Method Act

by splix

Summary

Something very strange keeps happening at 7:35 PM.

Notes

Note: Translation is incomplete.

Inspired by a prompt on the Sherlock Rant Meme. Thanks, anon prompter. :)

Many thanks to kimberlite for beta and steadfast friendship.

Additional pairings and tags may be added at a later date, depending on my whims.

For reference, this story takes place during the filming of S2.
Chapter 1

No one was absolutely sure whether Frick and Frack were really the same person or not. Some said that they were definitely two different people. True, they looked very much alike, but they had been seen in different places at the same time. Others claimed that such cases were merely an elaborate hoax and that Frick had been seen changing his clothes and wig to, as it were, become Frack. All that I can say for certain is that there were some very odd similarities between Frick and Frack but also some striking differences.

---Anthony Everett, Against Fictional Realism

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"Oh, for the love of –" John swiftly clamped a hand over his mouth and nose, slightly too late to prevent the sudden rush of horrifying stench that swamped him in a vile wave. His stomach gave a huge, unpleasant heave, churning up what had once been a very nice lunch of banh mi and pudding. He swallowed hard and implored his gorge to stay down. "Jesus Christ, Sherlock, what is that?"

"Barotrauma, John." Sherlock came out of the kitchen, fully outfitted in apron and goggles over his dressing gown, t-shirt, and pyjama bottoms. In one hand he brandished a striker, in the other a pair of crucible tongs clenched round something that looked weirdly like a deflated saline breast implant. A clear, viscous liquid dripped from it, splattering on the floor.

"On what, a haddock?" John set the groceries on the floor and shelved his hand under his nose to filter out the worst of the stink. "What the hell is that?"

"In this case, a porpoise," Sherlock said, looking pleased. "Excellent guess, for you."

"Yeah, I'm pretty good at diagnosing by smell," John said. "What's that?"

"This," Sherlock said, lifting the tongs higher, "is the lining of a cetacean air sac. Got it from Oduya down at the natural history museum." Another drop of liquid slid off the thing and fell with a fat, wet plop on the floor.

"They just had them lying about, did they?"

"She saved it for me. You remember Petr Frolev, that oil mogul who died in Belize a week ago. Newspapers said pulmonary emboli as a result of long inactivity. It's a twelve-hour flight from Moscow to Belize, he wasn't in the best of health. Overweight, heavy smoker, full-time drinker. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?"

"But you think it was pressure drop?" John tentatively pulled his hand away from his nose. He was getting used to the smell. One got used to frequent odours in 221B; the problem was that he thought he was becoming desensitised to it. More than once he'd brought a girlfriend by and watched, chagrined, as they'd wrinkled their noses in disgust. "Not the usual bachelor-flat fragrance, is it?" Sarah had chirped gamely. Hers had been by far the kindest reaction.

Sherlock grinned. "Murder by pressure drop. Really clever." He whirled; a spray of porpoise snot flew from the membrane as he marched back into the kitchen. "It was his brother, Vasily," he called.
"Not an oligarch by any stretch of the imagination – he acted as Petr's press secretary, rode his coattails, got jealous. Predictable, boring. He found out he was the principal beneficiary in Petr's will, though, and while they were in Belize, the pair of them went SCUBA diving with a local friend, a physician. Whilst they were on the ocean floor, Vasily cut Petr's weights."

"Ah, I get it, I get it," John said. "Because he was fat, he popped to the surface like a cork, at speed."

"Precisely. The rapid change in ambient pressure caused his lungs to rupture, resulting in fairly immediate death. Naturally Vasily caused quite a scene at the hospital, wailing and moaning for the benefit of the medical staff."

"But barotrauma and emboli don't present the same way. There's no effusion, the symptoms are completely – why didn't the --?" John paused. "Ah. No autopsy."

"Oh, who says you can't do anything with a medical licence these days?" Sherlock dropped the membrane into his biggest syringe. "Absolutely correct. And isn't it strange that the physician friend – who pronounced Petr Frolev dead, incidentally – is suddenly unavailable for questioning? On extended medical leave himself, evidently."

"Paid off."

"Or bumped off. Maybe he's at the bottom of the ocean with Petr's weights tied round his ankles." Sherlock closed the syringe.

John set the rest of the groceries on the counter and sat at the table, unmindful now of the smell. It was ridiculous and he'd die before admitting it, but he loved watching Sherlock plunged into his work. When Sherlock worked, he was happy, truly happy; his eyes sparkled, his long body lunged and swooped, his hands flashed back and forth, and he drew John effortlessly into a breathtaking rush of fervid enthusiasm. And yeah, a lot of what they did was repellent to ordinary people, but there was a secret pleasure to be found in someone so willfully extraordinary. Most people played it cool about their interests; for Sherlock, the very idea of cool would have been met with a blank stare.

_God damn it, you're doing it again._

He wrenched his gaze from Sherlock's face and drummed his fingers on the table, then picked up the paper, only slightly spattered with cetacean moisture. He feigned interest in the Life section; he'd been gawping at Sherlock far too much lately, and the only reason Sherlock hadn't noticed was because he seemed totally immune to personal intimacy of any kind. "So why the lining in the syringe?"

"Obvious. Boyle's Law, John." Sherlock retrieved the tongs and moved to the worktop. "Before that, though, I've got to –"

"Sherlock, not that, that's the –" John flung the paper aside, too late. As Sherlock plugged his hot plate into the faulty socket (Mrs. Hudson had taped it over, but for some inexplicable reason Sherlock had removed the tape) there was a spark, a loud pop, and Sherlock flew backward and collapsed on the floor, dragging the hot plate down with a crash.

John knocked his chair over scrambling up from the table. He pushed the chairs away from Sherlock's supine body, grabbed a wooden spoon from the worktop, and knocked the tongs from Sherlock's hand. _Not burned. Weird_. The thought was as fleeting as it was swift, and he pushed it aside and dropped to his knees. "Sherlock." He pressed two fingers against Sherlock's neck. "Sherlock, can you hear me? Sherlock?"
The production assistant, fresh out of film school and still very much beglamoured, sidled up to Benedict and cleared her throat. "Mr. Cumberbatch, they said you're all through. Can you sign off on this?"

"Certainly." Benedict pulled his pen from his pocket and signed the form on the girl's clipboard. "Benedict's fine, love."

"Right. Benedict." The PA – Nina, he remembered, her name was Nina – smiled timidly as she retrieved her clipboard, and smoothed back a thick skein of hair. Her pale, frail blondness was enlivened by that hair, a heavy sheaf of gold held back by an Alice band, the gesture of a girl who knew her hair was her best feature and with a sort of yearning sweetness, did the best she could with it.

"What pretty hair you've got." Two years ago he might have touched it in casual appreciation; now he only smiled.

"Oh my God. Thank you!" She clutched her clipboard to her chest and all but skipped away. As Benedict watched, she made her way to Andrew's side and proffered the clipboard with the same shy, ducking motion and aura of worshipful awe.

Benedict hid a grin and stretched, flexing muscles sore from nearly two hours of enforced stillness and unexpressed emotion. He and Andrew had been filming their scene all afternoon; they'd gone through endless cups of tea and almost two dozen apples, and by the end of it he'd been jittery and sloshing like an overfilled wineskin. He desperately wanted out of his costume and makeup, a piss, a beer, solid food, and a smoke, not necessarily in that order. He lifted a hand to Andrew, picking his way through taped-down cables. "Are you up for a meal? I'm starving."

Andrew's eyes lit up. "Giant plate of chips?"

"Giant plate of broccoli rabe."

"Ugh. Well, I don't have to kiss you. Right, wait for me outside. Twenty minutes?"

"Fifteen." Benedict skirted a stack of sandbags and nodded to a pair of grips. "Night, guys. Thanks."

"See you in a week, Ben."

"Right." Nina passed by, and Benedict touched her arm. "Nina, is Martin gone?"

"He's taking the 9:30 back."

"Thanks. Good night." He felt for his phone – sometimes he got away with it, but not in the pocket today, not for an afternoon of mostly sitting. Too tight, spoiled the line. In the trailer, then.

"Mind your shoe, it's come undone." Nina gave him another shy smile and darted away.

"Oh – thanks." He stuck his pen in his mouth and crouched low to tie his shoe. God, he was hungry; he actually felt light-headed. Fuck the broccoli rabe, he'd have a few chips and put in extra time at the pool over the weekend.
As he got to his feet, he wobbled and reached out for the nearest support, a flimsy C stand. It tipped over; startled, he flung his hand backward and grasped an electrical lead. He felt the slick smoothness of tape, then a sudden blazing-hot sliver of pain, and then nothing at all.

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Benedict opened his eyes and instantly squeezed them shut again to block out the blinding light that induced immediate tears. Covering the upper half of his face with his arm, he cautiously groped out with his other hand. "Guys, that's really bright. Could you turn it off? I think I'm okay."

"I wouldn't count on that."

"Oh, that's funny." Some wag had found a voice recording to prank him. Dirty trick to play on a guy who'd just got a shock serious enough to knock him unconscious. "Hilarious. Look, I think I'm okay, but it's just possible I might have a conc--"

He froze. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, making his skin tingle.

That hadn't been a recording.

Slowly, cautiously, Benedict took his arm away from his face and sat up, squinting through tears. Christ, the light was almost pure white, like football stadium halogens. There was a mottled blur about two metres away, a vaguely human shape. "Who's that?" No answer came from the figure, so he rubbed his eyes to clear them. God, couldn't they turn the light off? He drew his knees up and stared down at the dark wool of his trousers to soothe his eyes. "It's not funny," he muttered, then looked at the figure, who was also sitting on the floor. "Holy fuck."

The man on the floor looked just like Benedict. Exactly like Benedict. And if he didn't have a concussion and his brain wasn't projecting hallucinations as he slowly bled, he sounded just like Benedict. It was the best goddamned body double he'd ever seen. Ever.

Benedict managed to tear his eyes from the man – who wore, incongruously, his Great Game sleeping ensemble with the addition of a slick plastic apron. A pair of goggles sat on the floor beside him. White floor, white walls. Confused, Benedict glanced round. "Where the hell are we? This isn't the set."

"It's not 221B, either," the man said.

"Oh my God, you do sound like me. That's amazing. God, what did they do – clone me as I slept?"

Benedict peered closely at the man. Amazing likeness.

"Human cloning isn't a medical or scientific feasibility yet. Certainly wasn't in the late '70s, either, despite all that Boys From Brazil rubbish."

Benedict blinked. "Okay. Hey, what's going on? Where did everyone go?" He rose to his feet, still blinking in the staggering brilliance. "Why's it so bloody bright in here?" He stopped, frowning in consternation. They were in a...a box. Pure white, no doors, no windows, not a single seam to offset the whiteness. He whirled on the man who still sat on the floor. The man's feet were bare. Even his feet looked just like Benedict's. "Who are you? Where'd they dig you up?"

The man lifted a brow in a bizarrely familiar gesture. "Sherlock Holmes. Who are you?"

"That's not funny at all," Benedict snapped. He paced the length, then the breadth of the room,
stepping over the man's crossed ankles. "How long was I out?"

"Three minutes, give or take a few seconds. Of course, I was out myself and only came to a few moments ago. Electrical shock." The man shrugged and examined his hands. "No burns, though. Interesting."

"How did we get in here?"

"I have three or four ideas. Five, actually."

The man got up, stretching, and Benedict couldn't help but watch. It was like seeing a mirror with a life of its own between a layer of glass and silver paint. He'd copied Benedict's depiction of Sherlock so thoroughly it was a little scary. It was creepy, actually. "Look, you can drop it. You look exactly like me and you've obviously gone to a lot of trouble to get the details right –" Benedict's glance took in hair, eyes, teeth for fuck's sake – "All right, this is weird," he said with a nervous chuckle. "It's like I have a twin brother my parents never told me about."

"I don't have a twin," the man droned with exaggerated patience. "I do have brothers, though, and fortunately I don't resemble either of them." He leant against the wall, the picture of forbearance.

Benedict went to one wall and rested his hand upon its enamel-smooth whiteness. "I don't like being shut up," he whispered. A fine sweat had broken out on his back and under his arms. He knocked on the wall. "Mark? Sue?" He pounded harder. "Danny? Somebody?"

"Whoever you're calling, it's quite obvious they can't hear you."

Pivoting on his heel, Benedict glared at his double. "All right, just what the hell is going on? Who are you? How…" He trailed off and moved closer to the man, staring into his eyes.

The man met his gaze coolly.

There, the right eye, that tiny blot of brown just above the pupil. Desperately, he scanned for contact lenses, a custom job. No edge. No contacts. Real irises.

His eyes.

Benedict stumbled backward, gasping. "Jesus. Jesus Christ." He couldn't get air, and sucked in one rapid breath after another.

"You're going to hyperventilate," the man said. "Pull yourself together."

Heaving for breath, Benedict dropped into a crouch and tucked his head between his knees. Concussion. Had to be.

Something flickered beneath his vision. He tried to focus, and realised the man was waving a pack of cigarettes under his nose.

"Go on."

"Trying to quit," he mumbled, though he craved a smoke so badly his whole body twitched in need. He'd been planning one, just one tonight, but now he yearned to snatch the proffered box and stuff them all in his mouth at once. He took the fag with a trembling hand and put it between his lips, fumbling for a lighter. No goddamned lighter.

"You'll set yourself on fire," the man said in clear amusement, and crouched down, extending a
lighter.

Benedict cupped his hand round the light and leant forward, noting with an inward (and probably an outward) shudder that the man's hands were exactly –

Stop. STOP.

He took a deep drag, reducing a quarter of the smoke to ash in one go. He felt dizzy and the smoke burned his throat and sinuses, but it was calming, soothing; it stilled the palsy in his hand and gave him the courage to look the man in the face. "Who are you? Really?"

"I don't repeat myself."

"Oh, so I'll call you Sherlock, then," Benedict snapped. Arsehole.

'Sherlock' sighed and rolled his eyes. "Look, I don't know who you are and I don't really care, but the fact is that we've obviously been thrown together as a result of some sort of…anomaly. Temporal or spatial, I don't know yet."

"Anomaly." Benedict got up again and began pacing. "Anomaly. What the hell's that supposed to mean? I think you've got the wrong show, friend."

"You've got the same blot on your eye that I do. Same teeth, same nose, same hands, same pattern of hair growth. Now I'm not a betting man, but I'd make an exception in this instance. I'll wager you haven't got a twin either."

"No. No, just…just me." God, was it a separated-at-birth thing? Had his parents lied to him for some bizarre reason, some fucked-up Man in the Iron Mask scenario?

Shut up.

"Look, I admit it – I'm…puzzled about this as well." The man took out a cigarette of his own and lit it. He smoked in silence for a moment, and exhaled through his nostrils. "There's no data –" He glanced at the white walls, the pristine floor. "Nothing that indicates what might have happened. Except that you got an electrical shock as well."

"Yeah." Benedict stilled. "My shoe was untied, and I put my pen in my mouth to tie it, and I grabbed a raw cable – is that it? Some sort of electrically induced hallucination?"

The man who called himself Sherlock poked Benedict hard in the arm.

"Ow! Hey –"

"Quite a hallucination." The man took another contemplative drag. "Heard of the multiverse?"

"The –? Er…yeah, it's layered, or alternate worlds or something, I remember it from – oh, come on. That's rubbish."

'Sherlock' snorted. "Oh, I see. So it's perfectly ordinary to stand here talking to an exact duplicate of yourself, but the notion of physics and cosmological phenomena are utterly beyond rational thought."

"That's not even your area!"

The man tilted his head to one side. "How would you know?"

"Because Sherlock Holmes doesn't know anything about the cosmos, that's why."
"So you know who I am." The man preened a bit.

"I…we invented that! It's in the Doyle canon, for God's sake. It's fiction." Benedict's head was swimming. Hungry. I'm hungry and thirsty, that's all.

"Obviously not."

"Stop saying that!" Benedict stalked to the wall and leant against it, taking deep breaths, trying to find his center. It's the shock. I'm a normal, rational guy.

"You look just like me, you sound like me, and you even dress like me, but you aren't me. Clearly you're an actor – you've got makeup on, too much for any individual for ordinary wear, and yet it's melting a bit and not retouched, so at the end of whatever you've been doing, but you haven't had time to wash it off yet. Your hair isn't naturally that dark – auburn at the roots and a little thread of grey here and there, so not a brand-new dye job, but it's been artfully arranged so that the roots don't show much. The suit fits too tightly for comfort, and the side trouser seams have been pulled apart, re-stitched, and pressed to fit your body. It's good material, but not so good that it merits such an exact tailoring job. You keep feeling for your phone, further sign that this isn't really your suit. Your own suit would have accommodated a mobile, and there's nothing else in your pockets, which have been stitched down, so impossible to get anything in there anyway, not that you realise it because you do keep looking for it, so you must have more of this type of suit, possibly a variety of sizes depending on your activity. You've got nervous fingers, stained with nicotine, same with teeth, slightly whitened but still showing faint traces. Gums are a bit red because you scrubbed them extra hard, someone probably chastised you about your smoking habit, God forbid an actor should have yellow teeth. And judging by the number of names you called out, you're accustomed to coddling, typical insular world of the performing arts. And although you've just touched an exposed wire with high currency, there are no burns on your hand – no marks whatsoever." The man paused. "Shall I continue?"

"Anyone can do that," Benedict said. "If they've seen the show." He pressed his hands together and forced himself to speak calmly. "You're a fiction, and I'm hallucinating. So if you can't deduce us out of here, kindly shut the hell up so I can think, okay?"

The man gave him a smug smile. "Who's Tom?"

"What?" Benedict started forward, but the whiteness around him blazed into a dazzling radiance that blinded him. He cried out and felt himself falling.

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Benedict awoke to a gentle hand patting his face and another chafing his fingers. His whole body sagged in relief. They'd get him to hospital, give him a CT scan or an MRI or something, and everything would be okay again. Everything was okay now, in fact.

Until a voice spoke.

"Sherlock? Sherlock, you okay?"
Chapter 2

"Ben. Ben!"

"Oh my God. Call 999! Now!"

"On it!"

Sherlock opened his eyes to see a crowd of people standing round him.

_Oh. That's...interesting._

"He's awake, he's awake!"

"Fucking liability...Christ. Get Jeremy on the phone."

"Mr. Cumberbatch?"

"Ben?"

Sherlock closed his eyes again.

"Oh, shit --"

Interesting. None of those faces were familiar. Sherlock inhaled slowly. Freshly sawn wood, heavy makeup, dry cleaning fluid, bodily effluvia from the surrounding figures – whoever they were, they'd been here all day, some sitting around, some sweating and straining. At least three of them had eaten the same chicken piccata, mashed potatoes, and garlic string beans. Two had eaten the pasta salad, one the raw vegetable platter, and some foolhardy soul had consumed a large salami-and-Gouda sandwich. Ugh.

"Should we rub his hands?"

"No, don't move him! Where's the goddamned ambulance?"

"I've called, I've called. They'll be here shortly."

Sherlock opened his eyes again. A blonde middle-aged woman leant forward.

"Oh, darling, don't try to move. You've had a bad shock. Can you hear me, love?"

"Of course I can hear you," Sherlock snapped. "That wasn't enough of a current to damage my nerves, my choleheae, or my tympanic membranes."

The woman shook her head sadly. "Don't worry, we'll get you looked after." She stood and made a broad sweeping gesture. "Clear away, please! Give him some air." Sherlock tried to sit up, but she knelt and pushed him back down gently. "No, love. Don't move."

Sherlock hesitated. Through the forest of legs he saw what looked like his kitchen – but when he cut his eyes left, he saw a huge tangle of cables and what looked like film equipment. And when he looked up, there was no ceiling, only blackness.

As he sank back, staring upward into nothingness, a bright light blinded him, and he shielded his eyes with his hand.
"Turn that off, for fuck's sake!" someone shouted.

Only a few moments ago, he'd just seen his exact double wearing what looked like one of his suits and having a panic attack. At first he'd thought he was having some sort of momentary reaction, a neurological response to electric shock, complete with tactile hallucination. Then he'd thought perhaps it was hallucinogen persisting perception disorder – he'd consumed enough MDMA, mescaline, and psilocybin over the years to make it at least a remote possibility.

Now – to his immense discomfort – he wasn't so sure what had happened. The odd bit was that during that moment of communion – sticky as the word was, it fit the situation best – with his doppelganger, he hadn't felt any of the known symptoms of electrical shock. On the contrary, he'd felt perfectly lucid and healthy, which was likely why none of the drug or shock-related indicators had occurred to him, and the myriad wonders of the realm of physics had done. Possibly.

"The ambulance is here. Oh, thank Christ –"

Physics didn't matter now. His panicky, overly-emotional double with the secret boyfriend named Tom didn't matter now. What did matter was that he was apparently in some bizarre mockup of 221B, everyone around him thought he was an actor named Ben Cumberbatch, and if he didn't make a move soon – immediately, in fact – then he'd find himself trapped in a hospital with no way to work out what had actually happened.

He sat up. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

A dozen hands took hold of him and held him.

"No, Ben. Lie still. The paramedics are on their way. We'll get you to hospital, have them take a look at you."

"I'm fine!" Sherlock twisted fruitlessly. The hands held him nearly motionless.

"You were unconscious, love. You've got to wait, you'll be fine, I promise –"

Multiverse? God, where had he picked up such twaddle?

"They're coming, Mr. Cumberbatch. Up here!"

"John!" Sherlock shouted. "John!"

"Oh, God, he's in shock."

"I'm not in shock!" Why did people always defer to shock when they hadn't the faintest clue what was wrong with someone? Who were these idiots? And if John wasn't here, when he'd been just a moment ago – Film set?


He'd always trusted his senses, and he wasn't injured; he'd be able to tell if he were. His brain was working normally – rapidly he scanned the sea of faces in front of him and focused on the blonde woman who'd tried to soothe him. Clearly in charge since everyone had obeyed her immediately when she'd told them to move, also no ID hanging from a lanyard round her neck like most of the others, therefore high up enough not to have to wear one. Short nails, chipped lacquer, bit of gunge at the quick; not afraid to get her hands dirty once in a while, casual but smart clothes, expensive
tennis shoes. Two children, two cats, and a dog, staying in a hotel but brought her own candles to get the staleness out of the room.

There. Perfectly fine.

He lay back and glared at the paramedics who knelt beside him. "Mr. Cumberbatch," one said in hushed, respectful tones, "don't worry, we'll sort you out. Where'd he come into contact with the cable?" he asked the crowd.

"His hand," someone said.

Well, evidently they weren't going to let him up until they'd checked him thoroughly. Standard procedure, if completely, utterly boring. Sherlock closed his eyes and retreated to his mind palace. Surely there was a bit more data on doppelgangers and multiverses; he hadn't pulled the information out of nowhere, after all.

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Another flood of white light jolted him back to the present. He was lying on a bed, an oxygen mask strapped to his face. They'd undressed him down to his briefs (boxer briefs, not his brand) and attached electrodes to his chest and an oxygen monitor to his finger. There was a nurse beside his bed, starting an IV, and two women and a man in pale blue scrubs – two doctors and a physician assistant – hovered close by, watching him with triplicate expressions of anxiety.

Sherlock frowned. "Relax. I've got no plans to die on your watch." His voice sounded crushed and hollow beneath the mask.

One of the doctors raised her eyebrows. Not much movement. Botox. "You've been unresponsive for half an hour, Mr. Cumberbatch. We're just being careful. How do you feel?"

"Absolutely fine. I'd feel a lot better if you took this stuff off my chest and let me go home."

"Mr. Cumberbatch, do you know why you're here?"

"My na –" Sherlock halted. Wherever he was, they thought he was Ben Cumberbatch, actor. Questioning of the perceptual grasp of experience through physical objects dated at least back to Plato and his cave allegory, without the encumbrance of religion. Not the most popular or encouraged questioning, though current thinking disputed it less and less. Why not expand accepted laws of physics and the distribution of matter into and even beyond the reaches of the known universe, Vilenkin's Level 2? A thousand layers of reality with a thousand Sherlocks lying on a thousand beds, and in some of those layers, Sherlock's name was Ben Cumberbatch. Everything else seemed absolutely ordinary. Disappointing.

Well, until someone proposed a better hypothesis, he wouldn't rule out the entirely improbable. And probably, even in this universe, if there were hospitals, there were psych wards, so Ben Cumberbatch he would be until he got this sorted.

He forced a thin smile. "I touched a cable. I assume you've got me here to look for physiological signs of damage."

The second doctor smiled. "That's right. When's your birthday?"
Oh, dear.

Sherlock reached up and took off his mask. "I don't think I need this, do you? Look, it's reading 96, that's about perfect." He pointed to the digital oxygen readout and bestowed his most dazzling smile on the first doctor, glancing at her name tag. "Dr. DeMille? It's all right, isn't it?"

She blinked, then smiled in return, taking the mask from his hand. "I suppose so. The strangest thing, Mr. Cumberbatch – you said you touched the cable?" Her voice was soft, with a faint Scots burr. Happily married except for insecurities about her looks, played the guitar in her spare time, recent anniversary judging by the indent on her finger (thin circle of all diamonds next to the band and engagement ring, too small but too vain to tell her husband to have the ring re-sized).

"That's right." Find a computer. There didn't seem to be any perceptible lag in technology. Maybe he'd just been blasted to Glasgow.

"The strange thing is that there doesn't seem to be a burn site. No blistering, not even a reddened patch of skin," said the PA (just broke up with his girlfriend, using her shampoo and lotion in a desperate attempt at connection – no, she broke up with him). "Frankly, we're relieved – you were out for a few moments on the set, and then for the ambulance ride and triage – it wasn't more than half an hour, all told, but still."

"Fantastic," Sherlock said. "I guess that's it, then."

"Hold on," the second doctor said (juggling two lovers, one male, one female, recently engaged in threesome and is afraid – reddened eyes, evidence of recent and repeated dihydrocodeine use – that the other two are beginning to be attracted to each other, leaving her out in the cold – unlikely, judging from imperfectly covered beard-burn and tawdry suck mark by female with small bite). "You seem all right, but we've still got some tests to run. Any neuropathy – loss of feeling – in your hands or feet?"

Sherlock flexed his hands, then pulled up the sheet and wiggled his toes. "None at all."

"We've got to do some sensory testing nonetheless. And some neurological testing as well. When's your birthday?"

"Actually," said Sherlock, flashing another smile, "could I use the loo? I'm bursting."

DeMille frowned slightly. "I think it might be better –"

"Oh, God, no catheters, please." Sherlock opened his eyes wide and gave the trio a beseeching stare. "Please. I can manage."

"All right. Alan," the second doctor called, "would you walk Mr. Cumberbatch to the toilet?"

A nurse in black scrubs ambled up. "Sure. Glad to."

They disconnected the electrodes from the monitor, but left them attached to Sherlock's body, gave him a flimsy gown, and a pair of socks with rubber bits on the sole. The nurse took his arm, and it was all Sherlock could do not to snatch it away. He smiled again – his face was beginning to hurt from all the idiot grins, but the medical staff seemed to appreciate and even expect it – and forced himself to speak amiably. "Really appreciate this."

"God, are you kidding? It's an honour. Listen, I hope it's not too intrusive, but could I have your autograph? My daughter just loves your show. She's started to collect your older stuff. She'll probably murder me for not calling – hey, would you mind if I took your picture?"
Sherlock gaped, then shut his mouth. "Er – yeah, that'd be great. My pleasure." He saw the nurse's desk, unattended. What luck. He gave the nurse a quick once-over. "Maybe you should go and get your phone, though."

