?

How was it different from a silence that wasn’t companionable?

Was it dictated by the number of times they looked toward each other? The amount of non-essential movements they made? How regular their breathing was?

He wondered if anyone had ever devoted any research to the matter.

He heaved a long breath and looked at the work in progress currently standing on the easel. It was the rough outline of a landscape. Sub-Saharan Africa, by the looks of it.

Extraordinary, how his brother lived in a world of images, with a complete lack of context or additional information. Presumably, he saw things on television or in books, but did he know that the desert was hot? That the panda he’d painted earlier was on the verge of extinction?

It was almost incomprehensible: this silent, information-less world he lived in.

It was only on his way back home, sitting on the train, that Sherlock realised that there was no way Sherrinford could have known what effect opening the gas tap would have. He couldn’t have deliberately killed his fellow residents.

Chapter End Notes
The inspiration for Sherlock's relationship to his parents is based on my own experience. My parents both have autism (Asperger's), and I only realised they did after I had myself tested for autism and was told I didn't have it. Then how come I had all these typically autistic traits?? Ah.
This was one of the most important realisations of my life, and to my astonishment, I could hardly find ANY similar stories on the internet. Also, I'd seen several therapists in the course of a decade, none of who seemed to have realised what was going on. The internet and book shops are full of information about how to deal with your child with autism, but not at all about how to deal with your parents with autism!
Eventually, I found a FB group of adult (NT) children of parents with ASD, which has been an enormous emotional support for me in the past years. But because of the total lack of awareness even among psychologists about the emotional impact of having been raised by people with autism, I wanted to incorporate this into my fic. I'm actually considering to write a novel with a similar backstory in the near future.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Lots of new revelations, both factual and physical. Also, trains aren’t running as they should.

Chapter Notes

Feel free to rec this fic on tumblr or Twitter/Facebook/wherever, if you are enjoying this! I’m still hoping to get more readers than this… although I do realise that a lot of folks are just waiting until I finally finish this bloody thing before they start reading it, and I can’t blame them, LOL. Only a few more months, I hope!

Now that John was finally well enough even to bath Rosie all by himself (without losing his balance or letting her lose hers), it meant he no longer needed Hannah to take care of her at all. To be fair, she’d been almost purely on guard duty for a while, seeing as Sherlock had gradually been taking over all the care for Rosie – since Hannah had taught him all the tricks of nappy changing and sleep routines along the way. And now John was taking back over from Sherlock. Well, half of everything, anyway. They divided the tasks more or less evenly between the two of them, now that Sherlock had semi-officially become Rosie’s dad as well.

John smiled, still amazed at the turn his life had taken. Despite their extremely bumpy start, being with Sherlock was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He felt intensely contented, watching Rosie splash around with her rubber duck without a care in the world, while he washed her delightfully soft, fluffy baby hair himself again for the first time since July.

Miraculously, being locked inside the flat for as long as they had been, had not yet driven any of them up the walls. They had, of course, occasionally been sneaking out, making use of Sherlock’s extensive collection of alternative clothing and wigs, to stay off Eurus’s radar. (Hannah had had some extra suitcases full of clothes, hats and sunglasses brought over from her own house as well, for the same purpose.)

The first place John had gone to, once he was well enough to go out, was the hairdresser. His hair had been ridiculously long for a while now, what with him being too busy trying to have his wife arrested to get a haircut for several months, but it had only gotten worse in hospital.

Sherlock had kissed him significantly longer than usual when John had come back home with his familiar short cut.

Next, John had taken some outings to Regent’s Park to stretch his legs and help get himself back into shape. Daniel, the agent from downstairs, had accompanied him. Together, they’d also gone to Bronzefield to visit Aunt Vivian in prison twice. Sadly, as John rapidly got better, she rapidly got worse. It broke his heart to realise that she clearly had only a few weeks left to live. Then again, she
was on borrowed time already, seeing as they’d given her three months in May, which was four months ago. She was incredibly strong and remained cheerful, but he could tell that her energy was dwindling ever more rapidly.

During his last visit, they’d sat quietly together and talked about Rosie and how she was growing and how she regularly melted all of their hearts, even Sherlock’s. And how wonderful it was to see her interact with Sherlock, who didn’t even seem to mind looking after her at all.

Then, all of a sudden, she’d asked, “John, isn’t there a happy announcement you’d like to make?” She’d beamed a knowing smile at him.

John swallowed, trying to make this ridiculous smile go away, which he realised had been plastered onto his face for far too long. “Whatever it is you’re referring to… No one is supposed to know. Just yet.” He avoided her gaze in an attempt not to let her see straight into his soul. But it was no use. He bit his lip briefly, before quietly blurting out, “I’m so happy with him, you have no idea.”

*Why were his eyes suddenly moist?*

She gently put a hand over his, and he finally allowed his face to break into the big smile that was insisting to be there, on full display, and which she mirrored.

“I’m so happy for you, John,” she whispered, fondly. “For both of you. Please, look after him well.”

He promised her that he would. In turn, he made her promise not to tell anyone, for now, which made her giggle, like she was part of a secret pact – just like the one she was convicted for, but unimaginary, this time.

They both knew that by the time they would be able to go public, whenever that was (when Eurus was caught), she likely wouldn’t be around anymore. But in spite of that, she seemed honoured to have been let in on this big secret.

John promised himself he would visit as many times a week as he could, in order to be there for her on her final days.

He was so glad to be able to be out and about again whenever he wanted, even though he was always very much on his guard for Eurus, of course.

He’d gone back to his old credo of Trust No One, which for once actually came in handy as an ingrained strategy, this time.

Sherlock had been out several times for minor cases, which he’d taken on in hopes of finding new inspiration for the Moriarty case along the way. (He hadn’t.) Or that he thought might be connected to Eurus. (They weren’t.)

They’d never taken Rosie with them, though. The poor thing hadn’t had a breath of real fresh air since John had been shot, seven weeks ago. John couldn’t wait to take her to a park and let her play on the swings or on the lawn, investigate the bugs, acorns and pinecones.

But it would have to wait. For how long, nobody knew.

Once he had Rosie dried off and dressed again, he took her to the lounge, where he found Sherlock sitting on the sofa with his elbows on his knees, fingers steepled in front of his chin.
John could tell that he was brooding on the mystery of Sherrinford rather than on how to eliminate Eurus. There was something soft and insecure in his features when he was trying to understand his brother.

John was still stupefied by the bomb Sherlock had dropped on him by mentioning that both his parents most likely had autism. In the past, John had sometimes half-seriously considered whether Sherlock himself might be on the spectrum, but he’d always concluded that he wasn’t really, no matter how hard he tried to come across as an uncaring machine. However, since the other day, the whole conundrum had taken on an entirely new perspective, with Sherlock turning out to have very likely been imprinted by autistic parents to be this way, when he really wasn’t, deep down.

John could kick himself for, as a GP, never having given a thought to the fact that people don’t just have children with autism – a subject on which there were more books than there were underground stations in London – but a possibly equal number of people have parents with autism, which brings about a whole new set of challenges for the individuals involved.

John was determined to read any publications on the subject he could get his hands on as soon as he had the opportunity.

He put Rosie down on the blanket in her play corner and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

“I would like to meet your sister,” Sherlock suddenly said, out of the blue.

John momentarily froze, then continued to fill the kettle and put it back on its base. He flipped the switch and went over to sit next to Sherlock.

“Alright,” John said. He swallowed. He and Harry had a difficult relationship, and he wasn’t really bursting with enthusiasm to ask her over, but he himself had suggested they get to know each other’s family, after all.

“Am I correct in presuming that the reason that you’re hardly in touch is that her drinking reminds you of your dad, of whom you prefer not to be reminded?” Sherlock asked.

John took in a long breath. “Well, I guess that’s one way to put it.” He absently rubbed the back of his neck. “The thing is, we’re just really different. You would expect two siblings who grew up with the same pair of parents to have some common ground. But sadly, we don’t. Everything one of us says or does, seems to come across completely differently to the other one from how it was intended. Basically, we just annoy the shit out of each other.”

“Sounds familiar,” Sherlock said with a slight smirk, before rolling his eyes the way he always did during any interaction with Mycroft. “It is baffling indeed, isn’t it, how one couple can produce such wildly varying offspring.”

“Yeah,” John shrugged, grinning. “I’ll invite her over, so you can personally investigate our different sets of variables. Kettle’s boiled. Tea?”

“No, thanks. I need to think.”

John nodded and gave Sherlock a quick kiss. Then he went to make some tea for himself and sat down behind his laptop to answer an email from the estate agent. Once that was done, he would write an email to Harry.

Disconcertingly, John didn’t actually know whether Harry had read or heard somehow that their own aunt had been convicted for killing John’s wife. Their last contact had been a condolence card she’d sent him from Russia, four months ago. He could only hope that if she did know, she
wouldn’t be inclined to talk about this too elaborately when she came over.
If she came over at all.

* * * * *

John was close. So very close. Sherlock was holding him, kissing him, pressing him against the
bathroom wall, while John thrust into his hand.

They were still fully dressed – well, save for John’s open fly and hastily pushed down pants – and
had been about to head for bed, toothbrushes abandoned on the edge of the sink.

As John found himself being crowded against the cool tiles, feeling infinitely free and secure in
Sherlock’s tight grip, the thought briefly crossed his mind whether this was the moment to tell
Sherlock about the email he’d received from the surgery today.

Their STD tests had come back negative; they were both clean. (Thank god.)

_Theoretically, they could do anything they liked, now._

However, the mere thought of that possibility almost instantly sent him over the edge, spilling his
release into Sherlock’s hand before he’d managed to say anything.

After the fireworks had slowly started to die back down in his head, he just dazedly stood there,
leaning back against the wall, as if frozen in time – panting and feeling utterly sated, as the miracle
that was Sherlock gently nuzzled his hairline.

Getting off with Sherlock was infinitely different from his last sexual experiences, with Mary;
because those had been laced with a very different kind of passion – first grief and, later, outright
hatred. John had initially expected it to be hard to let go of those very unhealthy associations, but it
wasn’t. Sherlock was Sherlock, and although John had wanted to strangle the man on plenty of
occasions in the past, there was nothing but love and tenderness in their shared intimacy. When
they were together like this, the world was safe and wonderful, and any worries they might have in
their daily lives were utterly and completely gone.

As to being with a man, well, it was certainly different from being with a woman; but then again, it
was different with everyone, so there was that.

When John became aware of Sherlock subtly rutting against his hip, John quickly took matters into
his own hands and made sure that several neighbours raised their eyebrows at Sherlock’s reaching
completion some minutes later.

* * * * *

John.


John was wonderful. Brilliant. Spectacular. Made him feel things he’d never felt before. _His John._

_Focus, dammit._

Sherlock forced himself to actually _see_ the bits and pieces on the Moriarty Wall he was staring at.

His brain was being very unhelpful of late. He needed to _think_, solve this huge problem that held
them all hostage – quite literally.
It was no use.

He walked over to the window, closing the curtains before switching on the lights. The days were getting noticeably shorter. And colder.

Back at the fireplace, he bent down to light the fire and found himself continuing to stare into the emerging flames, hypnotised, as they released the energy trapped in the carbon bonds of the wood fibre molecules. *Just like John, releasing the sexual energy that had been trapped inside Sherlock for so long,* he mused.

*Conductor of flames.*

Once his knees started to hurt, he stood.

He’d always been sure romantic entanglement would slow him down and interfere with his Work. Still, that had now turned out to be only half true. He did get distracted on occasion, yes. But overall, being with John had opened doors in his mind that he hadn’t even known were *there* before.

He finally understood why there was such an outrageous quantity of love songs in the world, and also why being with your loved one was not the key to everlasting happiness after all, as it came with the new sorrow of the fear of losing them.

*Find Moriarty.*

*Find her, Sherlock,* he told himself as he let his eyes trace the colour-coded pieces of string connecting the notes on the wall, interspersed with key words.


Sherlock shook his head. Perhaps he needed to stop trying for a bit. Give himself a break.

He decided he needed some physical energy (or rather, biochemical) first, anyway. He went to find some biscuits in the kitchen.

As his eyes fell on the swirly blue line on the packaging of the chocolate chip cookies, his thoughts were pulled back in another direction.

Sherrinford’s blue skipping rope. His almost-murder weapon.

Sherlock absently chewed his biscuit as he allowed the scene to roll out in his mind once more. He had quite a vivid memory of just this one fragment, nothing more: his youngest older brother putting the blue rope around his neck and pulling, as he struggled for air… but was that memory even accurate? In it, he’d already been lying on the ground, flat on his back. He had no recollection of how he got there, what happened just before. Had they been fighting? If so, over what?

Had Sherrinford intentionally hurt him, or had it been an accident, somehow? *A children’s game gotten out of hand? But what game? How?*

Try as he might to focus on the Moriarty case, his mind kept coming back to these questions in circles.

After three biscuits, he decided to text Mycroft.

-- Call me as soon as convenient. SH
Sherlock hadn’t finished his fourth biscuit before his phone rang.

“Yes?” Mycroft sounded vaguely concerned.

“I need you to tell me about the day Redbeard died. In as much detail as you can remember.”

“Ah.” There was a silence. “Do we have to do this? I know that it undoubtedly occupies your thoughts, but is this really necessary? He couldn’t help himself back then, Sherlock. There’s no point in dwelling on the consequences of other people’s intractable, extreme emotions, brother mine. You should focus on keeping your own in check.” He sounded tired. “Solve the case you’re working on. Your biggest and most important case to date.”

“I need to know. Everything. Each tiny detail you can remember. Please.”

“Alright,” Mycroft sighed. “I was studying up in my room. Daddy was at work and Mummy was in the kitchen. Nanny Forsyth walked into the garden to hang up the washing just after Sherrinford had started attacking Redbeard, so I can only tell you what she saw that instant, as you well know.”

“Yes, I know all that, but please tell me again what you heard her tell our parents about what she saw, exactly. I’m not sure my memory of your previous account is accurate, after all these years. Also, I’ve kind of tried to forget. I might have partially succeeded,” Sherlock admitted, somewhat reluctantly.

“Very well. Nanny Forsyth said she saw Sherrinford making a slashing movement with Daddy’s axe – which we had explicitly been told never to touch, even me – repeatedly swinging it down at something on the lawn with all his might. She initially couldn’t see what it was. She instinctively shouted, because she was afraid he might hurt himself, but of course he couldn’t hear her. As she started to run towards him, he let go of the axe and moved over to you. When she arrived at the scene, she saw him sitting on top of you with his hands around your neck. She scared him away and he let go of you. You were unconscious. There were rope marks around your neck. Next to you, she found his blue skipping rope and the axe. About two yards away, where the garden steeply sloped down to a lower level, Redbeard was lying in a pool of his own blood. He had a wound to his chest, very near his heart.”

Sherlock was scribbling down everything Mycroft said in his notebook on the kitchen table as fast as he could. “Where was I when Sherrinford was swinging an axe at Redbeard? What was I doing?” he asked.

“I couldn’t tell you. I wasn’t there.”

“Hmm. Was there anything, anything at all, that seemed odd or unexplainable in the context of things?”

“Not really. Except the minor fact that Redbeard was wearing his leash, which was a little unusual to begin with, on the premises, but moreover, it was broken. When autumn came, we discovered the other end of the leather leash in the flower bed nearby the spot where the nanny found you.”

“That is odd, indeed,” Sherlock said. He thought for a bit. “And Mummy was actually in the kitchen when it happened? And she heard nothing?”

“She heard Nanny Forsyth shout and went outside soon after.”

“But before that, nothing? How about you, then? Your room was also on that side of the house. You didn’t hear a fight, or my screams?”
“No. Perhaps I was listening to music. I can’t remember.”

“Hmm. Which was the Christmas we snowed in and you got your radio?”

“1982, when I was thirteen. Oh, I see your point there. That was the year after.”

“Exactly. No music, then.”

“Well, seeing as Sherrinford would have been unable to hear you, anyway, perhaps you didn’t scream.”

“Even he screamed when he was upset, Mycroft.” Sherlock sighed. There was a distinct lack of logic in all this. “Also, how sure are you that Sherrinford swung the axe repeatedly? I mean, that hardly makes any sense, if Redbeard only had a single wound. On his chest, no less. Tell me, was Redbeard lying on his back also, before he was attacked?”

“Well, I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation,” Mycroft said.

“Yeah… so am I. And I intend to find it,” Sherlock replied, determined.

After hanging up, he stared into space for a long time, trying to find alternative angles that would shed new light onto the whole situation.

His Mind Palace was a chaotic mess, though, and wasn’t providing any answers. But he was on to something. He just knew it. That tingly sensation of having found a loose thread in the world. Sherlock was intent on seeing where it led. All he needed to do was to get a proper hold of it, and pull.

Eventually, by the time the fire had died down, John came in from putting Rosie to bed (and, apparently, a long chat with Irene upstairs), and he gently kissed Sherlock’s cheek. “What’s this?” he asked, gesturing towards the page with notes in Sherlock’s hand, that he’d torn out of his notebook.

“A witness report, of sorts. Of Sherrinford’s first crime scene. Second hand, though. I asked Mycroft to recount what our nanny said she saw.”

“Oh.” John nodded and swallowed. “Good. That’s good. That you’re delving into what happened exactly, I mean. Did you learn anything new?”

“Maybe.”

There was a short silence.

“You alright?” John asked.

“Yes, of course.” Sherlock walked over to the sofa and pinned his notes on the wall next to Sherrinford’s painting of Redbeard, which was now hanging beside the smiley face.

“How is Mycroft, by the way?”

“Well, he’s coping, I guess. Still mourning the death of his beloved, of course. But you know Mycroft.” Sherlock pressed his lips together. Then he turned around and smiled at John. “Let’s go to bed. We could use an early night.”

“Just what I was going to suggest. After so much investigating, I think you might, in fact, deserve a reward.” John wiggled his eyebrows in a decidedly cheeky manner, and invitingly held out his
Sherlock took it, and followed him into the bedroom, which was bathed in orange light from the evening sun, mirroring the warmth he felt inside at John’s suggestion.

* * * * *

John smiled and closed his eyes against the last few rays of sunshine streaming in through their bedroom window, trying not to fall asleep just yet, as he breathed in the scent of Sherlock in his arms.

The first time they’d used their mouths on each other had been nothing short of earth-shattering.

_Spectacular._

A persistent smile kept tugging at the corners of his mouth, even in this drowsy state.

John was quite sure his life couldn’t get any better than this. He was in heaven.

Sherlock had been more than a bit clumsy, but thorough, and adorable. Not to mention incredibly sexy, despite his inexperience. Or perhaps because of it? There was something exceptionally pure and sincere about him whenever they were being intimate.

John was determined, however, to soon make Sherlock feel less insecure and less awkward about sex, and ‘all the unwritten rules of sexual interaction’ that he’d said he still needed to learn. There was only one rule that mattered, as far as John was concerned – to be open and sincere, even if it meant being blunt or disappointing the other, which was fine – and they were both sticking to it incredibly well, he thought.

John wrapped his arms a little more tightly around his lover, who was already fast asleep, before drifting off himself as well.

* * * * *

Sherlock touched his pyramided fingertips to his lips. His eyes fell closed as he leaned back in his chair by the empty fireplace, remembering the previous night.

Heat pooled in his abdomen at the memory.

There had been something desperate about John. Something Sherlock had never seen before. Something breathtakingly beautiful: the way he’d muttered an endless string of profanities, the way his breath had hitched, the way he’d cast his eyes upwards, away from what Sherlock was doing to him.

Essentially, Sherlock had only been replicating what John had done to him minutes before. And it seemed John had enjoyed it just as much as he had, despite the fact that Sherlock hadn’t really known what he was doing exactly.

It was a strange sort of activity, awkward in many ways, but he’d decided he liked the result. He’d already begun improving his technique during a second round this morning, with satisfactory enough outcome.

“What are you smiling about?” a voice startlingly near him suddenly asked.

Sherlock opened his eyes to see John fondly looking down at him. His mind was racing to make up
some sort of excuse, until he realised he didn’t need one. “You,” he said.

John pressed his lips together to half-heartedly suppress a mischievous smile. “Hm. Would you like some fried eggs?”

“What?” Sherlock couldn’t resist replying.

This made John raise his eyebrows in a mock display of surprise, now hiding his lips between his teeth. “I’ll give you your sausage later,” he winked. “First, eggs. I’m starving.”

Sherlock was silent while they ate, his thoughts haphazardly jumping between the Moriarty case, sex with John, and what happened to Redbeard.

“You can’t stop brooding on Sherrinford, can you,” John said, sympathetically.

“Indeed I can’t.” Sherlock put down his knife and fork and looked at John. “I know this is probably stupid, after so many years, but I feel I need to find out the exact truth. Discover what really happened when Redbeard died. Things simply don’t add up.” He shook his head in frustration.

“I understand.” John cleared his throat. “Listen. Why don’t you go and spend some more time with him, then? We could go today, if you like.”

“John, as much as I’d like to, don’t you think there is a slightly more pressing case at hand right now?”

“There is. But this is distracting you, I can tell. There’s not enough room even in your magnificent brain for both these mysteries at the same time. Give yourself a chance to solve this one first, to make room for the other one.”

“Assuming there is indeed something to solve.”

“I trust your instincts,” John simply said. “Shall we get our coats and take the tube to Paddington train station?”

Sherlock thought for a bit. “No. I need to do this alone,” he said, collecting his last bits of egg onto his fork.

As soon as he’d finished his plate, he got up to grab his phone and gave John a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ll call you when I’m heading back.”

* * * * *

His third visit to Wantage.

He didn’t really know what he had expected.

Sherrinford and he sat in silence, stirring their teas, while Sherlock asked himself what had been the point in coming here.

How on earth was he ever going to find out what happened that day, that so radically changed both their lives?

He looked around, spotting two new art works of the cats: painted beams of sunlight reflecting beautifully off their fur and whiskers.
Then Sherrinford got up and carefully reached behind a stack in the corner, picking up a canvas that Sherlock recognised as the African landscape painting that he’d been working on last time. But in this finished version, there was a person in the picture, kneeling down to study unseen bugs on the bark of a dead tree. Dark curls partly obscured the young man’s face, but nevertheless Sherlock almost instantly realised, with a shock, that it was meant to be a teenaged version of himself.

Sherrinford shyly held it up to him, with an obvious question in his eyes.

‘Is this correct? Is this where you were, all that time?’

Sherlock looked at him, thunderstruck, but gently shook his head.

Is this what Sherrinford had imagined the reason was why he’d not seen Sherlock all these years? Because it only made sense for Sherlock to have been abroad? Studying bugs, like he’d done as a child?

Sherrinford started rummaging among his other works and produced a rather stunning painting of Niagara Falls. The spray of the water was beautifully captured, showing subtle rainbow diffractions from the sun’s rays. When Sherlock realised it was another question – ‘Is this where you were?’ – he shook his head.

What followed was a frantic search for canvases on which his brother had painted other well-known parts of the world: Sydney Harbour, Macchu Piccu, the pyramids of Egypt. He held them up at his little brother, and Sherlock shook his head at each of them, feeling the lump in his throat grow.

Until he was shown one of Moscow’s Red Square.

Sherlock nodded. Yes, he had briefly been there; during his Hiatus, which he preferred not to be reminded of. Not ‘all this time’, as Sherrinford seemed to really mean, but there was no way to begin to explain that.

Then a portrait of Mummy appeared from behind a stack. Sherrinford held it up questioningly. He vaguely pointed at her, then at the Red Square painting.

‘Was she there too?’

Sherlock swallowed, feeling moisture collect behind his eyes. He shook his head.

Sherrinford must have been creating theories as to why he didn’t get to see his parents anymore, why he was sent away in the first place, perhaps? In which case, he must have had no idea what he’d done wrong, why he was put away.

Sherlock suddenly had difficulty breathing.

Just when Sherlock thought this couldn’t get any worse, Sherrinford grabbed a sketchbook from a nearby shelf and doodled a quick drawing in it, which he held up to Sherlock as well, sort of in the direction of the Red Square painting, with the same question in his eyes once more.

It was a flawless image of Mycroft, frowning down at his umbrella.

‘Was he there with you?’

Sherlock shook his head.
Then, a quick sketch of a plane.

Sherlock nodded. Yes, he’d travelled there by plane. (On the false passport Mycroft had provided.)

A faint smile seemed to cross Sherrinford’s face.

Sherlock smiled as well.

They were communicating. For the first time, he was having a dialogue with his brother, without words, but with clear meaning. Although, to be fair, his part of the conversation had been limited to nodding and shaking his head. His brother, on the other hand, seemed to be able to say everything he wanted by just drawing it.

Sherlock kicked himself for not having thought of this before.

There was only one small obstacle, if he wanted to say anything back, or ask any questions. He couldn’t for the life of him make any sort of realistic drawing.

When the blue light flashed again, Sherrinford’s smile disappeared and he quickly started putting away the sketches and paintings. When the nurse came in and announced visiting hours were over, he was once more a façade of blank indifference.

* * * * *

At Oxford train station, Sherlock found himself in a chaotic throng of stranded train passengers. Due to damaged overhead lines, there were no trains running eastwards, an announcement over the speakers informed him. It would take several hours for the situation to be resolved.

He bought a latte at the kiosk and considered his options.

Trains were still running north and westwards.

He took out his phone and punched in a number.

“Dad? I happen to be stranded at Oxford station. Could you perhaps put me up for the night?”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Sherlock travels back in time… sort of, and finally learns the truth about what happened with Redbeard.

Chapter Notes

With thanks to camillo1978 for providing the inspiration for an important plot twist in this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock always felt a little uncomfortable being back home with his parents.

As soon as he’d crossed the threshold, it was as if they all fell back into old role patterns, where he was the teenaged boy who was expected to do everything their way – which he then didn’t, because their way made no sense. Except he could now see more clearly why their ways made no sense, and how indeed his parents were the ones who were different from the rest of the world, and not so much he himself.

Don’t take off your shoes in the house; you’ll catch a cold.

It was as if he’d travelled back in time, all his later achievements gone. They didn’t matter in this house. Only his father occasionally asked about Sherlock’s current life, what he’d been up to, how things were in London. But to his mother, nothing outside her direct sphere of observation seemed to be of any relevance whatsoever. Well, she did occasionally ask how many cases he’d solved in the past six months, and how many he hadn’t, but not what sort of cases they had been or whether he enjoyed his work. How he was. It would never occur to her to ask such questions. The ones that mattered.

A world of numbers.

She started baking a cake the minute he entered the house, because that was what she’d been planning to do, for the church’s charity fair. She did manage to cheerfully ask if he wanted tea or coffee, before starting to whisk the ingredients together, but after that, her baking meant no form of communication was possible for the next half hour, because she claimed she could only do one thing at a time; not bake a cake and have a conversation simultaneously.

Different processing of stimuli.

Sherlock sat at the kitchen table and texted John to let him know he’d safely arrived at his parents’ house.

He wondered if all the safety precautions were still really necessary. Was Eurus still shadowing their every move, or had she gotten bored and found a new project already? Just to be on the safe
side, he texted Mycroft as well, to let him know where he was.

Then he found a newspaper and decided he might as well scan the headlines. But as he held it in front of him, his mind wouldn’t let him read. It went round in circles, thinking about the ease with which his crazy youngest brother could capture scenes so perfectly with a pencil or brush, without needing to use any words at all.

All Sherlock had to do was come up with a tactic, somehow, to have Sherrinford draw what happened that fateful day. Then he would finally be able to find out what made Sherrinford do what he did, and what it really was he’d done, and how, exactly. The only way for Sherlock to ask him to draw all this, was by posing the question in the form of a drawing himself. Coming up with the best approach to do so, however, was not so easy.

By the time the batter for the cake was ready, and Mummy was ladling it into the springform, Sherlock ventured to remark, “I’ve visited Sherrinford a couple of times this summer. For the first time in 34 years.”

“What?” she said absent-mindedly. “Hold on, sprinkle two tablespoons of powdered sugar over the top, then bake for forty minutes,” she mumbled, reading the recipe to herself.

Sherlock pinched his lips together, waiting until the cursed cake was in the oven.

Once she’d set the timer and finally sat down across from him at the kitchen table, she managed a tone that sounded both enthusiastic and uninterested at the same time. “Visited Sherrinford? Did you, really? How was it? What painting was he working on?”

**Observe focus on indisputable facts.**

Sherlock tried hard not to roll his eyes, or to yell. “His latest painting hardly matters,” he said, tensely. “I hadn’t seen him since I was five, Mummy. Because you wouldn’t let me.”

“Well, …” she said, defensively, without finishing her sentence, seeming simultaneously puzzled and affronted.

“You know what was on one of the paintings he showed me? Me, researching bugs in Africa. Because that’s apparently where he thought I was all this time.”

“Did he now, really?” Mummy replied, cheerfully surprised, oblivious of the emotional implications of what Sherlock said. “Interesting, isn’t it, how his brain works. He paints the strangest things sometimes.”

**Of course, it had never occurred to her to think why he painted what he did. To consider any deeper meanings.**

“He also painted himself holding an umbrella over me when I was little,” Sherlock said, “and nanny Forsyth being furious in the background. He was protecting me against the rain.”

“Oh, he’s been making so many paintings since he’s been in Wantage, you have no idea. We keep having to take them away in truckloads to the store room we’ve rented. Mycroft actually started renting a second one for him now, I believe.”

Sherlock clenched his jaw, visualising one of those memes where an object, labelled ‘you’, flies past a dot, labelled ‘the point’.

“He gave me one of Redbeard,” he then said.
“He gave you one?” Her mouth fell open in pleasant wonder. “Well, there’s a first. Let’s hope this is a new phase!” She laughed light-heartedly.

“Of Redbeard,” Sherlock repeated, with emphasis.

“Oh yes, well, he loves painting animals,” she said, appearing a little distracted by her own thoughts. “I can’t believe he still remembers what Redbeard looked like. I mean, more likely he just coincidentally painted a similar dog from a magazine,” she said dismissively, waving a hand.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, I suppose it is quite a big coincidence, him giving you that painting. I see what you mean…” she trailed off.

“Mummy, why did you never take me with you, when you went to visit him?”

“Darling, it would just have upset him! He was always so jealous of you, always angry. And I figured you weren’t exactly bursting with enthusiasm to see him either, were you now? It would just have upset the both of you.” She raised her eyebrows as if she was surprised by her own statement, when quite the opposite was obviously true: it was clear there was no room in her mind for other views on the matter.

Sherlock had always been convinced it was because they’d wanted to rule out his brother harming him again. Apparently not.

He sucked in a breath. “So why did he never learn sign language? I’ve been wondering.”

“Oh,” she grunted, “don’t get me started on sign language. We had three different teachers come to the house to teach all of us. They were all rubbish. And Sherrinford just wasn’t interested. He generally refused to look at people, much less strangers. Which made it quite impossible for him to learn any of the gestures.”

“But if you learnt it as well, couldn’t you teach him, you not being a stranger?”

“Goodness, all those complicated, bizarre movements we were supposed to copy. What with my arthritis, I just couldn’t do it. My hands would hurt for days after each lesson!”

“You couldn’t do it,” Sherlock repeated, more to himself. “Hence he couldn’t learn.”

“It’s a really difficult language all of its own, you know. Extremely complex. The whole idea was just too ambitious.”

Sherlock clasped his forehead, elbows leaning on the table.

This certainly explained a lot.

Sherrinford’s reluctance to look at people, due to his autism, really only went for direct eye contact, as far as Sherlock had been able to tell. Copying gestures and learning sign language probably wouldn’t have been a problem at all, if it weren’t for Mummy’s arthritis and her resulting negative attitude towards the whole endeavour, which Sherrinford was bound to have sensed.

How can you expect a child to try to learn something new that his mother is obviously averse to?

His inability to communicate hadn’t just been plain stubbornness, then, after all.

After some silence, Sherlock decided to try a different subject. “Someone told me the theories in

“What? Who told you that?” she asked, her voice high-pitched.

“Someone who claims to be the daughter of the man you stole your book from, according to her.”

“Haha,” she chuckled. “That must be Jonathan White’s little girl, then. She’s probably around your age now.”

Jonathan White. Of course, Sherlock had always known that ‘Moriarty’ wasn’t their real surname. Still, he hadn’t expected his two worst demons to have such a common family name.

“I’m guessing she always was ‘around my age’, Mummy,” Sherlock couldn’t help remarking.

So Eurus White was the name of the conwoman they were looking for, then – assuming her first name was real. Not that knowing her name would really make it any easier to track her down, probably, but it was a nice extra.

“Well, yes. Anyway, Professor Jonathan White was a colleague of mine. Also a mathematician, but working on astrophysics rather than the field of thermodynamics, one floor up from where I was. He was always going on and on about his latest theories on asteroids, but the man never bothered to write anything down. He just talked and talked, to anyone who would listen – and most wouldn’t, you know, he was a right bore. But I did find some merit in his ideas, and repeatedly told him he should publish them. He never did, though. But, naturally, they influenced my research ideas and my own hypotheses. When I started writing my book, I did refer to his ideas several times, and discussed their relevance in my own field, and even credited him, mind, despite the fact that I wasn’t strictly obliged to. For a large part, I actually ended up disproving his theories, by the way. But as you know, disproving a theory in science is just as valid and valuable as proving one. More often than not, in those cases where I did prove one, I only could because I added essential elements to them that he had omitted.” She walked over to the oven to check if the cake was rising properly, and then contentedly sat back down at the table. “Of course, when he heard that I’d written and published a book, while he still hadn’t managed to publish hardly any of his own work, he was furious. Men can be so competitive. Whatever happened to being happy for someone else’s achievements? They were all my own.”

Interesting.