"How did you –" The nurse laughed. "God, the show must rub off on you! Will you be okay? You seem to be walking all right. No dizziness, light-headedness?"

"Nope." Sherlock popped his P. "I'll be fine. Thanks."

"Here we are. Ring the bell if you get dizzy. I'll be back in a flash."

"Okay." Sherlock gave another moronic grin, then rolled his eyes as the nurse dashed away. He slipped behind the desk and hit the enter button. The hospital login was password protected – but Internet Explorer [Internet Explorer in a parallel universe. This seemed less and less likely] popped up with nary a blip. Swiftly, he opened up Google and typed.

*Benjamin Cumberbatch.*

Eight thousand results. Not very impressive.

Oh. Benedict Cumberbatch. Thirty-seven million results.

Always something.

He went to Wikipedia, glad that no-one was watching (Wikipedia, for God’s sake), and gleaned the essential details, scanning rapidly. Theatre, television, film, radio work, personal, etc., etc., etc. Boring, boring, boring, dull, dull, dreary, mildly interesting, dull – good-looking, but the worst hairstyle, dear Christ! – dull, dull, dull –

Sherlock.

Sherlock clicked.

*Oh.*

Well, everything was a bit clearer now. Wait. What had the actor said? 'Doyle canon?'

Click.

"What the hell?" Sherlock straightened, scowling as his gown threatened to separate in the back. He clutched it closed. "Fictional?"

His scowl deepening, he went back to Google and typed in *Sherlock Holmes.*

80 million results. More than 'Benedict Cumberbatch', he noted smugly.

Wait, who was that dodgy-looking man with the scruff of beard? Surely that wasn't meant to –

"All through? Oi, what are you doing, Mr. Cumberbatch? Sorry, but you can't –"

Sherlock straightened and smiled again, backing out of IE. "Sorry. Just checking Twitter. I don't want this going public, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, right." The nurse smiled a bit nervously. Already called the papers, likely, promised them some sort of exclusive. "About that picture – do you mind?"
"Not at all." Sherlock held still while the man fumbled with his phone. If he was here, then Benedict Cumberbatch was probably…there.

At 221B.

With John.

Sherlock almost laughed. How on earth would John react to that jittery, chain-smoking bundle of nerves? They were nothing alike at all. Oh, God, poor John! He was probably having Cumberbatch committed at this very moment.

"Oh. That might not be good at all," Sherlock mumbled.

"What's that?"

Sherlock blinked. "Nothing, nothing. All set?"

"Lights, camera – action!"

Sherlock grinned once more.

*

"Well, that's it, I suppose. Everything seems in order. Heart, lungs, brain function all normal. CT and MRI are clear, no neuropathy, no burns. I admit you had us all worried, but you're fit as a fiddle, Mr. Cumberbatch. No reason for you not to return to work. Ms. Vertue's got a car out front for you." Dr. DeMille was businesslike, but her manner had become shyer, a bit more hesitant. Ridiculous what the presence of a celebrity did to an ordinarily competent individual.

"Fantastic. Thanks for all your help."

"It was a pleasure to meet you." A small crowd of medical staff had gathered round and was smiling timidly at him.

Dear God. "Oh, that's very kind. Thanks." He glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock.

"This way, sir."

On his way out of the hospital, Sherlock heard whispers and sudden excited, if swiftly strangled, cries. He saw phones aimed at him, and turned round to scowl at one of the intrusive photographers, but the blonde woman came up and tucked an arm in his. "Come on, love. We'll get you back to the hotel."

"I think I should get back to the set." If there was a point of egress, then there had to be a point of ingress. Sherlock could manage quite well in this reality, especially as it seemed to be as deadly dull as London could sometimes be – but he could only imagine the havoc that Benedict Theatre-Studies-Round-the-Bend-Awful-Hair Cumberbatch was wreaking in John Watson's world. Whatever was happening, it was sure to be not good.

Not good at all.

*
Chapter 3

"Sherlock? Sherlock, you okay?"

Benedict kept his eyes closed for a few seconds. "Martin," he mumbled, "that's not funny."

"Who – come on, Sherlock, open your eyes."

That was Martin's voice. Of course it was. He opened his eyes, and there was Martin, kneeling over him in a khaki-coloured t-shirt and a worn blue cardigan. No makeup; he must have washed it off. Benedict smiled tentatively. "Hey."

"Hey yourself. Have you got a goose egg forming back there?" Gently, Martin insinuated his hand beneath Benedict's head. "That was a hell of a fall you took."

"No, I think it's –" Benedict froze. "Martin."

"Martin. Was that the physician?" Martin probed at the back of Benedict's head. "I think your arse must have taken most of the impact. Doesn't seem to be any swelling. Want to sit up for me?"

"Physician?" A cold chill crept down Benedict's spine and settled in his belly.

"Yeah, the fellow who pronounced Frolev dead?" Martin slipped his hand under Benedict's back. "Come on, up you get. I don't want you to move from this spot, I just want to gauge your respiratory capacity. You're bloody lucky the current wasn't strong enough to hold you there. Christ, what made you take the tape off? You feel short of breath?"

Benedict sat up slowly, grateful for Martin's arm round his back. "Martin, honestly –"

"Yeah, yeah. Let me get my bag –" Martin broke off and squinted, starting into Benedict's eyes. "You're dead pale."

That was a dream, wasn't it? And Martin calling me Sherlock….

Benedict looked down and saw a slick black apron and smelled something awful. "All right," he said, conscious that his voice was trembling just a bit. "Joke's over."

"Too right it is. I'm going to get Mrs. Hudson to get that fixed this week." Martin stood up. "Back in a flash."

"That's not funny," Benedict said, heaving himself up by the palms of his hands. Martin scowled and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Don't get up. Don't."

"You called me Sherlock."

"Really don't move. What the hell's the amperage in those sockets?"

A sudden hot, irrational burst of red-tinged anger flared in Benedict's vision. He could take a joke – Martin had pranked him often enough that he'd become accustomed to it, and accepted it with relative grace, but he'd just had enough for now. He tried to struggle to his feet. "It's not funny. In
"Hey, hey!" Martin crouched close. "Easy. Sherlock, take it easy." He tilted Benedict's chin upward. "Let me see your eyes."

Benedict swatted Martin's hand away. "Stop that!" He glared at Martin, then stilled. Something wasn't right. He peered up and saw...a ceiling. Stained here and there, and a couple of what looked like paring knives and...one of those martial arts throwing stars embedded into the surface.

His heart thundering in his chest, he looked round. The crew. The equipment? What had happened to everybody?

"Look, I think we'd better get you to A&E. Just sit tight, okay? I'll be right back."

As Martin walked away, Benedict stared after him. He heard the sound of footsteps ascending stairs.

_The set doesn't go any higher. What the ever-loving hell –_

Hallucination. It was a hallucination. Except that now he was wearing that other guy's clothes, the stunt double or whoever he was, he was _awfully_ snotty, and dear God in heaven, what was that stench?

Frantically, Benedict rubbed his eyes, then his temples. _Okay. Okay. Don't lose it. It's definitely, decidedly weird, but no cause for completely freaking out. Where's the crew, for fuck's sake?_

Gathering himself together, he rose into a crouch, then to his feet. He wobbled just a little, but steadied himself on the table and after a few seconds, felt his equilibrium return. He glanced down at the table. It was covered with more stuff than usual, and it smelled – oh, God! – it smelled like a kipper factory. Foul.

As he looked over the table, and once more examined the ceiling, he became aware of a noise – commonplace, but one not heard on the closed set.

_That can't be right._

Fearfully, he advanced toward the window. The curtain fluttered a bit, and he inhaled the scent of rain. He caught up the thin fabric in one hand, pulled it aside, and looked down at the street below. Cars drove back and forth, headlights and red taillights winking in the darkness, the distinctive rush of tyres driving over wet tarmac drifting up to the open window along with muted conversation and laughter. As he watched, a couple ran past, clinging to each other beneath the broad shelter of a polka-dotted umbrella.

A scream locked itself in Benedict's throat.

"Sherlock!"

Benedict jumped and gave a little yelp. He spun on his heel and gaped at Martin, carrying a doctor's bag and fixing him with a stern glare.

"I _told_ you not to get up, God damn it. Would you please, for once in your life, defer to my expertise?" Martin crossed the room and slammed his bag on the cluttered coffee table. His movements were very John Watson – neat, economical, none of the casual loose-limbed ease of his ordinary demeanour.

"What the fuck is going on?" Benedict demanded.
"You got an electrical shock."

"I know that. I mean, what the fuck is happening here? Where's the crew? Why is there a ceiling, and a street –" Benedict thinned his mouth into a grim line. "You're having me on."

Martin sighed. "Yeah, that's exactly what I'm doing, is having you on. Off with the apron and sit on the sofa before you fall down. Can't think why you'd do an arse-ended – never mind, scratch that. Come on, you're staring and it's starting to get weird."

"Where is everybody? Where'd he go?"

"What are you on about?"

"Me. Me, me, the other me!"

"You're starting to scare me, Sherlock."

"I get it," Benedict snapped. "I get it, okay? It's funny. Fucking hilarious. Great performance. You're a brilliant actor, you won a fucking BAFTA –" Oh, God, he'd promised himself never to let that tiny scrap of bitterness out. Martin would never let him live it down. Too late now. He sucked in a quick breath. "What I mean is – it's all very funny, but you can stop now."

Martin stared in silence for a moment. "Right. I'm calling an ambulance. Please sit down, for God's sake." He pulled his phone from his pocket.

"Oh. Good. Great. Yes. Bring an ambulance in, that's perfect. You're going to make a fake phone call to emergency services. I'm pretty sure that's illegal, you know." Desperately, he turned back to the window, staring at the curtain moving in the damp breeze. What is that, how, how for God's sake? He pivoted on his heel again. "Martin --"

"Hi. I need an ambulance, please. Yes."

"Stop," Benedict snarled. He felt like crying. He and Martin had always got along like a house on fire, but this was…cruel, on top of his hallucination. Multiverse, his arse. Too much, even for a prank. "It's not funny anymore."

Martin shook his head. "Hi, yes. This is John Watson, and I need an ambulance, please. No, not for me, for my flatmate. We're at 221B Baker Street, W1. Sh – yes. Sherlock Holmes. He's –"

"Hang it up! Hang it up, for fuck's sake!" Benedict lunged at Martin and grabbed at the phone. Martin struggled to hang on to it, but Benedict succeeded in wrenching it from his hand. Frantically, he stabbed at the END button until the screen went blank. "Jesus Christ."

Martin spread his hands wide. "Great. Excellent. Well done you. You realise they're probably going to send the police now as well?"

Benedict looked down at the phone. It wasn't Martin's sleek black iPhone. It was a Nokia, silver, a bit scratched and dented. He turned it over.

Harry Watson
From Clara
XXX

Carefully, Benedict set the phone on the coffee table next to the doctor's bag. "I need the loo," he whispered, and stalked into the hallway. He paused and pushed a door open.
A fully equipped bathroom.
Naturally.

He shut himself inside, turned on the light, and leant against the door.

*I'm going round the twist.*

He gazed at his reflection in the smudged mirror above the little pedestal sink. He was white, but that was to be expected after an electrical shock and the nastiest prank anyone had ever pulled on him. He moved closer to the mirror.

"They're phoning me back!" Martin's voice was slightly muffled by the closed door.

His scars were gone. The scarring from his *Frankenstein* makeup and prosthetics – gone. His skin, occasionally plagued by makeup, was clear and perfect without...no, he wasn't wearing cosmetics. His hair, usually wilting at the end of a day's filming thanks to excessive product, was perfect. He wore the same clothes that his...clone, or whoever he'd been, had worn during that freakish episode: t-shirt, pyjama bottoms, dressing gown, smelly plastic apron.

*Multiverse?*

Impossible.

Benedict turned on the water to splash his face. He cupped his hands beneath the stream and lifted them, then stopped.

Water. Running water. In a bathroom that didn't really exist.

He was rational. If he'd gone round the twist, surely his fevered brain wouldn't have invented something so prosaic. Surely not. But a multiverse! It couldn't be a legitimate scientific phenomenon, it was too...too strange, too unpredictable. Impossible.

The water trickled through his fingers and splashed onto the slightly dirty surface of the sink.

Faintly, the noise of a siren filtered through the door.

"Sherlock!" The door rattled a bit beneath brief hammering. "Come out. It's the ambulance."

Another siren joined the first.

"And the police. Lovely."

*I'll bet this never happened to Jeremy Brett.* A half-hysterical spume of laughter escaped Benedict, and he clapped a wet hand to his mouth. *Okay. Okay. Get hold of yourself.*

The notion of Sherlock Holmes - *his* iteration of Sherlock Holmes – coming to independent life was absolutely, no question, beyond fucked up. There was no way that Sherlock had talked to him in a tiny white box of a room, no way that they had somehow traded places.

*Oh God, does that mean Sherlock's in Cardiff with Martin and Andrew and Sue and Mark and –* Benedict chortled again.

"Sherlock!"

He heard pounding feet ascending the stairs.
And I suppose that means that Sherlock's going to take the train back to London and go to my house and – He gasped. Oh, Christ!

"I'm coming in." The doorknob turned, the door opened, and Martin stepped inside.

No, not Martin.

John.

Benedict placed both hands on the sink and took a deep breath. "John."

"Don't make me drag you out, Sherlock. The paramedics are here. And the police. Look, I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm worried about TBI. You're being weirder than usual."

"TBI?" Benedict lifted his head and stared at Martin – no, John – in the mirror.


Benedict turned and peered at him. If that's acting, he deserves more than a BAFTA. "You're worried."

"Of course I'm worried, you git. You just took current that threw you back a metre and a half and knocked you unconscious."

"How long was I out?"

Mar – John shook his head. "Less than a minute, but that's more than enough."

A woman in a green uniform joined John in the corridor. "Mr. Holmes? Would you mind stepping out here, please? I understand you've had a bad shock."

Benedict went into the corridor and back into the front room. Two other paramedics and a police officer in a City uniform scrutinised him carefully. "Hello," he said.

"We're going to get you to hospital, Mr. Holmes," the first paramedic said, indicating a mobile stretcher. "Is there anything you'd like Dr. Watson to collect for you?"

The thing to do is play along. Let them examine you; don't make a fuss and alert them that there's anything wrong. Then you can work out how to get back to Cardiff. Maybe you're just overtired.

"No," Benedict said, then almost unconsciously elongated his spine and arranged his features into an expression of irritated boredom. "I don't see why any of this is necessary, though I am impressed that you responded within the three-hour window you usually allow." He let the rhythm of Sherlock's speech pattern settle onto his palate. "I mean, good job I wasn't bleeding out because I'd almost certainly be dead now, but still – nice effort. Gold star."

"Sherlock," John murmured, "scale it back a bit, yeah?" But a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes were less anxious.

"Sorry," Benedict replied automatically. His mouth twitched, and he struggled to stifle a grin. Dear God, this was beyond weird. John Watson. Christ!

"You want to take that apron off?" one of the other paramedics asked. Benedict complied, untying it in the back. He moved to drape it over a kitchen chair, then hesitated.
What would Sherlock do?

He dropped it on the floor.

"Nice," John muttered.

Perfect.

The police officer was visibly annoyed. "There doesn't seem to be any foul play in evidence here. You can't just terminate a 999 call like that, Dr. Watson. Besides being cause for alarm and a clear sign of danger, it's a waste of resources. We're obliged to respond to hang-up calls, and that's time that could have been spent on actual emergencies." He gave both Benedict and John a look of withering scorn.

"Yeah, I didn't --" John sighed. "Look, it was an accident. I told them that when they phoned back."

"Still," the officer said pompously, and marched down the stairs.

The female paramedic patted the stretcher. "Right. Shall we?"

Benedict turned to John. "You'll come with me?"

John's eyes warmed. "Yeah, of course I will. Of course."

A little sigh of relief shivered through Benedict's body. Thank God for loyal friends.

*  

Not for nothing had Benedict made a really thorough study of the identity and character of Sherlock Holmes in the 21st century. He had his full name, date and place of birth, parents' names, even his NHS number memorised, along with sundry other information that might have proved useful. He paused in the midst of filling out forms. If I hadn't memorised all this stuff, would it be happening right now?

He sat through a battery of visual and reaction tests, and a CT scan to check for brain injury. He felt absolutely fine, though, no headache, nothing. The hospital staff pulled the curtains round his bed and left him alone with John.

Benedict sat silently, pondering over what had happened. The ambulance, an honest-to-Christ ambulance, had driven him through the streets of London. He'd started on a set in Cardiff and wound up in London. Meanwhile...meanwhile, he supposed, impossible as it seemed, that some version of himself, or Sherlock Holmes, or...God knew what...was running round Cardiff. He had to get back and fix things, but how?

He still couldn't quite accept it. It was too mad. Suddenly he wished he'd taken the time, when he'd had the utterly amazing opportunity to meet Stephen Hawking, to ask him some really penetrating questions about the possibilities of a multiverse, instead of just babbling about what an utterly amazing opportunity it had been to meet him. Well, it wouldn't have worked out very well because of Dr. Hawking's capacity to answer questions, but still. Anything would have helped. Maybe.

John turned Benedict's hand over and marvelled over the lack of injury. "You didn't do that...er,
deliberately, did you, Sherlock?"

Benedict blinked. "Sorry?"

"You know how you are. Can be. Bit of a diva at times. You didn't fake the shock."

"No!" Benedict scowled in genuine annoyance, then remembered to slip back into Sherlock. "Honestly, John. You think I'd waste my time like this? I've got one or two better things to do."

"Yes," said a cold, sharp voice. A hand pulled the curtain aside. "For example, having the courtesy to answer my telephone calls."

John's hand tightened on Benedict's, then let go. "Hello, Mycroft."

*
Balancing three scripts, a shirt box, and a loaded Waterstones bag, Tom nevertheless managed to text briskly, his thumbs flying over the keyboard in time to his rapid pace.

*Hey-ho, hey nonny nonny, see you tonight? Am I at yours or are you at mine?*

"Tom. Tom!"

He skidded to a stop and bestowed a grin upon Hamilton Hodell's lushly curvaceous receptionist, Lecia. "Yes, darling! Why are you here so late?"

She held up a stack of post in one scarlet-tipped hand. "Busy looking after your affairs, that's why. Here – random sample. Shall I hold on to the rest? Doesn't look as though you can carry all of it."

"Yes, please. I'm a bit burdened. Throw it in a box for me, okay?"

"Of course. Are we taking you home?"

"Stan's bringing the car round, yeah." Tom plunked his belongings on the sweep of polished-stone countertop and plucked the envelopes from her hand. Neatly sorted according to size and already slit open, they made a tidy pile. "Did you sort out the–"

"Oh, yeah, it's not really that random. A few, but all of the kind you asked for."

Tom smiled. "Thanks, Lecia." He tucked the stack in between two of the scripts. "You look gorgeous. Hot date with intriguing gentleman tonight?"

Lecia twinkled a return smile at him and smoothed the skirt of her dress, a crisp sheath of china-blue linen. "As it happens, yes. Do you want a carrier bag? You're going to lose all that."

"Aren't you sweet – no, love, I'm fine. I'm only going from here to the car. If I can't manage that I should probably have my inner ear checked. 'Bye, Lecia." He scooped up the rest of his belongings and headed for the unobtrusive side door.

"Tom! Tom!"

A small gaggle of fans surged toward him – six or seven, totally manageable. He beamed and nodded genially. "Let me just put this stuff in the car, okay? Give me a second." The fans, four young women, one young man, and an older couple, smiled shyly back and gave him a wider berth.

Stan Godwin, driving a deep blue sedan, set the brake, leapt out of the car and hurried toward him, hands outstretched to receive Tom's packages. "Let me get those for you, Mr. Hiddleston." Stan refused to call company clients by their first name – it was an unaccustomed formality, but coming from Stan it was okay, even charming. Stan also refused to allow clients to be seen carrying their own parcels if at all possible, and his tailoring was so precise that Tom suspected that his own casual attire often earned discreetly disapproving glances.

"Thank you, Stan. I'll only be a moment." Tom turned to the fans and their camera phones and pens poised and ready. "Sorry." He posed for pictures, smiling and bantering, wrapping his arm around
trembling shoulders, patient when the pictures didn't come out correctly. He signed autographs and fielded questions and compliments with ease.

"Loved you in Thor. Oh my God."

"You should get a Twitter account."

"When's War Horse coming out? I read it when I was little and saw it last year –"

"We remembered you from Othello. Lovely. And then Bertie here saw Wallander and he said –"

"Can't wait for Avengers. Are you all finished with that, then?"

"Have you got a lot of screen time as Captain Nicholls? I don't know how they'll be able to fit the whole book in –"

It was great. It was almost always fantastic. The excitement had amped up a lot over the last month or so – his Loki had received favourable reviews, and fans had been unfailingly gracious and sweet. He thought that one day, if his trajectory continued upward, he might get heartily sick of recognition and glowing admiration, but at the moment he was enjoying it more than he'd ever thought possible.

One of the younger girls proffered a round tin. "I made you some chocolates."

"Oh, bless you, darling, that's so kind." Tom opened the tin; a luscious fragrance of chocolate drifted upward. He plucked one from the paper lace beneath and popped it in his mouth. "Oh my God," he mumbled around a mouthful of caramel. "That's glorious."

"Fleur de sel caramels," she said softly, twisting the hem of her pink hoodie.

"You're a genius. Open a shop, I'll be your first customer. Do you mind if I share?" He offered the tin round at the girl's nod, and thanked her again. "I've got to run, but it was lovely talking with you. One more –? Okay." He posed obligingly, then climbed into the car and shut the door. "My goodness."

"If it ever bothers you, just let me know, Mr. Hiddleston."

"Oh, no, Stan, it's fine. Lovely." Tom opened the tin and looked longingly at the chocolates, wishing he had some water to wash them down. He was thirsty. Hell with it. He took another and chewed in a happy trance.

"Home, sir?"

"Just for a minute, and then could you run me to Hampstead? If you can't, I completely –"

"Not a problem, Mr. Hiddleston."

"You can call me Tom, Stan."

Stan's eyes met his in the rear-view mirror.

"Well, don't feel as if you've got to," Tom said, and leant forward. "Want a chocolate? They're fantastic, I can't stop eating them."

"No, thank you, sir. Well, maybe one." Stan took one and popped it in his mouth.

Tom sat back comfortably. "There you go." He replaced the lid and began to sort through the pile of
fan mail. There were about two dozen pieces, all flat envelopes, all slit open at the top and carefully checked for potentially harmful items. He rifled through them restlessly, looking for a particular style – innocuous, but unsettling all the same. Handwritten, typewritten, calligraphy, green ink, black ink, pink envelope, envelope with heart stickers, picture of him stuck to the back, drawing of Loki – good heavens – and there. There.

A plain white business envelope with his name and the agency's address. No return.

He stared at it uneasily, then opened it.

_Hi Tom._

_It's been a while since I've written. Bet you missed me._

_I read one of your interviews online yesterday._

_You're such a liar._

_Liar._

_Liar._

_Liar._

_Let me tell you what I do to liars. First I --_

Tom folded the letter and stuffed it back into the envelope. The chocolates had hardened into an uncomfortable knot in his stomach.

Of course there were going to be crackpots. Everyone knew that. Even Anthony Hopkins had regaled him with stories about the letters he'd got after *Silence of the Lambs* - creepy. But these letters – there had been five of them so far – none of them had been about Loki, or Magnus, or any of the characters he'd played. They rarely mentioned his film roles. They were all personal.

Frowning, Tom checked his mobile. No messages. He typed again.

_Thought you were done shooting? Call or text. I'm as free as a bird._

He stuffed his phone into his pocket and gazed at the letter again.

The first one he'd read and no lie, it had worried him, but he chalked it up to random weirdness and had chucked it in the bin. He'd done the same with the second, but when the third one had arrived, he'd saved it. And the fourth, and now this one. And they seemed to get progressively more hostile. He hadn't told Luke, nor anyone at the agency, nor the police.

But maybe it was time to get them involved.

_Right. Tomorrow, then._

Feeling a bit better, he opened the tin once more and plucked another chocolate free. One more wouldn't kill him.

The hospital staff insisted on keeping him in a wheelchair until a black Land Rover pulled up to the doors. The orderly patted him on the shoulder. "Here we are." It took all he had not to swat her hand away. It reeked of salad cream.
Sherlock jumped out of the chair as the door opened and the blonde woman popped her head out. "All set?"

"God," Sherlock muttered, and leapt into the back seat. He buckled himself in and leant back, closing his eyes.

"You gave us all a hell of a scare, you know."

Sherlock slitted one eye open, glanced at her, then clamped his mouth shut and let his sigh out through his nose. If this woman insisted on talking, the least she could do was talk about something besides the accident and let him think. He doubted she had anything constructive to say.

"Well, you're all right. That's the main thing."

"And it won't be an insurance liability."

"Wh—" The woman – Ms. Vertue – coloured visibly, even in the dimness of the vehicle. "Benedict, please. Our first concern is for your safety. That's all I'm worried about. Why would you even say that?"

"Just a guess." That and you had your phone on your lap, texting your solicitor about it. "It's true, though, isn't it?" He had to play things down a bit. He hadn't gleaned enough from the Wikipedia article to get a read on Benedict Cumberbatch's personality, and his nervous panic in their little anomaly probably – possibly – wasn't his usual demeanour. Friendly and stupid seemed to be doing the trick so far. "I expect it'd be quite worrisome."

"Well, yes, but that's not the immediate concern. You lie back, we'll be at the hotel in no time."

Sherlock sat up abruptly. "The hotel?"

"Well, yes. You need a good night's sleep."

"No, I need to get back to the set." Sherlock unbuckled his belt and heaved forward to tap the driver on the shoulder. "Back to the set."

"No!" Vertue tugged on Sherlock's jacket. "Darling, sit down. Come on, you've had a really rough evening. We'll get some food in you, glass of wine, maybe, and you can go to bed early."

Christ, no wonder Cumberbatch had such an enormous meltdown; he was obviously accustomed to being coddled twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Actors. "I need to get back to the set," Sherlock snapped. Not that he wasn't doing a superb job as Benedict Cumberbatch – clearly no-one had seen anything amiss – but this was becoming boring, and besides, John wasn't stupid – if he and Cumberbatch had switched places, John would almost certainly notice at once. "I left something there."

"All your personal belongings are right here," Vertue said, pointing to a large duffel bag on the floor. "And I've got your phone in my bag." She rummaged through the handbag (Louis Vuitton, deep green Epi leather, at least it wasn't one of those monogrammed horrors) and withdrew a mobile, handing it to him.

Sherlock snatched the phone from her hand. "Listen to me," he snapped, then heard John's voice in his head.

_Calm down, Sherlock._
But oddly enough, thinking of John did calm him a bit. And then he thought about John staring at Cumberbatch and maybe working out that something wasn't quite right. Damn it. "Listen," he said again, "I know it's a lot to ask, but I just need to go back. Just for ten minutes."

"You can't, darling. The set's closed down. And I do mean closed down – the fire and electrical inspectors are going to be there tomorrow. Good job you weren't needed again until Thursday, they tell us it'll be a few days at least until we can resume. Of course it's not your fault, but it can't be helped."