It wasn’t as if Sherlock had actually taken Eurus at her word when she accused his mother of plagiarism (obviously), but the idea had still taken residence somewhere in a corner of his mind. He wouldn’t have put it past his mum to do something like that if she was somehow convinced it was her right to do so.

Now, her version of the truth turned out to be quite different.

As Mummy energetically started dinner preparations, Sherlock mulled over all the new information in his mind.

He sent another text to Mycroft.

-- Her real surname might be White. Daughter of math prof. Jonathan White. SH

During dinner, he let his parents chatter away, occasionally giving short answers to their mindless, pointless questions, while he continued to think.

He made an excuse to go to bed early. Once in his old room, he sat down on the bed and texted
John.

-- Parents visit turned out to yield valuable intel on both S and E. Once again, the truth is rarely pure, and never simple. Will tell you tomorrow. Miss you. Good night. xxx SH

Then he found an old pencil and a notebook with a couple of empty pages, and started to practise drawing what he wanted to ask Sherrinford.

He would go back to Wantage first thing in the morning, before heading back to London.

* * * * *

The look on Sherrinford’s face when Sherlock came in for the second day in a row, was certainly the most surprised look Sherlock had seen yet.

Sherlock tried a reassuring smile and imagined he saw a faint version mirrored in his sibling.

As soon as he sat down, Sherlock produced the new colouring pencils and notebook he had bought at the train station (not wanting to upset his brother by borrowing his without asking). First, Sherlock drew himself, sitting at the table and making a drawing, like a mise en abyme. It was an awkward way to introduce his plan of drawing something for Sherrinford, but he felt an introduction was necessary, nevertheless. Also, it was important he made this drawing of what he knew to be true with as many details of the surroundings as possible. So he drew Sherrinford sitting next to him and the cats lying on the floor in the exact positions they were in at that very moment.

(No matter they looked more like sheep than like actual cats.)

It felt extremely awkward doing something like this, which he wasn’t remotely good at. With all the numerous skills he’d mastered in the course of his life, drawing wasn’t one of them.

Sherrinford seemed intrigued, though, and watched carefully.

Once Sherlock felt the ice was broken a little, and the nurse had brought tea and disappeared again, he took a deep breath and turned to a new page. He looked at his brother, a little nervous, and sensed an anticipation that Sherrinford seemed to feel as well.

Here went nothing.

Just like he’d practised the evening before, he drew Redbeard, lying down on the lawn, with blood on the floor. He added some shrubs and flowers in the right places, to make the setting more clear. Then a question mark.

Only then did he realise, stupid, the question mark had no meaning to his brother. He then pointed his pencil at the empty space left and right of the dog, and looked at Sherrinford expectantly.

Sherrinford frowned.

Then Sherlock started another drawing on a new page. He drew himself as a child, lying down with a blue rope around his neck. Again, he pointed at the empty space around him, and handed his brother the pencil, by way of invitation to draw the rest.

Sherrinford, still frowning, did not take the offered pencil, but instead, reached for a brown pencil and started meticulously tracing the blue rope choking Sherlock, to make it brown. Then he took the blue pencil and drew his blue skipping rope lying on the floor, some distance away.
Was Sherrinford saying that it was not his skipping rope that had almost strangled Sherlock?

_What did this mean?_

Nobody had mentioned another, brown rope playing any part in this.

Sherlock pointed at the general area around the scene in the drawing, making a helpless gesture, in an attempt to convey that he didn’t understand.

Sherrinford swallowed, and looked at the floor in front of him, motionless.

Sherlock waited patiently.

After a minute or two, his brother went over to a cupboard with drawers and took a pile of drawing paper from it. Then he sat down at the table and started drawing.

Like a comic, he drew one scene per sheet, laying them all in a row in front of him as he finished each one.

Sketchy lines quickly became people, and 'people' became familiar faces. With just a few well-placed lines, he created specific backgrounds and settings. The kitchen, the playground. Facial expressions captured perfectly: surprise, frustration, puzzlement.

Sherlock could almost see the characters move on the pages.

The story that emerged from the drawings was crystal clear.

_It had been annoying having a little brother that was two years younger. Especially when the new arrival was learning to move his mouth and getting all his parents’ attention, when he himself was still struggling to make himself understood._

_Also, he didn’t like people staring at him and he didn’t like to look at people, either. The world was often overwhelming and he frequently felt angry._

_But one day, when he saw little Sherlock, who had been pretending to be walking the dog in their back garden, put the loop on the other end of the leather dog leash around his own neck, Sherrinford knew exactly what to do. As he saw the dog start to run, dragging his little brother behind him, Sherrinford abandoned his skipping rope and grabbed the nearest thing to bar the dog’s way, so that he wouldn’t strangle Sherlock while he ran. Sadly, as Sherrinford stuck out his arm as far as possible, in a clumsy attempt to hold the axe he’d snatched from daddy’s wood chopping block in front of the bounding dog, the sharp side of the blade inadvertently slashed the dog’s artery and he fell off the terrace, bleeding, strangling Sherlock even harder with his weight. With all his might, Sherrinford used the axe to cut the leash, which eventually broke. Then he crouched near Sherlock to remove the noose from Sherlock’s neck. When Sherrinford was leaning over his little brother, in shock, to study the red marks around his neck that the leash had left, and touched his face to try to bring him back to consciousness, he was suddenly brutally pulled away by the angry nanny, who blamed him for what had happened._

_He was put in a facility for unruly kids, which was hell. The only thing he enjoyed was drawing. And now here he was: surrounded by paintings, and alone._

Sherlock swallowed away the lump in his throat. He could feel tears slowly running down his cheeks as he looked at his brother. He wanted to hug him, hold a metaphorical umbrella over him to protect him from the outside world.
Instead, he carefully took his hand in his, and held it for a long time, as they sat together, next to the table full of drawings.

The truth had finally emerged, suddenly making the world an entirely different place.

Chapter End Notes

Two years ago, when I started working on this fic (right after S4 aired), I first spent *weeks* trying to come up with a believable scenario that left Sherlock traumatized by something involving his dog (as was hinted at several times in the show). Also, there had to be a mysterious sibling (*"The Other One*" as he was referred to in two different episodes), and it had to be explained why Sherlock never talked about him. I hope the explanation I came up with is satisfactory! :)

(All in the context of assuming that TFP is just John's coma dream, of course, and that Eurus lied to John about being Sherlock's sibling, just before shooting him at the end of TLD.)

For those now trying to remember what those hints in the show were again, exactly, here's a recap:

*Regarding Redbeard:*
Mycroft saying to Sherlock, on the phone, just before the start of John and Mary's wedding, "Oh, by the way, Sherlock – do you remember Redbeard?"
Sherlock’s jaw tightens, before replying, "I’m not a child any more, Mycroft."
“No, of course you’re not. Enjoy not getting involved, Sherlock.”

The text "PRESSURE POINT: REDBEARD (SEE FILE)" appearing when Magnussen analyses Sherlock.

During Sherlock’s mind palace scene after Mary shot him, Sherlock saying "Hello, Redbeard" to an Irish setter running towards him along a corridor, followed by "Here, boy. Come on!" and "Good boy! Clever boy!" before stroking his head and ears. Then, Sherlock says, "Hello, Redbeard. They’re putting me down too, now. It’s no fun, is it?"

And the other mind palace scene, a.k.a. TAB, where, in the middle of the greenhouse scene, just after John asking, "As your friend – as someone who... worries about you – what made you like this?" and Sherlock answering, "Oh, Watson. Nothing made me", scrabbling claws can be heard together with a sound of a dog whimpering anxiously, or as if it is in pain. Sherlock turns his head in the direction of the sound, saying "I made me." And then, "Redbeard?"

*Regarding the secret sibling:*
During the scene where Sir Edwin, Lady Smallwood and Mycroft Holmes are deciding what to do with Sherlock after he killed Magnussen, Mycroft saying, "I am not given to outbursts of brotherly compassion. You know what happened to the other one".

And, Mycroft telling John on the phone, when Sherlock is roaming the streets of London while high on drugs, "Sherlock gone rogue is a legitimate security concern.
The fact that I’m his brother changes absolutely nothing. It didn’t the last time and I assure you it won’t with... with Sherlock."

And, lastly, Mycroft clearly lying when he says "no" to John stating, "Sherlock’s not your only brother. There’s another one, isn’t there?"

*With a million thanks once again to Ariane Devere (arianedevere.livejournal.com) for her truly amazing transcripts of the show, which were absolutely indispensable for writing this fic!!!!!!*
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Hannah (Irene) does what she’s hired to do.

Sherlock reached for his phone the minute he walked out of the residential care home. He was brimming with excitement to tell John what he’d just learnt: his brother was innocent.

He wanted to yell it, sing it.

*Sherrinford had done nothing wrong!*

*Quite* the opposite, in fact.

He walked over the sun-dappled lawn, which looked just as his brother had painted it once and that somehow made it seem all the more beautiful to Sherlock now.

His enthusiasm, however, was quickly dampened by his phone screen staying black when he tried to unlock it.

He cursed his own stupidity. He hadn’t charged it overnight, naturally, because he’d been at his parents’, and he hadn’t brought his charger because he hadn’t known he wouldn’t be getting home last night.

He hurried over to the waiting cab and ordered the driver to get to Oxford train station as fast as was reasonably possible. He might just make the 11:51 to London.

* * * * *

Hannah sighed as she looked at the dark red stain on the wad of loo paper.

*Great.*

Her period had come early.

A quick check confirmed that both her knickers and trousers needed a prompt rinse in cold water if she ever wanted to wear them again.

She briefly squeezed her eyes shut and ran over the order of Things To Be Done in her head. Although she felt relatively at home in 221B by now, after five weeks of living with the boys, she hadn’t yet reached the stage where she kept her sanitary pads in the shared bathroom.

She made do with a copious amount of loo paper and, softly cursing, hurried up the stairs to her room for the real thing.

Once everything was sorted, and she’d managed to soak her garments in the wash basin upstairs without waking Rosie, she went straight back to the bathroom to stash a stock of pads there.

Shame be damned.
She nodded at the package as if to congratulate it on its newly acquired territory.

Seeing as Sherlock was still away, and both Rosie and John were having a late morning nap, she decided to make some hot chocolate milk and take it easy.

Once her steaming mug was ready, she made herself comfortable on the sofa with last Saturday’s newspaper supplement.

Apparently, anything went in the US these days, and some idiot named Trump had announced his candidacy to run for President. She snorted softly. She vaguely remembered him from some sort of American reality show. As she stared at his picture in the paper, she realised he reminded her more than a little of the creep Sherlock had put behind bars a couple of months ago, Smith. Deceptively friendly eyes, masking a complete lack of respect for others.

She’d have known what to do with those two if they’d come knocking at her previous job. Deep down, such men were invariably insecure little babies. Quite laughable. No longer able to compensate once they were naked. If only the reasonable people in the world were able to make such parasites feel naked all the time.

Anyway, it wasn’t as if this halfwit had any chance of making it past the primaries. He was obviously just in it for some more screen time, nothing more.

Attention seekers.

She turned the page in search of some more uplifting news.

That instant, she heard the faint sound of glass shattering from the direction of Sherlock and John’s bedroom.

It didn’t sound like a dropped drinking glass. It sounded like a broken window pane.

Putting down the paper and her mug in one fluid, quick, noiseless motion, she got up, simultaneously pressing the emergency button on her pager to alert Daniel, on guard downstairs. The next moment, she was in the corridor, gun drawn and pointing upwards.

Stealthily, she took another few fast steps towards the bedroom door, which was not entirely closed, and saw a hand appear, pointing a gun at the bed.

There was a loud, metallic sound and a woman’s shriek as Hannah shot the hand that was holding John at gunpoint.

The stranger’s gun fell to the floor, unused.

Hannah ran the last few metres through the small corridor and arrived in the bedroom only to see John sitting up in bed wide-eyed and a movement of black fabric disappearing through the knocked out window. She leaped over to look outside through the broken glass, but could only hear someone letting themselves fall awkwardly down the garbage bins under an overhang that restricted her view.


“Someone tried to shoot you. I shot them. Well, their hand, anyway.” Hannah’s eyes scanned the room. Strangely, there didn’t seem to be any blood. “Or perhaps I only hit their gun. Which seems to have done the trick, regardless,” she added, only slightly disappointed. She glanced outside once more, at the landscape of rooftops, where the intruder had come from. “I think it was a woman.”
“Jesus. You saved my life.”

Outside, she could hear her colleague set off in pursuit. Upstairs, Rosie started crying.

“You. To the lounge,” Hannah ordered.

Hannah could only hope that Daniel would manage on his own, for now. She quickly ran back down the hall and up the stairs two steps at a time while she called MI5 for backup, giving a short summary of events for them to act upon.

In her room, Rosie was grumpily beating her merman doll against the bars of her cot, dissatisfied at having been woken up by all this racket.

Hannah took her in her arms and hurried back down the stairs, calling to John, “Rosie’s fine!”

A moment later, she found him standing next to the sofa, looking lost and bewildered, and clearly not steady on his feet. “You alright?” she asked, as she handed Rosie to him.

“Thanks to you, yes.” He was trembling.

“Stay here. And sit,” she commanded.

She walked back into the main bedroom, where a chilly breeze blew through the broken pane. Once more, she scanned the room for anything unusual, other than the gun left behind on the floor.

When she spotted a small piece of paper lying below the window sill, the size of a receipt, she bent down to look at it more closely.

Considering what to do with it, and looking around to see where it might have come from, she briefly glanced through the bedroom door, down the hallway, and saw John sitting stiffly on the sofa, clutching his daughter, and following Hannah’s every move.

“What is it? Did you find something?” he asked, anxiously.

Without answering, she took an unused evidence bag from her pocket and, turning it inside out, she picked the paper up without touching it.

Once it was inside the bag, she turned it around.

On the other side, in sloppy handwriting, it said ‘Love, Jim’.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

John realises he's survived another murder attempt by Eurus Moriarty, and Harry comes to visit.

Chapter Notes

With many thanks again to my tireless betas mydogwatson, mama-orion and Jonathan!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John did not let go of Rosie.

He sat on the sofa, motionless, as far away from the window as possible, holding her tightly.

She was wide awake, but quiet as well, earnestly testing how far the hem of her daddy’s shirt would stretch.

He didn’t notice.

His eyes were scanning his surroundings for imminent danger. His ears pricked for unusual noises from outside.

Hannah sat in Sherlock’s chair, which she’d turned with its back towards the wall, just as vigilant as him, and was holding her phone in one hand and the note she’d found in the bedroom in the other.

Love, Jim.

She’d already called and texted a number of people – Mycroft and Greg, among others – and now the flat was silent again.

“Sherlock is still not answering his phone,” she said, restlessly.

John heaved in a breath.

He knew perfectly well that Sherlock’s phone’s battery needed charging every night, and he knew for a fact that Sherlock had not taken his charger with him when he left for Wantage yesterday, so those two things combined provided a perfectly plausible explanation for why he couldn’t be reached.

Also, the chance of Eurus carrying out two assassination attempts simultaneously in two different places miles apart was rather small. Then again, being Jim Moriarty’s sister, she might very well know some people who were more than willing to help her out with such minor logistical problems.
In short, John was worried sick.

The flat had suddenly started feeling incredibly empty and still without Sherlock. Just like… that time he’d rather not be reminded of.

The silence, however, only lasted a few minutes.

Shortly after the sound of the doorbell, Lestrade’s team came bounding up the stairs and swarmed all over the apartment, taping off their bedroom as a crime scene.

John witnessed it all in a daze, muttering to Rosie that everything was going to be alright, that she could play with her toys again as soon as all those people were finished with their job and had left.

About an hour later, having obtained no useful clues beside the gun, the note and some fibres of cloth they had found on the jagged window glass, Greg informed John that Daniel had also returned empty-handed.

Eurus was gone.

Only when Greg sat down next to John and asked him for his witness statement, did John realise that it must now be quite obvious to everyone who’d been in the flat that he and Sherlock were a couple now.

He shook his head with a vague smile and dragged a hand over his face.

They’d only been hiding it to keep it from Eurus, and she seemed to know now, anyway.

“I was in Sherlock’s bedroom, yes, because that’s where I sleep now,” he told Greg.

The smile on Greg’s face seemed to light up the entire room.

“What? Did you win a pool or something?” John joked.

“Win what?” Fleeting confusion passed over his face. “No! I’m just so happy for you guys! You know, for a long while I thought you were together, then I realised you weren’t, and then I hoped you would be, seeing as, you know…” He gestured with a vague hand movement at John.

“Seeing as what?”

“Well, you two are just so obviously perfect for one another,” Greg beamed. “He’s always happy when he’s with you, even though he doesn’t necessarily show it, as such,” he conceded. “But without you, he’s a total, insufferable prick. That’s true love, innit?”

Well, that was certainly a new definition of love, but possibly quite an accurate one, John supposed.

They both looked up at a loud, banging sound: someone running up the stairs. Then the door flew open and a sort of tornado entered the room, startling a couple of the younger officers. A tornado that bellowed, “Where’s John?” before resting his eyes on him and falling to John’s feet.

“John! Rosie,” Sherlock breathed, hugging the both of them. “Thank god you’re fine. What happened?”

* * * * *

Strange morning.
Sherlock came again. Asked drawings.

Shock and surprise on his face. Sadness.

Why?

Hold hands.

Nice.

Continue painting of him and blond man.

* * * * *

Being back in the UK was always a little alienating, Harry thought, as she hurried along Carteret Street, carefully dodging little groups of uniformed school kids on the pavement.

There were ads from brands she didn’t know, fashion trends she hadn’t seen before.

Like, what was with all these ripped jeans, all over the place?

“Excuse me, may I ask you something?” an elderly lady with a Welsh accent asked her, as she passed.

Even after two days, Harry still felt a little jolt of surprise every time someone addressed her in English.

“I’m looking for Westminster Abbey,” the lady said, “which is supposed to be near here. Do you happen to know the way?”

“Oh, er, yes, just around that corner. Turn left and then straight on,” Harry pointed.

She hadn’t been back in a while. Too much going on with work back in Volgograd. Especially with the current situation in Chechnya, just ‘down the road’ – in Russian terms, that was. Human rights being violated left and right, let alone LGBT rights. The Russian LGBT Network was busier than ever, especially since the new collaboration with the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

She could only hope that the subsidy she was applying for at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would be granted, so that her team could further improve the as of yet still lamentable position of queer people in Russia.

Harry turned the corner onto Great George Street and straightened her jacket. Well, she told herself, even if we get nothing, this trip won’t have been a complete waste. She had, after all, planned to meet up with her brother as well.

She hadn’t seen John in over a year. They’d had a horrible fight just before his child had been born – over the phone. They hadn’t really spoken since.

Not even when his wife had died.

Harry had been feeling horrible about that ever since, but somehow, she hadn’t been able to muster the initiative to get in touch. She didn’t even know how Mary died, except that it had been some sort of accident.

She hoped they could repair some of the damage during this visit.
Her relationship with her brother had always been difficult. As kids, their interests had invariably been vastly different, but she’d attributed that to their age difference. When she was in her teddy phase, he was in his Lego phase. When she had her Lego phase, he was in his computer game phase. When she was in her computer game phase, he had his rugby phase.

But moreover, ever since their teenage years, she felt that he’d never really accepted her being gay. There had been endless discussions about why it was really necessary that she was actively volunteering with the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. She thought it was important to press for law reforms and try to influence the provision of medical, psychiatric and social services, back in the early nineties. Her brother John, however, had seemed to think it was all just a load of nonsense and that she should stop wasting her time and start doing something that mattered. Like study medicine.

She sighed.

At least the email he’d sent her the other week – inviting her over the next time she was in London, which coincidentally happened to be very soon after – had been uncommonly friendly. He’d even asked about her girlfriend, Natalya. And she guessed it was time she got to know her niece, so she’d resolved to accept the invitation and try extra hard this time to avoid conflict.

She remembered how she had loved the visits from her own aunt, Vivian, who had always done fun things with her and John and had shown her that not everybody saw the world in the same way her parents did. Who had bought them Mivvi ice lollies in the park, because she didn’t think they were a waste of money.

It occurred to Harry that she could perhaps try to be that sort of aunt to her niece.

(Funny, Harry thought, how Aunt Viv had also had a difficult relationship with her brother, their dad. But it had not influenced her bond with his children. Or at least, not initially it hadn’t.)

Besides all that, she’d had a bit of a shock when this Sherlock bloke had gotten in touch last month, to tell her that John was in hospital. The network connection had been flaky for days, so she’d only received the message when John was already out of his coma. Hence she hadn’t had the chance to worry too much in the moment, but as the days passed, she’d started realising how she would have felt if the original message had reached her immediately: that her brother was in a bad way and might not pull through. He was still her brother, after all. Her only connection to her past. Well, him and Aunt Viv. They were the only family she had left.

She’d strangely lost touch with her aunt, though, several years ago. It was just really tricky to keep in touch with people who didn’t do social media and who expected individual updates. Letters.

At least Aunt Viv did use email. Maybe Harry should write her one some time.

She looked up at the building in front of her.

Time to persuade some men in suits to fund her projects.

* * * * *

As soon as John went into ‘care mode’, he felt calm again.

Sherlock had turned into a nervous wreck the minute he’d seen police cars outside the flat upon his returning from Wantage, and his anxiety hadn’t exactly faded when they told him what had happened.
After having let Sherlock frantically run around the flat for some time, looking for clues himself (and not finding anything the Yard hadn’t already documented) while John finished answering Greg’s questions, John eventually handed Rosie to Hannah.

Two armed officers had taken up posts at the windows at the front and back, so that she had her hands free again.

John made Sherlock sit on the couch and put both hands on his shoulders, telling him to take some deep breaths. “Tomorrow’s the audition,” John said quietly. “And Harry is coming over in less than two hours. Let’s not waste any energy on finding other ways to catch her until after, alright? The Yard are already doing all they can.” John pointedly ignored Sherlock’s eye roll at that. “Now, would you like a cup of tea, my love?”

“John, I--”

“Wait, no. I’m giving you tea whether you want it or not,” John said sternly.

“But John--”

“It calms the nerves.”

Upon Sherlock opening his mouth again, John quickly and efficiently shut him up with a look. Always worked.

When he came back with full mugs from the kitchen a little later, however, John was surprised to see a small grin on Sherlock’s face.

“What?” John asked, amused.

“Am I allowed to speak again?” Sherlock teased.

John raised an eyebrow in response.

“I actually have some rather incredibly good news. About Sherrinford.”

* * * * *

Once Harry had finished her morning’s round of soliciting for funds and had travelled to Baker Street, where she was now standing in front of the door to number 221, she realised she was more nervous to ring the bell than she had been at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

She swallowed, and rang it anyway.

Weirdly, John had called her only an hour earlier to try to reschedule, saying there had been “some complications” that morning, “which made the timing of their appointment less ideal”.

The sod.

Probably his way of saying his daughter had wet her bed or something.

She’d simply pointed out she’d be leaving the country again the next day. So take it or leave it. He’d sighed and muttered, “Never mind, see you in a bit, then.”

She started slightly when a police officer with a ballistic vest and a rather large gun across his chest opened the door to her.
“Yes?” he asked, gruffly, over his weapon.

“Er, I’m here to see my brother. Can I come in?”

“Name?”

“Er, Harry Watson. What’s going on?”

“ID, please.”

Baffled, and slightly intimidated, Harry pulled her passport out of her rucksack and showed it to him.

(Just in time, she’d repressed the automatic reflex of grabbing her wallet as well to offer him a small bribe, as would be customary to speed things up back home in Russia. But she wasn’t back home in Russia. She was back home in the UK, she reminded herself.)

After scrutinising her face on the photograph for a moment, the man raised his walkie-talkie to his mouth and said, “Visitor S coming up”. Then, to her, a little more friendly, “Come on in. First floor.”

She noticed the man carefully scanning the street as she stepped past him, and went up the stairs, dumbstruck.

On the next floor, in a rather messy and curious looking lounge, five pairs of eyes turned to her, as she entered. There was another fully armed man in AFO uniform, a pretty lady with a small gun at her hip, the odd, posh roommate whose name was escaping her at the minute, and two men in overalls carefully carrying a glass windowpane towards what seemed to be the kitchen.

Harry’s mouth fell slightly open. “Um, I’m here for John Watson,” she said stupidly.

“Oh, he’s just upstairs, changing a nappy,” the pretty lady said pleasantly. “I’ll go and get him.”

“Yes, come in. Would you like a cup of tea?” the posh bloke asked.

“Er, yes please,” Harry heard herself say.

“I’ll go make some. Have a seat. Oh, I’m Sherlock, by the way.”

“I’m Harry. Nice to meet you,” she stammered, at his already retreating back.

The men with the windowpane had disappeared down a little corridor behind the kitchen and could now be heard using various tools. The armed agent seemed to have turned into a decorative statue next to the curtains, keeping his eyes fixed on the street below.

Suddenly, the room was quiet.

Harry sat on the sofa and looked from the human skull on the mantelpiece to the dead bat surrounded by pricked up beetles in a frame next to it, to the variety of curious knick-knacks on the desk by the window, and felt a bit like she’d fallen down some surreal rabbit hole.

She’d imagined the place John lived rather differently, to say the least. And what was going on with all those people in the flat?

“Aunt Harry, yes, look, there she is!” she then heard John’s voice coo from the landing, as he came into the room with the cutest little baby girl on his arm.
The child looked at Harry with big, bright eyes. “Da!” she exclaimed enthusiastically.

Harry’s heart melted at the sight of her happy little face in the midst of all this chaos.

Five minutes later, the three of them were all sipping their tea peacefully, as the infant contently investigated Harry’s shoelaces from her realm on the floor.

“So, er, Johnny, want to tell me what that is all about?” Harry asked, nudging her head towards the remaining armed agent.

“I’d rather not,” John replied curtly, but managing to say it in a pleasant enough way. He calmly blew over his cup.

Upon Harry’s deepened frown, Sherlock chipped in, “It’s an MI5 exercise.” He smiled. “We occasionally volunteer to provide them with a truthful location to train anti-terrorism operations in a realistic setting.”

He seemed really proud, the weirdo.

“John had forgotten that we had a training scheduled for this afternoon,” he went on, smirking. “That’s why he called you.”

“Oh,” was all she said.

Sherlock briefly wrinkled his nose in a smile. “But I said I didn’t mind if you came, even if the house was already full of armed people walking around. The more, the merrier, I always say!”

For some reason, John seemed to find this funny, and he relaxed a little.

“So will there be a mock terrorist barging in any moment?” Harry asked, looking around her.

“No, she already left,” John said, with something of a sarcastic edge to his voice.

There was some silence.

She should probably not stay long.

“John, I’ve been meaning to say, I’m so sorry about Mary,” Harry said, “and sorry I--”

“I appreciate it, but I’d rather not talk about that,” John interrupted. He looked tense and uneasy for a moment – or rather, even more so than before – and exchanged a look with Sherlock. “To be quite honest, our marriage wasn’t a happy one,” he then said. “It soon turned out I didn’t really know her at all. We married too quickly.” He cleared his throat, visibly steeling himself for what he was about to say. “As sad as her passing was… Since her death, I’ve moved on.” His face softened. “I’ve found new love. True love, this time. First lost, then found again.” And to Harry’s astonishment, he gently took Sherlock’s hand and held it, while the two of them smiled at each other somewhat shyly.


They all smiled.

“We have hardly told anyone yet,” John said. “But with you, I can at least be sure that you’ll understand.” He raised his eyebrows.
She felt a knot form in her stomach, and looked away. He’d never shown any understanding the other way round.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t more supportive of you back then,” John said, as if reading her thoughts. He swallowed and ducked his chin. “I was always so afraid for you, scared that your being so open about your orientation would get you into trouble. That someone might harm you. But now I understand why you didn’t want to hide. Why you wanted to actively make the world a better place for LGBT people.”

Her mouth fell open, once more. She’d always thought he’d disapproved of her. Not that he wanted to protect her from harm.

So her lifelong anger and frustration about what she’d presumed to be his homophobic attitude apparently was just based on a huge misunderstanding?

As she was attempting to form words to say something back, Sherlock spoke. “So tell me, what are you working on in Russia at the moment?”

She gave a perfunctory summary of the projects she was coordinating with the local LGBT Network division, but to her surprise, Sherlock kept asking new questions about the things she told them, showing genuine interest and wanting to know more about her work, her ambitions and her new homeland.

And while Rosie pulled herself up on Harry’s knees and invited herself onto Harry’s lap, Harry told Sherlock and John all about her current life and the improvements in LGBT awareness and acceptance she had already helped achieve. She talked and talked, answering one question after another – more and more posed by John, too – and she felt like for the first time, her brother was actually listening to what she said.

And it made her hope.

Hope that perhaps, their bond could become stronger and better than it had been until now, thanks to him being in a relationship with the odd, posh bloke, who actually turned out to be quite alright once you got to know him a little.

When they asked after her personal life, she even told them she had now finally found a local therapy group that had helped her stay off the booze for over a year already. That she and Natalya were in a good place – Natalya having finally landed herself a rather good job at a large chemical company, which was basically a hobby that she had next to her ‘real’ work at her own little lab at home, in the second bedroom, trying to make durable bioplastic.

She smiled at the memory of home.

The two men seemed to exchange a gleeful grin.

And then Harry said something she hadn’t even thought about before. It was as if sitting here peacefully with her brother, his baby daughter and his boyfriend had suddenly let the final piece of her click into place. “I’m happy,” she smiled, earning her three smiles mirrored back at her.

Not a waste of time, indeed.

* * * * *

As John cleared away the teacups, his mind jumped back and forth between the memory of having been almost shot at this morning by Eurus sodding Moriarty (for the second bloody time),
Sherlock’s revelation that Sherrinford was innocent, and his sister visiting in the afternoon.

It all felt a bit surreal.

He didn’t know which had been the most unexpected. What Eurus had done had, in fact, been no surprise whatsoever. It was exactly the reason why Irene lived with them. And she’d handled the situation brilliantly.

Sherrinford’s innocence was something he and Sherlock had both been vaguely suspecting for a while, which had been why Sherlock had gone back there to begin with. A shock, certainly, but not entirely unanticipated.

Having it be rather lovely to have Harry over, however, was probably the most unforeseen event of the day. They hadn’t bickered or disagreed on anything. She hadn’t been annoyed by him, or by Sherlock or Rosie, for that matter. And hearing her talk about her work had been rather inspiring.

*Why had he never asked her about it before, he wondered?*

As he put the cups in the sink and added hot water and washing up liquid, he suddenly felt warm arms around him.

“You alright?” Sherlock’s low voice softly rumbled in his ear.

“Yeah.” John turned his head to brush his lips against Sherlock’s jaw. “Either you or Rosie seem to have a positive influence on my sister.” He smiled.

“Probably me,” Sherlock shrugged, in an exaggerated display of innocence.

John teasingly blew him a kiss and continued to do the washing up, as Sherlock grabbed a tea towel to dry.

John was glad he’d been able to finally come out to Harry. He’d never fully appreciated how important it really was to share something that was so essential to himself with someone close to him.

Besides that, he was especially relieved that she hadn’t brought up Aunt Viv. They’d obviously lost touch and she had no idea their aunt was in prison. And John had simply not dared take the risk of telling her, and Harry then creating an uproar trying to prove Vivian’s innocence. And he wasn’t ready to let her in on a truth that only he, Sherlock and Mycroft knew, either.

At the same time, he also felt incredibly guilty about not telling her that Vivian was dying, and that right now was Harry’s last chance to see her. He knew she had been both their favourite aunt.

But if Harry had not bothered to keep in contact, it wasn’t exactly his responsibility to tell her, was it?

Still, he felt awful about the whole situation.

He heaved a deep sigh as he rinsed the last foamy cup and handed it to Sherlock.

As he let the water spiral down the drain, he thought about Harry and her life back in Russia. About the good work she was trying to do, in spite of the dangers – especially seeing as she was just a foreigner there. In some strange way, it was a bit comparable to his mission in Afghanistan. Bringing tolerance and justice where it was lacking. And now they were both in a same-sex relationship with a mad chemist.
John smiled in spite of himself. He felt closer to her, suddenly, than he ever had.

He was particularly glad that she seemed to seriously be staying off the booze now. He knew she couldn’t really help it, having had the bad example of their dad always drinking throughout the day, but he’d always blamed her for reacting to that so differently from the way he had. She’d responded by copying his ways, while he had simply… well… developed trust issues.

Both habits were just a different reaction to the same thing, he now figured.

Sherlock’s voice jolted him out of his contemplations. “We were all formed by what happened in our families in the past, John,” he said, unsurprisingly knowing exactly what he was thinking. “But everyone has a different survival strategy, which can then make people drift apart. You were the one who taught me the importance of open communication. When I simply applied it to your sister, you both opened up.”

John looked at him, suddenly feeling immensely grateful and proud. “I’m so glad you did.”

“You know what?” Sherlock said, suddenly casual. “Shall we pop downstairs and tell Mrs Hudson about our new arrangements? I think she should be the next one to know, although she might very well have guessed already, of course.”

“Yeah, I never quite believed she actually fell for the story that I’d simply started sleeping in your room so that Hannah had a place to sleep upstairs,” John said, chuckling. “But let’s visit her anyway. She deserves to get some happy gossip material after all of this morning’s consternation.”

Sherlock smirked, valiantly attempting not to roll his eyes. “Just in case, let’s give her some of these leftover pastries as an additional peace offering for the fuss we caused by attracting another hardened criminal to her premises,” he suggested.

“Good idea. Nice way to celebrate all the day's unexpectedly good outcomes, hm?”

Chapter End Notes

Only five more chapters! Half of them are written and in the editing phase; only two and a half to go. After two years of working on this monstrosity of a fic, I can’t wait to see it all finished. (And I imagine neither can you guys, LOL.)