Damn it, damn it!

Sherlock folded his hands together and pondered. It would be easy enough to break in, but….

Oh, HELL.

While it wasn't true that lightning never struck the same place twice, it wasn't likely that he'd be able to duplicate the exact conditions under which he'd received the shock, if it was indeed the shock that had prompted it. Did he really want to try to electrocute himself again? Even under controlled conditions, there wasn't any certainty of success, and wouldn't Cumberbatch have to do the same thing at the same exact moment? God knew that wasn't reliable. Probably at this very second, Benedict Cumberbatch was running the length and breadth of London, smoking compulsively and destroying Sherlock's reputation.

What was left of it, anyhow.

About Cumberbatch. From his brief observation and the stupid Wikipedia article, he'd concluded that the man wasn't entirely without a sense of adventure – hands weren't petal-soft [looked as if he'd had recent friction burns, likely from rock climbing or a zip line, one of those pointless recreational activities], body was lean and athletic, and he wasn't completely stupid, but he'd practically gibbered at the sight of Sherlock, as if Sherlock had been a ghost. As if ghosts existed.

Surely if this peculiar little switch proved anything, it was that science trumped superstition. And it could possibly prove useful somewhere down the road – he had a handful of unsolved cases in his mind palace filed under Pseudo-supernatural Occurrences - in the attic, as a bit of a joke – and every once in a while, they niggled. Also, he happened to know that John kept a physical data file on his laptop, and it would be nice if he finally bloody erased it.

God, John and Benedict Cumberbatch. What on earth must John be thinking right now?

Well, if Sherlock were entirely honest with himself, it could be days before John noticed. He wasn't an utter dullard, but his forte wasn't observation, really. And Sherlock was a sphinx when it suited him.

So there was no guarantee that going back to the set would necessarily improve matters; there were too many unknown variables. And he couldn't know with exactitude what Benedict Cumberbatch was doing at that moment.

Still, he wasn't going to waste his time sitting round a hotel room in Cardiff. He'd have to sort out the Cumberbatch dilemma, work out his schedule, something.

"Train station," he said.

Vertue frowned. "What's that, darling?"
"You said you packed up my things. I've got to get…home." Assuming home was accessible by train. God almighty, unless Cumberbatch lived in somewhere appalling like Los Angeles.

"But it's only fifteen minutes until the last train leaves – surely you can stay the night."

Oh, good. London, then, or at least the vicinity. "Can't." He needed data. "I'd feel…safer at home. You understand." He gave Vertue a tight smile, then let his mouth broaden and his eyes crinkle up. *Friendly and stupid. Don't forget.*

Vertue shook her head. "It's so late –"

"Please." He patted her hand. God, he hated wheedling.

"All right." Vertue tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Rees, Cardiff Central, all right?" She heaved a breath and shook her head. "I don't know if it's a good idea. Maybe I should get someone to go with you."

*Fantastic, a nanny. What's next, tying my shoes and wiping my bottom?* "I'll be fine. Really."

She heaved the bag over to him. "Your wallet's on top. I assume you've got a return in there."

Sherlock opened the bag and scooped up the wallet, tucking it in his jacket pocket. He was still wearing makeup and the filming costume, he realised; oh well, too late now. He leant back, a bit more relaxed, and began to scroll through Cumberbatch's text messages (no password protection – pathetic) to begin discerning patterns.

*C U next weekend for punishingly unhealthy food. James*

Unlikely.

*Emily had pertinent books couriered to your house. Read at leisure, but not too much leisure. P*

No.

*M&M and Neal's delivered. CHEESE PONGS OMG. Em*

Good Lord.

*Berry Bros & Rudd also dl'vd. Did you want them to save you another Ch. Lynch Bages Pauillac they want to know. Em*

PA most likely, clearly coddled him as much as the crew.

*Hey-ho, hey nonny nonny, see you tonight? Am I at yours or are you at mine?*

Tonight? Sherlock double-checked the date. Yes, tonight. Sender: TWH. Ah – Tom the secret boyfriend. And another:

*Thought you were done shooting? Call or text. I'm as free as a bird.*

Sherlock thought a moment. It was risky, but who better to pick up cues from than a significant other? He quickly texted a reply:

*Heading for CC to London. You're at mine. Wait up for me.*

The return text came almost immediately.
Yes, sir!

Trophy boyfriend with nothing else to do, obviously.

Sherlock scrolled through the other texts, gathering snatches of information here and there, but nothing useful yet. He had to be patient. Everything would work out eventually.

They arrived at the station with a few moments to spare. Sherlock alighted from the car, snatched his bag, and remembered to wave and smile at Vertue, who was peering at him curiously. He banged the door shut and, letting the smile fall away, sprinted toward the platform. A quick scan of the contents of Cumberbatch's wallet had revealed a driving licence (good), an open return ticket, Cardiff-London (better) and an MBNA Platinum card (best), along with sundry useless stuff. Hampstead address, good enough he supposed; easy to use as a base for working out how to get back to Baker Street.

Perhaps simply going back to Baker Street would work. Maybe.

"You tit."

Sherlock froze.

John?

He spun on his heel and saw John – John! – in a pair of narrow cuffless trousers, a closely cut Blackwatch-tartan blazer, and – curiouser and curiouser – a silk foulard scarf wrapped around his throat. He looked absolutely ludicrous.

"J –" Sherlock began, then bit down on his lip hard enough to bring involuntary tears to his eyes. Because it wasn't John, was it? No, and not just because John Watson wouldn't have been caught dead in those clothes. It was another actor, an impostor, a John Watson look-alike who was now striding toward him, hitching one of those absurd carryalls, this one printed with the Union Jack, over his shoulder.

"What the fuck are you doing here? Sue said she was taking you back to the hotel. I didn't even think you'd be out yet. What were you thinking, grabbing hold of a live wire, you twat?"

Well, the vocabulary wasn't too far off. "It was an accident." Sherlock did his best not to glare, but for one of the first times in his life, he was flummoxed, and the sight of this fraud in his poncy clothes and shoulder bag, wearing John Watson's face and talking in John Watson's voice was nigh on unbearable.

Sherlock contained a sudden shiver. Somewhere in this universe of misrule was a clone of Lestrade, a clone of Molly Hooper, Mrs. Hudson, Jim Moriarty…oh, God! He had to meet Mycroft's double. What a treat that would be.

"Hey, you paying attention? I asked if you were feeling okay. We've got to board." Not-John frowned. "You've still got your makeup on. And your costume."

"What? Yeah. Yeah," Sherlock said. "Didn't want to miss the train." He hefted his duffel bag in one hand and gestured for Not-John to precede him. He stifled the urge to head in the opposite direction, but a peculiar fascination, not to mention the need for data mining, kept him near Not-John and his stupid wardrobe.

They found seats and stowed their luggage. "Christ, if I'm knackered, you must be halfway fucking
dead," Not-John said.

_Must find out his name._ "Yeah. It was weird."

"Well, we've both got time for a nap, so –" Not-John shrugged, leant back in his seat, and closed his eyes.

Sherlock watched him for a few moments, then slipped Cumberbatch's phone from his pocket. Time to do a little research. He found some earbuds, popped them in, and started browsing the web. Data, data, data.


---Benedict Cumberbatch, USA Today, modernises Sherlock Holmes. What on earth? "Holmes spent a lifetime obsessing about who, what, why and when," he says. "For me, it's something to toy with. People's hands fascinate me. It's tempting to look at a businessman's left hand and see if there's an indentation from a missing wedding ring. Or maybe there's a tan line and the skin is pressed down where he's worked a ring off his finger. Your mind's racing."

Gosh. _Rings._ Proper genius, this Cumberbatch fellow.

Father chose the stage name Carlton. "Sounded less like a fart in a bath."

Charming.

---Benedict Cumberbatch, Sunday Times, The Fabulous Baker Street Boy. Oh, for _God's_ sake! Oh, girlfriend, interesting. War Horse, bla bla bla, Tom Hiddleston, mm, TWH, there he is, fellow actor then – no wonder he was secret if Cumberbatch still had a girlfriend, South Africa, bla bla good _heavens_ he banged on and on about that, Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock –

Sherlock blew a breath out. The poor sod was certainly trying, he supposed. Now to read up on this Arthur Conan Doyle….

An hour later, he was still reading, skimming through the fiction. Fiction, some of it oddly familiar. Just snatches here and there…so very odd. A Victorian predecessor in this universe, a work of fiction, layers and layers away. Sherlock set the phone on the seat beside him and gazed at Not-John, whose name was in fact Martin Freeman, fast asleep, his hands folded on his chest. Sherlock felt the oddest little pang looking at him, and wondered what John, _his_ John, was doing at that moment. If Cumberbatch was as involved as he claimed to be, then possibly, just possibly he could hold it together long enough for another switch to take place.

How, though?

Martin Freeman stirred and opened his eyes. "The fuck are you staring at, Ben?"

"What?" Sherlock took one earbud out.

"I said what the fuck are you staring at?"

"Your scarf," Sherlock answered with complete honesty, leaving off _It's hideous._

"Yeah, nice one, huh? Amanda got it for me at Christmastime when we were in Ireland. Grafton Street, I think."
"Lovely." Oh, dear God, spare me tales of connubial bliss and gifted scarves. Though that did bear occasional resemblance to John. But apparently Freeman had been with one lady for a number of years, enough to have a couple of children. Not married – sensible, and yet, with two sprogs, they might as well have done. Boat anchors.

Freeman looked at Sherlock's phone. "Is that – are you looking at pictures of yourself, you vain fucking numpty?"

Sherlock blinked. "Research." Freeman was a bit quicker on the draw than he looked.

A muffled snort erupted from Freeman's vicinity. "Right, just stay away from tumblr if I'm not there to supervise. I'm going back to sleep. Wake me when we get there. Christ, I'm glad we've got a bit of a break." He closed his eyes again.

Sherlock stared for a moment longer.

He was nothing like John. Hardly at all.

A strange, tiny thorn of disappointment insinuated its way into Sherlock's belly. Well, why in God's name should he be disappointed? Sherlock wasn't in the least like Benedict Cumberbatch.

Poor John.

Sherlock stuck the earbud back in and returned to a YouTube video wherein Benedict Cumberbatch, in a truly horrifying moustache, was urging a criminally underaged girl to bite a chocolate bar.

They made it to London without further incident and made their way to a taxi rank. "Right," Freeman said, climbing into a cab, "let me know if you want to ride back together. Give me a call."

"Okay," Sherlock said, heartily sick of single syllable answers, but best to play the befuddled shock victim for a while. Cumberbatch certainly seemed verbose, but it was a flux-of-the-mouth sort of verbose, overindulged by star-struck journalists, meandering and too often pointless, and if Sherlock was anything, it was not pointless.

He hailed a cab, stunned and offended when several drove past without stopping. He was about to simply step into the road and stop traffic when one finally pulled up to the kerb. He got in, gave the Hampstead address, and sat back, flexing his mental and physical muscles to meet the secret boyfriend; also the biddable boyfriend, presumably awaiting Benedict Cumberbatch's arrival. The girlfriend had departed the scene a few months ago. Lucky TWH.

The car delivered him to the address on the licence and Sherlock stepped out. Not bad, not bad at all, even if it was in Hampstead. Top two floors….

He retrieved a set of keys from his bag and opened the door. There was an alarm system, unarmed, and a light on in the corridor. A locked post box sat just inside the door; he found a small key on the ring, fitted it in, and took a sizeable stack from the brass box. He moved through the corridor – nice, pretty wood, new paint and carpet. *Top two floors*, the news piece had said. He ascended the stairs, brushing his hand over the smooth polished oak, and fitted what looked like the correct key in the lock.

Sherlock swung the door open onto a darkish room – lots of gleaming mahogany and ebony, plum-coloured sofas, hand-painted wallpaper, heavy, fussy silk curtains, artfully scattered oversized books and magazines on low tables. Professionally decorated, Cumberbatch hadn't been living here long enough to really make it a home yet, and this was his first set of furniture that hadn't been purchased
at IKEA, so he was still frightened to upset the balance the decorator had created and probably urged him not to disturb. He'd read the books and magazines, though, but had taken them into another room to read them and then came back to carefully replace them. Cumberbatch wasn't mad about this room, hardly used it at all.

Softly, Sherlock closed the door and moved from the dark front room into a corridor, and from there into an immaculate, well-appointed kitchen, sleek, lots of brushed metal and pale-grey tilework. Uninteresting. Tiny bathroom, library – this room used frequently, stuffed with books, new, scarcely used desk, laptop, another sofa, leather, long enough to sleep on.

Comforting sort of room, Sherlock mused, but lacking the personal touch except for a few framed photos on the shelves. No photos of girlfriend in evidence. Shelves dusted, so no incriminating marks, but – an irregularity here and there, a lack of symmetry in the placement of the photos. One missing there, one there, one there. On the furthest shelf, a photo of Cumberbatch in Great War costume – the moustache, like most moustaches, was terrifying – smiling at TWH in similar costume. Standing close to each other, but not too close, nothing conspicuous.

"Now, my good sweet honey lord."

Sherlock turned to see a shadowed figure in the doorway. Tall, a head of bumptious curls. The figure stepped into the light.

TWH himself, dressed in a pair of exceedingly brief black running shorts and nothing else. Well, the beginnings of a beard and a broad smile.

"Tom."
Raw panic flooded Benedict's nervous system, and it took every drop of ability he was able to wring from the depths of his actorly soul to simply lie still and stare dead-eyed at Mycroft Holmes, sombrely attired in blue pinstriped worsted and a conservative wine-coloured tie that was more beautifully knotted than Benedict had ever been able to manage on his best day.

Bloody hell. John was one thing; they hadn't been living together too long, if the timeline was as Benedict suspected, but Mycroft...Sherlock's own brother, canonically more intelligent, certainly devious, at least the way Mark played him (and that was Mark's identical twin standing there, so logically, or at least as logical as one could be in this phenomenally weird situation, it was sound to align personalities), and not a little scary, staring at him with cold, narrowed eyes.

"Your ennui must be reaching catastrophic levels if you've resorted to electrocuting yourself in your own flat."

"It was an accident," John snapped, but Benedict waved a languid hand.

"Visiting the patisserie again?" Benedict clicked his tongue. "Sometimes the best defence was a blistering offence. "You do realise how many miles you have to run to work off those crème anglaise tarts?"

Mycroft offered Benedict a wintry smile. "It's nice to see that you're feeling so well. I stopped by 221B, but you were out."

"So you decided to make a tour of the local hospitals," John said.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, John," Mycroft said, his attention diverted for a moment.

"Right, right," John said. "No need, when Big Brother's on the scene."

Benedict kept his face still, but worry ate at his insides. They'd speculated, all of the major cast and producers, about the extent of Mycroft's powers. Surely he wasn't really the British government; no one person could wield that much power. He couldn't have said precisely why, not at this particular moment at least, but he didn't want Mycroft Holmes watching him with CCTV cameras and sundry spy equipment. It seemed important to stay in character as Sherlock, but the truth was that he just wanted to go home. He closed his eyes and tried to think of a quick way out of this.

He couldn't.

"You could have just texted," John went on.

"Mycroft doesn't text if he can talk," Benedict said, his eyes still closed. It was a bit too unnerving to keep meeting that chilly gaze.

"And yet he manages to text me a few times a month at least," John said. "Huh."

Mycroft cleared his throat. "It's none of my business –"


*Inwardly he smiled a bit. Getting the hang of
"I like it there."

"Sentiment," Mycroft replied, his tone conveying his extreme distaste of the notion. Benedict opened his eyes and gazed intently at Mycroft. What if it was all a horrible joke, despite what he'd seen? The ultimate Sartrean prank? Mycroft delicately tilted his head to one side and continued to scrutinise Benedict. "As I said, I've been trying to reach you."

"Don't care." Benedict closed his eyes again. He felt dampness between his shoulder blades. Was he sweating?

"And Mummy would like you to phone."

"Busy."

Mycroft sighed.

Benedict heard the scraping of chair legs against lino tile and the sound of a body settling itself. He kept his eyes closed. "John."

"Yeah?"

"Is he still here?"

"Yep."

"Tell him to leave." Benedict folded his hands on his chest and settled into the pillows.

"Ooh. I'd hate to get involved in a family quarrel." John sounded amused. "Tell him yourself."

"Leave," Benedict said.

"When you've recovered," Mycroft said, "I have something that might be of interest to you."

"Nothing you have is of interest to me," Benedict replied.

"Oh, you're wrong there, brother dear."

"Doubt it."

The chair legs scraped again. "See that you recover by tomorrow evening at the very latest. Good night, Sherlock. Do try to keep from electrocuting yourself again. I'd hate to have to have the building condemned. John, a word, please."

Benedict opened his eyes once more and frowned at John, who rose to his feet. John looked at Mycroft's retreating back, glanced back at Benedict, shrugged, and followed. Benedict pressed his hands to his eyes. 

"God, I've got to get out of here.

But how, for the love of God? Even if the impossible had truly happened and they were stuck inside some sort of spatial or temporal anomaly (not that Sherlock knew a thing about it – he was a chemist,
not a physicist, thank you very much!) how were they supposed to escape it? Benedict thought about being trapped forever, never seeing his parents again, the rest of his family, his friends, his coworkers, Tom –

A ragged sigh shuddered out of his throat and he felt the prickle of tears. He couldn't accept it. There had to be a way back.

He heard the sound of John's footfalls and quickly arranged his features into an expression of bored annoyance, keeping his eyes closed. He didn't hear Mycroft's footsteps. Thank God.

"I'm going to go find one of the staff and start things moving," John said. "Since you seem to be okay."

"Fine."

There was a pause. "Are you okay?"

Benedict opened his eyes and frowned at John. Of course I'm not okay. I'm trapped in a fictionalised iteration of modern-day London, I haven't got a single friend, not one person I can count on, and my fictional counterpart is back in Cardiff and if he's exactly as I portray him, Christ only knows the damage he's doing. Mycroft Holmes is scarier than Mark plays him, I don't know how this happened or how I'm going to get back, my entire world has collapsed around my ears and if I uttered one word of this aloud I'd be carted off to the bin; of course I'm not okay, God damn it. He sucked a breath in through his nose. "Fine."

John opened his mouth and closed it again.

"What?"

"Mycroft –" John looked down and smoothed out a crease in the white hospital blanket. "Mycroft asked if you'd had a toxicology screen done."

Benedict gaped. Two or three weeks ago – no, a bit more than that – he'd smoked a little grass at Glastonbury, not even an entire blunt – had Mycroft deduced that somehow? Or had it been something else? He shook his head. "Wh-why in God's name would he say that? The fat git," he added. He felt hot and uncomfortable, and John wouldn't stop staring.

"He said your responses were a bit on the slow side."

"And you told him to piss off, I hope."

"Not exactly. I did remind him that you'd just received a pretty nasty shock, though."

Benedict sagged in relief. Good old John.

"You haven't, have you?"

"Haven't what?"

John tightened his mouth. "Done any drugs recently."

Benedict looked John full in the face and was startled at the expression in John's eyes, and it was that – not the street below 221B, not the mobile, not the running water, not the ambulance trip nor the scary look in Mycroft's eyes – that convinced him. This wasn't Martin Freeman. Martin was a great actor, the best, but there was something different about this man's eyes. And he really was fond of
Sherlock. It was obvious. He smiled. "No. No drugs."

John's frame sagged a bit. His expression changed, though, his brow knotting. "You —"

"What?"

"No. Nothing." John shook his head and patted Benedict's knee under the thin bedclothes. "Right. Let's get you out of here."

*

The only remarkable thing about the ride back to 221B Baker Street was the ease with which John had hailed the cab – he'd simply raised his hand and the car had practically materialised right in front of them. Benedict, in a pair of sticky-bottomed hospital socks and his *Great Game* pyjama outfit, had climbed in without comment and leant back against the seat, closing his eyes for the duration of the drive. While he didn't feel physically exhausted, mentally and emotionally he was at the end of his tether, and he needed to regroup. John, sitting beside him, was blessedly quiet, and before Benedict had time to really rest, John was tapping his shoulder.

"Sherlock. Hey, Sherlock, wake up. We're here."

John's voice, like Martin's (or was Martin's like John's?) was soft, easy on the ear. Benedict was reminded of car trips to relatives' places – 'Darling, we're at Gran's. Put your shoes on' – and now, as then, he would have been happy to stay asleep in the cab. It could drive him away and he wouldn't have to cope with this madness any longer.

"Sherlock, come on."

"Where?" Benedict mumbled.

"Home. Up you get." John paid the fare and tugged on Benedict's arm. "Careful – watch your feet. There's glass." Gently, he manoeuvred Benedict out of the cab and onto the rain-spattered pavement, propelling him toward the door.

Benedict looked up, and with a faint sense of dread saw the familiar door, saw Speedy's. It wasn't the set, wasn't Gower Street at all.

*Right. Time to stop the internal meltdown and begin dealing with this. It's got to be temporary. You won't be stranded forever. Something will happen, and you'll be back in your own reality. All you have to do is get through this, even if it's one minute at a time. You've been through worse times. Buck up, you can do it.*

This little pep talk delivered, he glanced at John, who was busy fitting the key into the lock and ushering Benedict inside. They went up the stairs wordlessly, and Benedict pressed his hand to his nose as a sudden horrifying stink overwhelmed him. "Dear God."

"Oh, let's not."

"What?" Benedict stared at John in puzzlement.

"You're the one who brought home the air sac. The experiment's probably ruined now anyway – I
want you to throw the syringe out. Preferably unopened."

Benedict half-gagged at the fishy smell that permeated the flat. Not just fishy, either – fishy and rotting. Foul. "You could be right," he ventured cautiously. "I…I've already got it sorted."

"Yeah, Boyle's Law my arse. Just get rid of it."

"Right," Benedict said, frantically trying to dredge up Boyle's Law from his uni chem courses, more than ten years ago. "Obviously."

"You can text Lestrade with your conclusions tomorrow. Right now I think you'd better get some sleep."

Oh, God, Sherlock had been working on a case! Perfect. He thought fast. "You text him, John. The last thing I care about right now is telling him in excruciating detail what he should already know."

John sighed. "All right…Your Highness." He shucked his jacket and tossed it on a chair. His chair. "I'm knackered. I'm going to have a shower and get to bed. You --" he pointed at the kitchen – "clean that up yourself. Then sleep. It's the absolute least you can do." He wheeled and marched upstairs without another word.

Benedict sank into a kitchen chair, looking around bleakly. The flat was horribly cluttered: Benedict was by no stretch of the imagination a neat freak (laundry and housekeeping services were just a couple of the nicest perks about having some money), but the accumulation of stuff in the kitchen and front room seemed to be approaching hoarder territory. And yet, it looked not too much different from the set. Tentatively, he got up and wandered into the front room. Everything was the same after all; funny how it seemed unusual out of his own experience. He paced from object to object, touching them as if any moment they might dissolve to nothing beneath his hands. He glided a fingertip over the bleached, smooth topography of the steer skull, decorated with its headphones. He'd invented his own little backstory for it – it had been a souvenir of a case Sherlock had solved in New Mexico, a counterfeiting operation in an abandoned mine near Carlsbad Caverns.

So much he saw, in fact, were objects to which he'd attached personal meaning – it was a game, and pure fun, but it anchored him in Sherlock's reality, too, giving weight and substance to his surroundings. When he'd tried to engage Martin in the exercise, Martin had scoffed a bit at first ('Don't be so fucking daft- it's a fucking chair in a fucking lounge, for fuck's sake' had been his exact words), but eventually he'd joined in as well, and by the time they were finished, they'd given a history to every item in the flat. Benedict went to the mantel, to his music stand (scratched and nicked in a few places, relics of self-defence after a baddie had broken into the flat to try to exact revenge for the incarceration of his brother) to the sofa with its faded, flattened pillows.

You can do this. It's acting, that's all. And somehow you'll get out of it, don't worry.

How, though? Oh, God….

John came back downstairs in a thick towelling robe. "I'm not cleaning it up, so you might as well stop stalling." He paused at the bottom of the stairs. "Sherlock."

"Mm?" Benedict looked up from Sherlock's violin case (tiny dancing figures crudely etched into the leather, a little Doyle homage – Benedict had done the figures himself) and frowned. "What?"

"You're sure you're okay?"

John's tone was warm and concerned, and it took tremendous effort not to smile and thank him for being so sweetly solicitous. "Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?"
"Well, Mycroft –"

"Oh, God, Mycroft." Benedict waved a dismissive hand. Mycroft could be a problem. One wrong slip and Benedict might find himself incarcerated in some dank hole with no means of escape. "He's not happy unless he's hounding me, you know that perfectly well."

"It was a hell of a jolt, that's all."

Benedict sighed loudly. "I'm fine. I'll just start tidying up." He marched into the kitchen and bent to pick up the hot plate.

"Don't plug it in." John shouldered past him and yanked open a drawer, pawing through it rapidly. "I'm taping it up again. Do not remove the tape, got it? Don't bloody delete the information or anything –" John used his teeth to tear off a bit of electrical tape and plastered it over the sockets.

So that was how it happened to Sherlock.

John folded his arms and glared up at Benedict. "I will get a biohazard sticker if it helps."

"Technically it's not a biohazard –"

"Oh, shut it." John swatted him on the arm, and then smiled. "Git."

Benedict smiled back. Playing Sherlock opposite Martin playing John was one thing; this was different. It wasn't that he didn't dive deeply into the role – he did, he was as immersed as a working actor could conceivably be. And yet, there was always a layer of professional distraction it wasn't possible to eliminate: nuances of gesture, of facial expression, awareness of props, hitting marks, timing dialogue. None of it was effortless, though a good enough actor made it look that way. He hoped he did. This, though….

John Watson really cared about Sherlock Holmes. Benedict knew that, obviously, but still. It was rather nice to see. Maybe it was time to have Sherlock demonstrate some appreciation. Just a little.

"John." Benedict cleared his throat a bit. "Er. Thank you. For..before. Sorry about the…phone."

"Yeah, that's – that's okay." John peered closely at Sherlock. "What was that, anyway? You were pretty disoriented there for a bit. Talking all sorts of rubbish. More than usual. When Mycroft asked about the tox screen, I actually wondered a bit myself. I didn't say anything to him, though."

Bless your discretion, John Watson. "As you say. Disoriented. Common side effect of electrical shock, you know that." Benedict turned and opened another drawer, pulling out a roll of bin liners. "If you're not going to help me clean, move out of the way."

"Right. Off to shower."

"Don't use all the hot water."

"Says the man who takes half-hour long showers." John went into the bathroom and closed the door. In a moment Benedict heard tinny music filtering through the door, the sound of running water, and slightly off-key singing. Yazoo, sounded like.

Benedict chuckled. That was a detail they hadn't bothered to explore on the show. He looked at the roll of bin liner in his hand. He'd opened the drawer and pulled it out without a second thought, as if he'd expected it to be there. It wasn't a detail from the show, either, although he (and not Martin) had gone through the kitchen, sorting things in his head.
Benedict put his hand on another drawer. *Lab equipment*. He opened it. Yes – a file, some rubber tubing, a pinch clamp, pipettes, forceps, a few stirring rods. He went to another door, opened it – good Lord, it was mucky – more lab stuff. Another door, two shelves of tubes and flasks and beakers, just as he'd imagined. Sherlock had taken over the kitchen entirely; it was a wonder John wasn't a lot thinner.