EDIT 25 Oct. 2019: It's incredibly funny how I kept thinking there were only a around five chapters left to write for *ages*, but then I kept splitting the new draft chapters in two as I wrote them and they turned out to become much too long each bloody time. At the time I'm writing this comment, I'm pretty sure there will be 40 chapters in total. But who knows... ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t that she was afraid of dying, Vivian Norbury thought to herself. She had long known that the end was near.

Well, maybe not that long… Four months was, after all, not such a very long time, spent outside of prison. But in here, trapped in a web of your own thoughts, time seemed to pass ever so much more slowly.

Apparently, the human mind measures time by the number of new experiences one has in the course of it. She’d read this somewhere, once.

In prison, each day had been the same.

Except when John came to visit, of course. Which was always so very nice.

And except when she had been moved to the infirmary, which had not been very nice at all. But still, a new experience. And a necessary one. Her body was slowly losing the fight against cancer, needing more support and more medicine by the day. Painkillers, foremost.

No, she wasn’t afraid of death itself. In a way, she couldn’t wait for the horrible aches and nausea to end. For her struggling body to be allowed to just let go.

It was just that she feared she might have forgotten to do something, or say something, before the chance was gone for good.

For instance, until last night, she’d been terrified that the little bee teddy she had been crocheting for Rosie might remain unfinished. She knew it was silly, really, but now that she’d attached its little wings, it was as if a huge weight had fallen from her shoulders. It was done.

So when John came in that morning, her smile was a bit wider than it had been of late. “I’ve got something for you,” she said. Her voice sounded strangely raspy and faint even to her own ears. “No, not you, actually,” she corrected herself, speaking more slowly than she intended. “For your little girl. But I’m giving it to you, nevertheless. I wasn’t able to wrap it, so you need to close your eyes.”

John obliged.

Reaching for the teddy, which was behind a small pile of books on the bedside table next to her, cost an infuriating amount of effort. Once her stubborn fingers had eventually gotten proper hold of the thing, she fell back onto her pillow with a suppressed gasp, clutching the bee to her chest.

“So I need to help?” John asked, sounding worried.

“No! It’s fine,” she breathed. “Keep your eyes closed. Give me your hand.”

When he did, she pressed the plush toy into his palms. “You can look now,” she announced.

John gaped at the little bee in his hands. “Wow! Did you-- Did you make this? It’s lovely!”

“I did.”
“Aw, Rosie is going to love it; thank you so much, Aunt Viv!” He gently hugged her with one arm.

His fond reaction made her feel wonderfully warm inside. To be appreciated, to have accomplished something, however little.

“You know, Sherlock actually loves bees. He will probably use this teddy to lecture her silly on the subject,” John said.

The tone of his voice at the mention of his secret flame was full of love.

It filled her with happiness.

“By the way, you’re officially allowed to know about Sherlock and me now,” he then said, still a little shyly, clearly not yet used to talking about it openly. “We were keeping it secret from one nasty individual in particular, but it has turned out she knows already anyway.” He shrugged.

“Ooh, I will shout it from the rooftops then! My nephew has found true love!”

One of the nurses briefly looked up and smiled.

Vivian smiled too. “You take care of him, John. Promise me?”

“I promise,” he said, blushing a little.

Through the growing fog of her malaise, she suddenly remembered something. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask, how is your sister, Harry?”

A pained expression came over John’s face and he briefly looked away. “She lives in Russia now.” He swallowed, visibly sad. “I haven’t seen her in… ages. She doesn’t come back to the UK very often.” Then he smiled and put a hand on Vivian’s. “But I spoke to her yesterday. She sends all her love.”

That was nice, Vivian thought. And she closed her eyes. At this point in her life, it was just nice to be remembered.

“Would you like to rest now?” John asked.

She managed a small nod, before drifting off into another silent sleep.

* * * * *

23 September. Sherlock was trying not to get his hopes up too high as he was preparing his morning toast.

John had left early to visit his aunt.

Sherlock kept telling himself that the odds of Eurus Moriarty actually showing up for the Hamlet audition tonight were very small indeed.

Still, it was quite an operation they had planned, and which had to be executed absolutely flawlessly in order to have even a chance of success.

Greg had a team prepared for stand-by surrounding the building this evening, and he’d talked the theatre director into letting Sherlock sit on the jury, as long as he wouldn’t interfere in the actual selection process.
Sherlock, on his end, had the task ahead of donning a perfect disguise, so that Eurus would not recognise him, if she actually did show up. His job during the audition was in turn to recognise Eurus through her disguise – presuming she did not come looking like she had that one time at the hospital, when he’d bugged her. (And assuming she would not reuse her Faith Smith or German therapist disguise.)

After breakfast, he spent the remaining part of the morning trying on every single one of his lay-person disguises and all his wigs and fake noses, and throwing them all into a corner in frustration.

Normal people were easy to fool; normal people never looked properly. He’d disguised himself dozens of times in the past and it had always worked.

But this time, he had to fool a Moriarty. Up close. And the stakes were higher than they had ever been. There was zero room for error.

And at the same time, probably none of it mattered, as she likely wouldn’t even come.

But he had to try.

He sighed, deciding he needed to go shopping. Buy a new fake chin, or a beard. Something that would really change his face, so that he didn’t look so much like his damn self, with his stupid cheekbones and his ridiculous cupid’s bow.

Then again, a beard would probably only arouse more suspicion, because beards always quite literally screamed ‘disguise!’ Everyone knew that. Not a good idea at all.

He slammed his wardrobe door shut with more force than strictly necessary.

As he stood in the middle of the room, feeling increasingly apprehensive, he heard the faint sound of the front door downstairs being unlocked. Then John’s familiar footsteps on the stairs.

A few moments later, John came into the bedroom, took one look at Sherlock, and pulled him close. “Hey,” he said, concern audible in his voice.

The solid strength of John’s arms around him made some of the tension drain out of him.

They kissed.

Sherlock huffed a sigh. “How was Aunt Viv?” he asked, grateful for the distraction.

“As expected.” John sucked in a breath. “She made Rosie a teddy, though. Amazing, given how weak she is. She’s so kind.” John was silent for a moment. “And how are things over here?” John eyed the chaos of discarded clothes around him.

“I need to use the least likely disguise,” Sherlock said, through gritted teeth. “One she can’t possibly see through. None of my things are actually good enough for that purpose. I have no idea what to wear. A whole wardrobe full of stuff and nothing suitable.”

John chuckled. “You sound just like one of my ex-girlfriends.”

Sherlock didn’t think this was exceptionally funny.

Then a thought occurred to him.

“No, that’s ridiculous,” he mumbled to himself.
“What is?” John asked.

“The least likely disguise. Not a moustache or a beard. A woman. I could go as a woman.”

John’s mouth fell open in amused surprise. “Have you…?” He cleared his throat. “Have you ever done that before?”

“Once. Long time ago. Apparently, I passed rather well. I think Lestrade still has a picture on his phone.”

John chortled. “Alright. It would definitely be unexpected. So… are you serious about this?”

Sherlock remained silent, still listing the pros and cons in his head.

John was patiently studying his face, Sherlock noticed from the corner of his eye. “Should I go ask Irene for help?” John suggested.

“Her name is Hannah now, John.”

“Right. Sorry. I’ll go get her, then?” And with a mischievous smile, he left the room.

One of the many things Sherlock and Hannah had in common was their expertise at dressing up. Her collection of wigs and mock spectacles was actually bigger than his, and she had a good part of it with her at 221B.

Before mid-afternoon, Sherlock was unrecognisable even to himself. When he looked in the mirror, it was as if a strange woman had intruded his bedroom.

He wore a ginger wig with long, wavy hair, small but thick-rimmed purple glasses, a pink boxy top with a wide, green, coarsely knitted cardigan over it and a pair of his own dark blue skinny jeans and lilac pumps with medium high heels below, which he still had from last time. Furthermore, he wore a set of false teeth he’d remembered he kept in a drawer, and had stuffed bits of cotton wool in his cheeks to change the shape of his mouth and make his cheekbones not stand out as much. On top of that, Hannah had not only added a perfectly natural looking layer of make-up, but she’d also plucked his eyebrows to reduce them to a thinner line, higher up above his eyes.

The look on John’s face in the course of the whole process – as he’d occasionally stuck his head around the door of the bedroom in between his tending to Rosie – had been priceless. It had gone from giggly surprise, to impressed amazement, to outright, dumbstruck shock.

“I guess this should do the trick, then?” Sherlock asked. He realised his voice sounded ridiculously low now, but thankfully, he wasn’t supposed to speak anyway, this evening.

John looked a little pale. “This will definitely do the trick, yes,” he said, faintly.

Rosie, propped on John’s hip, kept staring and pointing at Sherlock’s wig, but seemed otherwise unimpressed.

Sherlock grinned.

Hannah then spent another good half hour giving him tips to make his posture more feminine without it looking like a parody, and Sherlock felt he was all set.

* * * * *

Inside the small and not terribly well-maintained local community theatre, a handwritten timetable
had been stuck onto the door to the music room, listing all the roles in the play and at what times the auditions for each of them started. A lady in black, ripped jeans ran around ordering people about, making sure they stayed on schedule and telling the candidates where to put down their names and where to sit and await their turn.

But since more Hamlets had turned up than expected, the Ophelias were now due to start twenty minutes later than originally planned.

Sherlock had to sit through all of them, pretending to be interested.

He was seated behind a long table, together with the director and two other members of the Creative Team. He sat with his legs crossed, letting one shoe dangle from the ball of his foot, so that at least one of his heels was in less pain.

One of the things he would never understand about women was why they freely chose to wear shoes that stopped all circulation in their feet. Or maybe he’d just chosen the wrong model. Either way, he was uncomfortable.

Contributing to that was the fact that his blasted wig itched like hell.

Sherlock tried to focus on his surroundings: the layout of the room, which smelled of old curtains and citrus-scented all-purpose cleaner. Only one entrance from the hallway, and one emergency exit onto Kingsley Road, where some of Lestrade’s men stood loitering about, undoubtedly either pretending to smoke or actually doing so. Several others, Sherlock knew, were in the waiting area, posing as candidates for Horatio’s role. Meanwhile, Sherlock feigned having his attention on the men in front of him stumbling through their lines.

By the time the last aspiring Prince Hamlet had finished, Sherlock thought he could recite the entire soliloquy by heart himself.

“Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them.”

Sherlock himself had been navigating a sea of troubles for what felt like an eternity now and he was also taking up arms against them – though in a quite different and hopefully more productive way than Shakespeare had intended.

His mind, however, automatically conjured up an image of John and the state he’d been in on the day they’d first met. John had definitely been contemplating opposing the slings and arrows of his bad fortune by ending his own life, like Hamlet. Sherlock had seen it and had understood, and, without consciously deciding to, had given John a reason to live.

Thanks to his instinctive acts on that day, John was still here.

*Here with him.*

He quickly shook those thoughts away. He had long promised himself he’d make sure John would never feel like that again. What was more, he now had the new privilege of actively making John happy on a daily basis, by simply being there for him in ways that made himself happy as well.

The strange paradox of love.

There was a five-minute break, during which the others discussed which Hamlet they preferred, and teas and coffees were brought in.
Then it was time for the Ophelias.

“He took me by the wrist and held me hard; then goes he to the length of all his arm; and, with his other hand thus o'er his brow, he falls to such perusal of my face, as he would draw it.”

Ophelia number One seemed to hardly be trying at all to get the part, and Sherlock had to make an effort not to blurt out that she should go and find another hobby, but instead tried to patiently sit still and let the real jury do the judging.

Also, this was definitely not Eurus. Too young, and untalented.

The director seemed charmed enough by her appearance, though.

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

When Ophelia number Two entered, he was less distracted by the quality of her acting, and more focussed on ruling out the possibility that this could be Miss Moriarty. Her jawline was similar, as was the position of the eyes, but not the shape. Make-up could do wonders, though.

Eventually, he decided she was too tall to be her.

“Long stay'd he so. At last, a little shaking of mine arm and thrice his head thus waving up and down, he raised a sigh so piteous and profound as it did seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being: that done, he lets me go.”

The third Ophelia was definitely not confident enough. Or was that actually part of the act?

The director read out Lord Polonius’s lines to continue the dialogue. “Come, go with me: I will go seek the king. This is the very ecstasy of love.”

Ophelia hesitated, needing prompting to remember her next line.

Her eyes wide and pale like those of a frightened deer.

Not Eurus.

When they eventually reached the last Ophelia on the photocopied list in front of him – Number Eight – and a tiny girl with big glasses entered, Sherlock softly cursed to himself.

It wasn’t her.

Just as the girl slunk away after finishing her lines, though, someone slipped inside through the open door and stepped into the centre of the room before anyone had a chance to tell her not to.

It was Ophelia Number Three – the timid one who’d forgotten her lines. “Hi. Sorry. Jenny Brown. I messed up just now and would very much like to have another go. I had a black-out, that’s all.”

She didn’t smile.

The director exchanged a look with the others behind the table. “Alright, Jenny, start from ‘He took me by the wrist’,” he said.

Sherlock scrutinised the woman in front of him once more. Shoulder-length blond hair, long blue dress. By far not as insecure as she’d been fifteen minutes ago.

Although, as soon as she started acting, a veil of shyness once more fell over her. Not for long,
though. It was part of the act, building up towards an entirely different kind of energy.

“And, with his head over his shoulder turn'd, he seem'd to find his way without his eyes; For out o' doors he went without their helps, and, to the last, bended their light on me.”

No prompting needed at all, this time. There was convincing worry in her eyes, which truthfully matched the words she was speaking. It was as if she’d refuelled and become a different version of herself during her break.

Maybe she’d had an empty stomach and had since eaten one of those high-energy chocolate bars, Sherlock thought to himself, frivolously. (Not everybody was slowed down by food, after all.) Or perhaps she’d simply needed the loo. There were lots of reasons why people temporarily underachieved.

He looked at her performance, at her palette of intense facial expressions and bodily movement, mesmerized.

Excellent diction, perfect intonation. Definitely, beyond any doubt, the best Ophelia yet.

Her eyes sparkled with every word.

Sherlock slowly took his phone and unlocked the screen without taking his eyes off her.

The one striking thing, besides her brilliant acting, was that she was holding her right hand in a strange way, as if her wrist hurt. Like it had been sprained – from something suddenly having been knocked out of her hand.

Sherlock glanced down to press ‘send’ on the text he’d already typed as a draft in the Yard’s group message system beforehand.

-- It’s her. SH

It took several seconds before anything happened, during which an increasingly enthusiastic director fed her the dialogue lines of Polonius, and she replied with verve.

Then, an NSY arrest unit of six men entered the room from two sides simultaneously, catching her just enough by surprise that they had her in handcuffs on the second try already.

She was fast, but they were faster.

Sherlock got up and looked on as Lestrade charged her with the murder of therapist Elsa Robins, manslaughter of Hannah’s look-a-like neighbour, as well as with inflicting grievous bodily harm on John Watson.

When they reached the bit where she was being read her rights, Sherlock let out a long sigh and pulled off his wig.

He and Eurus looked at each other for a short moment, Sherlock enjoying the obvious shock and loathing in her eyes.

He smirked at her.

She was no longer his problem.
Eurus splayed her hands against the cold, silent tiles, feeling the warmth get sucked out of her fingers.

It had all seemed so simple.

She had only wanted to separate Sherlock and John in a way that was cunning and that her brother would have approved of. *Only after pushing them further together first.* Burning the heart out of the *both* of them. She’d had it all planned out.

Jim would have been so proud.

And, by way of cherry on the cake, she’d wanted to take revenge on Adler for her stupidity of exposing a major part of Jim’s network by having her sodding phone be confiscated.

Eurus angrily bit one of her fingernails.

She really shouldn’t have longed to have fun along the way, to try and get a role in a stupid play – which wasn’t even a paid part.

She should have known better.

Jim would have despised her mistake, would have sneered and shouted at her. She could see her brother’s image as clear as day in her mind’s eye, as if he were really there with her, in her cell, looking down at her with anger and disdain.

Silently, she cried, and hated herself even more for it.

* * * * *

Sherlock no longer felt his too-tight shoes as he walked through the corridor of the theatre. Rather, it felt like he was floating on a cloud, gliding effortlessly, as in a dream.

The feeling of relief was overwhelming.

Like too many heavy coats suddenly having been taken off.

First, he called John, who’d stayed at home with Rosie and Hannah (and two AFO’s from the Armed Operations Unit).

John was speechless at the other end of the line.

Sherlock thought that John’s throat was probably suddenly too tight, in the same way that had made his own voice sound so unnatural just now.

In the background, he heard Hannah ask, “Have they got her?” and John apparently nodded, because Sherlock then heard her scream and yell euphorically, followed by cheers from the officers.

“I’ll be right there,” Sherlock promised.

Without even changing out of his disguise, he took a cab back to Baker Street, letting Lestrade take care of the rest.

As he stood on the pavement in front of number 221 and routinely checked his surroundings before reaching for his key, he realised there was no need anymore. No more reason to double-check his every move, to scrutinise every person around him in the street.
They were free.

Inside, he took off his pumps and ran up the stairs two steps at a time.

Upon reaching the landing, the living room door flew open and John came out and hugged him. For several long moments, they just clung to one another, burying their faces in each other’s necks.

“Finally,” John breathed.

“Yes. We’re safe now.”

Then they kissed. Thoroughly.

Sherlock vaguely became aware of some enthusiastic wolf whistles in the background.

“There’s champagne,” John said, proudly smiling, as they pulled apart. “Hannah had a bottle stashed for the occasion, whenever it should arise.”

Hannah poked her head around the door and winked at Sherlock. “Hello, gorgeous! Well done, you.”

Sherlock smiled, feeling ridiculously light and giddy with relief. “Let me just change back into normal clothes first,” he said, “and take all this facepaint off.”

“Good idea. Before Hannah jumps on you,” John said, with a playful angry look in her direction.

Chortling, and with a spring in his step, Sherlock headed for the bathroom, where he took some of Hannah’s face cleansing wipes that she’d told him he could use afterwards.

When he wiped his fake persona off his face, he seemed to wipe away a layer of stress, as well as a bunch of frustrating memories from the recent past.

For the first time in a long while, he felt the future was his again.

He threw the last dirty wipe in the bin with a sense of great satisfaction and victory.

He looked in the mirror. The only remaining problem was that his eyebrows now looked absolutely ridiculous.

He snorted out a laugh at his reflection and started scavenging Hannah’s make-up bag for some dark brown eyeshadow and a brush. Thankfully, after finding some, he soon managed to restore something of a semblance of his usual broad, low eyebrows. They would grow back in a couple of weeks, he told himself.

It was a small price to pay for capturing a Moriarty. Or rather, a White.

As the nerves continued to slowly fall away from him in little waves, he became aware of John leaning against the doorframe. His relief was visible not just on his face, but in his entire appearance. He suddenly looked several years younger.

“You are amazing, you know that?” John was beaming.

“Someone might have mentioned it before, occasionally, yes.”

“You practically single-handedly ensured that one of the slyest murderers of our time was put behind bars.” John shook his head. “I almost lost hope so many times. But you actually did it.” He
sniffed, his eyes moist.

“Yeah,” Sherlock said, softly. “I still can’t quite believe it.”

They both exhaled.

John seemed to suppress a snigger, looking Sherlock up and down.

Sherlock raised one half-fake eyebrow.

“Listen, don’t ever dress up as a woman again, alright?” he giggled. “It’s… unsettling.”

“Unsettling, really John? I rather thought you’d be intrigued, seeing as you’re bisexual. Why would you feel uneasy about me looking like a woman?”

“I don’t know,” John said, taking a few steps towards him, his cheeks a slight pink. “I guess I love you just the way you are. As a man.” He took Sherlock in his arms and let their foreheads rest against one another.

“Hm. I suppose I should be glad,” Sherlock said.

“Glad? Why?”

“That you’re really fine with me not actually being a woman.”

“Of course I am, silly. I thought we’d settled this a long time ago.” John playfully rolled his eyes. “But if you want more proof, I’ll give you proof,” he said, darkly. “Come here.” And with a mischievous grin, he pulled Sherlock into the bedroom with him and resolutely closed the door behind them.

“I thought there was champagne?” Sherlock objected half-heartedly.

“Champagne can wait,” John said, as he hastily started to take off Sherlock’s knitted cardigan and bright pink top, discarding each item onto the floor with a comically over-dramatic scowl.

Sherlock loved it when John undressed him, especially if it meant he was being impatient, like now.

When John spotted Sherlock’s underwear, however, his jaw dropped and he paused.

It was, of course, proper women’s underwear: a plain black set with a narrow lace border.

Sherlock could tell that it turned John on, regardless of what he’d just said. John clearly still had some stuff to work out for himself. “Well, I couldn’t very well dress up as a woman and wear men’s briefs underneath, could I?” Sherlock teased, playing innocent. “And the bra was necessary to put my fake boobs in. Your socks.” He pulled them out to show John the familiar black and green pattern.

John softly sniggered, shaking his head, and ran his fingers over the lace fabric, before gently pushing one of the straps down over Sherlock’s shoulder. Then he reverently kissed the newly exposed bit of skin, sending wonderful shivers down Sherlock’s spine.

As John possessively pulled Sherlock close, his mouth now moving to Sherlock’s jawline, Sherlock could sense an internal struggle going on inside John’s mind, although he couldn’t quite put his finger on the nature of it. Being bisexual was probably more complicated in some regards than being gay, he supposed. Especially for John, after recently having been betrayed by two
women whom he’d started to trust intimately and whom he’d subsequently come to hate to the core, Sherlock mused. Perhaps Sherlock’s lingerie reminded John of them.

Still, there was no more impatience or scorn in the way John carefully undid the bra and hung it over a chair.

After doing the same with the pair of black knickers, turning Sherlock back into his usual, naked self, John efficiently stripped off his own clothes, and soon after, they were on the bed, John on top of Sherlock, kissing as if their lives depended on it. Which was actually not the case, for the first time in months.

It was all over: the hellish stalemate they had found themselves in for a full year, ever since Mary had shot him.

They kissed and kissed, finally liberated from their long-term mortal threat and the accompanying crazy high-level stress they’d endured for so long.

When their kisses eventually slowed down, like a river reaching calmer water, they paused, looking into each other’s eyes, breathing each other in.

Sherlock read the same thoughts he had in John’s eyes.

They could finally start trying to live a normal life now, with the three of them.

Almost like a normal household.

And Sherlock could focus on reconnecting with Sherrinford, restoring normalcy to his family.

It was almost as if he could feel himself turning into a new person, with an entirely new context. Like an old painting revealing new details when displayed in a different light, or with layers of old grime removed.

John started languidly kissing his neck and Sherlock melted into the sensation, and into the touch of John’s hand running over his chest and down his side.

Having John on top of him, the weight of his sturdy frame wonderfully pressing down on Sherlock, making him feel revered and safe, Sherlock needed… he wanted… he desperately wanted more.

He was panting, hard.

John crawled down, covering Sherlock’s chest in kisses, making him writhe at each touch.

Just as John was about to take him into his mouth, Sherlock said, “Wait, stop. I want… something else.”

John sat up, listening.


John froze. “God, Sherlock, are you sure?” He crawled back to lie down next to Sherlock and looked him in the eye with a tentative smile and a frown, as he held him. “I mean, it might hurt. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Sherlock swallowed and nodded. “Yes. I’m more sure than I’ve ever been of anything in my life, and I think that’s saying something,” he said, with a small smirk. He reached for the small plastic bottle of lube in the back of the drawer of his bedside table. “I bought this a while ago.”
John took the bottle from him with obvious hesitation. “Listen, er, I need you to know that I’m not sure if I’ll ever, um…, want to switch, you know. I’m just not ready for that, I think. I feel you should know that, before we do this.”

“That’s alright. It doesn’t matter. I’m not expecting you to. I just… I need this, right now.”

John went still and cupped Sherlock’s jaw with his hand. “I love you,” he whispered. “And I don’t want to hurt you. So this makes me a bit nervous. Promise you’ll tell me if it’s hurting, okay? Because I don’t want that, and we’ll stop right away. You’ve got to promise.”

Sherlock pressed his lips together and nodded.

He grabbed a pillow and hastily stuffed it under his bottom, like he’d read somewhere on a page with tips on this sort of thing, and opened his legs.

John kept asking, very concernedly, and clearly overwhelmed, if it was still okay, as he slowly, wonderfully slid into him.

And Sherlock wholeheartedly said yes every time.

Yes, yes, yes.

John’s lovemaking opened entire new wings in Sherlock’s mind palace.

The unfamiliar burning sensation and the strange feeling of fullness, combined with John’s panted breaths and whispered endearments in his neck, all made him feel grounded in a way he’d never experienced before.

But above all, he felt wanted and loved like never before.

There were quiet gasps, hitching breaths, scraping fingers; there were gentle kisses between careful, slow thrusts.

“Is this still okay?” John asked, once again.

“Yes,” Sherlock panted. “Please don’t stop.”

“I won’t. Sweet Jesus, this feels so good. I love you so much,” John breathed.

Sherlock didn’t care when some of his muscles and limbs started protesting their unusual position after a while. All that mattered was John, rocking into him, holding him, flooding him with oxytocin and endorphins that were so much better than any drug. So much better.

He came harder than ever before.

John followed quickly after.

Lying in an intensely content heap of sweaty limbs, they gradually caught their breaths, with ridiculous smiles plastered to their faces.

“That was… good,” Sherlock said.

“It was. God, I love you,” John replied, pressing another kiss to Sherlock’s temple. “I’m sorry,” he smiled, “I can’t seem to stop saying it all of a sudden.”

“I love you too,” Sherlock whispered, smiling back. He took John’s hand and interlocked their
They lay nose to nose for a while, breathing together.

“Champagne?” John eventually asked, smirking.

“Champagne,” Sherlock chuckled, rolling onto his back. “Besides, I’m starving. I don’t think I’ve actually eaten since breakfast.”

“Alright, let’s go and find some fancy snacks as well, then,” John said. “It seems we have a lot of important stuff to celebrate, today.” And he gave Sherlock another long, lingering kiss.

When they came back into the lounge, all dressed again, Hannah had an outrageously proud, knowing grin on her face.

Sherlock let himself smile back at her, and, as they did a little eyebrow dance at each other, they both knew she knew exactly what they’d just done.

Sherlock felt radiant and felt no need whatsoever to hide it.

Champagne glasses were already set out on the coffee table, the bottle in a cooler next to it.

“You look like you could use some calories,” Hannah said and winked, before disappearing into the kitchen. She came back with a large bucket of strawberry cheesecake ice cream and three spoons. “My secret emergency stock from the back of the freezer,” she said, with a broad smile, as she pulled the lid off the tub. “Ooh, and there’s chocolate raisins,” she said, turning around to go and fetch them.

“Oh, this is good,” Sherlock said, pulling John over to the sofa, where they were within optimal reach of the delicacies.

“Is Rosie in bed already?” John asked.


“Yoo-hoo! It’s ready!” Mrs Hudson’s muffled voice called from the landing. “Can someone open the door for me, please?”

John got back up and opened the door to reveal their landlady carrying an enormous chocolate cake.

“Wow,” he said.

Sherlock rose to stand behind him and peered over his shoulder at the cake. It had white, swirly letters of icing spelling out ‘All dragons slayed’. Three little green broken chocolate dragons were partly sunken into the layer of molten chocolate on top.

Sherlock blinked, starting to feel his eyes prickle. She’d made this especially for them.

“I happened to still have this packet of chocolate fairy tale figures that I bought in that lovely shop over in Mayfair with Mrs Turner last month, but some of the ones at the bottom sadly got squashed on the way back. Then I realised how symbolic these were for this occasion.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock said, his voice thick, and leaned over to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Perfection,” Hannah said. “Shall I?” When Mrs Hudson nodded, Hannah took the cake from her fingers.
and went to cut it into generous pieces.

Two minutes later, they all tucked in and clinked their glasses, celebrating the result of months of hard work and patience.

The dragon slayers were finally allowed to rest, relax and be in love.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, the story isn’t finished yet! There will be five more chapters to round everything up. No loose ends. Not on my watch. ;)

P.S. Yes, that means I did it again: I split another draft chapter in two (chapter 33), because it was becoming too long, again. That means the total is going up *again*, to 36 chapters now. I really hope this was the last time I’ve had to do this. I just want this story to END as much as you do! LOL.

EDIT 21 June 2019: It wasn’t the last time. There will be 37 chapters at least.

EDIT 16 September: I've got 39 planned now, LOL.
Oh, and I changed the therapist’s first name to Elsa, as swissmissing pointed out to me that that is what she is called in the shooting script (even though the name isn’t actually mentioned on the show).

EDIT 25 October 2019: Yeah, it's 40 now. (See notes at the bottom of previous chapter.) *wipes away tears*
Chapter 32

When they finally went back to bed, they soon fell asleep, drunk on champagne, sex and victory.

The next morning, when dull, grey daylight started filtering through the curtains, John was the first to open his eyes. He chuckled softly as he looked down at the riot of dark curls resting on his chest, as his lover lay sprawled over him like a stranded starfish.

John gently put his arms around him, and relished the fantastic feeling of waking up in a world without any Moriartys on the loose.

Their task was done. They were safe now. Finally out of the woods. Thanks to Sherlock’s accurate prediction of Eurus auditioning for Ophelia and to his flawless scrutiny which had enabled him to recognise her. And, of course, also thanks to his brilliant disguise, which he’d accomplished with Hannah’s invaluable help.

John thought back to the confusing feelings he had been overcome with the previous afternoon upon seeing Sherlock dress up in women’s clothes. Sherlock was right, of course. He had been intrigued. What Sherlock didn’t know, however, was that ever since the debacle with Mary and ‘E’, John had been trying hard to renounce his attraction to anything feminine. Never again to fall for a pretty ankle in high heels, the bulge of perky breasts, or long hair falling seductively over a coyly lifted shoulder. All he wanted, from now on, was Sherlock.

To see his lover flaunt such womanly characteristics had momentarily caused a slight short-circuit in his brain.

He stared at the small strip of overcast sky he could see where the curtains hadn’t closed properly, and smiled.

He couldn’t care less about the gloomy weather. Under his hands, he could feel the rise and fall of Sherlock’s breathing, now calm and slow. Very different from last night, he mused.

His face heated at the memory.

They’d done it.

They’d actually, actually done it.

Grinning, John let out a shaky breath. He had been inside his lover and he felt he would be unable to stop smiling for the next year or so.

He marvelled once again at the willingness and unconditionality with which Sherlock had offered himself to John, had lain beneath him and allowed himself to be vulnerable.

At how easy it had been to make love to Sherlock.

At how it had felt like the most intimate he’d ever been with anyone.

At how intense Sherlock’s orgasm had seemed.

At how his own had utterly overwhelmed him.

He pressed a hand over his face in a ridiculous attempt not to burst from happiness.
Outside, gentle rain started pattering against the windows, like an applause from mother Nature.

When Sherlock eventually woke up and slowly lifted his head to look at John, staring into his eyes fondly, John thought he might melt.

Sherlock moved to his side and scooted up a little, so they were at the same level. “Morning, Doctor Watson,” he mumbled, cheekily, only half-awake still.

“Well, hello, my stunningly clever detective,” John replied, and he pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

For years, waking up next to Sherlock had just been a far-fetched fantasy, and now the opposite – the idea of waking up without Sherlock by his side – seemed utterly unthinkable.

“You know what else you are, besides stunningly clever?” John said, his voice a little hoarse.

“Tell me.”

John swallowed. “You are incredibly beautiful,” he whispered at Sherlock’s sleepy face, running a hand through his messy curls. “You are amazing. You are everything I’ve ever wanted. I want to be with you for the rest of my life, you understand? No more women, ever. Just you. If that’s… alright with you.”

Sherlock looked at him with a radiant, watery smile and nodded, crawling back on top of John and kissing him.

“And if you want to dress as a woman,” John added, between kisses, “for whatever reason, or you just want to wear lace underwear, that’s actually completely fine with me. More than fine, in fact.”

Sherlock grinned, humming appreciatively.

Not long after, they were making love again under the warm blankets, as rain poured down in large streams over the windows.

* * * * *

It was as if their newfound form of intimacy had unleashed a heightened and more uninhibited sort of attraction between them, Sherlock thought.

Of course, their significantly lower stress levels might have had something to do with that as well.

They would spend mornings, afternoons, days, being drawn to each other over and over again, kissing and pressing against one another until, eventually, they both reached release, in any number of ways.

Sometimes, they made love. Each time, before entering him, John would ask, “Are you sure?” and Sherlock loved him a little more. No one before had ever cared what he wanted or what he felt.

But what he wanted, unequivocally, was John. *John, John, John, and more of John*. As if to make up for all those years of being without him, and all the years of having him in his life at a much too large distance.

The way John loved him, worshipped his body and made him forget time and space was still an astonishing, miraculous experience to Sherlock, which he couldn’t get enough of.

And John was showing no signs of tiring of it either, much to Sherlock’s relief.
In spite of them living practically on a cloud, though, this sadly only went for as long as they remained safely inside the confines of 221B. Now that other stress factors had fallen away, it became increasingly clear that John’s mental state regarding his trust issues was sub-optimal, to say the least. Even though there was no longer any threat, he was still extremely stressed and paranoid as soon as he left the flat, leading to a state of anxiety that lasted several hours after returning home each time.

Of course, this wasn’t really any wonder at all. The deceit the man had suffered from as many as three different women whom he’d allowed into his closest personal sphere – and who had turned out to be only two different, but very dangerous individuals in reality – was more than anyone would be able to bear. And while the first instance of deceit was already reason enough for him to go back into therapy, his cursed fake therapist shooting him had obviously depleted any remaining mental resilience he might have had left.

Honestly, the irony of a man going to see someone for his trust issues and his therapist then assaulting him was the harshest turn of fate Sherlock thought he’d ever seen befall someone.