**Takeout.**

Food! Benedict went to the fridge and opened it. Carton of milk, bag of wilted lettuce, containers of takeout food, old stub of cheese, bottles of sauce, vinegar, plastic-covered plate of…something unidentifiable. Spleens, perhaps? Benedict closed the refrigerator door and concentrated.

Bag of thumbs. Big one.

He opened the door again. No, same stuff.

Well, he wasn't God, wasn't even a minor deity – he just had a working knowledge of the accumulation of clutter that would be in the kitchen of 221B Baker Street. It didn't mean anything.

*But it must mean something. This is your iteration of Holmes you've dropped into, not Jeremy Brett's or Basil Rathbone's or Robert Downey Junior's. In some small way, you've helped to create this universe – there must be a way for you to change places again.*

Benedict began to walk round the kitchen, gathering up what looked like rubbish and throwing it in the bin liner. He found the syringe that John had mentioned, stuffed with something unidentifiable; it looked a bit like melting plastic. He pitched it and began clearing the table, putting dirty flasks and tubes in the sink. No dishwasher, damn it. He hated washing dishes. Anyway, John was still in the shower.

**Ha. Excellent rationalisation, Mr. Holmes.**

He tidied the rest of the kitchen efficiently, putting things away, sorting the groceries John had apparently bought and left on the floor. Cans and boxes, pasta, rice. More lettuce, cheese, some grapes – it wasn't much the worse for having been left out a few hours.

As he worked, he pondered his situation. Temporal or spatial anomaly, Sherlock had said confidently. Was that possible? Benedict cast back to the narration he'd done for Dr. Hawking's series and recalled Hawking's hypotheses of the possibility of time travel through a wormhole, but it would require an enormous disturbance of matter, and surely – even accounting for a multiverse, oh God, he sounded like slapdash science fiction – even accounting for a multiverse, the minor voltage emanating from an electrical outlet couldn't produce enough energy to warp a space-time string into a wormhole.

Did Dr. Hawking even exist in this universe?

"My God, it's a miracle."

Benedict turned around to see John, freshly showered and glowing with cleanliness. "Well, you told me to clean up."

"Yeah, but I didn't expect you to actually listen." John opened the fridge. "You even put the food away." He took out the cheese and grapes. "Snack?"
"Why not?"

John gave him another smile. "You're in rare form." He took the food to the newly clean worktop and found plates.

Benedict watched him carefully. "Working tomorrow?"

"No. And you're not, either – Mycroft said he needed to speak with us."

"No." The last thing Benedict wanted was to speak with Mycroft.

"You know he'll just send his jack-booted thugs after us. And I exaggerate only slightly." John set a plate before Benedict and sat.

"God…." Benedict cradled his head in his hands. He didn't want to meet with Mycroft, or anybody – he just wanted to curl up and hide until all this was over.

"Come on, you love it. It's not as if you've got anything else on, anyhow." John leant back in his chair, his eyes twinkling. In his towelling robe and with wet hair, he looked younger, more carefree.

"And he said it would intrigue you."

Resigned, Benedict nodded. Obviously he couldn't sort everything out now. He needed a good night's sleep, and then, if he didn't wake up in his own universe again, he'd re-commence acting his arse off.

John gave him a searching look, but said nothing.

*

Benedict managed to get seven hours of sleep in Sherlock's not-terribly-comfortable bed before the mobile shrilled next to him. Actually, shrilled wasn't quite the word – it played the first eight notes of Beethoven's Fifth. Startled, blinking, Benedict scrabbled for the mobile and answered sleepily.

"Hello?"

There was a momentary silence on the other end. "The car is waiting outside. Tell me you're not still in bed."

Benedict's heart quickened just a bit. "I'm still in bed, Mycroft."

"Then get out of bed and get dressed, Sherlock. Your client is waiting. I trust last night's little debacle hasn't proved permanently debilitating."

"When did you start managing my daily schedule?" Benedict snapped. No need to act – Mycroft's lack of concern for Sherlock's safety was pretty obnoxious.

"Only on rare occasions. But I promise this one won't bore you. Get dressed." Mycroft rang off abruptly.

Benedict groaned and sat up. The curtains – blackout curtains, for Sherlock's irregular sleep patterns – were tightly drawn, and the room was comfortably cool. He heaved himself out of bed and stumbled to the connecting bathroom door. Five-minute shower, quick bite to eat, and he'd be ready to go.
He was still marvelling at how well his hair had turned out, considering that he hadn't done a thing to it – towel-dry, quick fluff with the fingers, and it was picture-perfect – when John all but hauled him out the door before he'd had a chance for a quick piece of toast and cup of tea. His stomach grumbled in protest, but he stayed in character – Sherlock Holmes existed on a diet of adrenaline and peril – and climbed into the sleek black sedan, tightening his scarf and drawing his coat closer round his body. It felt reassuring, like armour.

The two men in the front seat didn't speak to him, so he didn't say a word to them, hoping it was standard protocol for a Mycroft-engineered quasi-abduction. He watched London through the windows; it looked just the same. Everything was the same.

Almost everything was the same. Benedict closed his eyes and massaged his temples.

"Oh my gosh," John whispered.

Benedict gasped a little as the gates opened, and they drove through silently, past red-coated guardsmen, past black-clad security detail, past stone edifices that he'd only seen distantly or on television.

Christ.

Benedict, John, and the two men got out of the car and were ushered into the palace, through room after room of staggering luxury and no evident purpose. At last they found themselves in another chamber, more intimate than the other rooms, wood-panelled, Gainsborough and Lely and Turner on the walls, flowered carpet underfoot, and a pair of embroidered sofas facing each other, with a low table in between, set for tea.

Mycroft sat on one of the sofas. A slender, late-middle-aged man sat next to him.

"Mr. Holmes." The man rose to his feet and extended his hand. "Good of you to come."

Benedict repressed a smile, but it was difficult.

*Bit of a lag in the space-time continuum. I think I know why we're here.*
"Well," Sherlock said, pasting an idiotic grin to his face, "aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

"I should hope so," Tom replied with a similar grin and stepped closer, pressing the lower half of his body against Sherlock's hip. Sherlock forced himself to stay perfectly still. "Are you starving, or would you rather eat?"

Sherlock was momentarily distracted by Tom's smile. How many teeth did the man have? "Hungry?" He sounded a bit air-headed, but then Cumberbatch wasn't exactly overly endowed in the brains department.

"Yeah. I'm positively famished myself." Tom's eyebrows, extraordinarily mobile, waggled up and down.

"Ah. Ha-ha. Naughty." Sherlock lightly swatted Tom's nylon-clad bum (very tight, he couldn't help noticing) and moved a handsnap away. While this wasn't entirely unexpected, as TWH was Cumberbatch's secret boyfriend, and while Sherlock wasn't totally opposed to some transient pleasure and exchange of bodily fluids (though he hadn't indulged in a few years), he wasn't ready to give the game away so quickly. "Give me a minute to catch my breath. It's been a hell of a day." He flopped on the sofa and stretched out. Pretty comfortable, he had to admit.

Tom moved to the sofa, unceremoniously lifted Sherlock's feet, seated himself, and rested Sherlock's feet on his lap. Sherlock bit down on a 'what the hell do you think you're doing' and stayed silent as Tom slipped off Sherlock's shoes. "I should say you have. You're still in costume. And makeup! What happened, did they go late?" One by one, he dropped Sherlock's shoes on the floor and pulled off his socks. He pressed his thumbs into the middle of Sherlock's right foot and began massaging in circles.

Sherlock hadn't had his feet rubbed since he was eight years old and already a chronic insomniac. His father would tiptoe into his room and rub his feet with a camphorated lotion and hum softly until Sherlock, soothed by the smell, the sensation, and his father's voice, fell deeply asleep. The memory was so intense that Sherlock stopped short, briefly overwhelmed by a wave of nostalgic pleasure. "That…that's nice."

"Tell me about your day," Tom prompted.

"I got electrocuted."

Tom stopped rubbing Sherlock's feet. "What?" He shook his head, his mouth agape so that only some of his dozens of teeth showed. "What the hell happened?"

"A minor accident. I grabbed an exposed cable and got a jolt. It knocked me out for a bit." Knocked me into another universe, but we won't go into that at the moment.

"Knocked you out – for God's sake, why didn't they take you to hospital? Why aren't you there now?"

"Calm down," Sherlock said. "They did take me. And Ver – Sue was busy talking to her lawyers
"just in case I violated some sort of insurance policy."

"The violation's not on your end, damn it. Those cables are meant to be safe." Tom peered closely at him. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Fine. Keep rubbing my feet," Sherlock commanded. It really did feel lovely, and Sherlock rarely permitted anyone to touch him so…familiarly. This is different. Play along.

"Good God," Tom said, obediently pressing his thumbs into the sole of Sherlock's right foot. "When you say 'knocked out' – you mean as in unconscious?"

This one wasn't too bright either. Based on his research, TWH had gone to Eton and Cambridge (nothing special) and was a classics scholar (useless), but that meant bugger-all in the general brains department, evidently. Well, Sherlock had had plenty of school and uni acquaintances who were even more stupid. All of them, actually. "What else would it mean?" Sherlock snapped, then sat up and gave Tom's arm an I'm-just-having-you-on push. "I'm fine. Really. They performed every test under the sun. You know, star treatment." Certainly more than the average idiot on the street would get, at any rate. "I had to rush to make my train, though. That's why I've still got my costume and makeup on."

"Did anyone ride with you?"

"Er, yeah. Martin."

Tom chuckled. "Oh, I can just imagine." He broadened his voice and changed its timbre and rhythm. "'What the fuck did you fucking do, you fuckstick?'"

Not bad. Sherlock cracked a genuine grin. "That's about right."

"Well, as long as you're not hurt. Hey, I had some nibblies delivered, if you really are hungry."

"Yeah. Sounds good." The rubbing felt glorious, but Sherlock needed a moment. He felt…oddly disconcerted. Actually unsettled. He couldn't quite pick out why, but he didn't like it at all.

Tom lifted Sherlock's legs again and got up. His own legs, bare to the very tops of his thighs, were impossibly long, slender, but tightly muscled – an athlete's legs. He bent close, and Sherlock found himself imprisoned (and half crushed) by a pair of wiry, very strong arms. "I'm glad you're okay," Tom whispered, and kissed Sherlock's ear. He detached himself and smoothed back Sherlock's hair. "Back in a flash."

Sherlock watched him go. Backside looks as tight as it feels.

God, where had that come from? Well, he had been preparing for wanton camality, the typical sex-soaked indulgent celebrity escapade if one were to believe tabloid headlines, and considering the clandestine habits of the ordinary non-celebrities he'd encountered, both as clients and criminals, he wouldn't have been at all surprised. He hadn't quite anticipated the foot-massage, nor the solicitous questioning, stupid as it had been.

John would have picked me up, then told me to stop complaining and clean the place up. Sherlock chuckled, then sighed a little. John had probably said as much to Cumberbatch, and Cumberbatch was likely in hysterics. Idiot. He'll ruin everything.

What was there to ruin, though?

Oh, just your flat, your professional reputation, your status at the Met no thanks to twits like
Donovan and Anderson, any and all familial ties, your relationship with your friend –

Sherlock gave another deep sigh. Statistical probability that this was a purely temporary scenario: unknown. He’d brushed up a bit on cosmology and physics after the fake Vermeer incident, but space-time warps had only been touched on briefly, scarcely more than a page in any one of the books he’d read.

Logically, the situation was unprecedented…but in a very broad sense, the notion of a stranger-in-a-strange-land wasn’t. Therefore, what to do? Play along as he’d been doing, yes (and if Vertue the Television Woman and TWH the Vacant Boyfriend were fooled, then the likelihood of fooling everyone else was good). It was a universe with London, with hospitals and taxicabs and the internet and doctors in unhappy three-way relationships – not, as it happened, that far from his own reality. But how to find a way out? Some sort of spatial porthole? Open a cupboard and fall into another universe?

 wasn’t that something Mummy or Dad had read to – oh, never mind. Wasting time on pointless nostalgia. Admit it – you’re stumped.

Not that it was Sherlock’s fault. How was he supposed to work any of this out without data? And, presumably, work it out for Cumberbatch as well, because it was obvious that Cumberbatch couldn't deduce his way out of a wet paper bag. Unless it was in the shape of a gigantic hand, with rings on it. God. Biding his time wasn’t Sherlock’s style, but he didn't see anything else for it at present, vexing as that was.

Tom re-entered the room bearing a tray filled with cardboard containers. "I had them in the warming oven." He set it down on a low table and handed one container to Sherlock. "Sir. Pick your feet up, please, and let me sit."

Sherlock sat up, looked inside the carton, saw a conglomeration of vegetables and what looked like chicken covered in some thin garlicky-smelling sauce, and put it on the table, wrinkling his nose.

"Not hungry?" Tom dug a fork into his own container and yanked up a heap of noodles.

"Maybe later." Four hours in a parallel universe and already Sherlock was bored out of his mind. If things didn't improve soon, he was going to have to go out in search of some excitement. He wondered who was in charge of homicide and serious crime at this version of the Met and if they'd object to him poking around a bit. Not that it mattered if they did object.

Tom gave Sherlock an odd look, but continued to eat his noodles. "Hey, I know you said no last week, but can’t I persuade you to come along to dinner tomorrow night with the RADA set? They’re not half-bad, and I promise it won't be an evening of shop talk – most of them don't even act anymore."

An evening with more pampered, self-absorbed, histrionic morons. Sherlock had once had a client whose daughter went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (a commonality in this universe even duller than Internet Explorer, imagine) and talking to her had been purest agony. He couldn't think of anything less fun than dinner with actors.

"Look, just think about it, all right? It's…" Tom shrugged, clearly uncomfortable. "It'd be nice to have you along as support. I'm the only one who – well, as I said, most of them do other sorts of work, and the others mostly – er, theatre and whatnot." He reached out and rubbed his hand back and forth against Sherlock's thigh.

Outdistanced his former peers by a considerable margin. They’re probably jealous of him and let it
out in small, insidious ways – they were privileged enough to go to a prestigious drama school, but not talented enough to move beyond small-time theatre, so their bitterness likely eclipses any sense of fair play they might have. TWH clearly brought up with manners, evidenced by his natural solicitousness, and not in the habit of casual sniping. Too polite to tell them where to go, but still insecure enough to want backup in the form of another famous friend. Not a terribly subtle intimidation tactic, but not altogether stupid, either. "All right," Sherlock said. "I'll go." It wasn't as if he had other plans, after all.

"You will?" Tom beamed. "Ah, thanks, you're a gentleman and a prince."

Sherlock grandly waved a hand. "Think nothing of it." It might be fun to pick them apart. For Tom's benefit, of course. And as a favour to Cumberbatch, not that Sherlock owed him a thing.

"You're awfully quiet tonight."

Sherlock gave Tom a wan smile in acknowledgment of his slight tactical error. Good to know, though: Cumberbatch was as verbose in ordinary life as he was in interviews. He'd rectify that tomorrow. Best to keep up the façade for now. "Oh, you know. It's been a hell of a day."

"Are you completely beat? If you can hang on for a few more minutes, there's something I want to show you." Tom unfolded himself from the sofa again. "Hang on, I'll be right back. Wait, on second thought –" He tugged on Sherlock's arm. "Come on upstairs, I'll show you in bed."

Oh, God, another tactical error. Thank God John wasn't around; he'd have been twitting Sherlock liberally over his slipups. Minor slipups. Obviously Tom wanted to spend the night with Cumberbatch, if they were clandestine lovers. Probably didn't get the opportunity all that often as they were both busy actors, therefore it would look decidedly odd if Sherlock were to refuse outright. He'd think of some way of stalling once they were in bed – feign complete exhaustion, if he had to.

He allowed himself to be dragged up, and let Tom lead the way upstairs to a bedroom nearly the size of the front room and kitchen of 221B combined. Tidy and a bit too sybaritic for his tastes, it was done in a profusion of soft greys and greens, with too much unnecessary and clearly unused furniture.

"Oh, bugger, I forgot the – hold on, back in a flash." Tom pivoted on his heel and left the room abruptly.

Sherlock breathed a sigh of relief and idly examined the room. Not to his taste, but it wasn't bad, for a pampered television star. He opened a door and saw a walk-in closet-cum-dressing room (part of the renovation, obviously, as no Hampstead house's original plan featured a closet this size, unless it had been a servant's room – possible but unlikely), with a row of suits – mostly dark, some dove grey, one flashy Prince of Wales check, and a ghastly sort of cornflower blue – and banks of dark, polished drawers rising nearly to the ceiling. Outerwear: leather, wool, tweed, a terrible salmon-pink striped blazer. Rows of shoes – good God, was that black sequins on one pair? – and several pair of Converse trainers, some desert boots, some motorbike boots, a few hats on a flat shelf, a rack of ties.

Boring. And appalling taste. Sherlock closed the door and opened another, the en suite bathroom.

"Not bad, this."

It was large, white-and-black tiled, rather old-fashioned. The bathtub was old, perhaps original to the house: narrow, long, claw-footed, but its fixtures were shining and new, and there was a glassed-in shower stall in one corner. Lots of mirrors – typical – but no bidet, thank goodness. There was, happily, a huge basket next to the tub, overflowing with books and magazines, and a gleaming
chrome wire rack across the width of the tub. Evidently Cumberbatch liked to read in the bath – the only trait they seemed to have in common.

The makeup on his face was starting to itch. *I wouldn't mind a bath.*

He had a piss and was contemplating the tub when Tom pushed the door open. "Hey. You going to shower?"

"Mm? No, no – I was thinking about a bath, actually. Get this makeup off." He gave Tom a smile. *Remember: stupid and friendly.*

"That sounds brilliant." Tom beamed. "Would you mind listening to this first, though?"

"Alone," Sherlock muttered.

"Say again?"

Sherlock beamed. "Nothing. Talk away." He moved past Tom into the bedroom and flopped down on the bed, toeing his shoes off. Comfortable. He was actually a bit drowsy.

"Right. Okay." Tom perched on the bed beside Sherlock and proffered an envelope, slit open at the top. "So I've been getting these letters for a few months now. This is the fifth one."

Sherlock eyed the envelope without lifting his head from the pillow. "Crazy fan?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Is there any other type of fan?" Sherlock snorted and closed his eyes.

"That's not very nice," Tom replied, swatting Sherlock on the leg. "Most of them are sweet, you know that. They don't want anything more than a photo or an autograph. Granted, I've had some of them send me some odd art, but it's nothing odder than anything you and I have done. Generally." Tom gave a throaty laugh.

"Hmm." Sherlock took the envelope and turned it over. Ordinary DL envelope, plain white, mid-grade, slightly heavier stock than the cheapest bulk box on the market. Printed address, no return, South Kensington postmark, processed two days ago. Good beginning: the writer either lived in London or took pains to travel in order to mail the letter. He lifted the envelope to his nose. Smoke – Dunhill Distinct. Faint odour of a dog, black coffee, chicken tikka. The writer had licked the sticky strip to seal it – not a person who sent dozens of letters, then – frequent correspondents usually had sponges or some other means than the tongue to seal letters.

He drew the letter from the envelope and opened it. Inkjet printer, high concentrated accumulation of ink near beginning of letter. Not a printer that got a lot of use. Message delusional and threatening, first establishing false intimacy and then accusing TWH of lying in an interview, detailed description of physical punishment for said transgression. Stalker falling into resentful category: for reasons valid or invalid, TWH attracted stalker's hostility, incurred desire for revenge and pleasure and sensation of power derived from harassment of victim. Paranoid personality disorders predominated in resentful stalkers, and while the majority made threats, few actually followed through.

"That's quite something, isn't it?"

Tom nodded, his lips folded into a stern line. "Have you ever had one like that?"

*All the time.* Sherlock shook his head, widening his eyes. "Not quite. Is it really bothering you?"
"It wouldn't if this were the first one, but it's the fifth. I think I ought to take it to the police."

Who will do absolutely nothing of practical use, and there's hardly any point besides. "Maybe you should get a bodyguard."

"That might be taking things a bit far." Tom frowned. "Nothing's actually happened yet. Still…what do you think I should do?"

Sherlock scanned the letter again. "Have you got any enemies?"

Tom let out a nervous chortle. "Enemies? God, what a way to put it…no. Life's too short. Why? You don't think it's someone I already know?"

"Well…." Sherlock did his best to sound doubtful. "I could be wrong —" Hardly. "—but the writer mentions cutting out your lying, thieving…um, prick-licking tongue. Not someone you had a relationship with once?" Were that the case, the stalker could be bumped up to rejected/resentful.

"No." Tom sounded shocked. "I mean, I've had my heart bruised, but not broken, and most of my relationships just sort of ran their course. One girl, Sabrina, tried to brain me with a shoe, but she ended up marrying an earl, richer than me and handsomer too. She invited me to the wedding, so I don't think there were any hard feelings." He slid close to Sherlock and hooked a leg over Sherlock's knee, placing his hand flat on Sherlock's chest. "I think you know about everyone important."

Sherlock did his best not to twitch away. "Ha. Right. Well, you know it doesn't really matter how you perceive a relationship when it comes to stalkers – the only perception that matters is the stalker's."

"You've really learnt a thing or two from that show," Tom said with a laugh. "Well done, you."

Oh, for God's sake. "In any event, I don't think it's anything more than some deluded fan, certainly nothing to worry about. It's not a predator – they tend not to alert their victims in advance. But maybe you should tell the police, if you feel threatened. I'm not sure what they'll do – I suppose they could watch your flat for a while. You're famous, so they'll pay attention to you."

Tom was silent for a moment. "This is a hell of a rotten thing to say, but fame has its advantages."

"Although if you weren't famous, you probably wouldn't be stalked," Sherlock pointed out helpfully.

"There's that," Tom admitted, taking the letter from Sherlock's hand. "Leave it to you to be logical. I don't want to think about it anymore – certainly not tonight. Thanks for listening, though."

Sherlock closed his eyes. "Think nothing of it." He really wanted a bath, but the urge to sleep was even stronger.

"Hey." Tom fitted his body against Sherlock's, and Sherlock felt the press of Tom's genitals against his thigh, through layers of thin nylon and less-thin wool. "Don't fall asleep on me yet. What about that bath?"

"Mm. Too tired."

"You've still got makeup on."

"Don't care."

Tom leant close and whispered in Sherlock's ear. "Don't fall asleep, Ben." He slid his hand down
from Sherlock's chest to his belly and stroked in slow, languorous circles.

The touch was...discomfiting. Also...yes, slightly stimulating. Sherlock felt a decidedly inappropriate gathering of heat in his belly, and an even more inappropriate stirring in his cock. "I'm exhausted," he informed Tom.

Tom appeared to take this remark as a challenge. He slipped his hand lower and squeezed gently. "Oh my. Not that exhausted."

Sherlock was helpless to stop the moan that emerged from his mouth. He calculated quickly: would it be more or less disconcerting to protest strongly? Sex was nothing unusual for TWH and Cumberbatch, evidently, and protesting might raise questions best left unanswered. Not that he couldn't come up with something on the fly....

His zipper made a rasping noise as Tom pulled it down.

"Just lie still," Tom murmured. The tip of his tongue caressed the inner rim of Sherlock's ear, then the edge of his earlobe. "I'll make you feel wonderful."

Sex was ordinary to most people, who didn't care that their hormones overtook their intellect, feeble as it almost always was, with frightening intensity and frequency. It had been some time since he'd engaged in sex with someone for casual pleasure, longer still since he'd explored anything darker, but –

"Oh. Oh." Tom's hand had insinuated itself between fabric and bare skin and was rubbing, stroking, his thumb brushing against the supersensitive head of Sherlock's penis.

Sherlock bit his lip. *Perfectly normal for them. Therefore, don't give the game away. It'll be over in a moment.*

It was all simple chemistry, really – a surge in the body's production of bliss-inducing dopamine, that reward circuitry – oxytocin, serotonin, phenylethylamine, adrenaline, endorphins –

"Do you like that?"

Sherlock tensed his thighs. It felt good. So good. It wasn't *anything*, just chemistry and a mess to clean afterward, why did it feel so God-damned good?

Tom's fingers moved up and down, hot and insistent.

– norepinephrine, testosterone, *oh God!* Sherlock pressed his lips together to stifle another moan, and his eyes flew open as Tom's mouth descended on his.

"Mmf –" Sherlock opened his mouth and let Tom's tongue touch his. Odd, unfamiliar, but not unpleasant; Sherlock tasted salt and the slight sourness of saliva, but the sensation of taste dissolved as Tom suckled on his tongue, licking and tugging, and increased the pressure of his hand. Sherlock arched upward into Tom's hand: adrenaline surging, fight or flight; no, just desperate need. How many years had it been? Two? Three? He knew that since he and John had taken the flat in 221B together, he'd pleased himself in the shower six times. Stiff, his hand moving urgently, pressed against the bathroom tiles, water streaming in his eyes, a hand clamped over his mouth so that the smallest noise would stay where it belonged. So John wouldn't hear.

*Oh, God, oh God –*

He came, shuddering and gasping into Tom's mouth, a thick, milky rope of semen jetting from his
stiff prick. Tom detached himself and moved down, licking Sherlock clean, making Sherlock shiver as he delicately swirled his tongue over the tip of Sherlock's prick.

"Stop," Sherlock muttered, putting his hand between his cock and Tom's mouth.

Tom looked up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "What's wrong, love?"

"Tired."

"Did I wear you out?" Tom smiled. All those teeth.

"Mm."

"You'd better sleep, then. You can have a bath tomorrow."

"Fine." Sherlock lay perfectly still, letting his eyes drift shut. Eventually, he realised that Tom was stripping him, divesting him of his tight trousers, the jacket, his socks. He felt the duvet and sheet tugged from beneath him, and then a soft warmth. Nice. The light went out, and a body pressed against his.

"'Night, Ben."

Sherlock was already drifting. "Good night, John."

He heard a quiet chuckle and wondered what was so funny, but sleep claimed him before he could ask.

*
There were some notable differences about the scene as set before him and the scene they'd filmed: for one, they were actually inside Buckingham Palace. Inside, for God's sake. A world in which Sherlock Holmes co-existed with the Queen of England. The fellow sitting beside Mycroft didn't look exactly like the actor who'd played the equerry. The tea set up between the sofas was altogether different, far more elaborate than the filmed tea.

Also, Benedict was wearing pants.

He sat on the sofa opposite Mycroft, and John sat next to him. John, Benedict noticed, looked a bit bewildered, but was holding himself together nicely. He rather missed the scene where they'd giggled together like a couple of naughty schoolboys; that had been genuinely fun and practically effortless. But then that had been Martin, not John – oh, good Lord, how strange this still was. Still… still, he was an actor, and not half-bad at that. Improv was most decidedly in his skill set; all he needed was a framework, but for now he'd mostly stick to the script.

He sat up straight and met Mycroft's stony gaze with one of his own, then let his eyes flick toward the tea set.

"Most remiss of me," Mycroft said with one of his trademark razorblade smiles. "I'll be Mother." He reached for the milk.

"And there is a whole childhood in a nutshell," Benedict muttered, glancing at John, and saw John crack a grin. He wouldn't follow the script altogether, but that had been a damned good line.

Mycroft poured out, handed round tea and cakes, and withdrew a file from his briefcase. He glanced at the equerry.

"My employer has a problem," the equerry said.

After that, things were quite straightforward and predictable – a delightful respite after the unsettling events of last night. The Woman, et cetera et cetera. Dominatrix. Benedict drew out the word for effect.

Mycroft, on cue, looked smug. "Don't be alarmed. It's to do with sex."

Benedict caught it and lobbed it back. "Sex doesn't alarm me."

Mycroft, instead of responding, simply gazed at him and said nothing.

Okay. That's different. Benedict heaved a sigh. "Well, go on."

They went on. Benedict stayed alert for other changes, but everything seemed essentially the same. Young person, photographs, Ms. Adler informed the Palace the photographs were in her possession, no plans to use them. Et cetera, et cetera.

A tiny seed of an idea implanted itself in Benedict's head and blossomed quickly. This was it, he realised: a real chance to demonstrate Sherlock Holmes' deductive prowess and make things a bit easier on himself until everything else got sorted.
Yes.

He leapt to his feet. "John, come on." Heading toward the door, he called out over his shoulder. "Text me the details. I'll be in touch by the end of the day."

"You think you'll have news by then?" the equerry wanted to know.

"No, I think I'll have the photographs. In fact, make that two hours."

Definitely. He'd definitely have the photographs, and the gratitude of the denizens of Buckingham Palace.

By the time they'd reached the courtyard where their escort waited, Benedict's phone – Sherlock's phone pinged with an email. He thumbed in the code and opened up the message.

*Try not to let your ego trip you up on this one.*

Benedict grinned and texted a reply. *Jealous?* Then he turned his attention back to the email. There was an attachment. He opened it and scanned the details quickly. He barked out the address to the driver standing beside the car, and then stopped dead.

*Hang on a second.*

He'd opened Sherlock's mobile with no difficulty at all – thumbed the code as if he'd always known it. Cautiously, he peered down at the phone again. A regular iPhone, black case, nothing special about it. Except he knew the code.

The screen still gleamed whitely up at him. Without actually touching its smooth, gleaming face, he moved his thumb over it in perfect muscle memory.

6-1-5-4.

The number wasn't significant to Benedict. His own phone didn't have a passcode; he was too impatient to wait, even though his publicist and Em and Tom had all urged him to install one just in case he mislaid his phone. He wasn't in the habit of losing stuff, though, and –

How the hell *did* he know Sherlock's passcode?

"Sherlock?"

Benedict glanced up at John, who peered at him quizzically and gestured toward the car's back seat. "Hm? Oh, right." A puzzle for another time. He'd got into the phone, thank God; that was all that mattered. He climbed into the car and sat back for the short ride to Belgravia.

As the car rolled over cobble smoothed by centuries of feet, hooves, and wheels, he couldn't keep from humming the show's theme, quietly, gleefully. A bit nerdy, true, but nobody knew it except for him.

*The house was identical to the one in the show. Benedict instructed the driver to leave them and climbed out. He gazed up at the snowy edifice for a moment. He was off-script; in the show he'd*
gone back to the flat and tried on a couple of thin disguises before opting for the clerical collar and split cheekbone, but the truth was that his flair for drama wasn't quite as acute as Sherlock's and he wasn't keen on getting punched in the face. John was short, but he was wiry and had a lot of pent-up ire, and Benedict didn't want to incur it if at all possible.

Irene Adler had fancied Sherlock Holmes on exceeding short notice. Why not play on that a bit?

He strode to the door and rang the bell.

A female voice answered after a moment. "Hello?"

Benedict pasted an expression of, he hoped, sultry boredom on his face. "Sherlock Holmes to see Irene Adler."

There was a pause. "Are you expected?"

"A bit early, but yes, I'd say so."

John cleared his throat. "You sure about this?"

"Oh, I've never been more certain." Benedict smiled as the door clicked, and an attractive, immaculately dressed and shod woman appeared in the doorway.

"I don't think you have an appointment, do you, Mr…. Holmes, was it?" She tilted her head to one side, and a curtain of red, glossy hair spilled over her shoulder. Her crimson mouth curved up in what seemed like a genuine smile.

"No, but I think Ms. Adler will see me just the same."

"Please come in." She opened the door wider and gestured for Benedict and John to precede her. They went into the same sitting room – sparsely furnished and yet managing to convey an air of almost absurd luxury – and seated themselves on the sofa.

"Tea?" the young woman asked.

"No, thank you," Benedict replied. *We won't be staying that long.*

"Wait here, please." The woman smiled again and turned on her heel, exiting the room.

"You're very confident," John murmured.

"I'm always confident."

"Yeah, but there wasn't much to that email at all. I mean, you've only seen her photograph and already you've got her sorted? That's impressive, even for you."

Benedict frowned. "Why does that sound like an insult?"

"It's a compliment, you clot." John looked at him and smiled, and Benedict smiled back, forgetting to be aloof and stern. He *liked* John; no wonder Sherlock did too.

*All those rumours, all that speculation –*

"The celebrated Mr. Holmes," said a purring feminine voice.

There she was. The Woman. *The* Woman. In canon, she'd been an American opera singer, a
profession of then dubious repute, attempting to keep her fiancé from discovering what in Arthur Conan Doyle's time had been a terribly spicy past. In this universe she was as Steven had written her: a dominatrix with a taste for the very, very finest.

She sauntered into the room in a cream-coloured dress, clinging and prim at once, sheer black stockings, impossibly high black heels. How in God's name women walked in those things...her hair was done up in a roll, her lips painted as scarlet as the soles of her shoes. Benedict suppressed a grin. He'd definitely got the drop on her.

"Had I known you were going to pay me a visit, I'd have changed into something far more appropriate." She moved to stand in front of him, her legs spread as far as the tight dress would allow.

"Battle dress?"

Irene Adler cocked an eyebrow at him. "How perceptive."

"We've just come from Buckingham Palace," Benedict said, and watched a gleam come into her eyes. A little chill passed over him. He'd enjoyed his scenes with Lara – together, their timing was nearly impeccable and she hadn't needed to chew scenery in order to keep up with Sherlock's glamour – but this woman wasn't Lara Pulver, and if she was an actress it was only in the most cynical sense.

"Yes, I know." She smiled, displaying dazzling white teeth.

It was an unwritten rule in show business, but one almost everybody respected stringently, to close ranks on the topic of content in production. If Benedict didn't care for the way a scene was written, he wasn't shy about input, and even if no changes were made to a script, at least he was shown the courtesy of a listening ear. Ultimately, a programme or film belonged to the producers, directors, and writers; the money and glory usually went to the actors, though, which was a pretty fair trade-off. But in return, one didn't complain or express any dissatisfaction about a production in public; people who did usually found their employment prospects dwindling.

Benedict had a reputation, one he wanted to keep, of being easy to work with, gracious, accommodating. He had a healthy respect for Steven and Mark's vision, and his questions and issues were usually resolved pleasantly. But there were times – now and then, just now and then – when something niggled. The problem of Irene Adler had niggled in a way he couldn't quite articulate, and to his frustration, he hadn't been able to make anyone really understand him, though he'd poured out an impassioned stream of words on the subject of Irene's morality.

"It's her game, Ben," Steven had assured him. "She's got her game the way Sherlock has his. That's why they're so brilliant together."

And that was the final word on the matter. It wasn't as if they were going to do major rewrites just to answer his amorphous objections, so Benedict had accepted it and moved on. It wasn't his role to play, and in the script Sherlock had worked the dilemma out, so what was the problem?

One day last autumn, he and Tom had gone out for lunch, just a casual, relaxed sort of thing with no handlers, no entourage, and no expectations. Tom had kept his knee pressed to Benedict's the entire time, and while it hadn't been candlelight and violins, it had been lovely, an exploration from the warm and slightly shy camaraderie they'd shared filming War Horse. Only a few months ago, there had been snapshots of the two of them leaving the restaurant together. Looking at them, Benedict had felt sick. Someone had been watching them, had seen them enter perhaps, had waited the entire time they'd eaten. What if the photographer had come inside? Had known, somehow…?
Benedict's stomach clenched. He gazed flatly at Irene. "Let's make this as painless as possible, shall we?"

Irene gave him a feline smile. "Oh, Mr. Holmes. Making things painless is not my area of expertise. Quite the opposite, I'm afraid."

Sudden anger bloomed in Benedict's heart. Of course that was why. God, what an idiot he'd been not to see it. He met Irene's gaze, but it was difficult. He wanted to avert his eyes from the avarice and ruthlessness in them. Maybe it was wrong; surely Sherlock had his own problems, but Benedict adored Sherlock. Unfair, yes, perhaps. But….

He stood up, forcing Irene back a few paces. "I'll take the phone now."

Her gaze was blue and innocent. "Phone?"

"Bond Air," Benedict whispered, and took a step forward. "Tell me what you think of me, Ms. Adler."

She reached up and traced a slim finger down his cheek. "I think I would enjoy teaching you a thing or two, Mr. Holmes."

"You like that, do you? Teaching lessons?" Benedict couldn't keep the anger out of his voice.

"Sherlock?" John stood also.

"It's my job," Irene replied. "And I'm good at it."

"You told Buckingham Palace the photos of the young lady in question weren't going to be used. Why, then, would you even bother to take them?"

"Protection," Irene replied promptly. "It's important to build a stronghold in this world, Mr. Holmes. There are so many wolves at one's door."

"And how many secrets before you decide you've accumulated enough?"

Her smile faltered just a little, but she recovered herself quickly. "Oh, there's absolutely no end to secrets…Sherlock."

"True." Benedict moved past Irene toward the massive gilt-edged mirror over the mantelpiece. He felt beneath the mirror for the catch and found it. "John, come here, please."

John had been watching the byplay between Benedict and Irene with fascination. Now he moved reluctantly to stand beside Benedict. "Mind telling me what the hell's going on?" he inquired in a low mutter.

"Stand to the right of the mantel, please."

"Why?"

"Just do it," Benedict snapped. The wall looked like ordinary plaster. There'd be no chance of ricocheting. He hoped.

"Jesus," John sighed, and moved to the right, folding his arms and glaring.

Benedict released the catch and watched the mirror slide up. "You might want to stand aside too, Ms. Adler."
Irene had gone noticeably paler, but tilted a saucy little smile at him all the same. "You'll never crack the code."

"No?" Benedict typed in the first set of digits. "That's a very pretty dress you're wearing."

"Why, thank you. I quite like it."

"Couture, isn't it? Easy to spot a couture dress, if you know what to look for, but then I tend to notice these things. Texture of the fabric, quality of the notions, finishing of the seams, exactitude of fit. It's beautiful, but not so severely memorable that you wouldn't be able to wear it again." He typed the second set of numbers.

"You're welcome to examine the rest of my wardrobe, if you like. It's quite extensive." She stepped back a pace, well out of range of the weapon concealed in the safe. "Since you tend to notice these things."

"Thing about couture, though – you've really got to keep your figure to wear it. Gain weight, and the thing won't fit. Lose weight, and it won't hang properly. Oh, you could always get it altered, I suppose, but that's not really advisable with fragile fabrics. It's better to stay consistent. Never…." Benedict punched in the fifth digit. ". . . . . fluctuate," he finished, tapping the last number.

The safe clicked.

"Don't," Irene whispered. "Don't open it."

Benedict made sure John was standing exactly where he needed to be, glanced at Irene, twisted his mouth into a sardonic smile, and turned the release on the safe. He dropped into a low crouch as the safe opened, and the gun discharged itself into the opposite wall.

He felt his heart trip-hammering in his chest and inhaled the odour of ballistic effluvia. His ears rang with the report of the gun, and he had time to take a shaky breath before he saw Irene lunging for the safe, and John all but leaping over him to lunge for Irene. As he watched, John grabbed her wrist and pinned it against the wall.

"Don't," John said softly, "move."

"I see you're the protective sort," Irene replied, still arch and outwardly confident.

"And easily irritated, too," John said.

Benedict stood, looked at the hole in the wall, then at the safe. He stepped to one side and quickly retrieved the phone, then closed the little door. "Go ahead, let her go," he said, and thumbed the phone on. The passcode screen came up:

I AM

_ _ _ _

LOCKED

Irene stepped away from John, who was breathing hard and who looked furious. "That's mine," she said, holding out her hand. "Give it to me, please."

Benedict gazed steadily at her. "Don't tell me. Your whole life is on this phone."

"That's right. And it's mine."
"Every covert photograph you've taken of unsuspecting clients, people who trusted you with their greatest vulnerabilities." Sherlock wouldn't have said that; Irene had intrigued him, as he'd intrigued her. But Irene didn't intrigue Benedict. She was a few steps up from the sort of people who let tabloids pay them for tidbits of information, but not by much, when one came down to it. "Every scrap of information you gleaned from some fool in a post-coital haze, every document you stole from a phone when somebody's back was turned." Benedict held the phone up, well out of her reach, though she wasn't moving. "And emails from MOD officials stupid enough to trust you. I don't necessarily consider myself a patriot, but even on a sliding scale of morality, it's pretty reprehensible, wouldn't you say?"

She turned even whiter, but said nothing.

"You lie, and you steal, and you collude with people like Jim Moriarty because he can make you rich beyond every avaricious dream you've ever had. How much money is enough for you, Ms. Adler?"

He typed the passcode in.

The phone unlocked.

Tears formed in Irene's eyes. "Give it to me. Now."

Benedict's heart was soft enough to hurt a little at the sight of anyone crying, but he held his ground; Sherlock had, after all, and he'd nurtured a weird little thing for Irene Adler. "It's not that I mind the admiration, you understand. It's just that I'm not really in need of more." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw John bite back a smile.

"I wasn't lying about the phone. It's my protection. Without it, I've got nothing, nothing at all."

"Au contraire," Benedict said. "You've got looks, moderate intelligence, and probably loads of cash socked away. If I were you, I'd gather up as much cash as you can carry and leave while you can. If I'm not very much mistaken, there are going to be a few CIA operatives here in an hour or so, and they'll want this. Fortunately, I'm just patriotic enough to be glad that we got it first."

"You've killed me," she whispered. "You know that, don't you?"

Benedict paused. He hadn't...had he? Not if she was careful. "I'd avoid Karachi. Try New Jersey instead." He saw genuine pain in her face, the first honest emotion she'd exhibited. "It would have been better if you were protecting secrets instead of stealing them," he said gently, and pocketed the phone. "John – let's go."

She put her hand on his arm as he moved toward the threshold. "It was a game." A tear spilled down her cheek. "You know...we could have had something."

"It wouldn't have worked," Benedict said, and leaned close to whisper into her ear. "I prefer to be the dominant one."

They left her in her glacially lovely sitting room, now marred by a hole torn into the wall. The red-haired assistant was in the foyer, statue-still. "What have you done?"

"You'd better help her pack," Benedict said. "She's going to need some assistance. Apparently her wardrobe's quite extensive." Oh, good one.

Out in the street, Benedict flagged down a cab and got in. "221B Baker Street," he said, and concealed a little grin. It was just acting, but with the prosenium torn down and the audience incorporated into the play. Weirdly exhilarating, really.
"All the world's a –"

"What the hell was all that?"

Benedict drummed his fingers on his thigh. "What was what?"

"I mean how did you know? The code and all that? You didn't even know who she was two hours ago."

John was scrutinising him carefully. Benedict arranged a superior smile on his face and reminded himself that he couldn't let his guard down – John Watson was no fool, otherwise Sherlock wouldn't have suffered his presence. "Oh, come on, John. She was obviously smitten with me."

"Obviously. Yeah." John exhaled. "You and your sodding ego." He was quiet for a moment, then said, "You were different."

"How so?" Benedict asked casually.

"Can't quite put my finger on it. At first you seemed to like sparring with her –"

Benedict snorted.

"No, you did, I could tell. Got a thing for her?"

"You're the one who ground her into the wall," Benedict pointed out.

"She's not my type."

"Really? What is your type? The procession of women through the flat is so quick that it's difficult to work out any commonalities."

"Difficult? For you?" John scoffed. "Hard to believe. Can I put that in the blog?"

"I mean, so far I've been able to tick off the 'female' box, but they rotate so fast it's hard to even see them, let alone observe. Perhaps we ought to ask Mrs. Hudson to install a revolving door. Make it easier for them."

"Maybe I don't want you observing my girlfriends," John said. "Anyhow, you're dodging. You got angry with her – actually angry. I don't see that often."

And there was no explanation for that, not to John – not one that would satisfy him. Benedict sighed a little. "She exploits people without remorse."

John's brow laddered. "So do you, for cases. I've seen it lots of times." He paused. "But not for personal gain, I'll admit. Sherlock, I think I'm working out your personal code of ethics."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself, you'll never do it." Benedict glanced sidelong at John. He'd let things get personal in a way Sherlock wouldn't have done. A mistake; it wouldn't happen again.

At least, he hoped so. The sooner he got out of here….

"Anyhow, no point writing that one up – it only took fifteen minutes. You're going to have to look for something more challenging."

"Mm." That, Benedict reflected, was true. There would be no drugging, which was something of a relief; no texting accompanied by orgasmic sighing, no awkward Christmas party, no fake death, no
hectoring from Mycroft about giving codes away to impress Irene Adler. That last was probably the best part, because the less he saw of Mycroft, the better. On the other hand, if there really was a terrorist cell, that meant the Bond Air operation was still in effect, unblemished, and would go off without a hitch. No-one would be harmed. So he'd done well, even if he did say so himself.

Benedict checked his watch: half past twelve. He craved a cigarette and a cup of tea and something to eat. He needed a respite, and he needed it out of the flat, because the flat was still far too much like a stage set. And he wanted John along. John's presence was relaxing, soothing. "Let's have…lunch." He'd almost said dinner.

John smiled. "Yeah. Sounds good."

*

Kate reached out and stroked Irene's face. She felt tears threatening, but wouldn't allow them to fall. "Why won't you take me with you?"

"Darling." Irene caught Kate's hand and kissed the palm. "Not now, it's just too complicated. I'll send for you, I promise." She shrugged into a navy cashmere coat, supple as silk, and drew on a pair of gloves.

"But where are you going? Why won't you tell me?"

"I will, I promise. I'll call once I arrive."

"It's Sherlock Holmes, isn't it? What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. Nothing that matters." Irene sighed. "It's a pity, though. We could have been brilliant together, the pair of us." She turned back to Kate. "Take care of the house. And wait for my call." She slid a hand up Kate's thigh until she reached an encumbrance of leather and steel. "Don't you dare take it off, darling. If you do…I won't punish you."

"I won't," Kate whispered.

"See you soon, darling." Irene slid gracefully out of the car toward the porters waiting with her luggage, and disappeared.

Kate drove away, easing smoothly onto the motorway and accelerating. She turned on the radio and listened to something syrupy, pretty – Debussy, maybe – nothing Irene would have liked. Irene preferred the crystalline perfection of baroque music, its symmetry and seamlessness.

She swerved onto the shoulder at speed and nearly drove over an embankment. Tears of rage pooled and fell, and she slammed her hand against the wheel.

Irene had lied; she wasn't coming back.

Kate wasn't stupid – not as stupid as Irene liked to think, at any rate. She knew that Irene had spent her whole life steeping in deceit, so much that her mask had become permanent. Irene was smart and beautiful and sexy, and Kate had never so much as looked at another woman since they'd discovered each other. Irene's job didn't matter; it was just another layer of deceit, easy enough to discern. And it might have been something Sherlock had said to make Irene flee – God knew she'd been playing a
dangerous game for months – but she couldn't have dropped the façade for one minute to say she wasn't coming back?

What more could Kate have expected from a liar?

Maybe she was stupid after all.

Slowly, Kate reached for her mobile and dialled a number.

*

"Yes?"

The voice that came through was only vaguely familiar, but he held still and listened carefully.

"Where?"

The answer was short, curt, and in the negative.

"And the mobile?"

Another short answer.

"That gash." He listened briefly. "Shut up. Shut the fuck up." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, pulling in the scent of peonies from the arrangement on the table next to him. He touched the velvety edge of one bloom, then swept his hand out, sending the flowers and the seventy-thousand pound vase that contained them crashing to the floor.

He felt a little better. "So. Why?"

The answer was long and overly complicated and was easily summed up in two words.

"No. Don't. Stay there. If she calls, fine. If not... well, as some piece of trash literature once said: be sure your sin will find you out. If you have pertinent news, let me know. If not, don't bother me again."

He rang off and gazed at the spilled blossoms amidst shards of wet Chinese porcelain. Better that way. Sort of Duchamp-y, really. Deliberate disharmony was sweet music, sometimes.

"Time to end this, Sherlock," Jim said softly. "Time to bring this little game to a full stop."

*
It was Tom's internal clock that woke him, not sunlight filtering into Benedict's bedroom, which was almost completely dark. A busy actor needed his sleep like any other working professional, and the blackout curtains faced with silk the colour of new moss went a long way toward keeping out the brilliance that might have disturbed a peaceful slumber. They also prevented breaches of privacy, anything a casual passerby or too-enthusiastic fan might see. Tom and Benedict never so much as held hands unless the blackout curtains were drawn. They were both naturally physical and affectionate, and it had been a difficult lesson to learn.

Tom stretched his limbs, repressing the urge to vocalise a bit. Benedict was still deeply asleep, curled up on his side, his back to Tom. Poor guy, he'd been working long hours for weeks with no respite, and last night he'd got a nasty electric shock; if he wanted a bit of a lie-in, Tom wasn't going to disturb him, despite the half-erect cock between his legs that could have really done with Benedict's hand or mouth or….

He pulled up the blankets a bit and saw Benedict's arse, round and luscious and clad in thin boxer briefs, the sort that didn't show much under trousers – God forbid the camera should ever catch a bit of male VPL. Tom eased closer, fitting his chest to Benedict's back and snuggling up against his backside. *Just for a minute.* Benedict wasn't averse to being woken via spooning, so Tom stayed still for a moment, sliding his hand down to clasp Benedict's flat belly, pressing his nose to the nape of his neck to breathe in his aroma, this morning a mélange of warm skin and hair product and heavy-duty theatrical makeup.

Benedict didn't stir at all despite Tom's now almost fully erect cock and the proximity of his rapidly overheating body, and he wouldn't go so far as to shake Benedict or call to him. Regretfully, Tom moved away, climbed out of bed, and went into the bathroom for a quick businesslike wank. It didn't take more than a minute; all he had to think about was Benedict fitting him into the toys that had arrived a few days ago, and he was off, gasping and coming into a wad of toilet tissue.

"Whew…." Tom rested his head on the cool marble tile of the wall and dropped the tissue into the toilet. So romantic. Still, it got the job done. He had a pee, washed his hands, and tiptoed back into the bedroom where Benedict was still dead to the world. Scrabbling about in the near blackness, he found his shorts, wriggled into them, and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

*Oh, lovely!* It was a spectacularly pretty day already. Light flooded the kitchen (seven-thirty-six, the clock on the range read) and the sky through the windows was the softest of pastel blues. Perfect. Tom rummaged in the fridge and cupboards and whisked up an egg-white omelette with spinach and feta, enough for two. He put the kettle on, got a pot of tea ready, and stuck some bread in the toaster. Whistling, he went into the front room, found a couple of magazines, and brought them into the kitchen, hoping he wouldn't have to read and that Benedict would smell the food cooking and drift down, tousle-haired and sleepy-eyed and hungry – he'd hardly eaten a thing last night.

Five minutes passed, and Tom poured the omelette mixture into a shallow pan. A few more minutes, the thing was almost ready, and Benedict was nowhere in sight. Tom pushed the toaster lever down, readied the tea, and served the omelette up on two plates. He bounded upstairs and into the bedroom. "Ben?"
Benedict didn't stir.

"Ben, you hungry? I made an omelette."

"Mff." Benedict pushed his face into the pillow and made a snoring sound.

Tom smothered a chuckle. "Sleepyhead. All right, you can have it in a sandwich later." He went back downstairs, sat at the table, and tucked into his breakfast, desultorily turning the pages of *Time Out* and waiting for the sound of Benedict's footsteps.

Another half hour passed, and still no Ben. Tom frowned up at the ceiling. Was it common for electrical shocks to lay one low? He'd have to look that up. Benedict wasn't an up-with-the-birds sort of guy, but he tried to keep a regular schedule, and their time together was rare enough for them to make an effort…it must have been the shock combined with a tough work week, Tom concluded, and cleaned up after himself, piling dishes in the dishwasher and neatening the worktops. It was still early enough to get a run in, so he found his shoes and slipped them on.

One more try. He ran lightly upstairs and found Benedict in the same exact position he'd left him in. Sitting in the space between the end of the bed and Benedict's curled-up legs, he reached out and gently patted Benedict's hip. "Hey. Slugabed."

"Mn."

"You okay?"

"Yep. Fine."

"Want to go for a run with me?"

"Why in God's name would I want to do that?"

Tom froze for a second, taken aback at the scorn in Benedict's voice. Benedict sat up and glanced around the darkened bedroom, then fumbled for the bedside light. As he switched it on, he glanced round again, and there was a sudden look of total panic in his eyes before he turned to Tom, scrutinising him. "Ben," Tom said cautiously, "are you feeling all right?"

"Where was I there?" Ben shook his head. "God, that was a hell of a dream."

"Oh, no. What was it about?"

Benedict gave Tom a smile that managed to be baffled and charming at once. "Oh, you know – one of those dreams where you're completely lost and you've got to use the toilet and then out of nowhere someone offers you a plate of fish and chips, but the fish starts talking to you and asking how you'd like it cooked. That sort of thing."

"Oh, dear," Tom said, gently stroking Benedict's thigh. "That shock really knocked the stuffing out of you, didn't it?"

"It did," Benedict replied apologetically. "I think I'd better sleep a few more hours. What time is it, anyhow?"

"Almost eight-thirty. I was going to go for a run. I know it's not your cup of tea, but I thought – never mind. Never mind, you need your rest. Look, I'm going to run, then I thought I'd pop home for my stuff and then come back here. If you don't want to go out this morning, I've got a couple of scripts to go over. I can hang here, no problem."
Ben reached out and grasped Tom's hand. "Actually, I'm feeling really run down. I might sleep a long while more. What time's dinner?"

"Seven," Tom said, stifling his disappointment. "Should I just meet you at the restaurant?"

"Yeah, that sounds good." Ben dropped Tom's hand. "What restaurant again?"

"St. John," Tom brightened. "Well, we'll make it up after dinner. And I've got you the rest of the weekend, at least."

"Actually, they closed the set down to investigate the electrical issue," Ben said, then his face puckered as if he'd bitten into a rotten piece of fruit.

Tom laughed. "Don't look so upset – it's a holiday! And I've got some time on the other end, so now I don't feel so bad about leaving you all day. Brilliant! Kiss me." He leant forward and kissed Benedict on the mouth. Benedict stayed still for a moment, then kissed back a bit clumsily. Tom pulled back and smoothed Benedict's hair. "Crikey, you're really not yourself, are you? Get some sleep and I'll meet you there. Seven sharp – don't be late, they're such a grumpy lot when they haven't eaten." He got up and pressed a kiss to Benedict's forehead. "Go back to sleep. I left half an omelette for you if you're feeling peckish later on."

"Yum." Benedict smiled.

"And I had some rather interesting toys delivered – they arrived two days ago. I'll bring them tonight, what say you?"

"Fantastic." Benedict's grin got wider.

"I thought you'd say that. Right, back to bed with you." Tom kissed him again and waved from the door.

"Bye," Ben said, and shut off the light, nestling into his pillows again. "See you later."