So if anything, John needed therapy even more, now, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen. One minor limitation for that being the fact that John denied that anything was the matter. He just ascribed everything to his remaining dizziness and that was that, as far as he was concerned.

Sherlock had bought some psychology books touching on such matters, but he’d soon concluded they were all rubbish. Or rather, there was nothing useful in there that he didn’t already instinctively know.

His simple love and attention did seem to heal many wounds, though – slowly, very slowly – and as long as they were at home with the three of them, everything seemed almost normal. No, better than normal.

So they mostly stayed home, for the time being.

Hannah was still around, as Mycroft had insisted he wanted to absolutely rule out beyond any doubt that Eurus had been working together with someone who was still out there, before he let Hannah go. He wouldn’t listen to Sherlock, who had already deduced that she had operated all by herself, ever since Mary died (and even some time before that).

But at least, since Eurus’s arrest, they were no longer obliged to lock themselves inside the house at all times, like before. Hannah regularly went out to visit her own family, though only when Daniel could come up to replace her; on Mycroft’s orders. But there was no one to stop Sherlock going out to the supermarket, the dry-cleaner’s, or the hairdresser. To Sherlock’s initial surprise, it felt wonderful to suddenly be able to do such daily chores again which he’d previously always found mundane and boring, because of the immense relief of no longer having to look over his shoulder throughout.

After he’d begun to realise that they induced disproportionate stress in John, during those times they had gone together, and John had started making up excuses not to join him, Sherlock had eventually gently suggested that such outings were useful exercise to gradually build trust in the world again. John had objected that he merely didn’t **feel** like going anywhere. They’d finally agreed they would nevertheless go out a couple of times a week for some fresh air at least, and always head back the moment John wanted to go home, so that he remained in control at all times. Especially the argument of Rosie needing some vitamin D after having spent months inside, out of the sun, convinced John to occasionally come along outside.

It was wonderful to see her enjoy the little playground in the park with the sandpit and the see-saw.
(John holding her in place on the seat as Sherlock gently pushed and lifted the other side), and just the outside world in general.

She faithfully took the crocheted cuddly-toy bee from Aunt Viv with her wherever they went.

(Of course, the thing was anatomically incorrect on several points, which Sherlock had all explained to both John and Rosie, but she loved it regardless. Children were funny that way.)

The comic-like drawings that Sherrinford had made of what happened with Redbeard, and which Sherlock had shown to Mummy, Daddy and Mycroft by inviting them all over to Wantage in a sort of family gathering in Sherrinford’s own room, had naturally caused quite a stir.

Sherlock had mostly observed Sherrinford’s face as the others crowded round the table with the drawings laid out once more in rows of chronological order. Sherrinford had seemed puzzled by his family’s interest and their obvious reaction of shock to what they saw depicted. Sherlock had stood aside and watched the others struggle to somehow convey their apologies and regrets for having misunderstood him for all those years, but without being able to use words.

Interestingly, they still did, though. They said things like “I’m so sorry” and “My poor child, how will you ever be able to forgive us”, even though they knew perfectly well he couldn’t hear or understand those sentences.

But nevertheless, Sherrinford did seem to comprehend the general message. That a huge misunderstanding was being set right. And perhaps, even, that they were asking his forgiveness.

Sherrinford exchanged several long looks with Sherlock, as if conveying gratitude for what his brother had done.

And Sherlock felt that the world was almost right again.

In the following days, he’d started doing research into supported living residences and group homes for deaf people and finding out what their waiting lists were like. He was intent on giving Sherrinford the opportunity to move to one of those, should he wish to at some point in the future, rather than staying on the closed unit of a home for people with profound learning disabilities, which was obviously a label that didn’t apply to him at all.

But at any rate, it would be a while before Sherlock could ask his brother what he himself preferred. They first needed to build a communication system based on drawings, and eventually, after that, hopefully, have another go at British Sign Language.

He would soon have a look at private teachers who could teach BSL to the both of them.

The next time he visited, it was with John and Rosie. It was only the second time John had come to Wantage. And Rosie’s first.

Sherlock had bought each of them a drawing book and a set of colouring pencils to communicate with Sherrinford.

There was a look of mild horror on his brother’s face at the sight of the infant, which quickly faded into curious wonder. He seemed to scrutinise both Sherlock and John, but especially John, as if trying to deduce what the nature of their relationship was.

Of course, he had no way of knowing their history.

As they sat down at the small table in his room, Sherlock leaned close to John and put a hand on
his shoulder, to help Sherrinford figure it out. When Rosie instantly stretched her little hands towards him, indicating she wanted to move from John’s lap to his, he took her in his arms.

Sherrinford promptly seemed to relax and walked to the back of the room to fetch something.

From the way he held the painting and approached them with it, Sherlock could tell it was another gift.

A little shyly, Sherrinford turned the canvas around to face them and handed it to Sherlock.

Sherlock’s breath stopped.

It was a painting of him and John, smiling at each other as they walked through a lush, green and white landscape of blossoming cherry trees, below a faded pink sky. *Holding hands.*

“Da! Da!” Rosie yelled enthusiastically, pointing.

Sherlock looked at John, who seemed both impressed and moved. Then at his brother, who was looking on with patient anticipation.

Sherlock was astonished.

*After having seen them together only the one time when Sherlock first visited, Sherrinford had already deduced their relationship.*

Sherlock felt not only impressed and moved, but incredibly proud.

And he felt certain that Sherrinford could read all that quite accurately from his face.

John then opened his bag to take out the pecan plaits that one of the nurses had told Sherlock that Sherrinford liked, and they ate them together in quiet harmony, as Rosie crawled around, trying to pet the cats.

From then on, Sherlock went to visit Sherrinford twice a week, sometimes together with John, and they would spend a couple of hours drawing together, in silence, just being in each other’s company.

As Sherlock hadn’t really drawn or painted since his schooldays, it felt strange being so clumsy at something. But he did enjoy it, because he did it together with his big brother. Sometimes, they would put two easels side by side and each would work on their own canvas. Sherlock mostly painted still lifes of objects that were already in the room, while Sherrinford primarily painted animals, people and landscapes from memory. Occasionally, he would help his younger, inept brother, by adding shadows or mixing an additional colour into his palette. Then they would look at one another and smile.

On the occasions when John and Rosie came with him to Wantage, John often told Sherlock he was actually quite good, just not as brilliant as Sherrinford – who was an absolute wizard with paint – but still, objectively seen, quite skilled. Gradually, Sherlock also noticed himself getting better, even though that was not really the point at all; but if you practise something often enough, you’re bound to automatically become more proficient.

What he did purposely become better at, though, was understanding his brother, learning his habits and preferences, and making him feel more at ease in his presence.

They were very small steps, but if Sherlock wanted to build a proper relationship with his brother,
he had to build it slowly.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Because I split another chapter in two, this means that the second one is ready extra soon! :)

John realised he should probably soon go back to work, now that he’d almost fully recovered from his coma, and the threat of Eurus had been eliminated.

But he kept postponing taking action.

Also, there was no telling how long it would take for his slight, residual dizziness to disappear completely. It didn’t bother him much at home, but that might be different in a professional setting. He really shouldn’t feel so guilty about wanting to wait another week or two, he told himself.

He looked over at the love of his life, currently doing the washing up while singing a ridiculous song to Rosie, who was cheering him on from her high chair.

He smiled fondly, shaking his head to himself and trying to focus on the shopping list he was compiling.

Only minutes before, Sherlock had scared off poor Greg Lestrade, who had dared to call to ask for Sherlock’s view on a recent murder case.

“For god’s sake, I don’t care who did it. Can’t you see I’m busy?”

It seemed that Sherlock was becoming a bit more like his arrogant, posh, former self, of late, which John actually didn’t mind terribly much, because it was more like the man he’d initially fallen in love with to begin with. And although he was happy to have seen him soften a bit, Sherlock had become much too vulnerable and insecure in the last years, which had broken John’s heart time after time. Seeing him dash about more confidently and occasionally being haughty and rude again only made John smile, because it was like Sherlock had found the golden mean between what he used to be like and how he had grown to be later on.

John had just finished writing the shopping list when the doorbell rang again.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock sighed, interrupting his song to roll his eyes.

Even after all these years, John had no idea how Sherlock could recognise his brother from the way he rang the bell, but there it was.

As soon as Mycroft entered, it was as if the very air in the room changed, as usual. But the icy wind touching John’s soul did seem significantly less frosty this time. And it was not just John having gradually become immune to this effect, he thought.

A certain melancholy in Mycroft’s stance betrayed his being only human, after all. His cold exterior seemed to have thawed, somewhat, now that he was in mourning over the passing of a long-term lover. A lover that nobody had known about – a fact which left him grieving all alone, without receiving sympathy from anyone except, possibly, Anthea, and which undoubtedly made it
all the more painful.

“Hello, Sherlock. John.” He smiled unconvincingly. “I happened to be in the neighbourhood and thought I’d drop in, to see how everyone is faring in these quarters.”

“Everyone is fine,” Sherlock replied, a little less tersely than he normally would have.

“Lovely.” He looked at John, as if expecting him to say something.

He didn’t, settling for a friendly nod.

A vague smile was mirrored back at him. That was at least something.

“Now, regarding Mummy’s birthday,” Mycroft began, visibly tired. “I’m arranging a little dinner party on 28 October. You will be coming, I presume?” He looked from Sherlock to John.

John knew how much Sherlock hated it when Mycroft ‘presumed’ things.

“Oh, I wouldn’t presume that, Mycroft. Since John is obviously not going, neither am I.”

“Why isn’t John coming?”

The three of them looked at each other for a second.

“Well, I think it would be a tad odd, to bring him to such an intimate setting as my other half,” Sherlock said, “when they don’t even know yet that that is, in fact, what he is. Don’t you think? First things first. And no, I haven’t decided yet how or when to tell them, but definitely not within the next three weeks. Other priorities.”

Those priorities were all about Sherrinford, of course. Sherlock had asked John if it was alright with him if they waited a bit to come out properly – to his parents and then the rest of the public – until the dust had settled a little regarding the shock of Sherrinford’s true story, before dropping another bomb on his parents by telling them that their youngest son was actually gay and also in a gay relationship now. Obviously, Sherrinford’s well-being was the most important thing right now, and deserved all their attention. And of course John had agreed.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mycroft smiled. “They know already; we have discussed at length how happy you two are together. John is more than welcome.” Mycroft suddenly looked as smug as John had ever seen him.

John felt his blood start to boil.

Sherlock, too, had turned red. “You told them about us?” He took a small but menacing step towards his brother. “How dare you out me to them, when you’ve never even come out yourself?” he growled. “Should I call them right now, and tell them about Marcus? How happy you were together? How would you like that, hm?” Sherlock’s eyes shot fire.

Although John could understand Sherlock being upset, his reaction was definitely a bit not good, with Marcus having passed away not two months ago, and of course him having been married to someone else to begin with. “Sherlock,” he said, in a low voice.

Mycroft had gone pale as a ghost. “I… I didn’t…,” he stammered. And then, almost in a whisper, “We were just happy for you.”

“Right,” John said, quietly. “I think you’d better leave, Mycroft.”
“I… I’m sorry,” he said, before turning and leaving, his posture like that of a puppet whose main
supporting wire had snapped.

John took a few steps towards the door with him. “I’ll talk to him,” he said in a hushed voice. “Just
think it through next time, okay.”

Not looking at him, but giving a short nod all the same, the Ice Man disappeared.

John turned back around to see Sherlock digging his fingers into his scalp in frustration.

John bit his lip.

“How could he?” Sherlock exclaimed, his throat tight. “How can someone that smart be so
stupid?!”

“Yeah, that was indeed, incredibly moronic of him,” John acknowledged. He nodded and remained
silent for a bit.

Downstairs, the front door could be heard falling closed.

“I mean, I wanted to tell them myself, in my own time, in my chosen context, with as much or as
little detail as I chose. Now, I have no idea what they know, exactly. Or how they reacted. Do they
think you cheated on Mary with me? Who knows? I’m not there to answer any questions they
might have, or to take away misunderstandings. I was supposed to be in control of this story. My
story.” He gritted his teeth and looked away.

John walked over and put a hand on his shoulder.

Sherlock reluctantly turned back to him and let John put his arms around him.

“I know, alright?” John said, softly. “I understand. He shouldn’t have told them.” He looked
Sherlock in the eye, making sure he was listening. “But what you said was out of line. You do
realise that, don’t you?”

“But he was out of line too! The smug bastard needs to learn he can’t just toy with other people’s
lives like that!”

“That’s true. I’ve told you, I totally agree. But what you said about his… partner, was extremely
hurtful, and unnecessarily so.”

“I’m not sure about the ‘unnecessarily’,” Sherlock pouted.

“Well, it was. I’m just going to let you cool down for a bit, and we’ll talk about it later.”

Rosie reminded them of her presence by announcing she was tired and needed a nap – which was to
say, her quiet babbling turned into fussing of increasing volume – so John picked her up and took
her upstairs.

When he came back, after having changed her nappy and tucked her in, he found Sherlock had
made tea.

An invitation to talk.

John sat down next to him on the sofa and picked up his mug, taking a careful sip.

“Do you remember the end of our first case?” Sherlock said in a hushed voice. “Mycroft showing
up at the scene where you shot the cabbie, making you realise that my ‘arch enemy’, as he had introduced himself to you earlier, was actually my brother?”

“Yeah,” John chuckled softly. “Not a moment I’m likely to ever forget. He mentioned something to do with ‘old scores and resentments’ between you two, ending with, ‘You can imagine the Christmas dinners’.”

John expected Sherlock to say something then, but he just sipped his tea thoughtfully.

“You know,” John said, “even though I can obviously see that you don’t get along, and God knows I understand it, what was it he was referring to with those ‘old resentments’, exactly?”

“Well,” Sherlock said thoughtfully, “I think I’ve simply never forgiven him for the way he used to continually behave as a sort of third parent when I was little, rather than an ally. Always telling me I should act differently from the way I did, pointing out my every mistake. Rather than being on my side, as siblings are supposed to be – in disagreements with their parents, or with other children – he was always condescendingly telling me I simply shouldn’t have shown any emotions and then there wouldn’t have been so much trouble. I wouldn’t have upset our parents. The other children wouldn’t have bullied me. As if I just had myself to blame, always. Or, alternatively, I shouldn’t have actually had any emotions to begin with. The code phrase for that became ‘The East Wind is coming to get you!’, because of the way Eurus used to prey on my weak spot, back when she was just a random kid in our street.” He blindly stared at his mug in silence.

Ouch. That definitely sounded tough, John thought.

“Our parents didn’t invest a lot of energy into raising us, other than arranging access to the best schools and then presumably assuming that the teachers did the rest,” Sherlock went on. “They never bothered to set any social rules beyond table manners to guide our behaviour. Never showed interest in how our day at school had been or discussed with us how we could perhaps try to resolve the everyday conflicts and struggles that children naturally face on a regular basis.” Sherlock sighed. “But Mycroft was more than happy to fill in and teach me the ways of the world. In his own, unique way.” He rolled his eyes. “And on top of all that, he would continuously tell me I should stop being so slow and think faster, be cleverer. For instance, whenever I asked him to play with me, he’d only consent to doing so after I’d have finished reading some voluminous book or, quite often, after an elaborate private lesson in deductions. ‘First learn, then play.’”

Unsurprisingly, John had no trouble at all picturing Mycroft as a haughty teenager, although he had to admit, all of this sounded a lot more unpleasant than he’d imagined.

“It never seemed to occur to him that an eight-year-old would obviously not have the same mental capacities as someone studying for their A-levels. It was infuriating. And exhausting.”

“I can imagine,” John said, not quite sure what else to say or do. He gently put a hand on Sherlock’s thigh.

Sherlock sighed. “Because of that repeated frustration,” he continued, “it doesn’t take much to set me off against him. Anything he says is already too much. I just can’t seem to help it. It simply keeps grating, having been pushed past my own boundaries so much as a child.”

Sherlock was quite calm when he said all this, as if he was finally looking at the situation from a distance, simply stating facts.

John nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose it’s like someone rubbing a stick on your arm,” he said. “Initially, it doesn’t hurt at all, but after a while, it becomes unbearable.”
“Exactly, yes. That’s an excellent metaphor.” He was silent for a bit. “But the thing is, I’ve never really seriously asked myself, let alone him, why he was always like this. Looking at it rationally, he was probably trying to help me.” He looked at John with something of surprise on his face. “Even though his approach in doing so was utterly stupid and obviously didn’t work at all. He probably meant well.” Sherlock frowned. “I’ve never allowed myself to really, properly think about his side of things.”

“It isn’t easy to put yourself in the shoes of the people who’ve hurt you. But it’s a very valuable ability if you can,” John said.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows in wonder.

“I did learn something in therapy, you know,” John smiled. “Back when I was still going to Ella, immediately after returning from Afghanistan.” John thought for a bit. “Sometimes it takes a long time before you can really see that other person’s side, and their personal motivations. Years, even. But you have to try. And you’re doing that now, which is a very good thing.” He nodded. “By the way, his approach didn’t exclusively have negative effects on you, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, obviously he taught you some of the stuff you use in your work now. Would you even have started doing the work you do, if he hadn’t pushed you like that?”

“I don’t know.”

They drank their teas in silence for a while.

“All those things you’ve told me right now,” John said, eventually, “wouldn’t it be a good idea to tell him? In order to – I don’t know – make amends? Or at least find some common ground?”

Sherlock sighed. “And then what?”

“I don’t know. Mutual understanding?”

Sherlock leaned forward to set down his mug on the coffee table. “I’ll think about it.”

* * * * *

It was a beautiful, sunny autumn day when the dreaded phone call came.

Vivian Norbury had passed away.

John put down the phone in a daze.

Sherlock instantly came over to put his arms around him.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Another funeral to arrange – the second one in five months.

John went through all the motions without feeling much at all. He’d known she would die; it was no surprise. Things needed to be arranged, so he got to it.

Strangely, beyond a feeling of ordinary sadness, he seemed unable to reach his real grief.

That night, after a day full of traveling around, to the detention facility, the solicitor, and the funeral director, when he lay staring at the ceiling of their bedroom, the main emotion John experienced was guilt at not even having shed a tear over his aunt. His amazing, wonderful aunt,
who had given her freedom during the last months of her life for John, by taking the blame for something he had done, *so he could live in freedom with his true love.*

Sherlock held him through the night until, eventually, the carousel of thoughts in John’s head slowly came to a halt and he fell asleep.

* * * * *

Sherlock had deliberately chosen a posh restaurant that was virtually deserted at 10 am to meet up with Mycroft, while John was busy at home with the practicalities of Aunt Viv’s burial.

Mycroft arrived punctually almost to the second, meaning he’d probably arrived much too early and had waited to enter, Sherlock realised, with an unexpected pang of melancholy.

*Whenever Sherlock called, Mycroft was always there, waiting.*

They sat at a small table in the back and ordered a pot of Earl Grey.

“How is John?” Mycroft enquired.

“He’s coping. Arranging the funeral,” Sherlock replied.

“If he needs any help whatsoever--” Mycroft began.

“That’s kind of you, but probably not. I’ll pass your offer on, though.” Sherlock took the menu and glanced over the pastries section, deciding it would only be cruel to taunt his brother by ordering one, and put it back. Although the opportunity to taunt Mycroft had used to be a default reason to actually do so, his mission was now the opposite.

If he tried, really tried, from now on not to act annoyed at Mycroft, would Mycroft automatically stop being annoying, he wondered?

It was like an ingrained role pattern they had developed, but which might be able to change if they implemented some small changes themselves.

For the first time, he was at least willing to try.

“How about the investigation that was undoubtedly started into Ms Norbury’s presumed activities as a mole, after her false confession?” Sherlock asked, his voice low. “I hope that has been abandoned, by now?”

“Oh, there’s an intern somewhere still working on that. Unsurprisingly, he can’t seem to find anything. But it’s a good exercise.” He smiled.

“The poor bloke.” Sherlock smiled back.

After tea was brought to their table, Sherlock said, “Listen, um, I owe you an apology. John made me realise I really shouldn’t have said what I did, last time. I’m sorry.”

He looked up to see a sad smile on his brother’s face.

“Thank you. And in turn, I apologise for talking about you and John to our parents. I do understand now that I really shouldn’t have, as you didn’t want them to know just yet. I hadn’t realised.”

“It’s not *that*!” Sherlock retorted, trying not to be too loud. “It’s just that I wanted to tell them *myself.* See their reaction with my own eyes. Do my own damage control, where necessary.”
“Ah. Yes, they did start asking me all sorts of questions that I didn’t always know the answer to. Like how long you’d been together.”

“That’s exactly my point.” Sherlock tried not to roll his eyes or look away. “Please tell me they didn’t think it started when Mary was still alive,” he whispered loudly.

“I assured them it didn’t, even though I wasn’t entirely sure myself.”

“Jesus,” Sherlock hissed. “It didn’t, alright?” He threw his hands in the air in front of him. “It wasn’t until John got out of his coma, only two months ago.” He briefly closed his eyes. “Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Mycroft took the tea pot and raised his eyebrows at Sherlock in a silent question, before pouring him a cup. “I’ll be mother.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk about, in fact. Exactly that. Our past. You being… mother. About the way I apparently used to drive you up the walls with my ignorance, as a child, and the way you drove me up the walls by telling me all the things I should have done differently all the time, and making a day job out of pointing out all my mistakes.”

Mycroft looked at him with an alarmed frown. “Is that how you look back on your childhood?” he asked, clearly a little baffled.

“It is. I thought it might be… useful, to exchange our perspectives and perhaps take away some misunderstandings.”

So they did.

They drank tea and talked for over an hour: Mycroft telling Sherlock about how he was always worried sick about his little, frail brother, who had – as they’d thought at the time – survived a murderous attack by a sibling only to get picked on by his peers for being different all the time. How he’d wanted to help him, be there for him in ways his parents should have but weren’t; explain the world to him, so he would understand people better and be less vulnerable.

Sherlock swallowed repeatedly, starting to see things in a very new light. He, in turn, explained to Mycroft how he had always felt inadequate and stupid as a child, how he’d resented constantly being lectured by his own brother and how he’d felt that he was hardly allowed to have any fun in an age-appropriate way. “Not by you, but even less by Mummy and Daddy, who never seemed to accept the fact that children aren’t adults. That little kids need to be able to play, make mistakes and still be supported, and sometimes even comforted, when they do.” Sherlock heaved in a long breath.

Mycroft listened intently, silently.

“And then, of course,” Sherlock went on, “there was the way they handled the situation after Redbeard was killed. I don’t really want to go into all that now,” Sherlock sighed, “and I really don’t blame them for thinking Sherrinford did it on purpose, because that’s not the point. That wasn’t perhaps so much their fault, considering the way Nanny Forsyth had related to them what she thought she’d seen.” He briefly closed his eyes. “But the fact that they never talked with me about what had happened, how I missed my dog, who was my closest companion at the time… and they simply pretended it had never happened, making it seem almost like we’d never had another brother… or a dog… That is something I find very hard to comprehend and accept.”

Sherlock drained the last of his tea in the silence that followed.
Mycroft pursed his lips, nodding slowly. “Yes, I do see what you mean. That was a very curious
decision, certainly.”

“Intelligent though they are,” Sherlock concluded, “our parents were very much… emotionally
absent, as it’s apparently called. I also came across the term ‘emotionally illiterate’, which I think
applies rather well to them also, despite the large contrast with their profound educational literacy.”

“Our parents unquestionably skipped a few chapters in certain parts of our upbringing,” Mycroft
agreed. “Which is precisely why I felt I had to fill in. Even though I wasn’t actually very well
suited for the job either, it now seems.”

“I understand that now,” Sherlock said, his mind still reeling. “I suppose I should thank you for
that. As a child, I wasn’t terribly receptive to brotherly advice, I’m afraid. But I can see why you
deemed it necessary, what with our parents being… the way they are.”

They sat in silence for a while.

The tea pot was empty.

“Listen, on a slightly, but not entirely different subject,” Sherlock said, “Since I don’t expect them
to take any action regarding Sherrinford, I’ve started looking into alternative places for him to live.
There are some care homes that offer supported living for deaf people with long term mental health
issues and complex needs. One of which is in London. It’s a large, semi-detached Victorian house
in Balham which has been converted into self-contained studio flats. Residents go on day trips
together and attend deaf clubs and events. Do you agree to me putting him on a waiting list there?”

Mycroft nodded. “Excellent idea.”

“Good. Also, I’m trying to find a private teacher to teach us both sign language. Let me know if
you want in on that.”

“Oh, very good. I’ll probably catch up later, but thanks.” He smiled. “We’re all so very grateful to
you for having cleared up the truth, Sherlock. And I feel…” He swallowed visibly. “I have
unforgivably failed by not realising that there was another way in which the facts could be
interpreted. And that his IQ was in fact much higher than the diagnosis said. Mummy and Daddy
feel awful about it, too. They probably won’t thank you explicitly for what you did, but they do
appreciate it enormously, I guarantee you.”

“Thanks. I guess.”

It was time to go home. Help John with the funeral arrangements.

Sherlock asked for the bill. When it arrived, Mycroft tried to offer his card, but Sherlock made a
point out of paying this time. Mycroft raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

It appeared they had silently agreed that they were equals now, and Sherlock finally no longer
needed taking care of. At least it was the concrete start of an actual change in their relationship,
however small.

As he got up and took his umbrella, Mycroft seemed to remember something and turned back
around to Sherlock. “Oh, by the way, I’ve decided to trust your judgment regarding Eurus and
resolved to relieve Hannah of duty the day after the funeral. Daniel will stay on downstairs for
another two weeks, just in case, but at least you two will finally have some much deserved privacy.
Enjoy it.” He winked, and left.
When Sherlock got back home, John was out. He’d left a note on the kitchen table that said, “Gone to Leverton’s to choose a coffin. Back around 1pm.”

He could have texted, but then Sherlock might have decided to join him at Leverton’s on his way home and John apparently preferred he didn’t. He wanted to do this alone.

Sherlock guessed that was a good sign.

He sat in his chair and steepled his fingers. Surrounded by silence, he took the opportunity to store away the outcome of all the different parts of this morning’s conversation in his Mind Palace.

The insight into the way he and Mycroft had both been pushed in uncomfortable directions by their parents’ lack of basic psychological insight. The way those role patterns had kept affecting the both of them. And how none of that was really anybody’s fault. It just was the way it was.

But that didn’t mean that everything always had to stay the way it was.

Now that he properly recognised Mycroft’s motivations, it would become much easier to be an adult about the protective manner in which he was always behaving and meddling.

Although Sherlock had always known, somewhere deep down, that his eldest brother meant well, he really felt it now. And to some degree, he actually understood.

Eventually, he got up and went to the kitchen to make some lunch.

Only then did he spot the framed picture on the kitchen table that John must have found among Aunt Vivian’s things and taken home with him. It was a photograph of Vivian broadly smiling at the camera, standing next to a donkey, among sunny hills covered with olive trees. It was a lovely picture. Taken in southern France, by the looks of it.

He hadn’t yet seen John cry over her passing, but suddenly, there were tears in the corners of his own eyes now.

This woman had been so incredibly brave. She had sacrificed her reputation and the last months of her life for John. And Sherlock was so, so incredibly grateful to her. And indebted, of course, seeing as her sacrifice wouldn’t have been necessary at all if he hadn’t been so cocky and sent Mary (Rosamund) that stupid text, which had given away their location at the Aquarium, thereby creating a circumstance where John had had to shoot her to protect his aunt.

He quickly wiped away his tears when he heard Mrs Hudson come up the stairs.

“Yoo-hoo!” she called, wisely, before entering.

“Yes, come in, Mrs Hudson,” he called back.

When she stepped inside, he smiled at her in an attempt to hide his emotions, even though he knew it was futile.

Mrs Hudson diplomatically ignored his red eyes. She spoke in a quiet voice. “Hello, dear. I was just wondering if John needed any help with anything whatsoever, regarding the funeral of this family member Hannah said had passed away. An aunt of his, was it?”

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs Hudson, but he’s not here. He’ll be back in about half an hour.”
“Ah, I see. Well, I’d better leave you to it, then.” She smiled sympathetically and made towards the door.

“Mrs Hudson?” he asked, tentatively.

“Yes, Sherlock?” she said, turning back around.

“If you ever think I’m becoming a bit--”. He paused and swallowed “... full of myself, cocky or...” He paused again, pulling in a breath, “... over-confident ...”

“Yes?”

“... would you just say the word ‘Norbury’ to me? Would you?”

“Norbury,” she repeated, ducking her chin.

“Just that,” Sherlock said. “I’d be very grateful.”
Chapter 34

Aunt Vivian’s funeral was a small but beautiful and moving ceremony – with flowers, music and a poem by her favourite author – during which John finally shed his first tears. They silently rolled down his cheeks as the Benedictus from Bach’s mass in B minor resounded in the little church. Like the first lava from a volcanic eruption, slow but unstoppable once the first crack had appeared, his emotions started to trickle to the surface.

Sherlock rested his hand on John’s leg.

She was gone. No more Mivvi’s, no more crocheting. Gone.

Harry was sitting on his other side and seemed to still be in the first stage of grief, appearing quite unable to believe and accept that their aunt had really passed away. Her eyes were wide but dry throughout the service.

John felt horrible, once more, about not telling her of aunt Viv’s condition. But he quickly convinced himself yet again that it simply hadn’t been an option, despite how it made him feel.

That evening, in bed, John cried properly, sobbing into Sherlock’s embrace – the cracks in the metaphorical volcano having become wide-open crevices no longer keeping back anything at all – as his lover held his shaking body.

A combination of grief, guilt and indescribable gratitude seemed to erupt from his very core.

Then followed the deepest sleep he had experienced in a long while, with strange, intense dreams about donkeys, mountains, his parents, and his favourite aunt, floating in the sky.

* * * * *

The next morning, when he woke up, John felt completely empty.

Light and heavy at the same time.

Sherlock, lying on his back, was calmly scrolling on his phone. The minute he noticed that John had opened his eyes, however, he put his mobile away and turned to look at him. “Morning,” he said, quietly, his eyes carefully scanning John’s face. “How are you feeling?”

“Alright, I guess.” John moved closer and embraced Sherlock, burying his face in his neck, his head still cloudy with sleep.

It was as if feeling Sherlock’s living, breathing body against his own, combined with the knowledge that Aunt Viv would never wake up again, lying in her coffin in the cold earth, made him see the essence of life in a radically altered way.

He shivered.

No one lives forever.

He had experienced the profound feeling of being mortal before, of course, especially in his army days. But somehow, it was different, this time. His life was so much more meaningful now, that the awareness of his own mortality, as well as Rosie’s and Sherlock’s, outright terrified him all of a sudden.
John hadn’t had any such contemplations when Mary had died.

Or maybe he had, but hadn’t allowed himself to linger on such thoughts for long. He had been the one who’d killed her, after all. His emotions about her death had been similar to those after killing an enemy soldier in the war (except, in her case, with a greater sense of guilt). It was lamentable, but inevitable.

*Wasn’t everyone’s death inevitable, though, eventually?*

Aunt Viv’s certainly had been.

Regardless, the sound of Sherlock’s breathing and the warmth of his body suddenly seemed infinitely important.

John then realised he was probably clutching him to the point of discomfort, and he weakened his grip a little.

Sherlock pressed a kiss to his forehead and started rubbing his back, in rhythmic, grounding, soothing strokes.

John relaxed a little.

At the same time, he realised he was hard, which made no sense. But he didn’t have the energy to try to resist it.

And with Sherlock’s caresses grounding him in the present and with him slowly planting soft, unhurried kisses on his brow and temple, before John knew it, he suddenly felt overwhelmed with an unexpected want.

It was pulling at him in every cell of his body. A new and strange urge that left no room for his previous doubts and reservations.

Without a word, he stretched out one arm to grab the lube from the bedside table and handed it to Sherlock.

Sherlock looked at him earnestly for a moment, his eyes widening a little as he understood, almost instantly. “Are you sure?” he asked quietly.

John briefly smiled, and nodded, as he let his legs fall open.

Handing over all control, he surrendered his body to Sherlock, and Sherlock made love to him, tenderly, leaving room for John’s grief over his aunt.

The slide and pull of Sherlock inside of him was a little painful (as expected) and, hence, not a particularly pleasant feeling in itself, but it was *Sherlock*, and that fact alone was amazing and overwhelming. Being this close together, as one, was worth more than a little physical discomfort. Also, John was desperate to feel something, *anything*, to match the raw pain in his heart. It was an immense relief to channel these abstract and useless feelings into his body, where he could understand them, and where they were being turned into something beautiful.

Moreover, it was a revelation. To just trust, just *be*, and let himself be taken, was an amazing, new sensation.

Sherlock moved slowly, carefully, although perhaps a little clumsily. This was his very first time, after all. There was deep concentration on his face, as well as profound ecstasy. Seeing his
expression did things to John. *He* was the one making Sherlock feel what he did right now – just by letting him do this.

John strengthened the grip of his fingers on Sherlock’s lower back and closed his eyes.

Fully entrusting Sherlock with his body and soul – with everything he was – was definitely, by far, the most liberating thing he’d ever done.

Within moments, Sherlock was *there* already, grunting into John’s shoulder, as his movements stuttered to a halt.

John felt a strange but wonderful sort of pride.

But more than anything, he felt healed.

* * * * *

Several emotions were battling for the front row seat inside of Sherlock’s mind. Next to the deep sadness over aunt Vivian’s passing and over the way she’d had to spend her last months, there was suddenly outright exultation screaming through his brain.

He felt like singing. Dancing.

He knew it shouldn’t really matter. There were so many forms of sex, after all, that all qualified as such, regardless. But still, what they had done this morning had felt momentous: like he finally, irrefutably was no longer a virgin.