Tom closed the door quietly and trotted downstairs. He shrugged on a sweatshirt, found his phone and keys and money clip, thrust them in his pocket, stuck in his earbuds, slipped on his sunnies, and left through the garden door.

There was no-one lurking in the front, thank goodness; the tabloids weren't shy about staking out celebrity homes, and snapshots of Tom leaving alone in the morning wearing ratty warm-ups wouldn't do either him or Benedict any favours.

He did his stretches, then began a slow jog down the street. He'd do three, four miles and then just cab the rest of the way home.

Poor Ben. He'd be okay, almost certainly; he just needed some quality sleep and food. A few days together with no responsibilities was an unexpected luxury, and Tom planned to cherish the hell out of it. He loved being at home with Benedict, at either of their places, though the near covert-operation air of arriving and leaving was a little wearisome, as was their careful spacing of places they could reasonably be seen in public together.

Tom picked up his pace. He remembered the paparazzi shots of them coming from lunch together. The photos had been totally innocuous; they hadn't been standing close together, there were no glances of complicity, no public displays of affection, but the knowledge that they'd been watched, staked out even, had been beyond unsettling. Benedict had insisted on takeaway the next few weeks, and Tom had taken to looking over his shoulder for telephoto lens flashes. He didn't mind the fans –
Benedict did, sometimes, because they'd become a bit nuts, a few of them at least, and obviously it wasn't on to tar everyone with the same brush, but most people were respectful. The paps, on the other hand – stalking, chasing, shouting dog's abuse – yeah, it was the price of fame, but it was too ugly once in a while. He hated to complain – his life was too good. But the feeling persisted.

You could just come out, a little nagging voice said, prodding him with dainty claws.

Well, it wasn't that simple.

Not that he hadn't given it thought. And talked about it with Benedict, and seen the wistful expression in his eyes, but…it just wasn't the right time. Not yet.

If not now, when?

Tom sighed, upsetting his rhythm a little. He pushed himself forward, feeling sweat pricking between his shoulder blades.

They'd agreed to keep things quiet. For now, at least. They were both getting good roles, seeing some acclaim for their work. No point in torpedoing everything before it even got off the ground.

He ran faster and faster, his breath laboured, his knees pumping high, picking up velocity until every unsavoury thought blurred into ferocious concentration on the physical and the sensation of pure speed.

*

It had taken three cabs ignoring him until one finally deigned to pick him up, and even then the cabbie gave him a doubtful look, obviously not fancying a gasping, sweaty man in a damp sweatshirt and brief shorts stinking up his cab. Tom sat in silence for the ride (only a mile and a half, but he was dragged out) and tipped the driver handsomely for not making any snotty comments.

He plodded up the steps, unlocked the door, and scooped up the post. Unwilling to sit, he trudged into the bathroom, stripped, and ran a bath. He set the mail on the rack (he'd admired and emulated Benedict's bath-time reading habits – it was a bit daft, but fun) and climbed in, sighing as the warm water closed around him. He leant back for a bit, soaking, listening to the sound of occasional traffic through the open window, and then attended to the stack of mail. He sorted through it and stopped at one particular envelope.

Oh, God.

Cautiously, fearfully, he opened the envelope and withdrew a single sheet.

Hi Tom.

You're dead.

*
Sherlock listened to TWH's quick footfalls down the stairs and into...the kitchen, not the front hall, oddly enough, and then heard the door close. He threw the bedclothes back, dashed to the room at the front of the flat (an ordinary guest bedroom, to all appearances, sparsely furnished) and eased the curtain open a finger's length, watching as Tom emerged from a garden door and went round to the front. Sherlock rushed back to the bedroom, watched TWH push open a gate and do some stretches, then jog down the street.

*Thank God.*

Good job TWH was the accommodating sort of boyfriend. Sherlock didn't want to have to fend him off and create unnecessary suspicion. He'd felt Tom spooning him from behind and caressing his belly with a hand; more to the point, he'd felt Tom's sizeable erection against his arse and it was all he could do not to respond in kind. Last night's manual stimulation had been...well, stimulating. But distracting. Sherlock was glad Tom had left. He had work to do.

Research, for one thing. He'd never delved into temporal/spatial anomalies, but there had to be some evidence out there, somewhere, something he could put to practical use. If he couldn't work it out immediately, he could at least gather data.

Then there was the problem of Tom, rather more pressing than Sherlock had originally thought. He had to admit that though he hadn't done badly – at least Tom hadn't seemed unduly suspicious, being of ordinary, that was to say, *dull* intelligence at best – but feigning exhaustion and aping Cumberbatch's eager-puppy demeanour would only take him so far. Their relationship was secretive; there weren't any YouTube videos of the pair of them kissing or bantering or exchanging syrupy glances. It wasn't going to be easy to extrapolate the nuances of a relationship from the few cues TWH had given him; there were months of physical familiarity and affection and references known only to them. Christ, why did people bother?

Perhaps the thing to do was to find someone who knew both Cumberbatch and TWH, preferably intimately, at the very least socially, and ask a few leading questions. Perhaps tonight would help; ply the right tongues with enough alcohol and crack open a vault of information.

Sherlock went back into the bedroom and found Cumberbatch's phone on the night table. He turned it on – oh, ten percent battery, damn it – and scrolled through the messages. He hadn't answered any from the night before, and there were a rash of new texts now as well.

*Sue called me. She said you were OK but I'm concerned. CALL ME BACK. XO Em.*

Should probably check in at some point. Em sounded irritatingly persistent, even for a PA.

*You alright, mate? Call or text.*

From a Steven M. Not worth replying to.

*Confirming Sunday brunch interview at Momo. We can pick you up if needed.*

Ignore.

*Missed the fracas last night! Hope you're okay. Are you in town this weekend? Seeing Himself? Ian and I will be at the Ivy on*

Long-winded, this one. Next text, same initials (MG – wasn't that a car or motorbike or something?).

*Saturday if you two are interesting in joining. It's like a bank holiday. Save the juicy details if you please. M.*
You two. "Oh," Sherlock whispered. "There we are." Swiftly he texted a response: *Sounds brilliant – send me a time, we'll be there.* He hoped he wouldn't still be stuck in this place by Saturday (what day was it, anyhow?) but with a bit of cleverness he could put TWH off long enough to glean at least some detail.

He went through a number of other texts, none of which looked particularly important, and then turned off the phone (he'd find the charger later – if he didn't miss his guess, it was in one of the kitchen drawers nearest the refrigerator – a cursory glance had revealed a much-used socket above the worktop with no appliance in sight; doubtless Cumberbatch plugged his phone in at night and retrieved it in the morning whilst drinking some foul health concoction made of lawn clippings and goat placenta) and headed downstairs to the library or study, such as it was. He yawned and scratched idly, thought about finding a dressing gown, then decided against it – likely the king wouldn't be stopping by today. He wore only his costume shirt and a pair of boxer briefs, but he was comfortable enough, the fabric was decent, and he'd shower in a bit.

Sherlock seated himself at the desk and turned on the sleek laptop on the desk. Again, no password – Cumberbatch was beyond naïve. He called up a few interview videos of TWH, but there weren't many – in one, his face was ghastly white, his hair was the dead black of shoe varnish, and he was talking some rubbish about myth and legend. He hit a few more: myth and legend, Thor, Loki, Shakespeare, something called Comic-Con, someone called Chris – coma-inducing, most of it, even if he didn't sound as stupid as most people when he talked. And unrevealing except for a few key factors: he seemed not to mind giving patient answers to clearly stupid questions, he appeared to be even more naïve than Cumberbatch, though somewhat more poised, and he made almost no personal revelations whatsoever.

*A lot to hide, perhaps. Being gay or at least bisexual, for one thing; accommodating to everybody to compensate; not jaded yet. Clothes older, none of the polish of the sort of film stars who populated the tabloids. Eyes and expression not yet guarded, but physical gestures very much guarded, or perhaps controlled thanks to dramatic training. Answers courteous but succinct, unlike Cumberbatch's rambling.*

Sherlock sighed and shook his head. He clicked on another clip – TWH in the white makeup and black hair, weeping and shouting and snarling at an old man in an eyepatch. How fascinating. Still, there was something about him that caught one's attention, even if only momentarily. He watched until the scene ended, then got up and stretched a bit. He abandoned the laptop and went into the kitchen in search of food.

He wouldn't eat the egg-white omelette – what was the point of an egg without the yolk? – and besides, it had spinach in it. Sherlock opened the refrigerator and saw a loaf of bread, the two-tone nineteen grain variety. He sighed, took it out, then rummaged through the cupboards until he found a jar of Nutella. He cut the crusts off the bread, spread the Nutella thickly, and took a huge bite. Delicious. Much better than a pale omelette with bits of kelp.

Eating the sandwich, he wandered back into the library. A germ of an idea teased at him.

*No, don't. It will be horrid, and you'll regret it.*

He debated for approximately four seconds, then sat down and typed his own name into the YouTube search bar.

Some pinch-faced man holding up one lecturing finger. Same pinch-faced man with a bulky older fellow, a black-and-white film….

Reluctantly, he added "Benedict Cumberbatch."
Ah.

Sherlock blinked. There were dozens of clips, some clips called 'vids,' a number of references to 'Johnlock' – good God, people were too lazy to type their names out? – and there, perfect. 'Sherlock – Episode 1 – A Study in Pink – Full Episode.'

*A Study in Pink? But that was….*

Sherlock clicked the link and watched.

*What the hell…?*

The story was told from John's point of view. Strange…and…oddly precise. *How,* in the name of God? How did they know?

*It's in the Doyle canon, for God's sake. It's fiction.*

No, that wasn't quite right. He'd scanned some of the stories on the train – Doyle's story had been called *A Study in Scarlet* and there were hardly any similarities at all to what really had happened, but this –

He couldn't stop watching. A strange, unfamiliar sensation slowly flooded him, a mangled hybrid of unease and incredulity. That was Cumberbatch? That panicky, nervous, confused idiot was playing him almost flawlessly. A bit *too* dramatic, but otherwise…. And Martin Freeman, badly dressed, spewing profanities hither and yon, was almost note-perfect as well. Watching him, Sherlock felt his chest tighten a bit.

*What's John doing right now?*

Unaccountably angry, he tossed the rest of his sandwich into the waste basket and hit the pause button. *Multiverse.* He went to Google and started researching the concept of the multiverse. Despite his confident tossing-about of the idea to Cumberbatch, he'd managed to delete most of it immediately after he'd learnt it because it had seemed a pointless notion. And as he delved deeper, he realised that he'd been right to delete it – it *was* pointless. A multitude of universes in the Universe, inflationary expansion, inflaton field, quark confinement, conceptual quantum mechanics….

'All measured mass energy occurs on the boundary of the multiverse. All non-measured mass energy occurs in the interior of the multiverse. For measured mass energy, inertial mass energy equals gravitational mass energy. For non-measured mass energy, the inertial mass energy is always zero but virtual mass energy that is not measured always has nonzero gravitational mass energy. Dark energy has zero inertial mass energy and negative gravitational mass energy. Dark matter has zero inertial mass energy and positive gravitational mass energy. Is the preceding a meaningless farrago of verbiage?''

"Yes!" Sherlock shouted, half-tempted to pick up the laptop and toss it out the window. Who the hell *cared?* None of the information was the least bit practical; none of it would help him get back home. If he really was permanently trapped here, he'd go round the twist and take hundreds with him.

He stuck his fingers in his hair and rubbed briskly, then heaved a sigh and went back to YouTube, resuming the programme. He sat in silence, watching his life – his and John's, the beginning of their life together – unfold on the little screen. As he watched, he relaxed a bit. He wasn't given to nostalgia – waste of time – but he couldn't help smiling at an odd detail here and there. Lestrade's weary patience, John's confusion –

Ah, Mycroft! Hm. Not bad. Not as fat as Mycroft, but he certainly had the supercilious attitude just
right.

There was that slightly weird moment at Angelo's, the pair of them chortling in the hall. It seemed ages ago, but seeing it all again….

He paused the video. John had just seen the GPS tracker and realised that Sherlock was in trouble. Well, not trouble exactly. Sherlock backed it up and played it again, watching John's face carefully. John hadn't hesitated at all, he'd simply charged into action, as if Sherlock were someone he'd known for years.

A little dart of warmth pierced Sherlock's insides, and he found himself smiling.

The programme ended, and Sherlock found the next. He recognised it immediately, even without the ridiculously superfluous musical soundtrack. Yes, it's Chinese, thanks so very much, I'd never have guessed without the help of the music. This time he let it play through, only wincing a bit when Sarah made her appearance. She wasn't bad, as John's girlfriends went, though they'd parted a few weeks ago and John was seeing some other woman whose name Sherlock couldn't recall at all – difficult to get past the sprinkling of spots on her forehead and cheeks.

Then it was The Great Game – bit of overstatement there, Sherlock thought. The Not-Utterly-Boring Game, maybe, or The Moderately Diverting Game, but great? Hardly.

He did wince when Molly brought Jim in – stupid, so stupid. He should have seen Jim's craftiness and deception right away. And then John's anger. It had turned out all right in the end – absurd to end where it did, when what had happened immediately afterward had been so anti-climactic: a telephone call and Jim wandering out.

Sherlock sat up alertly. That had been just a fortnight ago. Was there more?

He searched but found only clips and dozens and dozens of 'vids.' He clicked on a 'Johnlock' vid and watched in bemusement; nothing more than their facial expressions, mostly, set to some insipid pop tune. What was the point? Bored, he scrolled down to the comments.

"Johnlock 4EVA!"

"OMG, that smile. My ovaries!"

"Oh, my heart. When Seb insults Sherlock, you can see the hurt in his eyes…."

Hurt? He'd been looking at Seb's watch.

"JAWWWWWWN"

"NEED MOAR John Watson walk."

Sherlock snorted laughter.

"Why do they have to be having sex? Can't two people be friends without having sex? Your a bunch of perverts."

Who was having sex? Well, apparently the majority of people in this universe weren't any brighter than those in his universe. Unsure whether or not that came as a relief, Sherlock shook his head, turned the laptop off, and went to have a shower.

One thing in Cumberbatch's favour – his bathroom was really nice. The hot water stayed on for ages,
and the shower-head was one of those rainfall-type things. The soaps and shampoos were decent
brands, Penhaligon's and Molton Brown and Floris (familiar brands, too – how little imagination the
multiverse had, apparently). Even the bath linens were ultra-luxurious.

Sherlock towelled off, slung the wet towel over the tub, and went to the sink. It took some digging,
but he found a fresh toothbrush and razorblade; no way in hell was he using Cumberbatch's stuff,
even if they did look exactly alike. He brushed, shaved, and wiped his face, peering curiously at his
skin. There were scars and discolourations here and there, a strange ruddiness to the top of his upper
lip, a few tiny spots. Cumberbatch hadn't been blessed with Sherlock's skin, unfortunately – that
perfection had been makeup. Poor sod.

He took a fresh towel, rubbed it over his hair, and drifted into Cumberbatch's sizeable closet-cum-
dressing room. He turned on the light (track lighting, in a closet. Really?), found a nice white shirt,
then tried it on and tossed it aside – too large. He tried on three more shirts in succession before
finding one that fit him snugly. It was a cream colour with fine threads of indigo blue, and already
pressed and lightly starched. Ugh. He pushed suit after suit aside, letting some drop to the floor, until
he found one in a deep navy – not quite as slimly cut as his own, but not as hideously billowy as
some of them seemed to be, and as a bonus, faintly scented with cigarette smoke. He rummaged
through the drawers for a decent pair of underwear and some socks, then selected a pair of shoes, not
quite able to tear his eyes from the pair covered with glittering paillettes.

Finally satisfied, Sherlock closed the mirrored door and gasped in horror.

What the hell had happened to his hair? It had…ballooned. There was no other word for it. Half of it
stuck out from his head in a sort of mad aureole, and the other half was plastered to his forehead. He
stuck his fingers in it and gave it his usual quick tousle, but that did absolutely nothing.

"Oh, for God's sake…." Sherlock kicked aside the pile of discarded shirts, suits, and underwear,
marched back into the bathroom, and rummaged through the drawers and the little linen closet,
searching for something to tame the mess. "Oh, come on. With hair like this you've got to have
something, you idiot." At last he found a jar labelled Aveda Men Pure-formance Grooming Clay.
Clay? Sighing, he scooped out a small amount, rubbed it between his hands, and smoothed it on his
hair.

Right. That didn't do a damn thing. He took more and slathered it on, and then more until his hair
was entirely scraped back from his head with a load of Grooming Clay, straight, horribly and
unevenly grooved and now dirty-looking in the bargain. Delightful. And hideously ugly.

Tant pis. He wasn't showering again, and he wasn't wearing a bloody hat. He found his watch on the
bedside table (evidently TWH had unstrapped it from his wrist while he was sleeping), scooped up
Cumberbatch's phone (hell, he'd completely forgot to charge it), retrieved his keys and wallet, and
went out. He needed to see this London, and most importantly, to see Baker Street. Maybe there was
a way….

The day was too warm. Well, it was high summer, evidently, and nearly midafternoon – he'd spent
hours watching the programme and some of the vids, and time had just vaporised. Amazing, how
much useless telly people watched. Still, they were watching him, even if it was only Cumberbatch
play-acting, and if the Wikipedia article was to be believed, the show was quite successful. That was
pleasant to know, if unsurprising.

Sherlock strode down the street. Not a cab in sight, damn it – he wasn't walking to central London,
though if he didn't find one, there was always the tube. He stopped and waited. Cars zoomed past,
billowing exhaust, noisy and irritating, and not one of them was a taxicab. Sherlock waited two more
minutes, then began walking to Hampstead Heath station.
By the time he arrived, he was sweating. Disgusted, he stripped off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder, feeling rivulets of perspiration trickling down his back. The sun beat down on his head and his skin felt uncomfortably prickly and hot. He dug in Cumberbatch's wallet but found no Oyster card – wasn't that typical, pampered moron actor – but found some cash for the fare. He squeezed on the train with a mass of people in summer clothes and vacant grins and stood near the door, turning his face away from a sea of bad perfume and body odour, glad when it was time to change trains.

Near his stop, someone tapped him on the arm. Sherlock turned and glared down at a young woman wearing a t-shirt with a picture of a phone box. "Yes?"

"Sorry…are you who I think you are?"

"No," Sherlock snapped, and turned away. God.

"Sorry," the young woman said softly, and moved away. Sherlock ignored her, but then heard someone else whisper "Cumberbatch," and saw, via peripheral vision, someone wielding a camera phone in his direction. He stared resolutely at the door.

A male voice said, "Oi, that's Sherlock!" Sherlock stiffened and was about to turn, then realised they were talking about…not him. Not exactly. Cumberbatch, who played him. He felt the intensity of stares, the bodily pressure of people drifting closer and closer to him.

"Oi. Oi, Benedict!" A hand tugged at his elbow, but before he could turn on the perpetrator, they came to Baker Street. He bounced on his heels, waiting for the doors to open, and the hand tugged again, more insistently.

"Bugger off!" he snarled, and dashed out, hearing Cumberbatch's name shouted and seeing a dozen cameras pointed at him.

"Arsehole!" someone bellowed just before the doors closed. Sherlock turned to salute them in kind, but the train was already pulling away.

"God," he muttered, and wiped his sweating forehead with his bare hand. If Cumberbatch had to endure that every day, Sherlock could almost feel sorry for him. No wonder he didn't have an Oyster card.

He made his way to street level and began walking toward 221B. There had to be some grounding point, some means of connection, some fine grain of data that would provide answers to his problem.

A small knot of people milled aimlessly around the front of Baker Street, but it wasn't until Sherlock drew near that he realised why.

The Sherlock Holmes Museum – Souvenirs, Antiques, Books, and Curios

Sherlock gaped.

There was a painted silhouette, a man with a beaked nose and a pipe in a funny hat. And a number of other people standing round wore the same sort of funny hat. And 221B didn't really even look like 221B, not his 221B, and they'd turned his name into…into commerce.

"OH MY GOD!"

Sherlock started, looking in the direction of the shriek, and saw two girls clutching at each other as they stared at him. He began backing away, and they advanced on him like a couple of lionesses sizing up their prey. He pivoted on his heel and moved away as fast as he could without running,
losing himself in the throng.

"BENEDICT! WAIT!"

Sherlock kept pace with a group of Danish tourists until they passed a little coffee shop. He backtracked, darted inside, and peered down the street. No predatory fans, thank God.

He ordered a coffee – mercifully, the woman behind the counter seemed to have no idea who he was – and slumped at a table. Clearly, he needed a new strategy, one that didn't involve a lot of public exposure. He'd have to do more research.

Mycroft's voice resounded in his head, contemptuous and cold. *On what, exactly, brother mine? You seem to be exhausting your resources.*

"Oh, shut up," Sherlock said, and turned on his phone. Low battery – bloody hell, he should have brought the charger. Oh, and seventeen new messages. The three most recent messages were from TWH, the latest one only twenty minutes ago. *Can't you stay away for three hours, for God's sake?* He deleted them one by one unlistened-to, then went to the text messages.

TWH, TWH, TWH, TWH. Most recent text three minutes ago.

"God…." Sherlock opened the latest text.

*PLEASE call me? Please, just for a minute.*

It was almost three o'clock, a few hours until dinner at wherever they were eating. He'd forgotten. Well, it was as good a time as any to get the name of the place. He hoped that TWH's friends weren't Cumberbatch fans. He dialled Tom's number and waited one and a half rings.

"Hi! Hi. Oh, God, sorry to bother you. Are you still feeling awful?"

"No, I'm all right," Sherlock said. *That is, I've just watched myself on telly – not even the most interesting cases – had absolutely no luck working out how quantum mechanics can help me get back home, plastered my hair down with actual clay, walked a mile in Amazonian-jungle levels of heat and humidity, was mobbed by fans, discovered my flat is a museum to someone else's idea of Sherlock Holmes, apparently an eagle in a silly hat, was chased down the street and now can't remember where the hell I was supposed to meet you for dinner, but otherwise – "Yeah, I'm fine. You?"*

"I'm okay." There was a nervous chuckle. "Well, actually, not quite. I guess you heard all those messages."

"Not yet." Wasn't quite a lie. "Sorry, my phone was off. I just saw them and decided to call you. Everything all right?"

"Not really. Ben…I got another one of those letters. I honestly think someone's going to try to kill me."

"Oh, good." Something to take his mind off the annoying circumlocution of his situation. The stalker thing had completely slipped his mind.

"Good?"

"I mean – good, I'm glad you called. Look, we'll work it out."
"Can you come over?"

"Yes. No problem. Be there in half an hour." Sherlock rang off and took a deep breath.

He didn't believe that things happened for a reason – that was the sort of palaver spouted by people who clutched on to coincidence and notions like fate and God, despite there being absolutely no empirical evidence that there was such a thing as fate, that a supreme being existed – and if such a being did exist, why would it bother with humans, who were largely too stupid to be borne and surely far too stupid and pointless for the entity who'd supposedly created the universe? If such a deity did indeed exist, Sherlock had a few choice words for Him or Her or It for allowing this debacle to happen.

The point was, things didn't happen for a reason, but there was occasional happy chance, and sometimes whilst on a case, Sherlock had managed to work out other problems, like the time he was wrestling with the problem of the Aluminium Crutch and discovered the existence of the owner of a house that wasn't actually a house…and further, that the owner, a socialite and gambler, had a taste for kidneys in béarnaise sauce. Fortunately, it had all turned out to his advantage; he was up one façade posing as a Leinster Gardens house, and he'd escaped the Clarence House cannibal with his kidneys intact.

Triumphantly, he shut the phone off, then realised he had no idea where TWH lived.

Always something.

*
You couldn't know someone completely. Everyone had a secret heart, facets of themselves they kept hidden from even their closest friends. John had always held that to be true, and he was totally okay with that, really. It was practical, and saved you trouble in the long run. What was the point of opening up your mouth and spilling your guts out? That was for people who liked to go on daytime telly and talk about their bad relationships and family issues and things.

It was true that his girlfriends sometimes (oftentimes, if John was being brutally honest) complained about his opacity. It was also true that in the year he'd been living with Sherlock he'd shuffled through an inordinate number of girlfriends, even for him. Good job they didn't get together and compare notes. Everyone needed a little mystery, though, and yet every once in a while people let things slip and showed a side of themselves heretofore hidden.

Take Sherlock, for example. John wasn't sure he wanted to know every nuance of Sherlock's personality – he was a bit of a nutter anyhow, and who knew the whole of what was hidden behind that arrogant and brilliant exterior? There had been moments, though: little moments, usually when it was just the pair of them, not dashing about solving crimes, but in the quiet spaces of their ordinary lives – a laugh, a grin that was somehow a bit goofy and attractive at once, not the public I-know-more-than-I'm-letting-on-but-you'll-be-hearing-about-it-momentarily smirk that Sherlock wielded with surgical precision, a mundane remark about fetching laundry or making supper that would have been commonplace coming from anybody else, but from Sherlock – it was hard to explain, but those little gestures and remarks were different. Somehow.

Maybe it was trust, and that was all there was to it. Sherlock had never lied to John about who he was, he'd demonstrated from the very first moment exactly what sort of man he was, and if he concealed parts of himself, they weren't malicious, or ugly. Yeah, he was a prick sometimes, he was thoughtless…almost always, arrogant 24/7, but –

*Doing it again.*

And that was happening more and more of late. If John had been the introspective type (only since he'd started therapy had he begun to question himself at all. What a mixed blessing that was) he'd have connected some dots: these occasional, becoming more frequent, little reveries about Sherlock, his markedly pronounced pinball-machine dating habits, and the stealthily encroaching feeling that something new and upsetting was insinuating itself into the fabric of his life and could only be detected now and again in moments of vulnerability and sensitivity.

*Oh, Christ.* John flipped through the menu, half-watching Sherlock pore over it as if his selection constituted one of the most important decisions in his life. They'd gone to Angelo's at Sherlock's insistence, and Sherlock had spent five minutes staring at the décor as if he'd never seen it before. "You planning to order, or are you just going to sit and watch me eat? It's a bit weird when you do that, you know," John had said.

"What? Oh. Oh, no. I'm famished," Sherlock had replied, and had begun reading the menu with ferocious attention.

After fifteen minutes and two check-ins from the waiter, John got impatient. "Sherlock, it's not War
"Right, right," Sherlock muttered, and waved the waiter down again. At least it wasn't Angelo – he'd toned down the boyfriend bit, but he was still a little too attentive for John's comfort. When the waiter approached, John ordered pasta primavera and Sherlock ordered chicken Marsala with extra vegetables. As they waited for their food, Sherlock fidgeted and checked his phone. Accustomed to Sherlock's silences, John was content to people-watch.

He'd started noticing little things he hadn't, details of dress and demeanour and habit, before Sherlock had come into his life, and if every once in a great while he unfurled his wings and made a stab or two at deduction, he never told Sherlock, because Sherlock, the smug bastard, would have shown him up, down, and sideways. Still, he thought he was developing a small skill here and there. For example, the woman near the door was wearing shoes that were scuffed at the heel and toe, while her clothes looked fresh off a shop rail. What might that mean? Maybe she was scrimping on her wardrobe budget to please her husband – or maybe the grumpy-looking bloke with her wasn't her husband at all, but her lover, and they were stealing a quick lunch after a roll in the hay and she didn't want to wear her good shoes and arouse suspicion….

Yeah, or maybe she's a spy and uses the heel and toe of her shoes to kill people. Leave the deductions to Sherlock, you prat.

"So."

Sherlock's neck popped audibly as he wrenched his gaze from his phone. His eyes were wide and he had that faintly manic look, the precursor to a three-kilometer sprint through London street traffic. "Yes?"

"She was quite something. Irene Adler."

"Oh." Sherlock shrugged and slipped his phone into his pocket. "I suppose. If you like that sort of thing."

"Well." John smiled a little. "She's a little…I don't know, severe for my tastes."

"Yes, I believe severity is her milieu, John."

"Not like that. I mean, she's very polished. The heels and the makeup and all. I don't like when women cake all that glop on their faces. I like a more natural look."

"Sarah wore foundation, concealer, powder, brow pencil, mascara, eyeliner, shadow, blush, and lip gloss," Sherlock said. "It's true some women don't wear makeup, but it takes others a lot to achieve that natural look."

"No she didn't. I'd have noticed."

Sherlock lifted his eyes to the painted tin ceiling. "Yep. She did."

"Huh," John said. "Anyway, Irene Adler's not my type." John looked at the woman with the scuffed shoes. She was leaning toward the man across from her; her hair was dangerously close to the candle on the table. "You seemed like hers, though." God, that sounded snippy. Granted they weren't ordinary flatmates – at least Sherlock wasn't – but flatmates would rib each other, do the whole nudge-nudge-wink-wink-say-no-more thing. They wouldn't sound like jealous lovers.

Fuck.

Sherlock shrugged. "She's gay. But you're right, she harboured some sort of infatuation for me."
John gave a disdainful snort. "You deduced that in the fifteen minutes we spent there." Of course he did.

"Never mind." Sherlock picked up a fork and began polishing it with his napkin. "We nipped that neatly in the bud." He smiled at John, a rather sweet smile.

"I don't care, Sherlock, I was just making an observation." John pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "I need the loo. Back in a bit."

"Good of you to inform me as to your incipient whereabouts, John."

"Oh, sod off," John said with a chuckle, and headed for the loo. Once inside, he locked himself inside a stall and leant his head against the door. What the hell was he doing? All that about Irene Adler and her makeup and heels was beside the point. When she was flirting with Sherlock, John's stomach had clenched and he'd felt the old quavering in his hand. At least Sherlock hadn't flirted back. At least! Oh, God. And when they'd left, John had felt…was it triumph?

Sometimes John wished he hadn't begun therapy at all. It was so much easier to live without questioning the self, without discovering a compulsion to dig for discomforting truths, to undermine his own life with aspects of his own personality that were perhaps better left buried.

But I'm not….

Unless, possibly, he was.

*

Benedict plucked uneasily at the tines of his fork as he watched John walk rather stumpily off to the loo. He let his face relax and then stretched his jaw and rolled his head back and forth. God, he was tense. Being Sherlock wasn't the easiest, despite the nice reviews about him inhabiting the role. It took a certain physical discipline to maintain Sherlock's facial expressions, and being 'on' with no respite was beginning to take its toll – he felt tired and out of sorts, and more than ready to go home.

But there was no going home, not now at any rate. He'd stepped off the stage only to discover another stage, this one world-sized and frightening even as it was familiar. He wasn't certain how long he'd have to keep this façade up; he thought he could manage the Hounds case with some degree of ease, but Reichenbach might prove a little more difficult. Surviving a six-storey jump was going to be problematic, for one thing, as he had no idea how to manage it and Steven had merely assured him that everything would be explained in due course.

A dart of panic arrowed itself into Benedict's belly. Relax, he told himself sternly. You've solved the Scandal case without bloodshed, and that means the chain of events that led to Reichenbach won't happen for a long while, if at all. And it's months and months in the script. You'll be back home before you know it.

Reassuring thought, but not at all certain. Focussing on the moment was best for now. Benedict rolled his head once more, took a sip of lemon-infused water, and drummed his fingers on the table. He wished he hadn't insisted on Angelo's. It was familiar, but with too much depth and scale, authentic cooking odours, real waiters and customers – bizarre. On the other hand, it was nice to just sit in a restaurant and not worry about being photographed or asked to sign something. Not that he minded, not usually, but the genuine sense of privacy was nice. Sherlock Holmes wasn't the celebrity
that Benedict Cumberbatch was – not yet. Had the Hat-Man and Robin thing happened already?

John came back from the loo, and Benedict arranged his features into an expression of deadpan boredom. He would have preferred to give John a friendly smile, but he didn't want to break character, and oddly, he didn't want to unnerve John, who already seemed a bit suspicious that something was amiss. Unless that was Benedict's paranoia. Maybe.

John slid into his seat and gave Benedict a little half-smile. "Getting a bit busy."

Benedict consulted his watch; it was nearly two (how had so much time slipped by? Well, traffic had been awful, and there had been a line at the door of Angelo's, and they'd waited forever for a table), and his stomach was demanding lunch quite plaintively. "Mm."

"What was all that about the CIA operatives?"

Oh, God! Of course John couldn't know about the CIA breaking into Irene's house. God, cocking it up everywhere. Think, you twit! "Oh. Something in the information Mycroft texted me, some tip from one of his minions. You know Mycroft, leave no stone unturned, no matter what sort of insects are crawling underneath." Benedict sat back, stunned with himself. Actually not bad.

"Like brother, like brother," John said. "He'd never manage with your homeless network, though. They'd probably jam that brolly up his arse."

Benedict cracked a grin. "Pity he'd have the video evidence destroyed. I'd put it on YouTube." John chuckled, and they stifled their merriment as the waiter approached with a tray. As Benedict tucked into his lunch, he traded a glance with John, and they descended into inane laughter again. Benedict wiped his eyes and beamed at John, who beamed back so brightly that Benedict was startled. John must have registered his reaction, because he dropped his gaze and dug into his pasta with fierce vigour.

There it was again, that look. John had looked at him the same way in Irene's house, open and affectionate…Benedict adored Martin and he was pretty certain the feeling was mutual, but Martin had never looked at him like that outside of filming.

Whilst filming, though….

There had been talk from the very first day Sherlock aired. The little innuendoes that Steven and Mark and Steve had thrown in there hadn't gone unnoticed, obviously, but people – fans and critics alike – had latched onto something besides those remarks. And why not? Martin had gone on record as calling it the gayest story in the history of television, after which Steven had ticked him off rather soundly. Martin had been red in the face and pissed off, but he'd only vented to Benedict. "Why all the fucking gay comments if he doesn't want anyone to think they're gay? How fucking stupid does he think people are?" he'd fumed.

Benedict had tried to soothe him. "I think he wants to keep it sort of subtextual. Honestly, I'd just as soon not have to cope with a million questions about whether or not Sherlock and John are –"

"Oh, belt up, Ben. Christ, like it came as some stonking surprise to him, that's what gets up my nose –"

Round and round they'd gone for a while, and in the end they'd agreed, independently of Steven's mandate, to mumble past the question of homoerotic content in the show. And that was just fine with Benedict. It was all very well for Martin to refer to it so flippantly, but Benedict felt a little more uneasy about it. He didn't want his private life paraded in the papers and on the internet; he didn't
want his past dug up, nor Olivia badgered for the years she'd spent with him, because bisexual still meant gay to a lot of people, and she'd be subject to all sorts of vile attention, none of which she deserved.

Playing gay still got the fish-eye in too many quarters. It was bad enough being photographed on the street coming home a bit squiffy after a party, or at lunch with Tom, but he truly loathed dealing in the cheap currency of rumour. He and Tom had decided to be discreet. His private life was firmly private, and Tom had too many decks stacked against him at the moment, and the more he was able to distance himself from unpleasantness, the better.

But it was there just the same, those undertones. God, the second series had even more snide in-jokes than the first – wait until the internet fiction fans got hold of the Hounds episode and the double room joke, they were going to run wild with that one. Of course they couldn't do more than make innuendoes – the viewership would plummet. And that was the bottom line, really – yes, it was the twenty-first century, it was stupid, and it was desperately unfair, but some middle-aged homophobe in Swindon would get his pants in a knot over a touch that seemed too affectionate and write letters and complain, and the hatred and vitriol would swamp, overwhelm, and eventually sink the show. It was easier to dismiss the delighted speculation of a smaller set of fans who saw what should have been obvious to the world – even if Sherlock Holmes and John Watson never had sex or even kissed, they were clearly, obviously, madly in love.

What a lot of excuses. But here was John Watson with, for just one single flash of a moment, his heart in his eyes. God, how well Martin played that, but the real thing was even more dazzling. Unaccountably, Benedict felt depressed. He wondered if Sherlock saw those flashes. If he did, he probably had no idea how to respond to them. Suppressing a sigh, he speared a piece of chicken and chewed. It was delicious; small wonder Sherlock liked this place when he did decide to eat. Across from him, John was eating rapidly, his face a bit pink, his eyes downcast.

"John –"

Benedict's mobile rang. Sherlock's mobile. Benedict scowled, fished it out of his pocket, and looked at the readout.

**Lestrade.**

Benedict almost laughed. *Curiouser and curiouser*. He put the phone to his ear. "I'm eating lunch. What?"

"*Where* are you eating lunch?"

God, it was Rupert's voice, yes, but a bit wearier, rougher, the accent a bit thicker than the one Rupert used. "Why?"

"I'm sending a car for you. Something you need to see."

Benedict rolled his eyes and mouthed 'Lestrade' at John, who perked up a bit. "Can't you tell me now? Is it some sort of secret?"

"Not on the phone. Where are you?"

"Angelo's. Give us half an hour, we've just started eating."

"Someone will be there in five minutes. Eat fast, Sherlock. Or better yet, get takeaway." Lestrade rang off abruptly.
Benedict shook his head, staring at the blinking readout. "Christ," he whispered. Then he stiffened. Oh, God, was Lestrade actually summoning him for a case? How the hell was he going to wriggle out of this one? Maybe he could feign a fever or a fainting spell.

"What's going on?" John wanted to know.

"Lestrade's sending a car. Something that can't wait, apparently." Benedict slipped the phone back into his pocket.

John clicked his tongue. "Better eat fast, then." He shovelled in a heap of pasta and got a second heap in his mouth just as a squad car pulled up, lights flashing.

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"Right, where are we headed?" John inquired, tapping on the divider.

One of the officers glanced over his shoulder, his face expressionless. "Gatwick."

John leant back in his seat. "You were right. We'll be a while."

"Told you," Benedict said, withdrawing John's takeaway box from its paper bag and handing it over. "You can thank me any time." He removed his own, offered John some plastic cutlery, and dug into his food, glad he'd insisted on the boxes.

"He didn't say what it was about?" John asked through a mouthful of pasta.

"No. Probably Lestrade lost his keys or he's dying for those airport chicken kebabs and can't remember his pin number." Actually, he was looking forward to meeting Rupert's counterpart. The show's Lestrade was patient and competent and an all-round good egg, and if the past eighteen or so hours had proved anything, it was that in real life, or what passed for real life in all this madness, the people he'd met were even more intense than the show's iterations. John was sweeter, Mycroft scarier. What would Lestrade prove to be?

"Sherlock," John chided.

The squad car made its way down Bedford Road toward the A23, and Benedict concentrated on his food, trying not to be nervous about whatever Lestrade would expect of him. Obviously they were headed to a crime scene. He hoped it wouldn't be too bloody, and that he could conjure up a few authentic-sounding deductions on the spot and get out in record time. He wouldn't, he prayed, be around long enough to actually have to try to solve a crime. He wasn't bad at deduction at this point, but he didn't think he could sustain it.

It had begun to rain. Staring out at the dreary scenery as they zipped down the motorway, Benedict wondered what Sherlock was up to. He'd probably terrorised poor Tom into retreat. Tom could be persistent when he was amorous, which Benedict found charming, but Sherlock had likely driven Tom off with a withering verbal assault. How on earth was he going to undo that bit of damage, as well as whatever else Sherlock had done?

*Oh, Christ, I've got that interview on Sunday. What if we're still trapped? Maybe Sherlock would just blow it off and not show up. It would be rude, but easier to explain than the doubtless horrifying answers to questions about being a newly minted sex god.*
Benedict finished his lunch automatically, conscious that the high from besting Irene so neatly had worn off. He missed Tom, his house, his friends, ordinary life. He had a headache, and desperately wanted a cigarette, a glass of wine, and maybe a nap. Beside him, John sat quietly, looking out the window, his hands folded in his lap. Benedict had the sudden urge to tell all, to drop the façade and let things occur as they might. John wouldn't quite understand, but he'd be a sympathetic ear. Wouldn't he?

John seemed to sense Benedict's regard and turned his head. "You okay?"

Benedict took a deep breath and opened his mouth to spill everything. *I'm trapped in Sherlock Holmes' body, I'm on my way to a crime scene I can't possibly solve, Sherlock is in my house probably damaging my career, and I want OUT of this. Help me, for fuck's sake!*

Oh, that would be brilliant, wouldn't it.

"Bored," he said, and turned his head. *Fuck."

"Won't be long," John said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

*No. "Why?"

There was a pause. "No reason."

Benedict kept his face averted for the rest of the journey, fairly certain the truth wouldn't even begin to set him free.

The car pulled smoothly onto the Gatwick exit and took a curving route Benedict had never noticed before, a long bare stretch of road that ended at a high gated checkpoint. They were waved through and drove past the featureless back ends of several terminals, stopping at a structure indistinguishable from the others. Everyone alighted and Benedict followed the police officers with a sinking heart. This wasn't going to be simple. *Right. Look annoyed, don't speak, insist on leaving quickly. He felt inside the breast pocket of his coat and discovered the familiar presence of his magnifying glass. He'd do his best, but Christ, what a mess this all was.*

Lestrade met them at the door, his face handsome, Rupert's face, but weary and grim. Benedict didn't even feel a little frisson of surprise – was it good that he was becoming accustomed to this universe, or not good?

"Yeah, follow me," Lestrade said, and led the way down a long corridor to a room furnished with a table and four chairs. And a body on the table, draped with an emergency blanket.

Benedict repressed a shiver. *Shit. I'm not up to this.*

Two clean-suited lab techs stood outside the door, staring at Benedict and John with hostile expressions. Benedict half-wished Anderson were one of them – at least he knew the rhythm of Sherlock and Anderson's relationship. Though admittedly, Sherlock and Anderson's relationship could probably be duplicated several times over with any number of techs. Or police officers. Or anyone.

"Think you might know this one," Lestrade said, and drew the blanket back.

"Oh my God," John murmured.

For one terrifying moment, Benedict thought he was going to faint. He reached for the back of a chair with a slow, groping motion and grasped it firmly. The hasty lunch he'd eaten in the car gave a
tremendous lurch and he tasted acid in his throat.

Lestrade glanced at him. "You do know her."

"Irene Adler," Benedict said through frozen lips. He kept his face perfectly still, but was certain that he'd gone utterly white.

"We met her two – three hours ago," John said. He took his jacket off and turned to the techs. "Gloves," he snapped, holding his hand out.

The techs glared sullenly. "Go on," Lestrade said. "Give him a pair." One tech moved to a portable kit and produced a pair, handing them over.

Benedict felt his hands shaking and gripped the back of the chair harder. He forced himself to look at her face. Her eyes were closed (thank God, thank God his subconscious babbled), her forehead slightly furrowed, and her red lips parted as if she were about to speak. She looked almost normal, in fact, except for the raw red-brown wound encircling her neck.

John had donned the gloves and had begun to examine her carefully. He picked up her hand, scrutinised her nails, and set her hand down again. He probed gently at her neck. "Ligature strangulation, looks like. Not much of a struggle – hardly any scratch marks on her neck, nails pretty clean. Whoever did it was strong – fast, too. No mess." He turned to Benedict, and his eyes widened a bit. "Sherlock –"

"So you never met her before this morning?" Lestrade folded his arms and stepped closer to the table.

"It was around noon," John said. "We were there for all of fifteen minutes." He looked at Benedict again and pressed his lips together.

"What for?" Lestrade peered at Benedict. "Sherlock?"

Benedict knew he'd have to speak, to act completely blasé and indifferent to Irene Adler's death. "Where'd you find her?" His stomach was starting to heave again.

"A cleaning woman found her in the loo of the BA first-class lounge, propped up against the wall. She'd bought a ticket to Marseilles. Cash. Bought a Pellegrino at the lounge bar. Bartender said he tried to flirt with her, no luck." Lestrade grimaced a bit. "Didn't see her go to the loo, but it was about fifteen minutes later that he heard the cleaning woman scream. There were about twelve people in the lounge at any given time. Three flights left between thirteen-forty when she bought her ticket and fourteen-twenty when she was found. We're detaining the first class passengers." Lestrade sighed. "British Airways isn't happy with us, but what the hell can you do?"

"Pathologist's here," one of the techs said, giving John a smug smile.

John ignored her and drew the blanket back over Irene's face. "How'd you know we met her?"

"Well, that's the funny thing," Lestrade said, and pulled out his phone. "We sent a car round to her house, and the door was ajar – I mean, the place is buried in cameras and security features, but the door was open. Nobody home, either, but there was a note on her dressing table. Hang on…." He stabbed at his screen. "Can't get used to this phone, hold on. Okay, here." He showed Benedict and John the screen, a photo of a handwritten note in elegant, slanting penmanship:

_Darling Kate,_
I'm sorry I had to leave so quickly. If Sherlock Holmes comes by again, please don't tell him I've gone. It's cowardly of me to run, but he frightens me and I can't permit him to threaten me. Will phone soon, love –

I

Numb and sick at once, Benedict licked parched lips and slid his hands into his coat pockets.

Lestrade stuck the phone back into his pocket. "Care to enlighten me?"

Benedict nodded shortly. "CIA," he said, surprised at how normal his voice sounded.

"Oh, Christ," John said.

"What?" Lestrade looked from Benedict to John, frowning.

"Her phone. Sherlock took her phone." John pulled off his gloves with a snap. "She was blackmailing royals. Or getting ready to." He explained succinctly. "Sherlock deciphered the phone and he's still got it. I expect Mycroft will get it, but – Sherlock, you want to show him?"

Benedict blinked. "What?"

"The phone," John said, a bit impatiently. "Show him the phone."

"Oh." Benedict took the phone from his pocket and gave it to John. "I need the loo," he said, and walked out of the room. He went down the corridor blindly and saw the door to the First lounge, which he recognised upon stepping inside. Two uniformed police officers were talking to the bartender, who glanced at him and then turned his attention back to the police. Benedict found the toilet, went into a stall, and locked it. Wrapping his arms around himself and screwing his eyes shut, he tried to still his trembling.

*Your fault. Your fault, you fucking egomaniac. Swanning in and taking the phone – you showed off and changed everything and now she's dead. You've killed her, even if you didn't strangle her yourself. She hadn't done anything really awful, not yet at least, and she didn't deserve that. And it's all your fault.*

He swiped fiercely at his eyes, but the tears came nonetheless. A choked sob emerged from his throat, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. *Oh, God. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, please, please, please –*

Someone came into the loo and went to the urinal. Through the crack of the door, Benedict saw a broad back in a chalk-striped suit, and a messy blond head of hair. The man unzipped, pissed, shook off, and zipped up again. He left without washing his hands, and the door hissed closed.

It was mad, beyond mad. Life was going on all around him whilst he was trapped, and he was utterly terrified. If he walked out the door and went back to John and Lestrade, then what? Would his presence disrupt events to their detriment too? He saw Lestrade caught in crossfire, John mowed down by a van, or attacked by enemies of Sherlock's, brutally murdered as Benedict stood by, helpless, shaking the foundations of Sherlock's existence by what he'd thought was an innocuous occupation of space.

*I want to go home. Please, please, get me out of here.* He wiped at his nose and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. What was he going to do? He couldn't stay locked in the loo forever. He'd have to carry on somehow.
Reluctantly, he opened the stall door and let himself out. The mirror reflected a frighteningly pale countenance and tear-reddened eyes. Benedict turned on the cold tap and splashed his face. A little better. Thank God there wasn't an attendant.

He stepped back and gazed at the shell of the man everyone thought he was. What now? Go out and pretend nothing was wrong, that he hadn't caused Irene Adler's death, that he wasn't persona non grata in a Sherlock Holmes suit, or come clean. So they'd put him in a bin for a while – he was probably better off there. And everyone around him would be safer.

Unless they wouldn't be. Unless retreating was an even worse decision than moving forward.

*Fuck. Oh, fuck.*

Benedict squared his shoulders and went back to face Lestrade and John, and the consequences of what he'd done.

*The sun was setting when the squad car pulled up in front of 221B, and Benedict felt as if he'd been awake for three days straight. He got out of the car and held the door open for John, then dragged himself inside. He smelled something nice – a combination of roasting chicken and baking bread. Mrs Hudson was cooking. *Dear God, stay away from her too. Given what happened in Scandal, a wide berth is the best possible thing you can do.*

"Sherlock."

Benedict turned. John's face was strained; he looked tired too, as well he might; he'd done most of the talking to Lestrade, the officers, the pathologist as Benedict remained mostly silent. Oddly, Lestrade hadn't seem surprised that Benedict wasn't looking Irene's body up and down and crawling all over the lounge searching for clues. He had pulled John aside to speak to him quietly, and Benedict had heard John say, "No. Not possible. I've been with him the whole time." Good old John, probably getting him off a murder charge.

"What, John?"

"Something's not…look, none of this…you're being a bit weird."

Benedict bit back a laugh borne of exhaustion and hysteria. *Gift of understatement there, John.*

"I mean, it's got to be a setup of some sort. Obviously, with the note, but you didn't threaten her. And if those CIA people followed her, then it's…" John shook his head. "Lestrade asked me…well, the same thing Mycroft did. You're not using, Sherlock? You didn't go into the loo and –"

"No," Benedict said, and then realised how sharply he'd spoken. He opened his mouth to apologise and stopped. *Sherlock wouldn't apologise for being an arsehole.*

Well, sod that. Sod Sherlock too, for that matter.

"Sorry, John," he said quietly, and turned to go upstairs. He heard John sigh and follow him.

Benedict shrugged off his coat, went into the front room, and halted in his tracks.
"Hi, boys."

Before Benedict could coax his overtaxed brain into fully registering the sight of Jim Moriarty sitting in Sherlock's chair, smiling, his dark eyes glittering, a sudden wave of heat and freezing cold and inexplicable pain coursed through his entire system, paralysing him. He blinked, blinded by white brilliance, and heard another voice: his own.

"Oh, thank God."

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Immediately after ending his call with Benedict, Tom went into the bathroom for a shower, leaving off the music he usually played and scrubbing determinedly at his sweat-soaked and gritty hair and body, a slightly painful yet reassuring ballast of reality against the frightening, nightmarish quality of the latest letter he'd received.

Words were his stock in trade. It was possible to act without words, obviously, and some actors did it brilliantly, inspiring awe and envy, but with Tom it had always been speech that had drawn an audience toward him – he thought, anyway, inasmuch as one could judge one's own performances. Words had power, always, and it was one reason he was cautious with them; it was too easy to wound with both carelessness and deliberation. It wasn't a theory he shared around much, but he lived by it and was content with the results.

 Whoever had sent the letters…they'd taken time to write out horrors, to describe them in detail (and grammatically correct and properly spelled at that) and hadn't neglected to mention Tom's physical and vocal reactions to the varying treatments in the letter, either. Charming. Also terrifying.

Tom froze for a moment. He'd locked the door, hadn't he? Wonderful place to be caught, the shower…no, he had locked it. The moment he'd come inside, he'd double-locked it. He heaved a little sigh of relief and poured a thin pearly-gold stream of conditioner into his palm, letting it pool there for a moment. It was meant for curly hair, but as far as he could tell it didn't make a bit of difference in texture, though it helped with the tangles when it was longer.

The writer had called him a liar again. He wondered about that. It didn't seem possible that the writer knew him, but he'd never received scary letters from fans – some of them were a little sad in their ardor (he wasn't even close to perfect, and even when he didn't make the same mistake twice he made new ones all the time, and he was sure that most of the fans who cherished him so much were perfectly sweet and reasonable, but idolising him wasn't the most practical or realistic thing to do) but most of them were just kind and generous about his performances, his looks, and so on. He couldn't believe a fan – could you call someone who hated you obsessively a fan? – was capable of such ugliness and vitriol.

Then he thought about John Lennon. About that young actress on American television who was murdered by a stalker in the 80s. Other actors who'd got more than their share of threats.

He liked the adulation, the gifts, the squealing. He ate it up. Even the paparazzi could be managed, to a degree. They weren't following him everywhere, not yet at least, and maybe he'd never achieve that level of fame anyhow, but he hadn't signed up for this at all.

Quickly, Tom rinsed, stepped out of the shower, and towelled off, dripping on the floor on the way to the bedroom. Relax, for God's sake. You're certainly not the first actor to deal with this, and you won't be the last.

There were ways to cope. He'd let the agency know, and the police. Maybe purchase some extra security measures for the house. He'd talk to his more famous friends. And Ben, of course. Ben had received some rather odd letters from fans, and he took them in stride, mostly by crumpling them up and throwing them away. Tom smiled as he shimmied into his softest jeans and t-shirt – too early to
dress for dinner. Benedict could be twitchy and over-analytical about his own problems, but he was wonderfully soothing and reasonable and giving of himself when it came to solving someone else's. It was a marvellous quality, one of his most endearing.

Tom felt a little better, and went into the kitchen to brew a pot of strong tea and make some sandwiches. Rummaging in the fridge, he found some prosciutto and cheese and lettuce and a jar of sun-dried tomatoes in oil and got to work, chopping and slicing and spreading, setting the stuff out on plates. The bell rang and he went to the door, wiping his hands on the seat of his jeans and peering into the peephole.

"There you are," he murmured, and unlocked the door. "Hey."

"Hey." Ben lifted one hand a little and gave him one of those tight-lipped smiles. "Sorry I'm late."

"No, no, I'm just glad you're here." Tom opened the door wider. "Come on in. You hungry? I made sandwiches."

"Um. Yes." Benedict stepped over the threshold and looked around curiously. "I am hungry, actually."

Tom closed and double-locked the door, then surveyed Ben up and down. "You look a little ragged."

"It's hot out there." Benedict's frown was thunderous.

"Yeah, it's warm. Well, it is August." Tom stepped closer and gathered Ben close. "You okay? You're all stiff." He bent and kissed salty skin just under Ben's ear, pleased at the little intake of breath he provoked. Boldly, he slipped his hands down to cup Ben's arse, digging his fingers in a bit. "Relax. Kiss me."

Benedict leant forward and gave Tom a little peck on the lips, the sort of kiss one gave to a powdery, perfume-soaked great-aunt. "You said you got another of those letters."

Okay, I guess he's in problem-solving mode. "Yeah. Let's eat and I'll show it to you. Or maybe we should wait. It turned my stomach, I don't mind telling you."

"No, let's eat." Benedict shucked his jacket and tossed it over the back of a chair, then dropped onto the sofa.

"Okay." Tom bit his lip and looked at Ben from beneath his eyelashes. "Shall I bring it to you?"

"Mm. Is this it?" Ben asked, picking up the envelope.

"Yeah, that's it." Toppy and distracted. That's a new one. "You sure you're okay?"

Benedict stared at him, then gave him a slow smile. "Fantastic." He let his gaze travel the length of Tom's body. "Freshly showered, I see."