That’s what Jim Moriarty had called him, according to Irene.

_The Virgin._

It really shouldn’t make any difference. Still, he estimated he was smiling at least 67 percent more since he’d invalidated his late nemesis’s stupid nickname for him.

* * * * *

In spite of the morning’s rather pleasant developments, John felt a little apprehensive as he walked from Russell Square tube station to the pub where he was about to meet up with Harry.

His sister had invited him to go out for lunch together the day after the funeral. She was going to fly back that evening, but she still had a couple of hours left and wanted to spend them with him, she’d said.

John was half expecting her to finally blame him for not telling her that Aunt Viv had been ill.

But she didn’t. Not as they glanced over their menus, deciding what to order, neither as they waited for the food to be brought to their table, nor during lunch itself.

In fact, John realised after a couple of minutes, they had a lovely time. They *talked*. About how they were. About how lovely the memorial service had been. And also about what their favourite memories of Aunt Viv were.

Not about John losing his second virginity just that very morning, though. He did think about that a lot, and probably smiled about it more than he should, but – naturally – he didn’t say a word. He did think she might have sensed it, nevertheless, because she, too, smiled a conspicuous amount more than usual.
She even thanked him for all the work of organising Vivian’s funeral and apologised for the fact that she hadn’t been there to help.

Afterwards, when he walked her to the cab that would bring her to the airport, he jested that he probably wouldn’t see her for years now that she had flown to the UK twice in two months’ time. “Although, of course, you’re always very welcome. You can stay with us, if you like. Anytime.”

“Thank you, that’s nice of you.”

“You have plans for Christmas? New Year’s?” John didn’t even know why he said it.

“Not yet. Why?”

“I dunno. Thought you might want to come over. Bring Natalya. I would love to meet her.”

“Oh! That would be lovely, yes. It would make three visits in four months. Bad for the environment and all,” she chuckled, “but I’ll consider it.”

John nodded to himself and smiled. He’d always told himself he didn’t overly care that his relationship with his sister wasn’t very good. It was just the way it was.

But now that it was getting better, it did make him feel genuinely glad.

* * * * *

Sherlock rested his shoulder against the wall of the little hallway downstairs, as he surveyed the collection of bags and suitcases he had helped carry down from two floors above.

Hannah was ready to leave.

Saying goodbye to her, however, soon turned out to be a more emotional affair than any of them had anticipated. She had been with them for nine weeks, after all, during the most hectic time of their lives, no less.

Sherlock realised he was stuttering a little, as he thanked her for everything. And John was decidedly more quiet than he usually was, and merely stood there nodding a lot.

But especially Rosie’s reaction gave them a lump in their throats. When Hannah eventually turned to walk towards the car waiting for her with the last of her bags, Rosie stretched her little arms out to her and angrily yelled, “No! No!”

“Great. Her first word ever is ‘no’,” John quipped.

And after many repeated thankyous and promises to often visit each other, Hannah left.

In the following days, Sherlock often wondered how the hell single parents managed to do the job, when parenting with just the two of them was already so much more of a challenge than it had been with three.

But, of course, they soon adapted.

Another thing they adapted to was publicly being out as a couple, which was both glorious and a nuisance, as it had led to quite a lot of attention from the media. John had persuaded Sherlock to agree to at least one interview, to the Guardian, to provide some positive LGBTQ representation in
a world that could definitely still use some. And Sherlock had to say that, to his surprise, most responses to that had been very positive.

Meanwhile, Sherlock and John’s relationship continued to evolve, building trust and intimacy.

John continued to mourn Aunt Vivian and visited her grave almost as often as he’d visited her in prison.

Sherlock and Sherrinford continued to become closer, spending two days a week together, drawing and painting and going for walks (him being allowed to leave his room freely now).

In the meantime, Sherlock was looking into the possibilities of hiring a private teacher of British Sign Language.

One day, when he had finally found one who he deemed suitable for the job, he brought him with him to Wantage. His name was Arnold.

“Good morning,” Arnold signed, once they were in Sherrinford’s room.

This was one of the few BSL signs Sherlock actively remembered coming across during his research into BSL teachers and their introductory YouTube videos, and which he could therefore already understand.

A thumbs-up followed by a short tap just below each of his collarbones with the other four fingers pressed together.

After that, more hand movements followed, which he couldn’t make heads nor tails of.

Naturally, neither could Sherrinford. He looked at Sherlock like a scared child.

Sherlock simply smiled and gestured one hand vaguely towards Arnold while maintaining eye contact with Sherrinford, encouraging his brother to keep observing him.

Arnold was deaf himself and taught British Sign Language without speaking. Sherlock had initially not known this approach was possible, but it turned out that it was, which was ideal for the two of them to learn it simultaneously, without putting Sherlock at an unfair advantage.

Arnold signed something that unmistakably meant, “You two, come with me and look at what I want to show you.” They followed him out onto the corridor and into the common room, a little further down the hall, which was deserted at this time of day. He went over to the tv set and took a DVD from his bag, which he inserted into the DVD player.

They all gathered round to see – Sherrinford clearly very reluctantly.

After Arnold had pressed a few buttons, fast forwarding past the intro, a scene appeared on the screen of a young man walking through a park, looking around him uncomfortably, clearly having lost his way. He approached a passers-by and signed something to her. She smiled and signed something back. Relieved, the man turned right and found the park restaurant he had apparently been looking for.

Then a slow motion replay of the signs that had been used, with pictographs explaining their meanings. After that, another scene, of someone asking a train conductor for directions at a train station in BSL. Then someone ordering a cup of coffee.

Very clever of Arnold, Sherlock realised, to first show Sherrinford what goal they were heading to
and what the possibilities of sign language were. That way, he would understand it was not just Arnold teaching him some personal communication method he had invented himself, but that there was a world out there where this was actually used. (Which Sherrinford naturally had no way of knowing.)

Arnold switched off the telly and signed something which Sherlock guessed meant, “I will teach you to sign too.” He then slowly made a thumbs-up with one hand, close to his chest, and supported it with his other flat palm underneath, before bringing both hands forwards toward them.

Sherlock was impressed: both with the beauty of sign language itself as well as with the ease with which some of it could be understood straight away. If a thumbs-up meant ‘something good’, then the gesture of giving ‘something good’ to the other surely meant ‘helping’.

Quite extraordinary.

And then something even more extraordinary happened.

Sherrinford pointed at Arnold and then stretched both arms forward, making a thumbs-up with one hand and putting his other flat palm underneath, before bringing both hands towards his own chest.

Arnold beamed with enthusiasm as he signed, “Correct. You will be helped by me.”

* * * * *

It wasn’t long before Sherlock started dreaming in sign language. Which was funny, because he’d often dreamed about people signing to each other before without actually knowing how to do so himself. (Like in that elaborate, strange Victorian dream he wasn’t likely to soon forget.) And he’d never realised that those dreams were almost certainly fuelled by some very early childhood memory, that he didn’t even consciously remember, of BSL teachers coming to their home to try to teach Sherrinford, back when they had been only toddlers.

Only now had he come to understand his lifelong, simmering fascination with the language.

As Sherlock learnt alongside Sherrinford from Arnold and his DVDs, which they watched for homework, John took the shortcut of learning BSL from spoken YouTube videos, which was naturally much easier and faster, as things were simply being translated and explained. This way, John only needed to invest a couple of hours a week, contrary to the Holmes brothers’ three-times-a-week half-day sessions.

In addition to it being beautiful, in a logical sort of way, sign language was also extremely useful in all manner of situations in which it was either unwise, cumbersome or plain impossible to speak out loud.

Sherlock and John soon started signing to each other when Rosie was asleep and they didn’t want to wake her, or while one of them was in the middle of a phone conversation, or when for whatever reason they didn’t want to be overheard in public. (That last one, of course, at the risk of someone around them knowing BSL, but still.)

Also, once, when Mrs Hudson had popped in right when John had been preparing a surprise cake for her, and they had to plot an instant diversion behind her back not to spoil it.

But also on a tube ride during rush hour, when they were sitting some distance apart and John wanted to check with Sherlock that Rosie’s teddy was in Sherlock’s bag (and not still back at the shop they’d just visited), without having to shout through the crowd.
Sherlock imagined future use of BSL during stakeouts, scuba diving sessions or simply for normal conversation in a couple of decades, when they would both be old and hard of hearing (and keeping bees in the garden of a nice little cottage in Sussex, although admittedly, the details of that plan hadn’t yet been discussed).

And he wondered, time after time, why sign language wasn’t part of the standard primary school curriculum, with it having such a vast array of practical use. Maybe he should persuade Mycroft to pull a few strings some day.

In the course of October, after several weeks of their intensive lessons, it did become clear that the language was harder for Sherrinford to learn than it was for Sherlock, as he didn’t yet know any language at all that he could relate it to. The whole principle of vocabulary and grammar was entirely new to him. His thoughts had presumably always consisted of mere concepts and ideas, of course, rather than actual words or sentences, arranged in some arbitrarily established pattern.

But nevertheless, finally being able to express himself to some extent, beyond just painting, and being able to really communicate, however minimally, clearly opened a whole new world to him. He seemed revived in ways none of his nurses had ever seen before.

And as Sherlock felt he finally got his brother back, bit by bit, he experienced a new vitality himself as well.
Chapter 35

With many thanks once again to my assiduous and invaluable betas Mamaorion, mydogwatson and Jonathan. And also to deaflock for proofreading all scenes involving sign language!

Even though it seemed impossible, John loved Sherlock more every day.

Now that they were more open and intimate with each other, John kept discovering more layers to Sherlock which had been hidden previously. Like his fascination with bees, his love of dancing, and his rather impressive artistic ability.

They only made John’s admiration for the man grow. Besides which, John loved the way all those things brought a dazzling sparkle to Sherlock’s eye, once he no longer felt the need to hide such interests.

In the more private moments they shared, John loved each new and unique mole that caught his attention on Sherlock’s skin, every new ticklish spot he discovered, every new sound he managed to elicit from him.

Thus, John’s heart became filled with more and more love for his mad detective. Love that sometimes merely simmered in the background, that frequently bubbled up to the surface in the form of words or gestures, and often manifested itself in gropes and kisses, which, in turn, occasionally led to other activities.

Making love to Sherlock felt like something of a cross between stroking an affectionate cat and playing an invaluable musical instrument. Sherlock reacted so sensitively to each and every touch, rhythm or angle, that every time was completely different. Like a different song, leading to a unique dance.

Almost like sign language, John mused, smiling to himself.

Being made love to by Sherlock was wonderful for entirely different reasons. John didn’t really experience the ecstatic physical pleasure that Sherlock usually seemed to feel (even though the initial unpleasant burning sensation had thankfully largely subsided), but having Sherlock be completely in charge of what was happening was incredibly hot in any situation, including during sex. Interestingly, after the first couple of times, most of Sherlock’s insecurity had frequently started to make way for something vaguely authoritative and dominant that John secretly had to admit turned him on no end. On top of which, Sherlock was almost always able to deduce exactly what John was or wasn’t comfortable with, even to the point of knowing precisely what it was he most desperately longed for in each given instant.

Finally, John was learning what it truly meant not only to love, but to trust, fully and completely.

(Also, John had learnt that orgasms were ten times as intense with something up your arse, no matter which stimulus triggered them.)
In short, being in a relationship with Sherlock was like looking at a diamond, with countless different facets all reflecting the light differently. Each beautiful in their own right.

John glanced over at the miracle between the wrinkly bedsheets next to him, still sweaty and not quite having caught his breath yet.

Verdigris eyes stared back at him, content but still inquisitive.

John brushed away a stray curl that had stuck to Sherlock’s forehead, and smiled.

After having lived together as flatmates for years, during which they had almost continually been bickering about anything and everything and feeling frustrated with one another, they had now miraculously finally accomplished an equilibrium where John felt they were truly equal, in all imaginable aspects of their relationship, with no more strife. (Well, not a lot of strife, anyway.)

Not that they had become more similar in any way; they were still poles apart in many regards. But they seemed to have reached a stage where they were both able to display an array of very different traits: vulnerability, self-assurance, pliancy, confidence. As if each of them finally had access to their own full palette of colours, like a rainbow sprung free. No longer were they hiding behind a mask of just one or two characteristics that they had subconsciously labelled their personal benchmark.

And that was true freedom.

Layers of useless defensive walls and built-up frustration had been peeled away to leave only this. Their unconditional love.

John leaned over to press a kiss to Sherlock’s lips, pushing him back onto his pillow.

Just as he gently started carding his hand through Sherlock’s luscious curls, making Sherlock’s eyes fall closed and his jaw go slack, Rosie called them. Over the baby monitor they heard her start crying with quickly increasing volume, informing them that every passing second nobody had yet arrived in her room was one too many.

“At least she has relatively good timing, for once,” John jested, as he got out of bed and quickly put on some pyjama bottoms.

Sherlock smirked and sighed.

They’d had quite a number of interrupted moments of intimacy since Hannah had left, not to mention several sleepless nights, now that Rosie was having to get used to sleeping alone.

“All right, it is in fact time to get up and get ready to travel to your mum’s birthday lunch,” John added. He left Sherlock reluctantly squinting at the clock as he walked down the hallway towards the source of the now furious crying. Once in his daughter’s room, he took her in his arms and, after a quick nappy change, brought her back downstairs to prepare her porridge.

Thankfully, she calmed down a little already during the process, but especially once it was ready and he started feeding it to her.

How straightforward her life’s worries still were, John mused, with her main concern simply being whether she received enough food and hugs.

(Which, of course, she always did.)
Two hours later, the three of them were on a train racing westwards, on their way to pick up Sherrinford and then continue even further westwards, to meet up with Mrs and Mr Holmes, and, of course, Mycroft.

From the minute they got off the train at their final destination, Sherrinford held onto Sherlock’s elbow, all the way to the restaurant, and in fact to their table, where the others were already waiting for them.

John felt a fierce pride, seeing Sherlock be so completely at ease with his brother depending so closely on him.

It was naturally still rather scary for Sherrinford to visit public places, after not having been allowed to for most of his life. Everything was new and strange.

John remembered only too well what it had been like for himself after returning from the war. That sense of alienation wherever he went had to be a hundred times worse for Sherrinford. But Sherlock was impressively good with him, anticipating every situation his brother might find stressful and inventing little ways to guide him through.

It was astounding how they’d bonded in a matter of mere months.

Seeing how Sherlock watched out for his brother suddenly made John realise that Sherlock often did something similar for him, as well. He had the ability to flawlessly tune in to what John needed, or what he wanted to avoid, and made sure that any avertable obstacles and situations were steered clear of. John had just never seen it this clearly, as now that he was witnessing Sherlock do something like this with Sherrinford – even though his needs were quite different, of course.

At this realisation, he felt another surge of love for the man who had so successfully tried to make most people believe he was nothing but a calculating egotist. But John decided he’d better save any sort of expression of his affection for later, as they had just arrived.

After all the family had greeted one another in the secluded corner at the back of the restaurant, Sherlock purposely sat his brother at the head of the table, straight across from Mrs Holmes, so that he could clearly see everyone and he wouldn’t have to look too far sideways to sign with Sherlock or John, who sat down on either side of him at the long sides of the table. A high chair was found for Rosie and placed at the corner next to John, so that Sherrinford ended up sitting between Sherlock and Rosie. A rare smile crossed his face as Rosie let her cuddly-toy bee elaborately kiss Sherrinford’s arm.

“Well, it’s truly lovely to have you all here,” Mummy Holmes declared. “Especially including Sherrinford, now that they have finally started relaxing all those ghastly restrictions, so that I can at last sit with all three of my sons once more, as it’s supposed to be.”

Sherlock translated her words into sign language for Sherrinford as she spoke.

“Or actually, even four ‘sons’, if I may be so free as to call John my potentially prospective son-in-law.” She giggled a little.

John felt a strange combination of relief at apparently being instantly accepted as her son’s partner and awkwardness at her mentioning marriage in this early stage.

“Even though,” she went on, “no announcement has been made as of yet to fix anything by law, as far as I know.” She made a face. “But anyway, anything is possible these days, isn’t it, so one never knows, eh? Nothing like our time, is it?” She shook her head at her husband. “At least, I
always assumed that if my sons got married, I would get daughters-in-law, not sons-in-law! Ha-ha, silly me. But there you go, everything always turns out different from what you expected, doesn’t it? To be honest, I’d already stopped hoping that any of you would ever find anyone, what with you two always scaring everyone away with your antics,” she said, pointedly looking at Sherlock and Mycroft, “and Sherrinford of course being the way he is… So this is better than nothing, I guess.” She smiled a radiant smile at them.

John and Sherlock looked at each other in mild horror.

Sherlock, who had stopped translating, turned to Sherrinford and signed, “Never mind her; she’s just talking nonsense. Count yourself lucky you can’t hear her rambling.”

At that, the three of them exchanged some furtive smirks, shaking their heads in resignation.

John heaved in a long breath as he braced himself for the rest of the afternoon.

Sherlock had told him quite a lot about his parents lately, and how awkward they could sometimes be in social settings – especially his mother. They’d also talked elaborately about why Sherlock thought they had autism, so John wasn’t overly surprised by his mother’s lack of tact. But it was a different thing altogether being personally subjected to it for the first time.

“What was that, just now?” Mrs Holmes asked, suddenly alarmed. “Were you… signing, over there?”

“Yes, Mummy,” Mycroft said, beating Sherlock to it. “I believe I’ve told you of Sherlock’s plan to try the sign language thing once more.”

“Yes, you did,” she said, her voice high-pitched. “And I told you it was a waste of time and effort, as…” She stopped speaking as she noticed her middle son elaborately signing back at Sherlock now. (What she didn’t know was that he asked, “What is she going on about and how much longer will it take until we get some food here?”)

“Well, dear mother,” Mycroft said, “I think it’s worth noting that when Sherlock has a plan, he generally won’t stop until it has been executed to his satisfaction. As you can see.”

Her mouth was still open, but no more sound was coming from it.

“Jolly good,” Mr Holmes said. “So how does this sign language phenomenon work, then?” he asked. “I’ve never quite understood.”

Had he not tried to learn back then? John wondered.

“Well, it’s just like any other language,” Sherlock said, clearly making an enormous effort not to show his annoyance. Meanwhile, he signed along with the words he spoke, so that Sherrinford would also understand what he was saying. “Except it uses movements of your hands, arms and face instead of sounds,” he explained. “It has its own grammar rules, and dialects differ per region.” He mustered an expression that almost looked like a polite smile, but John thought he knew the true nature of it: Sherlock secretly enjoyed the baffled looks of his parents as he’d signed along with all of what he’d just said.

“Marvellous!” his mother exclaimed. “I’m so glad you’ve figured out a way to use that strange invention. And to teach him some of it as well, no less! Golly gosh, my wrists hurt just looking at you signing like that.” She shook her head in a sort of shudder.

John briefly exchanged a look with Sherlock, intended to send him strength, before taking a rather
large gulp of coffee for his own fortification.

A waiter came and took their meal orders, which involved more signing at the junior end of the table, and more staring at them from the other end.

“So tell me, how have you been?” Sherlock’s mother asked, after the waiter had left, with a smile in Sherlock’s direction, apparently in an attempt to change the subject. “I’m so glad to see you again after all these months,” she continued, not stopping even to so much as breathe, much less give Sherlock an opportunity to answer her question. “Just lovely. I hope you’re not feeling uncomfortable being together here in public, with John and Rosie, I mean? Although with the two of you sitting apart like this, it’s probably hard to tell, so I guess it doesn’t really matter. If anything, people probably thought you and Sherrinford were a couple, what with the way you were clinging to one another when you came in, ha!” She laughed out loud at the notion.

*Good Lord.*

Sherlock had his mouth open and blinked, undoubtedly brooding on some sort of sarcastic reply, which, however, didn’t come to him within the time frame of the second and a half that she remained silent.

“Have you hired a new nanny yet to look after the child, now that Hannah has left?” she then asked, jumping from one subject to the next faster than a cat on hot bricks. “I’ve heard it’s dreadfully hard finding a good one in London these days.”

The awkwardness of the situation was tangible to everyone except to Mrs Holmes. It was clear from his face that even Sherrinford could tell that his mother was making Sherlock and John deeply uncomfortable. He wildly gestured at Sherlock.

“Sherlock? What is your brother signing?”

Despite his discomfort, John had to make an effort not to snigger at Sherrinford’s remark. He pinched the bridge of his nose so as not to reveal any of the thoughts going on inside his head.

*Honestly, this was just like having landed in a sitcom.*

Sherlock directed a deadpan stare at his mother and raised one eyebrow. “You want me to translate what he just signed?”

“Yes, that’s what I asked, wasn’t it?”

John held his breath.

“He signed, ‘This is awful. Can’t you tell her to stop talking?’”

For a short moment, one could have heard a pin drop.

“I was still contemplating my answer to him,” Sherlock continued pleasantly. “Although, quite possibly, that is now no longer necessary.”

“I think,” Mycroft intervened, his brows knitted together in an alarmed frown, “for the purpose of clarity, he didn’t mean ‘talking’ altogether, just talking about your specific view of their personal situation.”

“I was just asking them some perfectly normal questions! Out of interest!” she said defensively. “Because he’s my son and I would like to know how he is!” she pouted.
“We both do,” added her husband a little sheepishly, by way of calming the minds.

“Well, let me answer them for you,” Mycroft smiled. “They are only as uncomfortable in public as other people are making them feel. In this case you, I’m afraid, by asking about it. And no, they won’t hire another nanny, as both of them are quite capable of looking after a baby, now that John has recovered from his hospitalisation and also seeing as they are no longer in mortal danger from any criminal mastermind’s revengeful siblings. Hannah was primarily a secret agent, after all, and not really a nanny to begin with.”

Sherlock’s father nodded understandingly.

His mother looked at Mycroft as if he was merely giving a mildly interesting academic lecture about something that didn’t concern her at all, absent-mindedly taking a sip of her drink.

“So how about just asking them how they have been,” Mycroft suggested, “and letting them tell you themselves?”

“Thank you, Mycroft,” Sherlock said, gnashing his teeth. Then he quite calmly gave his parents a summary of how they were, cleverly shifting the focus of the conversation to Rosie and then to his and Sherrinford’s joint painting sessions. He let Sherrinford tell them all about his latest canvas he was working on, translating what he said into spoken language for the rest.

John did notice that his voice kept trembling a little, subtle as it was.

Mr and Mrs Holmes seemed rather dumbfounded to hear their middle son’s elaborate descriptions and considerations about his art, which were all very well thought out and sensible, just as one would expect from a proper Holmes.

But very new to them.

They ooh-ed and aah-ed and said, “That is wonderful!” and “How splendid!”

The youngest family member gave them a similar shock, when she signed she wanted her water bottle.

“Yes, of course Rosie is learning it as well,” Sherlock said. “At this age, they copy everything they observe. The only reason she’s not speaking with sounds yet is that at nine months, her vocal chords have not yet developed sufficiently. But her hands have.”

“What a clever little girl,” Mrs Holmes said, delighted. “It’s just marvellous, isn’t it, how fast these youngsters learn?”

During the rest of the afternoon, John relieved Sherlock of having to do more talking by asking Mrs Holmes about her embroidery projects of MC Escher’s mathematical designs, Mr Holmes about his garden and his preferred control methods against box tree caterpillars, and then Mycroft about his views on the current political situation in the EU. To John’s surprise, their gathering actually became a rather pleasant one, once Mrs Holmes had stopped asking awkward, closed-ended questions. She was, after all, also a lovely, caring, intelligent and funny woman, who simply occasionally – and entirely unpredictably – seemed to spectacularly miss the mark with her comments.

(There was indeed very little doubt in John’s mind by now that Sherlock’s unofficial diagnosis of her was correct.)

But despite her erratic bluntness, it was very clear to John that she had no bad intentions
whatsoever, and the fact that she was completely unaware of the effect of her unfortunate remarks on the people around her meant that the atmosphere almost instantly improved immensely as soon as John had successfully managed to steer the conversation away from personal matters.

Sherlock, however, had turned noticeably more quiet and withdrawn. Even though his mother had meant no harm, and Sherlock knew she couldn’t help it, her words had clearly still affected him. He took it with admirable dignity, John thought, showing his hurt only by his lesser engagement in the conversation, still managing to smile occasionally at the puns his father made. But he seemed wary, cautious, somehow. And John couldn’t blame him. The glimpse he had gotten that afternoon of how hard it must have been for Sherlock and his brothers growing up with their mother’s lack of perceptiveness only increased John’s sympathy and love for Sherlock. He had been enduring a lot to continue to be compassionate for his mother, John now understood.

Another selfless act.

Maybe he got that part from his dad, who, despite his degree of social clumsiness being similar to that of his wife, was one of the kindest souls John thought he had ever met. Maybe that was thanks in part to him not making the same amount of incorrect assumptions as his wife did – or at least not voicing them out loud. And the mischievous twinkle in his eye betrayed the real and genuinely humorous meaning of the ambiguous remarks he made, whenever he did speak.

John was surprised to get to know a different side to Mycroft as well. There was something decidedly meek about him in the presence of his parents – or perhaps there were simply other things on his mind, which caused him to react with less vigour and sarcasm than usual. Maybe he missed Marcus all the more in settings like these. Mycroft had, of course, never had the opportunity to bring the man he’d loved to any such family gathering, John realised, and was perhaps a little envious of the fact that his youngest brother now could.

Recognising this, John actually felt quite sorry for him.

All in all, this lunch gathering was a very interesting experience, to say the least.

Mrs Holmes filed only two official complaints with the waiter in the course of the meal, which Sherlock afterwards assured John was a very good score, for her.

By the time Sherlock and John had brought Sherrinford back to Wantage and had themselves arrived back home that evening, they were absolutely knackered.

“Let’s go to sleep for a week,” John suggested, once Rosie was in her cot. He collapsed onto the mattress next to Sherlock, who, however, gave no answer, as he had already dozed off.

* * * * *

The next morning at 6 am, however, Rosie announced that she had had sufficient rest and was ready to take on the world again.

Only half awake, John trudged up the stairs to get her out of bed.

After having changed and fed her and put her on her play blanket in the lounge with some toys, John made himself some coffee and sat at the kitchen table.

The house was wonderfully quiet, save for the little, contented noises that Rosie was making and for the dull city noise from outside in the background.

John opened his laptop and spent some time reading a couple of articles on a news website about
David Cameron’s ridiculous plan to organise a referendum about whether or not to stay in the EU – Why the heck wouldn’t they?? – before eventually clicking away the tab in his browser with a sigh and a shake of his head.

He got up to refill his cup.

Rosie was still busy putting teddies in various boxes and taking them out again.

Sherlock was still sleeping.

Unsure of what to do, John sat back down and opened his blog, deciding almost immediately to close it again. After all, what could he write on there? After having been occupied with two subsequent secret missions for months, eliminating first Mary (Rosamund bloody Moran) and then Eurus (Moran’s sodding ex-lover), he and Sherlock were now busy settling into a normal, domestic life, taking care of a baby and learning sign language.

John hovered the mouse pointer over the little cross in the upper right corner. Just as he hadn’t been able to write anything truthful about those missions, he now couldn’t very well write about nappies and baby food on his public blog, could he? It was supposed to be about outlandish crimes, exciting adventures and brilliant deductions.

He sighed, and took a large gulp of coffee.

He could, of course, make something up again, like he’d done before, just after Mary (Rosamund) had died, just for the sake of letting people believe everything was business as usual. And to keep up the visitor rates on his blog.

And also because he enjoyed writing.

He could perhaps alter the facts of an old case that he’d never bothered to write up, or one he hadn’t been allowed to make public at the time, and – with some minor alterations – turn it into a new story, just for fun.

He remembered their little adventure with the Trepoff murder and the seven clocks that he’d never posted about. Could be interesting, after all.

Before he knew it, his fingers were flying over the keyboard and words were flowing out of him. His creativity was on fire, and for the first time in a long while, he felt he was doing something that gave him real, positive energy. Something not involving Rosie or Sherlock, that was. Something purely his.

And soon he realised, this was no blog post he was writing. This was going way too far off the rails for that. This was a short story. Pure fiction. Utterly unsuitable for his blog. But enormous fun.

He smiled, and kept going. New ideas and plot points were popping into his head like daisies in spring: about secret agents and far-fetched disguises and how the male protagonist was helplessly attracted to the man he was supposed to guard with his life.

Two cups of coffee and one more changed nappy later, Sherlock padded into the kitchen.

“Morning, handsome,” he yawned, gently squeezing the back of John’s neck.

“Good morning, my prince,” John teased.

“Prince? You’re feeling fanciful this morning.” Sherlock raised one amused eyebrow at him as he grabbed a mug from one of the cupboards. “Are you feeling quite well?”
“I’m on fire. Letting my creativity flow. I’m writing a story.”

“What, for your blog?”

“Nope. Just for fun.” He took another sip of coffee, then stared into the dark liquid, contemplating. “Do you think I should write a novel?”

Sherlock stopped and looked at him, probably checking whether he was taking the piss.

John smiled back at him, considering for himself whether he in fact was or not. “I’m… sort of serious, actually. I mean, I’ve always wanted to. Then again, lots of people say that, and it doesn’t actually mean a thing. But in the past couple of hours, I’ve had more fun, by myself, than I’ve had in a long time. And I actually do have some ideas that I really want to write about, too. Perspectives that you don’t see often enough in the media, you know? And God knows I’ve seen enough crazy stuff this year alone to inspire at least three novels, ha.” He lifted his mug. “Could be more effective than therapy. Also, cheaper. Not to mention safer.”

Sherlock studied him, without judgement.

Then John put down his mug. “Ugh, but who am I kidding? If anything, I need to resume my work at the surgery.” He dragged a hand over his face. “I think I can’t actually keep claiming that I’m still in the process of recovery for much longer. I mean, obviously, I still get tired easily, and I can’t stand up for long stretches of time, but that’s hardly relevant for my job, is it.”

“John, you are still recovering, and not just physically,” Sherlock said. “If the prospect of going back to work fills you with so much dread, then maybe you should consider whether you really want to do that at all.”

“Well, we do need the income, don’t we.”

Sherlock picked up an envelope from a pile of advertising leaflets on the table. “What’s this?”

John looked. It was a letter from the solicitor, addressed to him.

He’d meant to open it earlier and then forgot about it. With a sigh, he tore it open and read the letter inside. It was about Aunt Vivian’s inheritance.

She’d left him forty thousand pounds.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, the last part, PART FOUR: THE LOST SPECIAL!

(Just to refresh people’s memory, since I’ve written the first parts literally *years* ago:
Part One was THE TWELVE THATCHERS
Part Two was THE LYING DETECTIVES
Part Three was THE FAMILY PROBLEM)
“Now the tables are turned,” Janine couldn’t resist cheekily remarking, as she sipped her tea in the
dimly lit lounge of 221B.

Outside, dark, stormy autumn clouds gathered overhead, but in here, it was nice and cosy.

Janine carefully cupped her hands around the hot mug, letting the wonderful warmth seep into her
cold fingers. “Now I’m the jealous one.” She winked exaggeratedly at John, who sat next to
Sherlock on the sofa – very much closer together than normal friends would sit, with John resting
his elbow on the backrest near Sherlock’s shoulder, one leg casually pulled up.

“Just kidding!” She laughed. “I’m so happy for you both. Honestly,” she added, more earnestly.
She really meant it, and she knew they knew.

Her previous infatuation with Sherlock had just been a silly phase that was well behind her now,
and had been replaced by a remarkable friendship.

Of course, she was still a little envious of him having found a partner while she was still single, but
that was another matter.

Sherlock and John both grinned sheepishly.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t popped round sooner,” she said. “I’ve just been crazy busy with my new
job.”

“Ah, you finally managed to escape Ms Prada?” Sherlock smirked. “I’m glad. So where do you
work now?”

“At an art gallery, believe it or not. I was so done with the world of publishing.”

“An art gallery?”

“Yes. I handle the bookings of receptions, private parties and such, and I organise the catering.
Much more fun than in Prada’s prison.” She practically shivered at the memory of her former boss.
After Magnussen, she had thought that anyone was better, and she had been wrong.

“Sounds great,” John said, sipping his tea. “Is the pay alright?”

“Yeah, well, just enough to get by on. That’s the main thing, right?” She smiled. “So tell me, how
have you guys been, lately? Fate has been so tough on you two this year! But you both look really
well, after all that you’ve been through.”

“Yes, well. Thankfully, I’m good and well out of the pit I crawled into,” Sherlock said, casting
down his eyes. “Thanks in part to your good care, preventing me from relapsing in the first
month.” A faint smile touched his lips as he looked at her, before setting his jaw. “And that
Moriarty woman is lucky that John woke up well and sound – even though it did take a few months
“Well, there’s another reason why I’m really glad John recovered so well,” she said, giving him a playfully admonishing, shocked look. “God, you had me so worried when you were unconscious!” She looked at John, and then at Sherlock, remembering how he’d never left John’s side in the hospital. “You were both in my prayers every day throughout the summer.”

“That’s very kind, thank you,” John said.

“So what are you up to at the moment? Back to work, then?” Janine asked.

“Not just yet,” Sherlock replied. “Well, save for the odd, forthright armchair case. We’re mainly studying sign language at the moment. For my brother.”

“What, Mycroft? Why?”

“No, the other one. Sherrinford. He’s deaf,” Sherlock clarified.

“Ah, I didn’t know.” She momentarily wracked her brain trying to remember if she even knew about the existence of another brother at all. She decided to pretend she did, and smiled. “That sounds great, though.”

“Oh, it is. We’re just taking it easy, with Rosie and all.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. You definitely deserve some rest. But how about your work, John? Aren’t they pestering you to come back yet?”

“I decided to quit, actually,” John stated, to Janine’s surprise. “I might eventually start subbing again occasionally, you know, as replacement for colleagues who are ill or on leave. I don’t know. But my aunt left me some money, and I realised I need rest, for the time being.”

Poor bloke.

Janine nodded, realising full well he probably wasn’t talking about physical rest. “Yeah, besides the recovery from your coma, I imagine that, um…” She hesitated. “I imagine that Mary’s deceit is also something you’ll need a long time to get over,” she ventured. “I understand. Still not over it myself. She managed to get so close to me. The personal things I’ve shared with her! And all she did was lie. And break the law.” She wearily shook her head. “It gives you a right dent, having trusted someone like that. And then your therapist turning out to be a fake as well! God, I can’t imagine the trauma. And her shooting you on top of that, it’s more than any sane person would be able to handle, John. You deserve a break. A proper break.”

“Yeah, now that you summarise it like that, it suddenly doesn’t sound so strange that I couldn’t bring myself to go back to work,” John huffed with a half-smile.

“Not at all!”

It was a pure miracle he hadn’t gone absolutely batshit insane, Janine thought.

She smiled at him sympathetically. “John,” she said, hesitantly, “you do need some sort of therapy, though, I should think. You need to work through this, somehow. I’m kind of afraid… you know… that rest alone isn’t going to do the trick, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, ain’t gonna happen. It seems therapists have only made my trust issues worse.”
He had a fair point there, of course, but still, it just wouldn’t do. “A private diary, then?” she suggested. “Just to get it out of your system?”

“I was actually thinking a novel.” He nodded once, underlining the determination behind his idea.

“A novel!” she repeated excitedly, staring at John in utter awe. “Even better!” she exclaimed. “Wow, that is a brilliant idea. Writing is, after all, an excellent form of therapy indeed, they say.” Janine felt the enthusiasm for John’s idea of writing a novel well up like a giant bubble inside her. “Because you really have to think about the emotional effects of things that happen to your characters and describe those effects in detail, don’t you.”

Of course, Janine had tried her hand at fanfiction quite a lot when she’d been much younger, so she had some experience putting fictional characters through tough times. Thinking back to it now, she felt a pang of nostalgia at those good old days. She’d absolutely loved writing. She wasn’t even sure why or when exactly she’d stopped doing it. Maybe she should check online what those fan communities were like now, she mused. Surely age didn’t really matter?

“Exactly, yeah,” John said, now showing a noticeable spark of enthusiasm himself. “It’s all about consequences, isn’t it. That’s one of the great challenges in writing fiction, I think. To figure out how certain events make people feel, how they are affected by them in the long term.” He nodded, pressing his lips together. “It’s somehow always easier to see such things more clearly when it’s about someone else, weirdly, even if they’re fictional.” He looked pensive for a moment. “Someway, it still manages to teach you something about yourself and your own life.”

“Yeah. Writing is a great way to get stuff out of your system, I’ve found,” Janine said. “Oh, I’m so excited for you! A novel!” she squeed. “Ooh, can I know what it’s about?”

John blushed a little. “Er, I’m still working on the plot. So I can’t tell you much just yet. But there’ll be action and mysteries, stuff like that.”

The sudden shy but proud smile on John’s face was so genuine that it was crystal clear that he’d found his calling.

Now Janine was feeling jealous for real. But still mainly happy for John, of course. “Sounds bril!”

Even Sherlock radiated delighted approval at John’s plan. “Would anyone like more tea?” he asked, getting up to refill the kettle.

“Not me, thanks. I need to be off in a minute,” Janine said. “God, look at the weather. It looks like a proper storm now. Autumn is compensating for the lovely summer we’ve had.”

“Yeah, when we were locked inside the hospital and then inside the flat for weeks on end. No compensation for us, I’m afraid,” John said.

“Gosh, of course. That’s horrible.” Janine frowned, drinking the last of her tea before putting the cup back down on the table. “You know what you two need? A holiday. Somewhere abroad, far away, where it’s sunny and where you can leave everything behind for a while.”

Sherlock and John looked at each other. And Janine was glad to see she’d planted a seed in fertile soil. A proper vacation in a different place would definitely do them good, to make up for the ghastly summer they’d had. They surely earned it.

* * * * *

They hadn’t talked about the holiday thing.
Although Sherlock thought that John was amenable to the idea when Janine suggested it, he hadn’t actually brought it up afterwards. Neither had Sherlock.

Sherlock hadn’t been on holiday for over a decade. He’d always found the concept of going to another place in order to do nothing rather ridiculous.

But somehow, it did appeal to him now. A little. Just to have a change of scenery. A different routine.

Still, he was reluctant to mention it to John. With the anxiety he still suffered upon leaving the flat, a holiday didn’t sound like a particularly good idea.

Maybe Sherlock would suggest it at some later time.

He looked up to find John holding out a cup of tea in front of him.

“Drink up, and then we’re going to the morgue. Molly’s got a body that Greg wants us to take a look at. I think it’s a seven, at least. I’ve asked Mrs Hudson to look after Rosie.”

Sherlock frowned. The tea was only lukewarm. Apparently, it had been sitting in front of him for quite a while. “Hm. Why a seven?”

They’d agreed to only take straightforward cases with next to no danger and minimal legwork, for the time being, and requiring as little interaction with strangers as possible, for John. (They were slowly practicing exposure to strangers at the shops, not yet at crime scenes.)

The morgue was an excellent place, in this respect, as John was fine with being in a room with dead people, and the route to the morgue was familiar to him, as were the people working there. However, a seven in this context was exceptionally rare.

John started reading out Greg’s text, and only half-way through, Sherlock agreed, “Oh, very good, indeed. Let’s go.” He quickly drained his cup and grabbed his coat.

Once at Bart’s, they found both Molly and Greg standing next to the slab with the victim. They looked up as Sherlock and John entered.

“Aw!” Greg exclaimed. “I was just about to call you. Molly solved it already. Sorry chaps. It was a rare fungal toxin that she thought of testing, and it just came up positive: both in the body and in the neighbour’s mysterious concoction out of his greenhouse laboratory.”

Great.

“Well done, Molly,” Sherlock said, forcing out a smile. “Well, at least this trip gave us some fresh air.” He was about to turn and leave, when John started a conversation, asking Molly and Greg how they’d been.

Sherlock sighed.

Well, if John wanted to engage in some idle chitchat, Sherlock guessed he should just try to endure it with dignity for a few minutes. It would probably do John good.

“Yeah,” Sherlock heard Greg say. “Still working on that robbery-turned-homicide on one of the Borgias, the owners of the Black Pearl, from almost a year ago. The victim’s sister is driving us insane with weekly emails with newspaper clippings about the case from back in Italy, telling us what a disgrace it is that even we can’t solve it. And seeing as the murdered sister – or half-sister, I
should say – had a British mother, and therefore, a British passport, the other sister expects us to put in more effort than the Slovenian police, who couldn’t care less, according to her, just because the pair happened to be in their country when her sister was murdered for their special pearl. ‘La Speciale’ is what the bloody thing is apparently called over there.” Greg sighed and showed them a picture on his phone that the only remaining Ms Borgia had sent him. There were several clippings in one image, the headlines of which read:

‘LA SPECIALE PERLA NERA È SCOMPARSA’

‘LA SPECIALE NON ANCORA RITROVATA’

‘LE IPOTESI SULLA SPECIALE PERDUTA CONTINUANO’

‘LA POLIZIA INGLESE ANCORA SCONCERTATA DALLA SPECIALE PERDUTA’

Sherlock’s Italian was just good enough to know that these sentences meant: ‘The special black pearl has disappeared’, ‘The special one is still not found’, ‘Speculations about the lost special one continue’ and ‘English police still baffled by the lost special one’.

Underneath, the woman had written, “If you not can give me back my beloved syster, at least bring me The Lost Special!!!”

“Her English isn’t very good, I’m afraid.” Lestrade shrugged.

“Surely you of all people must be able to figure out where those two hid the pearl, if you tried,” Molly said to Sherlock, smiling timidly. “I mean, if I were Mary, I would have hidden it the first place I went to while running. Can’t you… I don’t know… retrace her steps or something?”

“I told you, we have no idea where she went, exactly,” said Greg, exasperated. “Except that she was probably at one point in Morocco, around two weeks later, by early May. At least that’s where her pal AJ turned up when my Moroccan colleagues came across him.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at Molly, amused. “I see I must congratulate you once more. And you, Greg. Finally a couple, are you?”

They both gaped at him. “How the hell did you…?” Greg muttered.

“That pearl being inside one of the Thatcher busts and AJ taking it with him from the Sandefords’ house in Reading last April was classified information. You wouldn’t just tell anyone,” he said, looking at Greg. “But it’s been keeping you awake at night, and that’s when you told her. Because she was in your bed. Or you in hers.”

Molly blushed and looked down, trying to hide her smile.

Greg didn’t make such attempts and just shrugged, beaming. “Yes,” he said. “If you must know, we’re very happy together. And yes, it is keeping me awake at night. Sometimes.”

Meanwhile, Sherlock’s mind had already drifted away. Because Molly was right, of course. Seeing as he and John had tracked Mary’s entire trail via GPS when she’d gone on the run, it shouldn’t be too difficult a task to find the pearl.

It just hadn’t been at the top of their priority list earlier.

Back then (Sherlock now shamefully realised), it hadn’t even occurred to him to share the information with Scotland Yard, obsessed as he and John had been with finding out what had
happened in Tbilisi, while awaiting the right moment to catch Mary red-handed themselves.

But no matter. All that was behind them now.

He grinned.

*La Speciale Perduta.*

*The Lost Special.*

“John, let’s go.”

“So will you look into this pearl thing, then?” Greg called after them.

“We’ll let you know!”

A few minutes later, when Sherlock and John walked back out into the sun, Sherlock decided to float the idea that had occurred to him. “John, do you remember what the first destination was on Mary’s GPS trail when she ran, after AJ found the pearl?”

“I think Norway, was it?”

“Hm, I thought so too. Ever been to Scandinavia?”

“No.”

“Would you like to go?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” John grinned. They walked past Saint Paul’s Cathedral as a light drizzle started to descend. “Because Janine was right, you know,” John said. “I think we could use a little getaway. If nothing else, to get out of this horrible weather.”

“It’s more than a getaway, John. It’s a treasure hunt!” Sherlock balled his fist in enthusiasm. Then he cleared his throat. “Not a case, though, mind. We’re not going to bend over backwards to find it. It's only a pearl, after all. We just give it a try and see. Just for fun.”


* * * * *

With both their laptops next to each other on the kitchen table, mugs of steaming tea and a pencil and paper to make notes, they started to plan their *holiday cum glorified business trip* to Norway.

Images of vast lakes, wooden cottages surrounded by pine tree forests and elks strolling along dirt roads appeared on their screens as they surfed around various travel websites.

As the month of November was probably the least busy with tourists of the entire year, they had their choice of flights and hotels.

Rosie would come too, of course, so that in turn did narrow things down a bit. There had to be a children’s cot available at the hotel. And isolated, remote locations with no shops nearby were out of the question, as it was only possible to carry so much stock of nappies and formula around.

The GPS trail showed that Mary (Rosamund) had first flown to Oslo, then Ørsta-Volda Airport, Hovden, after which she’d travelled up north via Norddal, towards the Trondheim area.
Sherlock had deduced back then that she’d probably used dice to determine where she went, linking the numbers to references in a pocket atlas, or something of the sort.

As Sherlock zoomed in on the west coast of Norway on Google Maps, village names like Grøa, Kvikne, Hell, Lesjaverk and Fagerhaug appeared on the screen, conjuring foreign images in their minds of picturesque hamlets surrounded by snowy mountain tops.

“For now, shall we just book hotels only in the first three places she went to, with one day in between,” John suggested, “and then we can decide how fast and how far to travel further north once we’re there. Does that sound like a plan to you?”


By the end of the evening, they had booked three hotels and flights to Ørsta-Volda.

They looked at each other and smiled.

“Ka! Ka!” Rosie called enthusiastically.

“Yes, sweetie pie,” John cooed back at her. “Next week, we’re going away on holiday! Your very first treasure hunt. Even if we don’t find the shiny black pearl, it will still be loads of fun. Because it’ll be the three of us together.”

“Ka!”

* * * * *

Sherlock had a strange dream that night.

Mary (Rosamund) was talking to him, giving some sort of strange monologue, from a television screen, it seemed.

“Nothing’s certain; nothing’s written. My old life – it was full of consequences. The danger was the fun part, but you can’t outrun that forever. You need to remember that, so... I’m giving you a case.”

‘Giving’, really? She made it sound like it was a present.

Sherlock felt annoyance and anger, but frustratingly, seemed unable to speak, and was therefore incapable of putting her in her place.

She droned on for a bit about incomprehensible things, before telling him, “Go to hell, Sherlock.”

He woke up with a start, sweating. He looked around him in the dim light of the bedroom. He was at home. Mary wasn’t there. She was dead, after all. She would never speak patronisingly to anyone again, or try to kill anybody, for that matter.

John was peacefully sleeping next to him.

Sherlock snuggled up close to him, pulling the blankets higher over the both of them, and drifted back off into a calmer sleep.

* * * * *

On Guy Fawkes Day, Sherrinford visited them in London for the first time.
They went to Hyde Park together, had some lunch at the restaurant next to the lake and then had a quiet afternoon at the flat with hot chocolate milk and homemade cake, which John had baked from a packet.

A few days prior, they had started to study the alphabet in BSL in order to learn how to spell names. Sherrinford could now sign his own name and those of his family – which was no minor feat, seeing as letters had no meaning to him whatsoever; as he naturally didn’t associate any sounds with them. For him, they only corresponded with silent, vague, meaningless mouth movements.

“How spell child’s name?” Sherrinford signed, after they’d finished their cake, nodding toward Rosie.

Sherlock spelled it out in signs.

Sherrinford frowned. “Why you not like her name?” he asked.

John and Sherlock looked at each other.

“You both not like. Very obvious. Why?” he signed.

John bit the inside of his cheeks. “Well observed,” he signed. “Name reminds us of not nice person.”

“Why not change name?”

“Not sure, change to what,” John signed, looking a little helpless. “We’re used to it now. Changing is strange.”

“Think about,” Sherrinford ordered. “Still young.”

When Sherlock laughed, John started to chuckle also.

“He’s right,” Sherlock signed.

At that, Sherrinford showed a small smile.

John would indeed have to think about it.

* * * * *

Fireworks pretty.

Sherlock and John’s home very cosy.

Big city strange.

Dinner nice.

Sherlock suddenly standing next to him at window, looking at him, then signing, “I want to ask something. You like to live in other house? Not far from here? Especially for deaf people?” He studied him for a moment. “There, everyone uses sign language. You want to go look tomorrow? Decide after?”

Surprise.
Sherrinford thought.

Maybe yes.

Living with mouth-moving people not nice. But paintings there. And cats. Important.

“Paintings?” he asked. “Cats?”

“Yes!” Sherlock nodded. “Bring.”

“Yes. Want to look.”

Maybe good idea.

* * * * *

“John, can I--”

John’s eyes had just started to fall closed as he was drifting off into sleep, when the sound of Sherlock’s voice, serious and concerned, startled him back to full consciousness.

“Oh, sorry. You were sleeping already,” Sherlock said quietly, upon John’s suddenly jerking awake.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t really.” He groggily turned towards Sherlock, listening.

“No, never mind. It’s nothing.”

“I’m awake now, anyway, love.”

Despite the dark, John noticed that Sherlock’s eyes darted all over the place, as he apparently considered his words.

“Well…,” he said, hesitantly, “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure.” John frowned. “What is it?”

“Don’t you… I don’t know.” Sherlock let out a rather dramatic sigh. “Don’t you miss having sex with a woman, now that you’re… well… stuck with me?”

John should have expected this question, really. Wasn’t that what all gay people were afraid of when they were in a relationship with someone bisexual?

Wasn’t that the reason why some gay men would never want to be with a bi man in the first place?

John cleared his throat. “Listen. In the first place: I’m not stuck with you. I chose you. I want you. In the second place, I wanna tell you something.”

He sat up a little, resting on one elbow.

“You know all those ads with half-naked, sexy women you see all over the city, wherever you go, or whenever you switch on the telly?” John said. “They can drive a man crazy. I know, because I used to be such a man. That incessant stream of images showing scantily-clad females used to turn me on endlessly. Incredibly frustrating and annoying. I spent half my life fantasising about models staring me in the face all over the place. But you know what? Not anymore. Now, I look at them and all I can think is: I have something so much better. I’ve got Sherlock bloody Holmes in bed
with me every night, not to mention his amazing, perfect mouth doing all sorts of wonderful, unspeakable things to me on a regular basis. I’ve got all that I could ever wish for. If ten beautiful women would throw themselves at my feet and beg me to take them, I would still choose you, and only you. Because you are absolutely gorgeous and brilliant, naturally, but on top of that, you love me. What’s more, you know me. And in spite of that, you still love me.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “But you’re easy to love, John. Any woman having sex with you would probably fall in love with you and want to marry you on the spot.”

“Sherlock, nobody who has ever loved me, has properly known me, until now. But you could see straight through me from the first day. You see something precious in me that even I never saw in myself before, until I met you.” John noticed his voice was starting to sound funny now, but he didn’t care. “And that is why this is more than just being in love. You actually make me feel good about myself.”

Sherlock just stared at him in the dim light. A high frown had formed on his forehead. “I think the same is true the other way round,” he said eventually, his voice soft.

John grinned, lifting one eyebrow. “That means we’re a good match, then.”

At that, they simultaneously gravitated towards one another, mouths slotting together, hands roaming over hips and backs, and carding through hair. Softly, gently, and without urgency.

“So… Will it always be like this?” Sherlock asked, between kisses.

“I hope so. Together forever, yeah?”


“Sherlock Holmes, are you proposing to me?”

“Er… I didn’t… er…”

“Pity.”

Chapter End Notes

With many thanks to myspecialhell, fatto-il-misfatto and johnlockismyreligion, who helped with the Italian translations of the Pearl’s name and with the newspaper headlines! And of course to deaflock for checking the BSL dialogue and grammar.

Only four more chapters now.
Finally, after over 2.5 years of working on this fic almost on a daily basis, I’ve now finished writing the entire draft of this story (which has shockingly become more than twice as long as I thought it would be, when I started)! So now it’s just a matter of editing, yay!

Rosie followed all the goings-on at the baggage check-in, security and customs with interest, but thankfully soon fell fast asleep once their plane was up in the air and heading north, towards Oslo.

John stared out of the window, seeing the English countryside glide away into the distance below.

It had been a while since he’d last flown. It made him feel light, free.

Beside the calm contentedness that he felt on the one hand, there was, however, also a considerable amount of anxiousness seeping in at every corner, of course; at not only being outside of the house, but being 30,000 feet above the earth, never mind being locked into a small space with a bunch of strangers.

He managed to largely neutralise his stress, nevertheless, by slipping his hand into Sherlock’s and holding it for a good deal of the flight. If – as John feared deep down – there happened to be any dangerous lunatics in this same piece of flying metal with them, he and Sherlock would handle them together, he told himself, in an attempt to stay calm.

And it worked.

Thankfully, no psychopaths made themselves known during the journey, and the connecting flight from Oslo to Ørsta-Volda being delayed by twenty minutes was the only setback in an otherwise perfectly smooth journey. They arrived in the village of Ørsta even before the notoriously early Scandinavian dusk had set in.

By the time they had checked into the hotel and were finally up in their room with all their bags and a cot from reception, though, it had become dark – even though it was still only 4:15 pm.

Time to feed and change Rosie, which John did while Sherlock put up the cot.

Once all that had been managed (including the adventure of acquiring and subsequently mastering the workings of the hotel’s only electric kettle, for the preparation of Rosie's formula), they went for dinner in the restaurant downstairs.

John enjoyed the unfamiliar feel of it all. The food was different, the buildings were different, and although everyone around them seemed to speak English really well, it all felt decidedly foreign.

Which, of course, had been exactly the point of a holiday.

John felt a sense of calm fall over him like a soft blanket.
It was as if he’d become invisible, in the best possible way. Here, he wasn’t ‘Doctor Watson’, but just a random tourist. Nobody watched them. Nobody was going to target them: no press, no well-meaning acquaintances or patients, no fans of his blog, no arch enemies.

It felt like being able to breathe again after having stayed under water for too long.

That night, he had the longest sleep he’d had in ages. Even Rosie broke a personal record. As he suspected did Sherlock.

The next day, after a late breakfast with smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, they started their Search. They walked around the town, between the white and brownish-red wooden houses, following Rosamund’s GPS trail along streets and backways.

While John mainly enjoyed the scenery and casually checked whether they weren’t being followed or observed by anyone in a suspicious manner (just in case), Sherlock looked for possible hiding places for Rosamund’s and AJ’s loot: in hollow trees, under letter boxes, under loose paving stones, in conspicuous crevices of old walls or rocks, beneath loose soil near unmovable landmarks.

Although they had to wrap up warm, it was still well above freezing, so thankfully there was no snow they had to dig through. And the sun shining brightly, combined with the beautiful surroundings, did in fact make it feel like a proper holiday.

John didn’t know how Sherlock selected which tree, wall, or rock to investigate up close. But they definitely weren’t random choices. He could practically hear the cogwheels turning inside the detective’s head, measuring the probability of all sorts of variables against each other with the knowledge he had of these two delinquents, their dispositions and their previous *modi operandi*.

They took turns carrying Rosie strapped to their back. Around every two hours, they took a break for coffee, lunch or cinnamon buns, enjoying Norwegian hospitality. Also, Rosie still needed her regular daytime naps, of course, for which John took her back to the hotel and sat in the room with her, plotting his book as she slept, while Sherlock continued searching alone. When she woke, John and Rosie joined him again, until eventually dusk set in once more.

“Well,” John said, when they decided to call it a day and head back to the hotel for the night, “she probably wouldn’t have travelled so far up north from here onwards if she had hidden it in the first village she arrived at.”

“You never know, John. She might have anticipated being followed or tracked, and hence have deliberately left a more erratic trail, even though she’d hidden it already. We just have to keep looking.”

Smoke curled up from various chimneys into the darkening sky as they walked the quiet streets side by side.

“We’ve scanned all the streets of Ørsta she walked through with her bag on her,” Sherlock said. “But she might have moved around more when she left her bag, including the pill box fitted with your GPS tracker, in one place. I estimate I’ll need another two hours here in Ørsta tomorrow and then we can head on to Norddal.”

The next few days passed similarly, as they looked for the The Lost Special Pearl in several villages, spending one or two days in each, before deciding to travel further north each time.

Each morning, Sherlock opened a good old-fashioned, large, paper map of Norway over their
breakfast table and scrutinised it for no apparent reason. When asked, he said he preferred it over the digital map on his phone.

John presumed it helped him think, somehow. So he didn’t press the matter further, despite Sherlock occasionally knocking over a salt cellar or a not-quite-empty glass of milk with it.

It was a holiday, after all.

Thankfully, the weather remained lovely for the time of the year and mostly sunny.

John even bought some sunglasses, as he hadn’t anticipated needing any and had left his at home.

Upon coming out of the shop – wearing his new shades – he found Sherlock on his knees, petting a dog that had been temporarily tied to a lamppost by its owner. It was a large, friendly setter, its chestnut coat gleaming in the bright light.

Sherlock looked strangely melancholy while he scratched the dog behind its ear and talked to it in a soothing voice.

It took a second for it to click in John’s brain.

This was the exact kind of dog that Sherlock had used to have as a kid. The one who died in the horrible accident when Sherrinford had saved Sherlock from getting strangled to death in his own dog-walking game.

Redbeard.

When Sherlock noticed John, he quickly stood. “Nice shades,” he said.

As Sherlock made to turn away and continue their walk, John stopped him. “Hey.” He reached for Sherlock’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

A faint, sad smile appeared on Sherlock’s lips. “Let’s go.”

So they continued.

John was wondering whether he should say something, but eventually decided that Sherlock probably didn’t want to talk about it. What was there left to say, anyway?

As they walked past quaysides, wooden churches and impressive rock formations, thinking about dead dogs and dead criminals from Moriarty’s network – the latter being the reason they travelled all the way here – John automatically pictured his late assassin wife walking these very streets last April. But this spirit-like appearance, wandering about in his imagination, projected onto the surroundings, did not stir any emotions in him. Rather, it detached her further from his life. As if he was finally properly leaving her memory behind here, in Norway, walking away from him in the distance, until she finally disappeared.

Sherlock was the one walking by his side now, staying close to him wherever they went.

They took it easy, enjoying the scenery, the fresh air and the food, and hurrying only to the extent that they needed to stop looking every afternoon when it got dark. After that, they just sat in their hotel lobby, often next to a cosy hearth fire, either reading – or in John’s case, writing – a book, or playing a game of chess. Sherlock sometimes made drawings – of the mountains and fjords they’d seen that day, or of John and Rosie sitting opposite him.
Thankfully, Rosie was in a phase where she could contently occupy herself with a couple of clothes pegs or some pinecones for half an hour easily. When she got bored, John and Sherlock took turns reading picture books to her.

(When John did this, he would just read the words that were in the book – like you were meant to. Sherlock, however, focused on the illustrations and would tell Rosie all sorts of facts and figures about the animal species depicted and what these particular individuals had obviously had been up to, judging by the pictures – and ignoring the text altogether. Because of this, it was impossible for John to get any writing done while Sherlock read to her, seeing as he ended up listening and giggling just as much as Rosie – who didn’t even understand half of what Sherlock was saying, anyway.)

One evening, Sherlock persuaded John they go to a local ballet in a bigger town nearby. The performance turned out to be of considerably higher proficiency than they’d dared hope, despite it being an amateur company. Both Sherlock and Rosie were mesmerised. John thought he even detected a subtle change in the way both of them moved afterwards, and smiled inwardly.

In Hjerkinn, they were having a rest sitting on a fallen tree trunk one morning, when Rosie first said her own name. They’d just had a drink and when John put the bottle back into his bag, she spotted the bread he carried with him. “Lowey, bred!” She signed the words for “I” and “bread” along as she said it.

“Lowey!” she yelled again, pointing at their lunch.

Naturally, the letter ‘s’ was still impossible for her to pronounce. And the ‘r’ was rather tricky to get right.

John grinned, and gave her her sandwich. “Here you go, Rosie. Well done!”

Of course, after this reward, she started using her name more often to get what she wanted. Each time, there was a cheeky twinkle in her eyes, as she pointed at her rattle, her teddy, or the pretty coasters at the restaurant. “Lowey! Lowey!”

“It sounds an awful lot like she’s calling herself ‘Chloe’, to me, rather than ‘Rosie’,” Sherlock casually remarked by the next afternoon.

John looked at him with his mouth agape. “You know what, I rather think she is Chloe. That’s quite a lovely name, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, very nice indeed. I definitely like the sound of it,” Sherlock smiled, an exaggerated display of innocence.

John mirrored a radiant smile back at him. They had finally found a solution to the problem that had so very rightly been raised by Sherrinford.

From then on, they started calling her Chloe.

Initially, it felt a little strange, and they sometimes slipped up and called her Rosie again. But soon, her new name started to sound more and more natural to their ears.

After a few days, once they had all gotten used to the name change and John had still had no second thoughts, he sent out a group email to a small circle of friends and acquaintances announcing his daughter’s new name, accompanied by a selfie of the three of them next to a fjord.

If they didn’t find the blasted Pearl during their holiday, they had at least found a much better
name for their daughter, John thought.

* * * * *

That night, Sherlock once more had the same dream of Rosamund speaking to him through a television screen. Her cold eyes piercing his soul as she said, “Go to Hell, Sherlock.”

* * * * *

Sherlock opened the map of Norway once more over his finished breakfast plate in their B&B in Soknedal. It was starting to show considerable signs of wear and tear by now, as well as a variety of small food and coffee stains from various Norwegian breakfast dishes – like free souvenirs.

“Next stop Trondheim, right?” John said. “Is that it, then? Should we book a flight back to London for the day after tomorrow?”

Sherlock studied the map and the 250 mile trail they had covered in the past 12 days, and let out a non-committal hum.

Only 40 miles to go.

Rosamund had, of course, travelled through this whole stretch of Norway within only three days. She’d then left the country by taking a flight from Trondheim to Warsaw, via Stockholm. But she had stayed in Trondheim for a full day before flying, with her GPS signal staying suspiciously in one specific hotel all day long.

Sherlock took his phone and checked what the weather had been like on that particular day in April.

Dry, with sunny spells in the morning, cloudy in the afternoon.

So it was indeed rather unlikely that she hadn’t gone out at all.

That meant that the search was going to be rather tricky, Sherlock realised. He’d have to use all his deduction skills at maximum capacity to deduce where might she have gone that day, without taking the pill box that contained the tracker. All the more so since Trondheim was a city the size of Oxford.

She might even have taken a day trip out of town.

Sherlock’s eyes automatically scanned the surrounding area on the map.

He took a sip of coffee, quickly deciding it would be crazy to search the entire area around Trondheim only because of a hunch. Just the city centre, then – even though the chances of finding the gem were infinitesimally small by now. But they had to at least keep trying until the end.

He smoothed the map flat to fold it closed again.

Then his breath stopped.

“What is it?” John asked, frowning.

Sherlock stopped mid-fold.

Just east of Trondheim, there was a little village with a very striking name.
‘Hell’.

“Go to Hell, Sherlock,” Rosamund’s voice echoed once more in his mind.

A coincidence? Or could there perhaps be...

He shook the thought away. Correlations like that made no sense.

Although… to be fair, it would be her exact sort of dark humour to hide the stolen pearl in a place with such a name. Just like the thing with the bloody Thatcher bust – from a batch of six – which she’d chosen as an initial hiding place for the very same jewel by way of sticking out her tongue at them behind their backs, because John had written about a case with a criminal hiding something inside one of six Thatcher figurines before on his blog.

Sherlock drained the rest of his coffee.

Had his subconscious been trying to tell him something? Something he’d already known on a level he wasn’t aware of?

He’d looked at the map a hundred times in the past couple of weeks. Could his eyes have fallen on the curious name of this village before, just without registering it consciously? Could his brain then have provided the link with Mary’s sense of humour in his dreams?

There was nothing for it now. He had to find out.

“Sherlock, would you mind sharing what’s going on in that magnificent brain of yours?” John asked. “Feeling a bit lost here.”

Sherlock beamed at him as he got up from the table. “Come on, John! We’re going to Hell!”

* * * * *

Hell turned out to be a lovely little place on the southern coast of a river mouth lined with deciduous forests. The sun was only partly visible behind the mostly overcast sky, not dissimilar to the day Rosamund had been in the area, six months ago.

Despite the village consisting of nothing more than a few hundred scattered houses, a grocery store, a fast food shop and a petrol station, it was of course a minor tourist attraction, as visitors liked to have their photograph taken in front of its name sign. There were in fact a few doing that as John and Sherlock walked past.

In reality, the name Hell stemmed from the Old Norse word for ‘overhang’ or ‘cliff cave’, John had read on Wikipedia. (He liked to look such things up rather than keep wondering.)

They wandered around for a couple of hours, lifting rocks and stones and checking out trees, until they made their way to an isolated area of extraordinarily rocky shoreline. Rather than consisting of loose rocks, the shore was in fact one big stretch of rock itself.

There was a coastal watchtower looking out over the fjord, with a stone wall below it that was made up of large, ancient-looking, squarely hewn rocks, stacked together roughly with cement. A little further down stood a lonely, wooden bench, which had clearly seen better days. A few empty beer cans lay littered around, occasionally attracting the attention of sea gulls that were looking for food.

John wondered how anything could possibly be hidden on this beach.
Still, Sherlock had been determined to come down here. He currently stood looking around, his eyes narrowed, apparently tuning in to the environment in that way he did.

After a while, he walked over to the rough, stone wall and started systematically feeling every stone in it at chest height, seemingly checking if it moved if he tried to wiggle it.

“You want me to do the row beneath?” John asked, already taking a step towards it.

“Well,” Sherlock said, grunting a little, as just then, with some effort, he pulled out a large, loose stone from the wall. After setting it down onto the ground, he squinted into the gap it had left. Then he reached one hand inside. “Let’s see what we have here, first.”

To John’s astonishment, Sherlock pulled out a weathered, brown envelope.

They looked at each other for a stunned moment, not daring to hope.

Sherlock grabbed his phone – his fingers trembling ever so slightly – and took a couple of pictures of the envelope in his hand and of the gap he had recovered it from. Then he nodded to the bench nearby.

They silently walked over and sat down, some distance apart, leaving room to carefully open the envelope between them.

First, Sherlock took two pairs of latex gloves from his coat pocket, handed one pair to John, and put the other pair on himself.

After studying the envelope for another bit, slowly turning it around in his hands, he eventually cautiously opened it with his pocket knife.

Inside was a flat, see-through zip-lock bag with what seemed to be two British passports and a curious little round ball of crumpled up masking tape, about an inch across.

Wordlessly, they each took a passport to see whose it was.

John opened his. It supposedly belonged to a woman called Susan Lee, with spikey, short black hair and dark eyeliner around her eyes. He frowned, swallowing hard.

Sherlock held out the opened passport in his hands towards John, pressing his lips together.

John felt a cool chill down his spine. “Mary Morstan,” he muttered, reading the fake name next to the familiar photo.

_Incredible._

_Sherlock had actually found a hiding place of hers, in the middle of this hellhole._

John looked at the face of the woman he’d married. Then at ‘Susan Lee’.

It was the same face, just different hair and make-up.

Blowing out a sigh, he handed the passport to Sherlock, briefly exchanging a look with him.

Sherlock’s face was a mask of neutral concentration as he once more fished out his phone and took another couple of pictures of the three items, separately and together, passports opened and closed – laid out on top of the envelope – before picking up the mysterious ball of tape and holding it between his thumb and index finger. He looked at John with raised eyebrows.
John nodded, shrugging.

Sherlock spent the next few minutes struggling with the many layers of sticky tape. Bit by bit, he tore pieces off of it, picking away at the clump and making it gradually smaller.

Meanwhile, John lifted Chloe out of the baby carrier and put her onto his lap. She grabbed a pebble that was lying on the armrest and tried to put it in her mouth. “No, Chloe. No eating pebbles,” John warned her, carefully prying it out of her little hands.

The tension of being about to find out whether the tape ball actually contained an invaluable missing pearl made everything seem unreal.

_Here they were, in Norway, of all places, on a remote beach where Mary had actually once been._

John had no idea how to gauge the odds that the Black Pearl of the Borgias was actually inside that little clump. In a way, it seemed unlikely.

Then again, what else could it be? Surely the clump was not just what it seemed to be – a mere ball of tape, stashed away in such a secret hiding place.

He looked at the fishing boats on the horizon, pointing them out to Chloe, as Sherlock valiantly plucked on, softly cursing every so often.

Then, just as John and Chloe were debating which ship had the prettiest colours (“Da?”, “Da!”), suddenly, a cry of joy next to him.

“Oh, yes!”

John whipped his head around.

In Sherlock’s palm lay a shiny, dark bead.

* * * * *

Once Lestrade and Interpol had been alerted, John and Sherlock numbly remained seated on the wooden bench, staring out at the sea.

“Well,” John said.

“Yeah,” Sherlock replied.

Then they both burst into giggles.

“This is just incredible,” John wheezed, catching his breath again.

“I should probably, um, stow this thing away somewhere secure,” Sherlock said, “before I drop it, or something.”

“Hm, yes,” John agreed. “It would indeed be rather a pity if it bounced into the ocean now.”

“That is where it came from, once upon a time, though,” Sherlock pointed out. “In a way, you could say it belongs there.”

They giggled a little more as Sherlock safely put it in an inside pocket of his coat. “There.”

“Don’t lose your coat now,” John jested.

John snorted out a laugh, before turning quiet again. Still wearing his latex gloves, he picked up the ‘Mary Morstan’ passport and looked at the photograph once more.

*How could he ever have believed she was so innocent?*

*Or could it be that he had known, on some subconscious level, that there had been more to her, which was perhaps what had attracted him to her in the first place, as Sherlock had once argued?*

A breeze picked up as the conversation they’d had over a year ago echoed in his mind.

“*Why is she like that?*”

“*Because you chose her. You are abnormally attracted to dangerous situations and people.*”

John shivered.

He thought about that little, priceless, black gem, now inside Sherlock’s pocket. Mary and AJ had *killed* someone for that pearl. Actually ended a human life in order to possess it, probably to sell it. And since, it had been lying here, inside a stone wall in Norway, forgotten. Worthless, until Sherlock had found it again.

It would be but a small consolation for the grieving sister, to have the family pearl back that cost her sibling her life.

Chloe pointed a little chubby finger in the direction of her mother’s vaguely smiling face on the passport photo. “Da,” she said, flatly.

“Yeah, remember mummy?” John asked, with a growing, angry lump in his throat.

Chloe, indifferent, had already shifted her focus, reaching her arms out to Sherlock in order to move over onto his lap. “Mummy! Mummy!” she repeated, nestling herself in Sherlock’s arms.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows, gaping at John with big eyes. “Did she just--?”

Suddenly, the lump in John’s throat had taken on an entirely different nature. He managed a wet smile as he huffed out an awed, melodious, “*Oh yes.*”

And when he saw Sherlock’s proud, baffled, fond, sentimental grin, *that* was the moment when John suddenly knew that *this was it*. Sherlock really, really wanted to be there for not just John, but also Chloe.

*They were in this together, for the long run.*

Like a beam of sunlight suddenly illuminating something that had already been there, John suddenly saw their relationship in a new light. Despite his earlier fears that Sherlock might quickly get bored with John and the whole relationship thing, let alone having to help raise Chloe, he now unequivocally realised, clear as day, that that wasn’t going to happen. The relationship they had now been in for three months was more stable than anything John had ever experienced or seen. And Sherlock was as good a father as anyone could wish for.

In one crazy moment, the thought ‘Let’s get married’ screamed through John’s brain, but that would be something for later – if ever. What he really meant was ‘*I want you to legally adopt Chloe so we can officially be a proper family*’. That was much more important than a stupid
marriage ceremony at any rate, which he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to put himself through for a second time anyway (regardless of what Sherlock’s mother seemed to think).

But he knew this for certain: he wanted this; the three of them together. In writing.

Their eyes remained locked in loving wonder as all these thoughts jumbled through John’s mind.

But he didn’t say anything.

He wanted to do this right: he first had to find out what the legal possibilities even were, exactly, before asking Sherlock such an important question. But the decision to ask him had been made today, on this beach, and it felt momentous and wonderful.

John looked away to the horizon, biting his lip in a smile.

“What?” Sherlock asked, with a laugh.

John shook his head.

Although finding the pearl was brilliant, of course, the other things John had found (and left) in Norway were of infinitely greater value. There was Chloe’s new name, and the resolution to arrange official parental responsibility for Sherlock – if he should want it. But also the realisation that – now that they had been properly together for a while – Sherlock had still not stopped loving him, or Chloe, and it didn’t look as if he ever would.

This was really it.

The life he’d always wanted.

Everything was alright. Literally, everything. They were publicly out and the world hadn’t ended. Together, they had solved all the adversity that had been thrown their way, and they had survived.

They could actually start living their lives together and John could finally, at long last, stop looking for what he hadn’t been able to find anywhere else.

John still felt his partner’s gaze on him, who was clearly wondering what was going on in his mind.

“I never thought I’d ever be this happy,” John said, his voice catching in his throat. “And it has nothing to do with a sodding pearl.”

Chapter End Notes

Still not the end! :) Three more chapters. Btw, one of the fun things about writing a fic like this is finding out there is a website [https://www.sunrise-and-sunset.com] where you can enter any place name in the world and a date of choice, and it gives you the exact times of sunrise and sunset in that place on that day. Also, Google Streetview enabled me to ‘walk through’ all these places in Norway that I’ve never been to irl, so that I could describe them as if I had. Amazing! Long live the internet, lol. (I’m one of those fossils who can quite clearly remember the time before it existed. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to write fic back then – or publish it, for that matter! We are honestly so lucky in this day and age...)
Oh, and there was actually a tiny Cabin Pressure reference in this chapter, although I’m afraid it might almost be impossible to catch… Let me know if you still did! (It’s two lines from Martin and Douglas that are mirrored here by Sherlock and John, although in a rather different context.)
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the quiet before the storm, Sherlock knew.

He and John remained on their bench, smiling at one another, as Chloe played with Sherlock’s coat buttons.

Sherlock relished this moment of familial intimacy.

Any moment now, the people from Interpol would arrive and swarm this peaceful beach. Soon after, the press would follow.

Sherlock looked out over the water of Trondheim Fjord, one of the biggest of its kind.

They would have to stick it out for a couple of days. Ah well. It would be over soon enough, and then the calm would return. Proper calm.

Everything had been resolved. No loose ends left.

He took a deep breath of fresh sea air.

And then, with something of a small shock, he suddenly came to a realisation. The withdrawal symptoms of last summer’s escapade, which had slowly been fading more and more to the background: they were gone now. Completely gone. He felt a hundred percent fit and normal, much as he usually loathed that term.

He grinned in spite of himself.

Normal was good. Excellent, in fact.

He looked at John, sitting beside him on the bench, pensively gazing into the distance.

And then Sherlock became aware of another – even more momentous – thing. John’s eyes were steady. His posture solid and strong. No signs of dizziness.

Sherlock’s heart started to beat faster, euphoria creeping in: an even stronger feeling than he’d had just now upon finding the lost pearl. He thought back to their first week in Norway. John had still needed to sit down quite often during their expeditions. But not the last couple of days. They had walked for more than an hour on end, sometimes.

Sherlock let out a shaky breath.

John was better.

They were both better. They had found the Pearl. Mary and Eurus could no longer interfere in their lives in any way. And Chloe had a new name, banishing Rosamund from their lives entirely. On top of which, she’d called Sherlock ‘mummy’.

Everything was perfect.

In Hell, of all places, it had all come full circle. In Hell, they had found heaven.
Sherlock smirked.

He’d always hated people who had what they called ‘a perfect life’, but now he was one of them. He had everything. Everything that was perfect to him, anyway.

He looked down at Chloe, who appeared to be trying to push herself up into a standing position on his lap, and helped her. No sooner had she gotten herself upright, than she started to enthusiastically bounce up and down, bending and stretching her little knees with impressive force and vigour, as Sherlock held her torso and carefully swayed along with her movements – without pushing her in any direction.

Sherlock chuckled, as the way she moved reminded him of one particular part of that ballet they’d seen the other day. He hummed along the accompanying tune, encouraging Chloe to keep moving on the beat.

Come to think of it, now that he was being really honest with himself, maybe there was one more thing he wanted in his life. Maybe, once they were back home in London, he could try and find a place where he could take ballet lessons. John had his book project in his free time now, after all. Perhaps, at the age of almost forty, it was time for him to finally pick up an old hobby as well.

The Work was hardly the most important thing, after all.

Of course, people would say it was definitely too late for him to start doing something like that.

He briefly pictured himself in a ballet class surrounded by little girls in tutus.

**But surely they had intermediate classes for grown-ups somewhere in London?**

There was no reason not to look into it, he thought, as he supported Chloe through her rhythmic little dance. He didn’t care what people would think. Not one tiny bit.

He’d always wanted to dance. The only reason he’d stopped, back in his uni years, was that he hadn’t been able to stand his new teacher, and there hadn’t been any other class.

“Look at that energetic ballerina,” John chuckled. “It won’t take long before she can stand by herself.”

“By the looks of it, she’ll dance before she learns to walk,” Sherlock joked.

“I think she gets that from you.” John smiled a cheeky smile, which made Sherlock suddenly feel wonderfully warm inside, even though John was just talking nonsense, of course. Since Sherlock had no genetic bond with Chloe, she couldn’t ‘get’ anything from him. At least, he didn’t think behavioural imprinting started as early as this in humans. Or did it?

Also, was John implying that Sherlock didn’t walk like a normal person?

Sherlock snorted, deciding to ignore the remark.

A group of seagulls suddenly landed in front of them, loudly disagreeing on something, before disappearing in different directions.

“How the hell did you know, though?” John suddenly asked. “To look in Hell?”

“Ah. You’re not going to believe it,” Sherlock answered, pulling his mind away from his previous thoughts.
John raised his eyebrows at him.

Sherlock sighed. “I… had a dream that led us here.”

He looked at John from the corner of his eye and saw that his mouth was comically hanging half open. He clearly didn’t believe him.

“There is sometimes great value in unconsciously made connections in dreams,” Sherlock explained, a little defensively, “as well as in what people have come to call ‘gut feeling’, which is really – in both cases – just a matter of your brain making logical connections between things you might not have registered on a conscious level, but which your neurons have nevertheless stowed away somewhere.

“Seriously, a dream? What was this dream about, then?” John wanted to know.

A little reluctantly, he answered, “It was Mary, giving a little personal speech from some sort of television screen or something, before kindly telling me, ‘Go to Hell, Sherlock’.”

John gaped at him. “I wrote that on my blog,” he then said, astounded. “Well, not literally. But back in June, I made up that story about Mary recording a DVD and sending it to you after her death, telling you to put yourself in harm’s way so that I would come and save you, remember?”

Sherlock didn’t remember. But he knew for a fact he’d read all of John’s blog, so he must have read this also. Which only went to prove his point. Unconsciously stored information could most certainly influence dreams and decisions.

And it dawned on him that he would not have dreamt this dream if John hadn’t written that story on his blog. Hence, John’s fiction writing had – incredibly – saved the day. His own brain had simply supplied a word joke that had been very like Mary.

He shook his head in amazement. “Remarkable.”

“You can say that again,” John huffed.

They stared out onto the sea for another bit, content. Their guard down.

Of course, this was a foolish thing to do. Never let your guard down. Not ever. Especially not when you’ve got a priceless pearl hidden in your coat and a bag sitting next to you with two illegal, fake passports that were essential evidence for the police forces of several different countries.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, an arm appeared that snatched Sherlock’s rucksack from right beside him on the bench.

Sherlock spent almost a full second being stunned – to his utter shame having been taken completely by surprise. As he instinctively clutched Chloe – who was still on his lap – in a protective embrace, he awkwardly, and much too slowly, turned around to see who the perpetrator was, while also telling himself how much of a complete idiot he was.

Because of Chloe, there probably wasn’t much else he could have done anyway.

John, however, promptly – and very nimbly – jumped over the back of the bench towards the scrawny thief, practically in the same instant the man had appeared. He managed to grab him by the sleeve as he tried to run away, making the man lose his balance so that he stumbled and fell.

The culprit succeeded in getting up, though, and resuming his flight faster than John could get
proper hold of him.

There was a short sprint over the relatively flat, but uneven, rough rocks, before John forcefully launched himself at the fugitive, hugging him from behind as he collided with him and propelled him down towards the ground.

John efficiently used his full weight on the scraggy robber, as he held him down onto the hard rocks, twisting his arms behind his back.

The man howled like a small puppy.

Sherlock stupidly gaped at the two of them, holding Chloe close to his chest.

“Hello there,” John said to the criminal, his voice a sea of calm. “Now where did you think you were going with that rucksack?”

Sherlock could breathe again.

John obviously had the situation well under control. Thank God. His brilliant John.

The pitiful bandit mumbled something unintelligibly. Maybe it was Norwegian. Either way, he was clearly high as a kite.

As John and Sherlock looked at each other, there was the welcome sound of a helicopter approaching, quickly making any sort of conversation impossible with its noise.

It landed right by their side.

*Impeccable timing.*

Sherlock smirked.

Time to hand over a crook and a pearl, and then face the red tape.

* * * * *

It soon turned out that said crook had had no idea who he’d tried to rob. He’d just been out for a quick snatch-and-grab. Which amused John no end, afterwards, when they were having dinner at their hotel.

He was on his own kind of high, beaming and laughing an amount Sherlock had never seen him do.

Sherlock suspected John might actually think something similar of him at the moment.

It was contagious.

(People around them probably thought they’d had too much to drink. But, although they had ordered champagne, it had yet to be brought to their table.)

“Can you imagine?” John wheezed, “This bloke going, ‘Oh, you know what? I’ll have a go at these two; they might have a fiver or a sandwich left in their bag’, and then me jumping on top of him and a sodding helicopter coming to pick him up within less than two minutes.”

Sherlock chuckled loudly, making no attempt to keep it down.
They were staying at a slightly fancier hotel than their previous ones, because it was their last stop and also because there actually were fancier hotels in Trondheim than there had been in the little villages they had stayed in until now.

So they were having a nice, proper three-course meal. With Chloe thankfully fast asleep in her moses basket on the floor next to them, they talked and they laughed about nothing and everything.

Just as the waiter brought them their main course, Sherlock’s phone rang.

It was Mycroft.

“Hellooo,” Sherlock said, simultaneously eyeing the various dishes being set out in front of him.

“Good evening, brother mine. So nice to speak to you again.”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock sighed. “I gather that word has reached you we’ve completed Moran’s little treasure hunt and you’re calling to congratulate us, no doubt?”

“Precisely. Congratulations, Sherlock. Very nicely done, I must say,” Mycroft drawled. “In fact, I’ve booked a little surprise for you two, by way of a reward, if you will. The three of you, I mean, sorry. As I think you’ve deserved some proper relaxation, there’s a Premium Deluxe Suite awaiting you at the Britannia Hotel. It’s booked for an entire week.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “The Britannia, seriously?” He snorted. In spite of its dubious name, it was in fact the fanciest hotel in the city, of course, established 1897. “You just wanted to make sure we didn’t leave on tomorrow’s flight without properly wrapping up the case with Interpol.”

He sighed, throwing John a look. “Rather transparent, don’t you think? We’ll consider it, though. Good evening.”

He put down the phone and narrowed his eyes at John for a moment in silence. Then he took a large breath. “Let’s move to the Britannia.”

John gave him a deadpan stare, subtly raising one eyebrow at him.

“It would be a shame, after all,” Sherlock said, “to turn down a free gift from the Government. And I bet the suite has a jacuzzi.”


Sherlock frowned. “A bubble bath, John.”

John looked at him with a lopsided grin, pushing his tongue against the inside of his cheek. “Alright. Let’s go. As soon as we’ve finished up this meal.”

* * * * *

The bath indeed turned out to be a welcome diversion after all the questions, forms and witness statements they had to deal with over the following couple of days.

As did the indoor swimming pool and sauna.

On top of which, room service was proving an ideal way to avoid running into journalists.

Their find was all over the news now. #thelostspecial was trending on Twitter, along with #lostspecialfound. Suddenly, no one called it The Black Pearl of the Borgias anymore, for some
reason. (Maybe because one of the Borgias was now dead and there was sadly only one left, of what had once been a large and powerful family.)

Although John had enjoyed their travelling through little villages and being outside all day for almost two weeks, locking themselves inside a luxury suite for a while was definitely also most agreeable.

Sherlock teased the public by tweeting some pictures of their rooms with the hashtag #holidayatlast. Including one of the bath, of course. (Thankfully, with neither of them in it.)

On the third day, they received a message from the one remaining Ms Borgias, stating that she was intending to give them an enormous reward for retrieving the family gem. Judging by the way she phrased it, it looked very much as if they wouldn’t need to work for money for a good while.

“God is smiling upon us,” John joked, shaking his head. “Finally.”

“It’s funny how everything started to look up significantly from the moment we got into a relationship,” Sherlock replied. “God must approve of that, then, it seems.”

John knew that Sherlock did not remotely believe there was a god. (‘And if there is, there’s definitely no reason to assume it’s male,’ he used to say.) John also knew Sherlock was aware that John had been brought up with religion playing a central role in his early life, and hence with an engrained disapproval of anything but traditional gender roles. Not that he gave a toss anymore about what the Church thought, but still, it had been part of the fabric of his childhood. So what Sherlock had made seem like a light joke was actually a remark of reassurance and comfort to John. Because he was right. Since starting a relationship, things had only taken a turn for the better. They had not been punished in any way, not even by the public (save for a handful of anticipated rude comments of some internet trolls who couldn’t be taken seriously anyway), nor by anyone they knew personally.

In response, John grinned and said, “Well, let’s generate some more good luck, then,” leisurely tackling Sherlock onto the bed and diving on top of him. In one smooth movement, he playfully pinned down Sherlock’s arms next to his head onto the mattress and casually nuzzled his neck.

As their luxury room was considerably larger than the places they’d stayed at previously, this not only meant that Chloe finally had a proper play area of her own, but also that they had been able to put Chloe’s cot around a little corner, giving them some privacy in bed at last.

(She was thankfully asleep at the moment, anyway.)

John unhurriedly started undressing Sherlock – whose lazy smile indicated his approval of the proceedings – and then made quick work of his own clothes, after which Sherlock instantly conjured up a bottle of lube seemingly out of nowhere and applied the contents onto John with dazzling dexterity.

A very clear invitation.

John easily fell between Sherlock’s legs, and, with a deep sigh, soon buried himself inside of him.

They fitted together like a key in a lock, opening new worlds visible only to them.

Slowly, John deepened his thrusts, until soft moans of desire became muffled cries of pleasure in the silence of the room.

Once they had stilled, and contentedly started to doze off between sweaty sheets, snow started
falling outside their windows, covering the world in a beautiful blanket. Like a fresh start; a new page, waiting to be written.

* * * * *

There was a thin, powdery layer of snow in the UK as well when they arrived home the next week, well-rested and satisfied with their successful mission.

Even though it was still almost a month until Christmas, the snow – in combination with the already omnipresent Christmas decorations all over London – made even Sherlock experience a bout of winter holiday cheer.

A fresh page, indeed.

Although the trains were having some trouble sticking to their schedule because of the weather, Sherlock still went to visit Sherrinford the day after arriving back home.

They’d agreed they would visit an art museum together as soon as Sherlock was back from Norway. He thought it was an outrage that the last time anybody had taken Sherrinford to one was over eight years ago – on his birthday the year he’d come out of prison.

Once at the museum, Sherrinford stopped signing and interacting with Sherlock. He just looked. Looked and looked and looked, soaking in all the art, all the different art styles, colours, techniques.

He spent almost half an hour sitting in front of a painting of the sea, just staring at it.

Sherlock patiently sat there with him.

It was funny seeing Sherrinford be so in awe of these paintings, that were barely of superior quality to his own, Sherlock thought.

When it was time for lunch, they went to the museum café and finally, they talked.

Sherrinford gestured excitedly to tell Sherlock how much he loved it here. Which paintings he had liked best so far and why.

Sherlock mostly just nodded and smiled.

They ordered coffees and apple muffins and sat at a small table in the back.

Just before their trip to Norway, Sherrinford had told Sherlock he had decided he would indeed like to move to the London care home they had visited together. Of course, Sherlock had already put him on a waiting list there long before, just in case. And luck had it that he had been offered a place there already for the new year, as one of the current residents happened to be moving back to Scotland. The move was only six weeks away.

“Are you looking forward to moving to your new home?” Sherlock asked, after finishing his muffin.

“Yes. A lot,” Sherrinford replied.

“Your room there will be smaller. Have you decided yet which paintings you will take with you? And what to do with others?”

“How do you mean, what to do? Storage, of course. Mycroft arranges.”
“Yes, that is one option.”

Sherlock was waiting for the next question.

“What other option?” His brother looked absolutely bewildered, and a little worried.

“Well… you could also exhibit them,” Sherlock signed. “Lend them to art galleries.” Sherlock had looked up the signs for those terms the evening before.

Naturally, they were still new to Sherrinford.

“What’s an ‘art gallery’?”

“Like a museum, such as this, but much smaller,” he explained. “More like a shop. People can also go there to buy paintings they like.”

Sherrinford’s mouth was hanging slightly open.

“If you want,” Sherlock went on, “you can try to sell some of your paintings. Then you receive money. The paintings would get a new home in somebody’s house, always being on display there.” Sherlock studied his brother’s face. “Is that something you maybe want to consider?”

Sherlock knew he had to tread carefully. His brother was very attached to his paintings. Then again, the ones that were in storage never saw the light of day. They might as well not be there.

“You can also exhibit your paintings at an art gallery without selling them,” he clarified. “Then you get them back afterwards. Maybe you would prefer that?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s alright. Just think about it.”

When they went back into the museum to finish looking at the wings they had not yet visited, Sherlock noticed that Sherrinford had shifted his focus. He now spent more time looking at the other visitors as well, at them admiring the art around them.

He was clearly considering his options, and what it meant to exhibit your own creations. To have other people enjoy them.

On a hunch, Sherlock started googling the names of the artists in the contemporary wing on his phone and showing their pictures to his brother. “Look, this artist is Deaf also,” he signed, showing him a Wikipedia page. “And here, this one lives very near Wantage,” he pointed, standing next to a painting of a giant still life of a salad bowl. “Would you like to meet some other artists some time?”

Sherrinford frowned.

“If you exhibit your paintings in a couple of art galleries in London, that can also be a way to get in touch with other painters,” Sherlock explained. “There’s a whole world of art out there.” He smiled.

“Think about,” Sherrinford signed, pensively.

* * * * *

Sherrinford did not think about it for long.
The next time Sherlock was in Wantage for their BSL lesson, Sherrinford signed, “I want to show my paintings to more people. In an art gallery. Take them out of storage. How to arrange?”

“I will help you,” Sherlock answered.

A couple of phone calls with Janine later, he had an opening date for Sherrinford’s first exhibition.

Chapter End Notes

So I actually finished writing the first draft of this chapter during last August’s Fic Writers’ Retreat in Canada. Such fond memories!

Btw, if anyone would like to see some pictures of The Britannia Hotel in Trondheim, see this link: https://britannia.no/en/rooms-and-suites
Officially changing Chloe’s name turned out to be a bit of a hassle, but by mid-December, they had it on record.

While they were at it, they’d given her a new middle name as well.

*Vivian.*

That same afternoon, Sherlock painted her new names onto her bedroom door in sparkly, sea-green, swirly letters, with a mermaid next to it.

She loved it.

Sherlock was quite content with the result himself.

The paint was still drying – Sherlock having only just washed the stains off his hands – when John approached him in the kitchen with a funny look in his eyes and the hint of a nervous sort of smile tugging at his lips. Chloe was sitting on John’s arm, flapping her arms wildly in excitement, clutching a tiny, purple, heart-shaped paper box in one of her little hands.

Sherlock stared.

*Surely the box didn't contain…?*

“Don’t worry,” John said, “I know it’s a bit too early to propose to you to get married…” He tilted his head and huffed out a bright smile. “…but in the meantime, there is something else I want to propose to you. And I’m sure that Chloe would totally agree, if she could talk about such things.”

His hands trembled a little as he carefully lifted the lid off the box Chloe was holding. “Yes, let’s give it to Sherlock now,” he whispered to her, and helped her hold out the opened box in Sherlock’s direction. John’s eyes crinkled as Chloe showed Sherlock the contents.

Held in place by a piece of glistening white foam, there was a comically bright orange plastic ring, with a little sticker of an overexcited cartoon bee on the wider part, where there was usually a diamond.

“Would you like to officially become Chloe’s dad, too?” John asked, pronouncing each word clearly and slowly.

*Solemnly.*

Sherlock briefly lost the ability to speak.

“Dada!” Chloe shouted, enthusiastically waving the box in front of Sherlock.

“You’re asking me to… to adopt Chloe and officially get equal parental responsibility?” he stammered, after a few long seconds. “I mean, are you… are you really sure you want me to?”

Sherlock cursed himself.

*Why were those the only words coming out of his mouth? Why couldn’t he just shout ‘yes!’?*

This was a momentous proposal; it meant that John wanted them to be a real family. Under the law. And of course John was sure, or he would not have asked. With a hilariously appropriate ring,
John nodded, biting his lips in an anticipating smile.

Finally, the speech centre in Sherlock’s brain caught up with the rest of his grey matter.

“Yes!” he yelled. “Yes, I would!”

As John’s smile widened into an intensely happy grin, Sherlock hastily pried the ring out of the box and set it on the top of his little finger. Naturally, it was too small to go on properly. Nevertheless, he showed it to them with pride.

Two smiling faces beamed back at him.

He looked at Chloe, turning a little more serious, and said, “I am honoured to become your second dad, Chloe.” He swallowed hard. “I will try to be the very best father I can.”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing already and you’re good,” John said, with a clear lump in his throat as well.

Sherlock put his arms around the two of them, pressing kisses to their cheeks. “I promise I won’t let you down. I’ll be there for both of you, forever.” His voice sounded strangely raspy to his own ears.

Sherlock heard John reply close to his ear with what he thought must be a happy sob.

When Chloe indicated she was tired of sitting on John’s arm and being in the middle of the embrace, John put her down to crawl around the floor by herself, and kissed Sherlock on the lips.

They didn’t often share a closed-mouth kiss, or at least not one that lasted this long. But this one seemed to seal the most important promise they would ever make. To stick together, as a family. And the duration seemed symbolic of the durability of their pact.

“Thank you,” Sherlock whispered, when they eventually broke apart.

“Thank you,” John said. “Thank you so much. For everything.”

* * * * *

Sherrinford’s exhibition opened the week before Christmas, at the art gallery where Janine worked. Another artist had broken their contract and Janine had only been too glad when Sherlock had called with his suggestion the very next day.

A stroke of luck for both parties.

At the opening, she efficiently moved through the small crowd, managing the caterers who were carrying trays of champagne and canapés with skilful precision, a bright smile on her face – clearly in her element.

Sherlock nodded a smile at her as their gazes crossed.

Besides some family members and friends, who had in turn brought their friends, there were also a number of other artists there, and even some local press. Janine had invited them through their mailing list with a short paragraph dedicated to Sherrinford’s backstory: a deaf artist who had learnt to communicate only through art. A brother of the famous Sherlock Holmes, no less.
So that had attracted a bit of an audience, which was nice.

There was even a Deaf journalist who wrote for a magazine for the Deaf community, who asked Sherrinford for an interview.

Sherrinford looked both bewildered and pleased at all the attention he and his paintings were receiving.

Mrs Hudson and her sister had come to the opening also, and after standing in front of one particular landscape painting for a long while, pointing and chatting, her sister came up to Sherrinford, smiled, and said very earnestly, “I would very much like to buy that painting over there.”

Sherlock was standing next to him, naturally not leaving his side for even a second, and translated for his brother.

His eyes lit up. “She likes the snow painting?” he asked.

“Yes, she does. She likes it so much she wants to look at it every day,” Sherlock answered, signing and speaking simultaneously. “And also wants to pay you for it.”

Mrs Hudson’s sister nodded. “And you can come and visit me to look at it in my house, whenever you like,” she added.

She obviously realised with perfect clarity what Sherrinford’s paintings meant to him, and that this was the very first one he was selling, ever. For which Sherlock was infinitely grateful. It was important that his brother had a first positive experience, if this was something he might want to start doing more often.

He noticed Mycroft looking awfully pleased in the background. He was undoubtedly very glad he might soon be able to stop renting more and more storage space for all the canvases.

Sherlock was mainly happy that Sherrinford finally got some recognition and appreciation for his extraordinary self-taught skill.

The next day, the two of them went shopping together with the money Sherrinford had earned with the sale.

He bought things for the new apartment he was soon going to move to, like a clock and a plant, as well as some new clothes.

Sherlock felt pained and proud at the same time. Finally, his brother was getting to do something he should have been allowed to all along. To be independent.

Occasionally, Sherlock still got overwhelmed with anger and frustration at how all of the grownups around Sherrinford had jumped to the wrong conclusion when Redbeard had died, and how no one had bothered to make sense of the broken leash with the missing piece.

He tried as much as he could to let bygones be bygones, but sometimes he still broke into a sweat just thinking about it.

As he did now.

He glanced at his brother walking beside him in the busy shopping street, unaware of his thoughts, as they passed all sorts of elaborate Christmas displays in the shop windows, all complete with
fake snow and blinking lights.

Sherlock hadn’t yet had the heart to explain to Sherrinford what he had been suspected of all this time and that that was the reason he had been put away and had not gotten to see Sherlock for several decades.

Maybe he already knew.

*But if he didn’t, wouldn’t it perhaps be kinder to leave it that way?*

Sherrinford seemed at peace with the present, at least, marvelling at all the decorations, the traffic lights, the sky.

When just a quarter before closing time, they passed a shop with art supplies, Sherrinford stopped to look and made it clear he wanted to go inside. So they did.

Open-mouthed, Sherrinford took in all the kinds of art materials the shop had, which were for a whole range of different media and techniques besides just oil painting, as he himself had only ever done. He largely ignored the products that were already familiar to him, and focused on the rest, intrigued. He ended up buying a couple of spray cans and template stencils.

Once they were back outside, he smiled at Sherlock, before looking down at his bags with the day’s harvest. Then he put them down to sign to Sherlock, “I am happy.”

“So am I,” Sherlock signed back, feeling the words to his very core.

They both kept smiling all the way back to Baker Street, where Sherrinford was staying another night.

While Sherlock and John prepared dinner, Sherrinford sat in the lounge with Chloe and drew funny animals for her in his sketchbook, making her giggle out loud.

“I’m so glad he will be able to come visit more often once he moves to London,” Sherlock said quietly to John, while stirring the salad dressing.

“So am I,” John replied, looking over in their direction. “And, by the looks of it, so is he,” John smiled. “Not to mention our daughter.”

Sherlock still got a thrill whenever John referred to Chloe as “their daughter”. Sometimes he thought John did it just to make him blush and smile.

At which he succeeded every single time.

* * * * *

Christmas was meant to be a cosy, intimate affair this year.

Sherlock and John had decided not to invite anybody over this time, or to go visit anyone else, as they didn’t want the hassle with a baby who was in the middle of a phase where she was teething, cranky and unable to sleep most of the time.

Mrs Hudson would be away visiting her sister anyway, so they didn’t have to feel guilty about not inviting her.

And Mycroft was already taking Sherrinford home to their parents, so they weren’t obliged to go and take him.
John did sense that Sherlock was slightly uneasy about not being there for Sherrinford during the holidays, despite his own, rightful argument that he simply couldn’t accompany him everywhere all the time, and it was only healthy for Sherrinford to get used to having to fend for himself a little whenever he was outside the safe confines of the care facility. Even though he would of course largely be unable to communicate. (Mycroft had been very vague as to whether he’d started learning BSL yet. The twat.) But then of course, that was the way it had been for years.

John thought it was admirable that Sherlock was able to let it go, regardless – and was glad that he prioritised him and Chloe now that they were going through a bit of a rough patch with her.

On top of Chloe’s grumpy phase being a reason to take it easy, John was also organising Sherlock’s fortieth birthday party for two weeks after. That’s when they would have a house full of people already.

He’d finally found out when Sherlock’s birthday was by looking inside his passport while in the queue to board their plane, on their way back from Norway. And also what his age was – funny as that may be. It had simply never come up in conversation.

“You’re turning forty the month after next!” John had exclaimed. “Surely that calls for a party. We can invite some friends over, celebrate properly.” John had given him a meaningful look. “To compensate for all the years you haven’t.”

Sherlock had merely raised one eyebrow and given him a blank stare.

“You’re not objecting?” John had asked, double-checking.

“I’m still deciding,” he’d replied, “whether or not to protest this initiative.”

A few days later, when Sherlock had still not raised any objections, despite a good number of insinuating remarks by John semi-innocuously referring to birthdays and parties, John had eventually asked Sherlock straight-up if he would enjoy celebrating his fortieth with all of his friends and family there.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? That means yes, right?”

“Hmm. Not sure.”

John sighed. “Sherlock, as you know, I’m all for explicit consent in a lot of matters. But I’m telling you, in this case, if you’re not saying ‘no’, I’m going to take it as a ‘yes’.”

Sherlock merely smirked.

So John had smirked right back, and had then started to organise it.

Obviously, it wasn’t a surprise party, exactly – but they did both sort of pretend that it was, which was quite a lot of fun in itself.

John secretly sent out invitations, bought tacky garlands that said ’40!’ and ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY’ and started stashing drinks and snacks.

Also, he put in a lot of effort to acquire the perfect present, which was no mean feat. He knew exactly what he wanted to give Sherlock, but the timing in selecting the right specimen was crucial. It involved a lot of internet searches and phone calls until he found what he was looking for.
Meanwhile, John was rather busy getting a Christmas tree into the house as well, then putting it up – and persuading Sherlock to help him decorate it – and buying toys for Chloe to put under it on Christmas Eve.

Sherlock only very reluctantly lent a hand with anything having to do with Christmas, which he never failed to point out was a ridiculous tradition, especially seeing as neither of them was religious. But John demanded they gave Chloe a normal upbringing in all respects they still could (as having a gay crime-fighting duo for parents already minimised the margin for what was considered ‘normal’ quite enough, John thought.)

So John not only bought a tree to hang stuff in, but also decorated the rest of the house with fairy lights, shiny silver stars and mistletoe – under loud, excited cheers from Chloe. Of course, he couldn’t resist throwing Sherlock meaningful glances whenever she did so, and thankfully, he quickly saw Sherlock soften a little at the idea of all that holiday ‘nonsense’. (In part also thanks to the mistletoe, which had been a strategic choice.)

At the same time – in between the sleepless nights because of Chloe’s ‘phase’ – John was in the final stages of selling his house, which involved repeated trips to the solicitor and reading a lot of small print. This came on top of the paperwork he was already dealing with for legalising Sherlock’s parental responsibility over Chloe.

So by the time it was almost Christmas, John was unsurprisingly rather exhausted. Hence it was only on the afternoon of 23 December, that it suddenly occurred to him he hadn’t yet thought about Christmas dinner, let alone bought any ingredients.

Just as he started hastily leafing through their cook books in order to try to find a suitable recipe, Sherlock stopped him.


“Sherlock, I need to choose a recipe for Christmas dinner. What’s more, I have to go out and buy stuff for Christmas dinner.”

“Nope. Your health is more important than some Christian tradition that was stolen from the pagans anyway. Also, they got the date wrong. The return of the light was actually the day before yesterday, when we had the thing with the peas, which was lovely. Now, off to bed with you.”

Annoying as it was, Sherlock was probably at least partly right, seeing as John found he was too weak to protest properly. “Well, maybe if I just lie down for half an hour…” he said.

He was awfully tired.

Once in the bedroom, he gratefully collapsed onto the mattress, his mind almost instantly slipping into oblivion.

John started awake when the clock showed 9:46pm and Sherlock was crawling into bed with him: both much too early and much too late – for different reasons. John subsequently became aware of the fact that his body felt like he had been run over by a lorry.

This did not bode well.

“Looks like you’ve passed it to me and Chloe, too,” Sherlock mumbled. “I’ve stayed up with her as long as I could for her evening bottle. She’s in bed now.”
“Oh, no. We still need to buy food!” John groaned, lifting himself from the mattress with one elbow.

But it was as if earth’s gravity had suddenly become stronger. The bed pulled him back down like a magnet.

“We won’t be needing much food, John,” Sherlock croaked. “We’ve got a flu.”

John let out a moan, admitting defeat.

“I’ve checked. We’ve still got some canned soup,” Sherlock whispered hoarsely.

John almost giggled at how funny Sherlock’s voice sounded.

Almost.

Then he felt himself being pulled back down into a dizzying but rather soothing vortex of unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Breakfast consisted of hot water with honey.

Chloe was drowsily sat in front of the telly watching Christmas-themed CBeebies as Sherlock and John silently stirred their cups, with hunched shoulders and half-lidded eyes.

Whenever either of them attempted to speak, a sound came out like a mouse being trampled on. So they stuck to whispering, so as to try and spare their voices and avoid comical sounds.

“I had the strangest dream,” John whispered, sounding to Sherlock a bit like an undercover agent from a bad film passing on a secret message in code (and thus making Sherlock have to suppress a chuckle, which would only have hurt his throat anyway). “When you came back from your two-year mission, “ John went on, “and I still thought you were dead, you disguised yourself as a French waiter with a fake moustache and showed up during my proposal to Mary at The Landmark.”

Sherlock couldn’t help letting out a squeaky laugh. “Oh God, I’ll admit that just ringing your doorbell out of the blue wasn’t the best idea, but at least it wasn’t as badly misjudged as that,” he whispered back croakily, before elaborately blowing his nose. “Very symbolic, though.”

However, he wasn’t sure what it meant that John had dreamt about him being that spectacularly tone-deaf. Probably a remnant from his earlier self, when they’d first met and Sherlock had only just started becoming properly aware of how his parents’ comportment had shaped his own.

Thankfully, he’d come rather a long way since then, even though it had been a bumpy road (which also hadn’t exactly ended yet, but at least he had John by his side now).

John smirked wryly. “Yeah, it gets worse. In my dream, the ring I had for Mary was really old and ugly, talking about symbolic. Before popping the question, when Mary went to the washroom, I took it out and I kept rotating it in the light to make the three little diamonds sparkle, but they wouldn’t. They looked a bit like the worn glass you find washed up on the beach.” He sighed. “But the absolute pinnacle of the dream was, that once I recognised you, the first thing you did was make some stupid joke about moustaches, so I angrily grabbed your lapels and pushed you back onto the floor, ending up lying flat on top of you in the middle of an extremely fancy restaurant, he-he,” John chuckled hoarsely.
Sherlock shook his head, smirking. “There is great entertainment value in the things you come up with in your sleep, John. It seems your capacity to create fiction even extends beyond your own consciousness.” He took another sip of the hot liquid that was meant to soothe his throat, but didn’t yet seem to be having much effect. “Although, come to think of it, I had a rather strange dream myself, as well, last night. Must be the flu. It’s suddenly coming back to me now. I dreamed we went to Morocco to find Mary, like I made Sally believe we did when I gave her my witness statement last spring, and then we ended up in some sort of hotel where AJ suddenly showed up. But then, in my dream, there were guns being fired all over the place and I threw over a table to protect you and there was lots of chaos. Anyway, the only thing I remember clearly was I shot a lamp, which then magically repaired itself. Oh, and before that, I was playing Happy Families with a local boy, but I didn’t know how it went. It was infuriating.”

John loudly blew his nose and grinned faintly.

“And you never once made tea for me in the dream, John. It was a horrible dream.”

Sherlock decided not to mention the other parts that were coming back to him then, like the bit where he made John believe he didn’t know how to switch off the bomb they’d found in the tube carriage, when they had been preventing the attack on the Palace of Westminster two years ago.

He shivered, trying to ban the nightmarish image of John’s frightened face from his mind.

John chortled. “Sounds like you could write a novel as well, if you wanted. Or an action series.”

“Dreams are hardly interesting for such a purpose,” Sherlock mumble-whispered, waving away the idea with a flick of his wrist. “*Even I* know there’s a bit more to it than that.”

As soon as he’d said it, he was already forgetting what they had been talking about, exactly. It was as if his temperature was causing his brain to coagulate.

“You’re probably right.” John sighed, letting his head rest in his hands. “Sorry, I think I need to lie down again. Headache’s getting worse.” He hesitated. “Can you wake me in an hour, so I can feed Chloe? That is, if you are able to stay up for a bit, to mind her in the meantime?”

John did look rather awful – even more so than he felt himself. His white blood cells had probably just shifted into the highest gear producing antibodies and were therefore taking up a lot of energy.

“Sure, no problem.”

Of course, Sherlock let John sleep until he woke up by himself, three hours later (Sherlock having fed Chloe her fruit snack already).

The rest of the day, they took turns lying down and looking after Chloe. But as it looked like John had it worse, Sherlock did the most, so that John got enough rest. Among other things, he played some Christmas carols to her on his violin and let her do some random colouring on the pages of the newspaper he was reading, as she sat on his lap, both of which calmed her down significantly from the fretful state she had been in.

For dinner, they had a banana and a glass of orange juice.

That night, they put Chloe’s cot at the foot of their bed, so that she could sleep in the room with them and they didn’t need to climb the stairs each time her sore throat made her cry.

The next day, Christmas morning, they felt even worse than the day before. The three of them formed a chorus of coughs and sneezes and were now leaving trails of used tissues in little heaps
around the flat, like giant snowflakes among the Christmas decorations.

Chloe was absolutely miserable and kept whinging whenever she was awake.

To their shame, they had forgotten to put the presents under the tree the previous night, so they did so during Chloe’s late morning nap, seeing as she wasn’t likely to tell the difference just yet, anyway.

She absolutely adored the pink unicorn lamp she’d gotten, and the rainbow-coloured little piano kept her occupied and made her stop fussing for almost a full hour.

Sherlock was happy with his book on plant fibres John had gotten him from A.Z. Fell’s antiquarian bookshop, and John seemed very chuffed with his engraved pen and hand-bound leather notebook.

They spent the rest of the afternoon drinking chamomile tea, listening to Christmas music – which suddenly sounded much less tacky than it always had before – and reminiscing over Christmases past: how John had been jealous of Irene (Hannah) that one time, and how Mrs Hudson was always trying to make Sherlock wear the antlers.

John lit some candles for Christmas atmosphere and persuaded Sherlock to at least play one game of Carcassonne.

Despite the coughing and the raised temperatures, there were also laughs and smiles.

Neither of them said a word about last year, though, when they had stayed with Sherlock’s parents, pretending to have forgiven Mary, just before it had all gone pear-shaped with Magnussen. That was still too painful. But the fact that they both stuck to this unwritten rule of not referring to any of that, made Sherlock feel extra grateful.

Christmas dinner consisted of canned tomato soup, which Chloe actually ate without complaining, which was nice.

They each managed a mince pie afterwards, before turning in and falling asleep instantly, in spite of Chloe still playing her new piano in her cot right next to their bed.

With some imagination, it sounded just as if she was playing Jingle Bells.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

FINALLY COMPLETED!

Chapter Notes

THE FINAL CHAPTER, AT LAST! As much as I loved working on this for the past two years and eleven sodding months (which is over three times as long as I thought I would need, aarrgghhh), I’m really glad that this enormous opus and labour of love is now done. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Boxing Day, Sherlock woke up to the smell of freshly baked bread.

An additional surprise was that he found it gave him an appetite – contrary to how his body would have responded during the previous couple of days.

Also, although he did still feel a little light-headed, his throat no longer felt like brand-new sandpaper. Apparently his immune system’s lymphocytes had largely conquered the influenza viruses. So that was good, at least.

Still, the mystery remained: where was the smell coming from?

It couldn’t be from Speedy’s, as the café was meant to be closed today.

Step One of his investigation, before opening his eyes just yet, was to stretch out one arm towards John’s side of the bed and see if his significant other was still there. However, his fingers only met a crumpled duvet. Step Two was irrevocably to open his eyes and check if John had just entered the room with a tray full of freshly baked buns for a surprise breakfast in bed.

He hadn’t.

Sherlock considered continuing his research by means of shouting John’s name, but decided against it. If he felt well enough for shouting, he was probably well enough to get out of bed and find John himself. That approach was, after all, less likely to make John cross, and hence, the preferable course of action.

So he heaved himself out of bed, put on his robe and padded to the kitchen. There, he stopped in the doorway to take in the scene before him.

John turned out to be busy kneading dough. The kitchen worktop was covered in flour, as was John’s apron and one of his eyebrows. In the oven Sherlock spotted the source of the lovely smell: an almost fully risen, golden loaf of bread.

“I was peckish, but we had no cereal or bread,” John said, his voice practically back to normal.
“But we did still have some flour and also some dry yeast, which you probably purchased at one point for some sort of foul experiment I’m not sure I want to know about.” He threw Sherlock a fond look. “Anyway, I actually mixed too much for one loaf, so I’m making another one with raisins that we still turned out to have as well.” He beamed at Sherlock as he rested his hands on the ball of dough.

Sherlock was puzzled. He’d never once seen John bake bread before. Was that something you could just do, without learning it somewhere first?

Apparently it was.

Or, alternatively, John had learned it in the past. Either recently, in secret – which seemed highly unlikely – or a longer time ago, simply without ever applying this knowledge in Sherlock’s presence, for some reason.

Sherlock didn’t see any cookbook, laptop or phone that John was reading instructions from. He did, however, on second glance, notice a yellowed old piece of paper with unfamiliar handwriting propped against the toaster.

“My mum’s old recipe,” John said. “I figured it was time.”

_Time_

Sherlock ambled over to where John was working, now alternately stretching the ball of dough and flattening it onto the work surface. He still looked a little weak, but not nearly as poorly as the previous few days. Same as Sherlock.

“_Time_ in what sense?” he asked, as he went to stand behind John and put his arms around him, curiously watching the kneading process over John’s shoulder.

John let the dough rest and breathed out a long sigh. “I realised I was suppressing my memories of her, because her death was so painful to me.”

Sherlock suddenly felt a deep shame as he realised he had no idea how or when John’s mother had died.

Well, probably in his late teens, as he never mentioned her in any of his major life events, nor hinted at his mum not being there when he was little. And it likely happened in an unexpected manner, purely based on age and John never mentioning any sort of progressive disease he was familiar with from a relative’s or carer’s standpoint.

But other than that, nothing.

“I was seventeen,” John said. “My dad accidentally made her trip down the stairs, because he was drunk. As usual. But she didn’t manage to avoid his uncoordinated staggering that time.” He took a deep, shaky breath. “She was carrying a heavy laundry basket, full of wet clothes.” His voice broke, as he continued, “They ended up strewn all over the hallway.”

Sherlock winced at the mental image, suddenly very aware of what it must have been like for John to keep living in that house afterwards, together with the man who’d inadvertently killed his mother.

No wonder he’d wanted to go far, far away after having finished school, and joined the military.

“Oh God,” Sherlock breathed. “That’s… awful.” He had no idea what else to say, so he just held
John even closer.

John turned around in his embrace to face Sherlock, and buried his face in Sherlock’s neck, softly sobbing about the decades-old grief that had been part of him all this time, and forever would be.

At least now Sherlock knew.

“I’m so sorry, John,” he whispered into John’s hair. And again, “I’m so sorry.” Once for John’s loss and once for Sherlock not knowing.

After a while, Sherlock could feel the tension gradually seep out of John, but still, they remained standing there in that embrace, just breathing together.

Sherlock slowly rubbed soothing circles over John’s back, until John lifted his head and took in a long breath. “I guess that, because we are like a proper family now, living here at 221B with the three of us,” John said, “with the same sort of homeliness that I always used to associate with her, I guess… well, I guess I wanted to honour her by making her recipe. By doing the thing she always used to do on special days, like Christmas.” John smiled despite the wetness of his eyes. “By baking her own bread, she would fill the whole house with its wonderful smell: the smell of home, of safety. I’m finally home again, Sherlock.”

Later that morning, when they ate the bread with nothing but some butter on it, Sherlock decided it was the best thing he’d ever eaten in his life.

* * * * *

The last day of the year 2015 arrived as if it was just an ordinary day.

Chloe was studying a book with fairies and winged unicorns on the floor next to Sherlock, as he was sipping his tea.

John was in the shower, which was boring, so Sherlock was on Twitter.

#DuringSexDontYellOut “IT WAS THE SECOND COUSIN!” Your partner will be unable to finish.

Sherlock hit Tweet with a satisfied grin, already looking forward to the entertaining responses this post would elicit.

He’d spent the previous two days solving a case for Lestrade and was feeling full of energy. John had mainly been busy with his book project and his not-so-secret party preparations, which were amusing to witness as well.

John had finished, in the end, of course, after Sherlock had solved the case (and texted Lestrade from their bed). Sherlock had made sure of that. It had just taken quite a bit of extra effort.

He chuckled to himself, cheeks heating, then languidly took another sip of tea, continuing to scroll the Twitter feed.

Sometimes, he didn’t use social media for weeks, but when he did, it made him feel more… alive, somehow.

“The frailty of genius: it needs an audience,” his father’s voice echoed in his head.

Ah, well.

At the ping of an incoming email his thumb flew over the screen to make the message appear.
It was from the clerk to the court’s office from where Eurus Moriarty had been tried.

His eyes darted over the contents, taking in the information.

She had been convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Sherlock stared at his screen and let out a long breath.

_At last._

He considered going into the bathroom to tell John. However, he’d already started typing in the search field, to find more information on Twitter, before even consciously deciding to. Within seconds, he found a short news item about the court case, listing all the crimes she had been found guilty of.

He hit Retweet and, with a feeling of great satisfaction, added, ‘No matter how smart a woman thinks she is, she will be caught in the end.’

He smirked, and checked his notifications. Just as he heard the shower being turned off and he was about to get up and tell John about Eurus, a retweet caught his eye.

All it said was ‘#norbury’.

He clicked on it.

It was from an account called OpNorbury, apparently short for _Operation Norbury_, which, upon further inspection, turned out to contain nothing but a number of his own tweets retweeted with the same added hashtag each time.

_Norbury._

He frowned at them, trying to understand.

It didn’t take him long to see the pattern. If he was being completely honest, all these tweets of his were, well, rather smug.

“What’s up?” John’s voice suddenly said right next to him.

“It must be Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock said faintly, feeling slightly embarrassed. He showed John the Twitter account, the sole purpose of which seemed to be to point out when Sherlock was being arrogant, misogynist or otherwise offensive. Just like he’d asked their landlady to do.

“Hmm,” was all John said.

“Did she start a Twitter account just to point out when I’m wrong?”

John’s eyes were still scanning the screen, etched into a deep frown. “No, when you’re being an arse.”

* * * * *

Sherlock’s New Year’s resolution was to be less of an arse.

John had taken the trouble of refreshing his memory on this about every two hours, with a cheeky grin and sometimes even a sodding wink.
On occasion, the bastard even reminded him to be a ‘good boy’ during... *certain activities*, managing to make Sherlock promise him all sorts of things, which maddeningly accelerated the proceedings of said activities for both parties immensely. Although John, of course, still tried to draw it out as much as possible, most of the time, as was his M.O..

He had even gone so far as to make Sherlock beg. Twice.

Not today, though.

It was the 6\textsuperscript{th} of January, meaning that in a few hours, the house would be flooded with people for his birthday.

Also, he was now forty.

That morning, John had given him a new, dark-green scarf with a subtle bee pattern woven into it which was only visible from a certain angle, as well as an absolutely brilliant, perfect and wonderful blowjob, and a delicious breakfast with toasted crumpets and strawberry jam.

Currently, John was baking bread again, seeing as this was a ‘special day’.

Sherlock had to admit it was true that the smell of freshly baked bread did make it feel extra special, somehow – and not only for the anticipation it created of eating the end product itself. Either way, he had decided it was a welcome new tradition.

He wasn’t sure what to expect this afternoon, though, once the guests arrived. He’d never really used to enjoy parties in any form or shape, until quite recently, at least. But being with John had changed his feelings about a lot of things. He found that, although he was slightly nervous about the prospect of their flat full of excited, cheery people, he was also sort of looking forward to it. A little.

One reason being, he could finally show off how happy he was with John. He had already been doing this for five months, of course, but on a much smaller scale, in occasional one-on-one settings only. Having all his acquaintances over and showing off to all of them simultaneously was much more efficient, and therefore much better, naturally.

*Not acquaintances*, he reminded himself. *Friends.*

And *family*, even.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d celebrated his birthday in the presence of either.

He’d been quenching his nerves by scrolling his Twitter feed for the past hour, and liking the incoming birthday wishes.

However, he now found that John’s kneading and stretching of the bread dough was becoming rather distracting, and he decided to walk over to have a closer look.

“Hello, Mr Putting-The-Baker-In-Baker-Street,” Sherlock teased, as he wrapped his arms around John from behind and smelled his hair. His favourite kind of John-hug.

“Why, hello, handsome stranger,” John replied, with a grin over his shoulder.

“Hmm, would you let a stranger touch you like this?” Sherlock asked, pressing himself even closer to John’s back and resting his chin on his shoulder.
“I would if his name was Sherlock Holmes.”

“Would you? Good thing I’m the only one in the world, then.” At that, he started softly kissing John’s neck, letting his hands roam down John’s front.

At first, John merely let out an almost inaudibly soft moan. But after a few more neck kisses, John suddenly grabbed a towel to quickly wipe most of the dough off his hands and, with a hurried movement, reached down to unfasten his belt, pushing his trousers down in one fluid motion.

Sherlock gasped as John suggestively pushed back against Sherlock’s groin, before invitingly leaning forward on his elbows over the cluttered worktop.

That was all the hint Sherlock needed.

Soon, he was inside of John, pushing home into his wonderful, tight warmth, creating little white clouds of flour puffing up from below John’s stomach at every thrust.

Afterwards, they decided, giggling, that this particular loaf of bread was definitely for their own consumption only.

* * * * *

In the course of the day, Sherlock established that turning forty wasn’t so bad.

In spite of the ridiculous waste of helium by filling nonsensical shiny balloons with it, and in spite of the stupidly repetitive buntings suddenly having been draped all over their bookcases and in front of windows throughout the flat (screaming ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY HAPPY BIRTHDAY HAPPY BIRTHDAY’), the party was in fact rather agreeable.

The presents he received from his guests were actually quite nice and there was something about having friends and family over simultaneously – so that the people he knew so well actually got to know one another – that made him feel quite pleased.

Molly and Greg were seemingly practising their parenting skills – sitting on the floor next to the fairy-tale castle Hannah’s daughter Imogen had built together with Chloe in front of the hearth, and undergoing an imaginary adventure that was taking place there – as Hannah and her wife Briony were happily chatting away with Harry and Natalya, who’d flown over especially for the occasion.

Janine was immersed in a philosophical discussion with Uncle Rudy, as Mike Stamford listened to an explanation of Mummy and Daddy’s latest garden project involving a bird feeder with a camera attached to it.

Meanwhile, Mycroft was working on his thankfully already rather decent command of British Sign Language with Sherrinford as they were coming in, being in the process of debating where to hang up their coats.

Mrs Hudson was helping distribute the drinks as a rather transparent excuse to have little conversations with everyone in the room, which, however, was a method Sherlock decided to copy as it was in fact quite a convenient approach which ensured he didn’t have to talk with anyone for too long, while still being considered sociable.

John was busy in the kitchen, which he’d secretively declared forbidden territory for Sherlock until further notice.

About an hour after the first guests had arrived, when everyone was there and had been provided
with drinks, Sherlock suddenly noticed two things.

Firstly, Sherrinford hadn’t given him a present yet, and also didn’t seem to have anything with him, which could mean two things: either he didn’t have one, because no one had taken him shopping (which wouldn’t be entirely unlikely), or some sort of big reveal was waiting…

Secondly, Chloe was being very excited while sitting on John’s arm and ‘helping’ with something in the kitchen.

However, John had made him promise not to start deducing anything. At all.

In order to distract himself, Sherlock casually strolled over to his parents, who were now talking with Sherrinford – using Mycroft as an interpreter. At least they now seemed more at ease with the use of sign language, even though they had still learnt too little themselves to actually apply it in any meaningful way. But in some measure they were trying now.

They were talking about the social relevance of art, on which both Sherrinford and Mummy had a few very interesting points to make – even largely agreeing with each other – when Uncle Rudy joined the conversation.

Sherlock was glad to see that there seemed to be virtually no tension anymore between his father and his uncle, who hadn’t seen each other in years. Also, Rudy amazingly had an instant click with Sherrinford, despite the language barrier.

In the next few minutes, the conversation seamlessly shifted from art to neuropsychology to the geological structure of volcanoes, as easily as most other people talked about the weather, or what their neighbours had been up to.

Mycroft wasn’t half as deprecating as usual and even flashed a genuine smile at Sherlock when he gave his view on the matter.

With a slight delay, Sherlock hesitantly smiled back.

Looking at all his close family members together in one room like this, jauntily talking to each other in such a relaxed manner, Sherlock all of a sudden felt that the family bonds, which had been rickety for so long, due to so many terrible misunderstandings, had finally been restored.

The wonders of simply talking about personal matters now and then – rather than just sticking solely to factual topics of conversation and winging the rest by trying to be clever and merely making deductions all the time (and occasionally getting very important stuff spectacularly wrong).

The little group of Holmeses standing there chatting away in that manner they all had in common, forming a rather colourful contrast with the rest of the guests, also made Sherlock realise that, try as you might, you can’t ignore your family. They give your identity a necessary context, stupid as that sounded, but it really was true. They played an essential part in shaping you as a person – even if you didn’t especially like how they made you turn out.

But accepting how they had made you turn out was the key to forgiveness for both past and future hurt, he could now see. That way, all the unpleasant white noise faded into the background, making real contact possible again.

And the fact that John’s sister had, once more, come all the way from Russia to see John again and introduce Natalya to him, meant something similar for the Watsons.

Restored bonds all over.
Not to mention the fact that his and John’s acting on their eventual realisation that they both wanted more than just friendship after having danced around one another for years, was another example of a bond only having been successfully forged thanks to their both committing to honesty, openness and good communication – much as he loathed that term.

A loud eruption of high-pitched giggles made everyone suddenly turn around towards the kitchen. Mrs Hudson was holding a helium balloon and had apparently inhaled some of the gas, as she announced with a mouse-like voice that there was cake!

Everyone laughed out loud.

Then John appeared behind her with an enormous chocolate creation, messily decorated in bright-coloured sprinkles and several candles seeming to form the number ‘129’, which momentarily puzzled Sherlock.

Everyone sang ‘Happy Birthday’ as John slowly walked towards Sherlock with the birthday cake, a giant smile on his face.

This. This was an image Sherlock would remember forever.

Just before blowing out the candles, he recalled he was supposed to make a wish. But there was nothing left to wish for. He smiled. Everything was perfect just the way it was. So he blew them out just like that, under loud applause.

“So, am I a hundred and twenty-nine already?” he couldn’t resist asking, feigning confused wonder.

“Ah, yes. Chloe was trying to help,” John said, sounding a little exasperated, as he carefully placed the cake in the middle of the coffee table. “The candles were, obviously, meant to form a ‘4’ and a ‘0’, but it turns out that by adding a couple extra, you can add almost ninety years!” He turned back to face Sherlock, a weary grin on his face. “That’s what children do, isn’t it? Make you age faster.” He chuckled.

“To be fair,” Sherlock said softly, “it does feel like I had to wait 129 years to be where I am now, together with you, surrounded by my loved ones.” He had really only been talking to John, but everyone had suddenly fallen silent and seemed to have their full attention on him.

They all heard.

He looked around to see nothing but smiling faces.

Hannah stepped out of the crowd and hugged him. Then Janine, then his father. Then Greg, even. And Molly. They all gave him a short hug or a quick peck on the cheek.

Although Mycroft didn’t join in – obviously – he interestingly didn’t seem to find it awkward either. He just looked on, smiling, openly showing how genuinely happy he was for his little brother – a somewhat unusual state to witness. “Time for the most important present!” Mycroft then called, gesturing to Sherrinford that now was the moment to go out and fetch something from the hallway.

Shortly after, Sherrinford came back with an enormous, bulky object, wrapped in metallic blue paper.

To Sherlock’s astonishment, he couldn’t even begin to deduce what was in it. He tore off the paper, stupefied.
It was a large dog basket.

“And another one from me, to go with that one,” he heard John say.

When he looked up, bewildered, John was suddenly holding out a small sleepy puppy, that had definitely not been in his hands before.

Sherlock would have noticed.

It was a tiny, black setter, staring up at him with big, droopy eyes.

Sherlock looked back up at John. There was a shy smile on his face, as he raised his eyebrows further, as if encouraging Sherlock to take the dog from him.

Wordlessly, Sherlock took the puppy and instantly cradled it close to his chest.

* A dog.

*John had given him a dog.*

He carefully pressed his cheek against its little head.

*How he’d missed the feeling of soft fur against his face.*

Was the dog really for him to keep, though? Maybe the present was that he was allowed to just hold a puppy for a while?

He was well aware they’d let you rent almost anything these days.

*Of course. Naturally, they couldn’t actually keep a dog in the middle of London, especially with Chloe and all.*

Sherlock felt a stone drop into his stomach as various explanations popped into his head, while he was frantically trying to make sense of the meaning of all this.

*But the dog basket… Didn’t that mean it was a real present, after all? No one would wrap a hired object, would they? Also, it was undeniably meant for when the dog would be bigger.*

Disappointment started to make way for slight panic.

“Sherlock, you okay?”

He swallowed, blinking several times. “John,” he said urgently, his voice low, “are you sure you’re alright with this? Us having a dog in the house? What with Chloe still being this little?”

*What if John really hadn’t thought this through and he would get second thoughts the minute the poor creature barked or otherwise upset Chloe?*

Sherlock had always been completely convinced John would never want a dog, regardless of the child.

John’s eyes went soft. “If it means I get to see that incredibly cute look on your face when you cuddled her just now more often… *definitely.*”

That made a few people chuckle, after which everyone went back to their own conversations.
“Also,” John added, “maybe we can train her to work with us, you know, trace scents and such. That is, if she wants to. We’ll just have to wait and see about that, of course.”

John had thought it through.

Thank God.

Him not ever wanting a dog was another incorrect hypothesis, apparently.

He should really stop making assumptions without checking, Sherlock resolved, once again, regardless how good he was at them most of the time.

They really had a dog now. He still couldn’t quite believe it.

Unwilling to let go of her, he kept stroking her beautifully soft, pitch black fur. After a while, he walked over to his chair and sat down with the puppy in his lap.

While the cake was being cut and handed round, John kneeled next to him, petting the puppy’s head. “Shall we call her Pearl? What do you think?”

Sherlock thought for a moment as he studied the way her fur gleamed in the light just as the Lost Special had. “Hm. Although I do like it, I actually rather thought… Blackbeard,” he replied. “Let’s go and ask Sherrinford. I have a feeling he was involved in this initiative as well,” Sherlock smirked.

John just smiled back conspiratorially.

Sherlock handed the little creature to John so as to have his hands free to be able to sign, and walked over to his youngest brother. “May I ask,” Sherlock signed, “Since you are an expert on appropriate names, what do you think about ‘Blackbeard’ as a name for this little dog?”

Sherrinford’s face lit up. “Yes! Excellent!”

“Blackbeard it is,” Sherlock said, taking the dog back from John and scratching behind its soft little ear, as Sherrinford gently rubbed its back.

Even Mycroft joined them to briefly stroke its head.

In the background, they head Mummy ask, “Isn’t that just the same breed we used to have, only a different colour? The ears look very similar.”

“Yes, mother,” Mycroft politely replied in her direction.

The three brothers smiled at one another, exchanging a knowing look.

“You know, dear brother,” Mycroft said, signing along so Sherrinford could also understand, “this really makes you and John a proper family now: having a kid and a dog. Couldn’t get more domestic than that. I’d honestly never taken you for the type.”

Sherlock amicably rolled his eyes.

They ate cake and chatted some more, and John casually kissed Sherlock in front of everyone – twice – making the afternoon fly by.

Later, once the puppy was fast asleep in its still-much-too-large basket and some of the guests had already started leaving, Sherlock noticed John standing by himself in front of the fireplace,

Sherlock stepped closer to him and put an arm around his shoulder.

John sighed. “I just wish she were here.”

“She is, John. She forever will be.”

They leaned their heads against each other, looking at Vivian’s picture together, until a soft, rhythmic, banging sound on their left caught their attention, making them turn to look.

Blackbeard’s little tail was beating wildly against her basket, as Chloe was trying to climb in with her.

Chloe then fearlessly lay down next to the dog, wrapping one little arm around the pitch black creature as if it was a teddy she’d had for ages.

“Just look at those two,” John said, his voice soft.

Sherlock smiled. “They’ve made friends already.”

Chapter End Notes

That was it, folks! Thank you so much for coming along on this looooong ride, and for the encouraging words and comments I received along the way! (Please do keep them coming, even now that the story is finished! ;) )

Many, many thanks once more to Ariane DeVere for her indispensable transcripts of the show, to Jonathan for Brit-picking the entire thing from beginning to end, to my meticulous grammar and language beta mydogwatson for improving both this fic and my knowledge of the English language, and to my plot betas mamaorion, 88thparallel, camillo1978 and thelanding for beta‘ing different parts of the story and helping me make it flow so much more smoothly.

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As you may have noticed, there were various Easter eggs in this last chapter, which I wanted to include as a tribute to all the people who have tried to ‘fix’ the disappointing ending of BBC Sherlock, including its lack of LGBT representation, which to many came as a slap in the face after the makers’ scattering about so many hints of that nature.

Firstly, there is the short film The Adventure of the Furtive Festivity, where Sherlock and John are in an established relationship and celebrate Sherlock’s birthday, which you can view here. (Helium balloons!)

Then there’s OpNorbury, who run a Twitter and a tumblr account, with the purpose of denouncing Moffat and Gatiss’s use of queerbaiting and the BBC’s lofty response to the thousands of serious complaints that were sent to them, explaining how this has
caused harm to the show’s most loyal fans. What gave people an enormous positivity boost are the incredibly realistic and very in character "Contact" Twitter accounts, from which I stole the #DuringSexDontYellOut tweet. :).
A big thank you not only to the wonderful individuals behind those initiatives, but also to the Sherlock fandom as a whole, with its incredibly creative atmosphere, intelligent discussions and well thought-out dissertations and meta analyses on tumblr. This fic is dedicated to all of you!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!