Tom's stomach did a happy little flip-flop. That's more like it. "Back in a flash."

He assembled the food and tea on a tray and brought it back to the coffee table. Benedict was lying full-length on the sofa, staring holes into the letter. "Creepy, isn't it?" Tom said, putting the tray down and sitting on the floor beside the sofa.

"I'm going to saw your balls off with rusty clippers and stuff them down your throat," Benedict
read, enunciating precisely.

Tom winced. "Yeah. I guess one consoling aspect of the whole thing is that he doesn't actually talk about fucking me, but when you stack that up against ball-sawing, fucking doesn't seem bad at all." He tried to laugh and failed.

Benedict eyed him, then went back to the letter. "Clippers."

"Maybe he's a barber?" Tom hazarded. He selected a sandwich and started eating. Yum.

"Clippers." Benedict closed his eyes and sniffed the paper, then took a longer sniff. "Dunhill Distinct. Mm."

"God, how can you tell? Don't be tempted," Tom said. He only smoked once in a blue moon and made Ben smoke in the back garden.

Benedict picked up a sandwich and munched on it, still staring at the letter. He rubbed his fingers and thumb over it, flipped it over, flipped it again, and re-read, his eyes tracking the single-spaced words rapidly. He set the sandwich down and felt blindly for his cup of tea.

Tom rescued Benedict's tea before Ben dunked his fingers and guided it to his hand. "I think I'd better call the police. This is the sixth letter, and they're getting more frequent. I know you said it probably wasn't a predator, and you might be right, but...I hate to admit it, but I'm a bit frightened now."

Ben folded the letter and slid it back into its envelope. He dropped it on the table and retrieved his sandwich, taking a huge bite. "This is good."

"Thanks." Tom eyed the letter. "I wish I knew who the writer was. At least some identifiable clue, something."

Benedict sighed. "Your stalker's in London. Someone who lives outside the city wouldn't likely have time to make several trips to the central post office just to mail a letter. They might only work in the city, but if so they're a friendless sort, not taking lunch with work mates, too busy scurrying off to the post office, too many questions to answer if they did have a curious friend. You got six in what span of time?"

"Three months, Sherlock," Tom replied with a laugh. He took a deep swallow of tea.

"Don't look so petrified, you only do it once in a while. I'm teasing you, relax. Anyhow, I got them pretty regularly, one every two weeks or so, then they stopped, then started up again yesterday."

"And this is the first one that's been delivered directly to your house."

Tom shivered. "Yes. He knows where I live. Jesus."

"Stick to well-lighted areas and carry pepper spray. You can run fast – you'll be all right."

"Pepper spray! Where am I going to get hold of that?" Benedict rolled his eyes, and Tom frowned. "Look, I know I have easier access to certain things now, but I don't need some photographer catching me with pepper spray in my hand. I think I'm just going to phone the police on Monday. Don't roll your eyes again! You're not being very consoling, you know." He said this last in a bantering tone, though in truth he felt a little hurt. Come on, get over it. He's used to crazy letters.
You heard him talking about crazy fans last night – he probably gets a lot more than he lets on.

Benedict's mouth turned up at the corners. "Sorry." He patted Tom's shoulder.

Tom laughed. "Oh my God, did you just give me a 'there, there' pat? You bastard."

Smiling wider, Ben slipped his hand down Tom's back, caressing. "Sorry," he repeated.

"Better," Tom said. He grasped Ben's other hand and turned it, looking at his watch. "We have a few hours before we have to meet the RADA gang." Springing to his feet, he stared down at Ben – those intense eyes, the pale column of his throat, his hands.

Oh, those hands.

Tom stripped off his t-shirt and let it fall to the floor. "Let's spend our time productively."

*

Oh, for God's sake.

This was getting old and remarkably tedious. Bad enough that he'd had to find his way to TWH's house – not that it had been difficult, mind, just a quick Google to find Tom's agency and ring them up, then slather on a sickly-sweet layer of charm like meringue on a cake.

"Good afternoon, Hamilton Hodell."

"Hi. This is Benedict Cumberbatch. I'm really sorry to bother you –"

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Cumberbatch!" The female voice on the other end of the phone had dropped a half octave into a register the owner no doubt found seductive. "What can I do for you?"

"This is the absolute worst imposition, but I'm supposed to be at Tom's now and I'm completely stranded and I can't get hold of anyone at mine." Best to leave that ambiguous, Sherlock thought. And with any luck, they'd know which Tom he referred to so familiarly. He hoped. He'd launched into a wheedle. "I hate to ask, but could you call whatever car service you use and get them to give me a lift to Tom's? I'd be happy to reimburse –"

"Of course, don't give it a second thought. We'll be there ASAP. Where are you?"

Sherlock had given them the address and ducked back into the air-conditioned coffee shop to wait. Not fifteen minutes later a discreetly luxurious car, the sort Mycroft favoured, had pulled up, and Sherlock had climbed in, thanking the driver profusely, and sat back for the ride back to – surprise, surprise – Hampstead, not far away from Cumberbatch's flat.

How convenient.

Now he was lying on TWH's couch after yet another very dull stalker letter – it was telling that the writer had chosen to send the missive directly to Tom's rather than the agency, but not very interesting, and his initial excitement had long dimmed. God knew Sherlock had received a good deal of hate mail, some of it violent, and yes, once or twice the writers of those letters had tried to make good on their threats, but he'd always managed to outwit them, or John had been there to help out, and they'd never got the best of him. And those letters had been more imaginative than the
deluge of written torture pornography in the two communiques he'd seen. This stalker with his cigarettes and his lonely habits wasn't worth a second thought, though obviously Sherlock had to make it seem as if he cared.

But none of that mattered right now, it seemed; TWH was clearly sex-addled. He stood staring down at Sherlock, his eyes a bit glazed, his naked chest rising and falling in time with his slightly ragged breaths, and apparently the affair of the letters had been altogether banished from priority and memory. Thomas W. Hiddleston's essential compound was a mélange of toothy grins and Shakespeare and sexual intercourse.

Productively? What was productive about sex?

He gave Tom a lazy smile. "You don't want to talk about the letters any longer?"

"No, I want to eradicate them, at least for the moment. I'll call the police on Monday. They can establish a presence here, or I'll hire a private security guard, something. It'll work out – thanks for helping me see that." Tom knelt and combed his fingers through Sherlock's hair – or tried to. He recoiled a bit. "What did you put on your hair?"

"Aveda Men Pure-formance Grooming Clay."

Tom blinked. "That's the nastiest texture. Are you going to dinner like that?"

Sherlock managed a smile. "It's different when you haven't got an army of hairdressers working on you." Or if you're utterly incompetent and can't manage your own hair. Not that it was precisely Cumberbatch's fault. Maybe he did a brilliant job of styling on his own, but it certainly didn't fall into place the way it was meant to do.

"I know you hate it. It's sexy, though." Tom toyed with the button on Sherlock's shirt. "No wonder you're hot – you're wearing a suit in August, you nutter."

"Yeah, I know. Stupid of me."

"Let's remedy that, hmm?" Tom unbuttoned a button and traced the tip of his finger over Sherlock's collarbone.

The light touch provoked the smallest shiver. Maybe levity was the answer. "Are you aiming to cool me down, or make me hotter?" TWH chuckled, but didn't pull away. No, instead he leant close and suckled on Sherlock's earlobe. Sherlock pulled in a quick breath and tightened his hands into fists. His cock stirred. Traitor.

It wasn't true that the sexual impulse couldn't be ignored. Sherlock was ordinarily able to ignore it quite easily – at least he'd managed well enough up until a few months ago. And those were just – oh God inside the ear, ahh – small and infrequent physical anomalies in an otherwise cerebral existence – GOD!

TWH's hand had slipped down to Sherlock's crotch and was sliding softly back and forth over summer-weight wool and the cotton of his underwear, a gentle, maddening friction. His lips met Sherlock's and kissed – open-mouthed but dry, small, delicate kisses without the unwelcome intrusion of a tongue. He kissed Sherlock's top lip, then his bottom lip, over and over, his hand unceasing in its deliberately restrained motion.

Unwillingly, Sherlock's mouth opened, and he found himself straining upward for a deeper kiss. His mouth was wet now, swollen from the faint, repeated pressure of Tom's lips, and to his horror he heard a groan. That was me. It was ridiculous that the smallest stimulation could produce so strong a
reaction, it –

"Shall we repair to the bedroom? I have something I want to show you." Tom's lips moved against Sherlock's ear. His hand moved round and round, caressing the prick now stiff and straining against the fabric trapping it.

Sherlock nodded hazily, though he wasn't certain that getting up and walking would be all that easy. He allowed Tom to take his hand and pull him up and then crush him close.

"Touch it," Tom whispered against Sherlock's ear – again – and caught Sherlock's hand, pressing it against his crotch. Hard, hot, ready.

"Oh."

"Come on." Tugging on Sherlock's hand, Tom led Sherlock down the corridor and into a bedroom, much smaller than Cumberbatch's, and less stuffy. The bed, a tarnished brass, was made up with a duvet of what looked like a dozen different embroidered sari textiles in blue and green, the walls were papered in blue and yellow stripes, and the long curtains at the windows, parchment-coloured silk, blew gently in a faint breeze. Clothes and books littered the room; Tom nudged a pile off the bed and drew back the duvet and top sheet.

Sherlock couldn't stop looking round the room, seeking out tiny details and filing them away without analysis. He couldn't quite.... There was a stack of bound plays: Shakespeare, Ibsen, O'Neill, Chekhov, Williams. A pile of folded shirts, solids, stripes, Tattersall. A tie with a pale-pink floral design flung across a faded chintz slipper chair, a pair of trainers upended against the wall. Another book on the bedside table, a bit dusty: Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man. A battered carriage clock. A multicoloured jumble of theatre and cinema tickets.

Different steps in career, Sherlock finally realised a bit hazily. None of the pristine elegance of Cumberbatch's newish digs; if he had a cleaning service he used it irregularly or had them avoid the bedroom.

There. Deduction.

Tom was on his knees, pulling something from under the bed: a long, flat box covered in green and white toile. He lifted the lid and pulled out fistfuls of glossy black rope, then grinned up at Sherlock. "Just got these." He pulled a white silk scarf from the box and dropped it beside the ropes.

Sherlock blinked and felt his knees buckle a bit. Casually, he reached out and rested a hand on the brass footboard.

Mycroft. He and Mycroft had....

Only a few times, an extension of the childhood games he'd forced upon his older brother, demanding that Mycroft tie his hands and push him onto the makeshift plank in the Beardsleys' unused stable. Mycroft's steadfast and vociferous refusals dwindling as Sherlock put the rope in his hands, Sherlock's shiver of pleasure as his hands were restrained.

Years later, at a wedding, some distant cousin with a spattering of mud-coloured freckles, Sherlock and Mycroft escaping the festivities with a bottle of plonk and hiding in the tiny, ancient stone church, getting pleasantly smashed (Sherlock in less than ten minutes), and Sherlock pulling the silken cord from an insipid and earnest banner bearing a dove of peace. "G'wan, Mike. Tie me up."

"Stop calling me Mike, you little fungus."

"Oh, God….

But Mycroft had complied, his hands trembling, his face scarlet. And though nothing much had happened – they were too drunk – a few years later, Sherlock had pressed his advantage again. Zip-ties this time, a furious Mycroft fetching him from the police on a charge of disorderly conduct, hauling a still-bound Sherlock out of the Bromley station, shoving him into a car, dragging Sherlock into his dreary little flat, as if manhandling would push Sherlock onto the straight and narrow. Sherlock, still high, had sprawled onto Mycroft's sagging chesterfield, jeans-clad legs apart, and had beckoned with his eyes, his mouth, his wide-open thighs. What had followed had been delightfully filthy, debauched beyond measure, and had never been repeated.

And though Mycroft had almost certainly deleted it, Sherlock hadn't.

TWH stood and casually tossed the rope onto the bed where they gleamed darkly against the ochre sheets. He unbuttoned and unzipped the jeans hanging low on his narrow hips and stepped out of them, displaying his flushed and erect cock.

Sans pants. Sherlock might have guessed.

"Work your magic," Tom murmured, and climbed on the bed. He stretched out his arms and legs, watching Sherlock expectantly.

Oh. A small leaden lump of disappointment dropped into his belly as he comprehended what TWH wanted him to do. It wasn't really in his purview, not that he'd indulged in outré practises much – Mycroft, and his chem-lab partner Issie at uni a few times, and once a dealer who'd traded an hour in bed for two grams of roxanne. He'd never tied anyone up for pleasure, found it boring, but….

There had been that moment, after the Black Lotus debacle, when he'd knelt beside John and freed him from the ropes still tethering him to the tipped-over chair. Sarah had composed herself enough to call the police, and Sherlock had unfastened the knots and massaged the blood back into John's cold hands. John had taken a few unsteady breaths and allowed Sherlock to chafe his fingers, and for one moment, their eyes had met. And hadn't he felt…something? Some small stirring that he'd attributed to the euphoria of violence and triumph?

He'd shivered a little inside at the raw marks on John's wrists and then touched a finger to the side of John's face. John, you're hurt.

John had scrambled up, hadn't quite met Sherlock's eyes. I'm okay. I'm okay. Thanks.

Funny, the telly programme hadn't shown that.

Oh God. He'd liked unbinding John. But it didn't necessarily follow that he'd have liked binding him as well.

"Ben?"

Sherlock blinked. "What?"

"We've only got a few hours." TWH smiled brightly.

"Right." If he tied Tom up, then…touched him a little, perhaps, it would all be over very quickly without any need for hedging or excuses. From the looks of him, he hadn't far to go before orgasm;
his cock was nearly flat against his belly and glistening at the tip.

Sherlock nodded resolutely and gathered up the rope. It was heavy and silken to the touch, and he weighed it briefly before taking up one section and fastening it to the brass rail of the bed. Hesitantly, he caught Tom's left hand and wound the rope snugly round his wrist, then made an efficient constrictor knot that Tom wouldn't be able to slip or twist out of no matter how hard he struggled.

He moved to the other side of the bed and bound TWH's right wrist. His own cock pushed insistently against the fitted boxer briefs, and he felt wetness at the tip. Moving faster, he bound Tom's ankles to the rails, making the knots tight, stretching Tom's legs as far apart as he could – not the easiest task as the man appeared to be seventy-five percent leg. Fortunately it was a very large bed, and at last Tom was spread-eagled and helpless. His eyes were closed, and he was pulling in deep breaths through his nose.

Sherlock picked up the white silk scarf, slippery and cool in his fingers, and pulled it taut, then put it against Tom's mouth.

Tom's eyes flew open. "No," he whispered. "I told you I don't like that."

"Sorry," Sherlock said. Ah.

He folded the scarf lengthwise, then put the strip of silk over TWH's eyes and made a tight knot behind his head.

TWH shivered. "What…what are you going to do to me?"

Uncertainty and exasperation at having to guess what TWH and Cumberbatch did in bed together collided with arousal and sparked a bit of creativity. Sherlock grasped Tom's chin in his hand and tightened his fingers a bit. Unbidden, a visual of him doing the same to John – or no…better still, John doing it to him lodged itself firmly in Sherlock's brain, and his cock strained harder against his clothes. He put one hand between his legs and rubbed almost absently.

John would never let you do this to him and certainly would never do it to you. Idiot. He groaned softly, prompting an upward surge of Tom's hips.

Trembling a bit, Sherlock forced himself to speak. "What do you think I'm going to do?" His voice was a low rumble from his chest. Dizziness made him sway.

"Whatever you want." Tom's lips were parted, his knuckles white. Sweat glittered in the hollow of his throat and down the centre of his chest.

Sherlock glanced down at the toile box and saw a tube of lubricant. He didn't see condoms; presumably they'd both been tested, but he wouldn't take chances. Something else, then….

He leant down, grabbed the tube, and climbed on the bed, kneeling between TWH's spread legs. Sex-addled. You too, just as common as anyone else. He wasn't mindless; he wouldn't penetrate Tom, nor rut against him, but he couldn't…it was too much, too much.

"Please," Tom gasped in a parched voice.


Cumberbatch had no idea how lucky he –

_God damn it!_ Sherlock dropped the tube and put his hands on TWH's inner thighs, spreading them further apart. He bent and suckled on the tip of Tom's cock, tracing his tongue round the head, delicately touching the slit. He unfastened his trousers with one hand and grasped his cock, rubbing frantically as Tom writhed and cried out underneath him.
Tom arched up and climaxed, spurting in Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock gasped, nearly choking, and pulled away, watching in half-appalled fascination as Tom bucked, coming once more before falling back on the bed, panting.

"Oh, God. God."

Sherlock leant back on his heels. He was still hard, but the urgency and desire for release was ebbing. It was bearable. A peculiar sensation swamped him, leaving him feeling unpleasantly heavy and dismal, the same feeling he got when John ignored him or was angry with him. Ordinarily he'd retaliate by stomping round the flat or playing the loudest, most dissonant pieces he could think of or simply sulking, but he couldn't do that now.

He wanted to go home.

"Ben? Could you untie me?"

Sherlock heaved a ragged sigh. "Of course," he replied quietly, and went about unfastening Tom's ankles and wrists. He was glad to see Tom remove the blindfold himself.

"Ooh." Tom sat up, flexing his arms and drawing his knees up. He smiled at Sherlock, then frowned, then looked almost comically concerned. "Love, did you –"

"Need the loo," Sherlock said, and dashed into the bathroom. He closed the door and leant against the sink, staring into the mirror at his imperfect skin, his bad hair, the premature ageing round his eyes.

Love?

Sherlock's stomach clenched. His erection had mostly subsided, but there was an odd tumult in his chest that had nothing to do with sexual impulse.

He didn't know what it was, but he didn't like it at all.

* 

Sherlock tuned out the chatter at the table and spread bone marrow over a triangle of toast. The restaurant that the RADA group had chosen, St. John, was an under-decorated place located imaginatively on St. John Street, and the vast majority of the diners appeared to be aggressively stupid and pompous City boys and their vacuous dates, but the wine wasn't bad, and the starters were intriguing.

"How is it?" Tom asked, taking a forkful of his own starter, fresh radish with butter.

"Not bad," Sherlock mumbled around a mouthful of food. It was certainly more interesting than Tom's friends, all of whom had made twittering respectful noises at Sherlock, but that hadn't done much to disguise varying degrees of negative emotion.

Sherlock had catalogued and dismissed them quickly. There was Lucy Strickling, who worked at Christie's and whose skin was so white and whose body was so attenuated that she looked as though
she might fall over and break, as delicate as the porcelain she curated – but her ostensible fragility masked seething anger, Sherlock saw. She'd had some sort of affair with TWH (that too-casual greeting, the sweep of sooty lashes against the hollows beneath her eyes evidencing flirtation, the fuchsia skirt that rode high up her thighs) and now bitterly regretted its end despite not really being attracted to him any longer. Doubtless being hitched to a rising young star was far more desirable than dusting off old pots.

Henry Burgess, stockbroker: a bore, hardly worth a second glance. Weathered country complexion (drinking plus high blood pressure plus horsey activity), running to fat (belly pushing at buttons of gaudy Italian suit), racing form sticking out of a pocket of the Barbour he affected (it wasn't raining, and the evening was warm). Covered his resentment of TWH's good looks beneath a veneer of bluff affability.

Graham Charles Lowe: "development director" for middling theatre, a.k.a. professional beggar, taste in clothes the same sort of subdued cuts and fabrics Mycroft wore – they probably used the same boring tailor. Despised Sherlock on sight despite fawning over him and dropping the names of a dozen plays Cumberbatch had apparently done; fancied Tom and stared at his hands incessantly.

Fiona Coutrell, stage manager for same middling theatre. Dishwater hair, unfashionable lavender silk shirtwaist with pleated calf-length skirt, far too long and a bit too big for her petite frame – borrowed from a friend for the occasion. The smell of Miss Dior clung to the dress, but Coutrell's perfume was Yardley's April Violets. Unlike the rest, didn't dislike TWH; rather, pined for him, watching him with eyes so eager and desperate in their longing it was a wonder Tom didn't see it. Occasionally slept with Lowe; possibly united in their mutual desire for their clueless chum.

And Peter Houghton, no profession. Rumpled jeans, ruinously expensive linen blazer, Birkenstocks, a fortnight's growth on chin, cheeks, and neck. Blond, jut-jawed, leading-man sort of looks, but an endless cushion of family money and extreme lack of ambition combined with meagre talent made for no success as an actor. Loathed Tom with all the energy he was able to muster, which admittedly wasn't much.

Sherlock yawned into his glass of wine. What a crew; he wondered if Cumberbatch's drama school pals were as boring.

Lucy leant over her brown shrimp and white cabbage, displaying a great deal of breastbone. "I'd guess we probably have you to thank for getting Tom here, Ben. It's all right if I call you Ben?"

Sherlock sighed through his nose and gave her an artificial smile. "I'd prefer Benedict, actually."

"Oh." She turned a bit pink. "Right, save the intimacies for intimates. Quite right. My PA calls me Looce sometimes and I've got to correct her."

"I've just been so busy, Lucy," Tom said.

Peter snorted. "Mr. Hollywood."

"Well, not…I've been there, of course. Actually, it's been pretty exciting. I got to see New York and Albuquerque and Ohio –"

"Oh, I've always wanted to visit New York," Fiona said.

"God, why?" Henry took a swig of the wine they'd split. "Don't bother, Fifi. It's completely overrated, and full of…well, I don't know that you'd get on with people there."

"Why's that?" Tom asked, a bit sharply. "I think she'd do fine." He gave Fiona a warm smile,
probably cementing a life-long complex. "You should go, Fi. When you do, let me know and maybe I can fit in a day or two there."

"Tom and his entourage," Peter said.

"Of course, the theatres are a bit disappointing," Graham said. "Or rather, what's in them."

"Oh, God, shut up, Graham," Lucy said. "Benedict – I've seen Sherlock. It's fabulous. Beyond fabulous. You've managed to make Sherlock Holmes sexy. Never thought I'd see the day, quite honestly. That is, nothing against Jeremy Brett or Basil Rathbone, but – mm. Certainly a welcome change of pace."

Sherlock sat up a bit. "Really?"

"Oh, yes."

Tom beamed. "He's brilliant. And wait 'til you see his Peter Guillam. God, the complexity, so many layers of loyalty and –"

"Now is that the movie the pair of you were in?" Henry inquired.

"No, that was War Horse." Tom smiled at Sherlock. "They're not large roles, but in the context of the film they're –"

"Oh, yeah. Spielberg, right?" Peter gave another derisive snort. "Mr. E.T. and Indiana Jones."

Fiona touched Peter's hand. "He's done a lot more than that. Have you seen –"

"There she goes again, sticking up for you," Peter laughed. "Good old Fi. Christ, Fi, it's not as if he needs the boost."

"Oh, God," Henry sighed.

Bitterly sorry he'd come – there was nothing less entertaining than listening to strangers sniping at one another – Sherlock leapt to his feet. "Excuse me for just a moment," he said, flashing a smile at the table in general. He headed for the loo and went inside.

There was a window at eye level. He could just wriggle out and escape. He didn't want to be with TWH or his friends anymore. Tom was a saint compared with the rest of them, but Sherlock was no longer up to maintaining the stupid façade of Benedict Cumberbatch. The public persona was far too accommodating, and the private persona lacked data; much as he hated to admit it, he was feeling vaguely strained.

The door opened, and a hand landed solidly on his back. "Hello there."

Turning to answer the voice – Henry Burgess, the boring stockbroker – Sherlock blinked and winced away from a sudden deluge of white light. When his vision cleared, he saw Cumberbatch, wearing one of his suits, an expression of utter bewilderment on his face.

Sherlock heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank God."
Cumberbatch blinked. His mouth dropped open. "Oh. Oh my God." He closed his eyes and folded his hands together. "Oh, God, I thought I'd be stuck forever."

Sherlock scowled. "Why? What did you do?"

"What did I – do you know that Jim Moriarty is sitting in your flat at this very moment?" Cumberbatch's eyes were wild. He paced back and forth in their little white box.

"Infinitely preferable to what I'm suffering at the moment."

"Oh, really! What, pray tell, are you suffering?"

"I'm meant to be sitting at a table in a restaurant with your boyfriend –" Sherlock endowed the word with infinite scorn, " – and five of the dreariest people I've ever had the displeasure of enduring in my entire existence."

"You're having dinner with Tom?" Cumberbatch scratched the nape of his neck – nervous habit, he'd done it last time, Sherlock had noted. "How is he?"

Sherlock considered a variety of responses regarding TWH's sexual voracity and decided to go with a simple answer. "He's fine."

"Does he know that you're – that I'm…you know…not actually there?"

"I think I've done a bang-up job of impersonation so far," Sherlock replied drily. "He hasn't telephoned the police. Well, he's planning that on Monday."

"What?" Cumberbatch stopped pacing and glared. "What the hell are you on about?"

"Oh, he's been getting threatening letters from a stalker. Some fan." Sherlock tossed off an indifferent shrug. "I suppose you're getting on badly."

"Wait just a minute. Back up. What letters? How long has he been getting them? Is he okay? Why hasn't he called the police already?"

"Oh, for the love of…well, threatening letters, as I quite clearly said. A number of weeks now. He's fine, as I also said. And I told him not to bother, as they don't appear to be the sort of letter that gets a follow-through."

Cumberbatch gaped. Sherlock hoped he didn't look so moronic with that expression pasted to his face. Actually, he hoped he never had that expression pasted to his face.

"You told him not to bother." Cumberbatch's voice was soft. "You utter bastard."

"There's no point!" Sherlock said, throwing his hands in the air. "God, I get worse letters every day. Now what's Jim doing in the flat?"

"You're making me look like a gigantic arsehole, aren't you?"

"You're much less than that, trust me," Sherlock said with a sneer. "Actor. You're all façade, no substance."

Cumberbatch took a step forward, his fists clenched. "At least I don't treat my flatmate like dirt."

Sherlock stilled. A cold little ripple of disquiet shuddered its way through him. "What's that supposed to mean?"
"Yeah. You're surprised? The only friend you've ever had in your life, the only person outside your terrifying brother that you haven't driven away, and you hardly...do you know that he took care of me, even when I was flipping the fuck out because of this --" Cumberbatch waved his hands in what was evidently meant to be a world-encompassing gesture. "He made sure I was okay and got me to hospital, and he looks at you – at me – like...oh, God, never mind."

*Looks at me like what?* "You spoke with Mycroft? My God, that can't be good. I'll have to sort him out." *Like what, for God's sake?*

"He wanted me to solve a case." Cumberbatch rubbed his eyes. "And I did, because we'd filmed it already, and it couldn't have gone more smoothly, but then someone murdered Irene. And I didn't mean for it to happen, but if I hadn't, the whole Bond Air operation would have completely collapsed. But she's dead, and it was my fault. Oh, God."

Cumberbatch's babbling was beginning to wear. "Well, it's over now, so never mind," Sherlock said. "Enjoy your dinner with the boring ex-theatre types. They all hate your boyfriend, you know. Except the one woman, deleted her name, she wants to have sex with him. Not that he's interested, obviously. Hope you like beef and kidney pie, that's what I ordered."

"Wait. What do you mean, *obviously*? What's...." Horror stole over Cumberbatch's face. "Don't tell me you –"

The whiteness flashed again, and Sherlock drew back, blinded. There was a thump, and he found himself looking up at Henry What's-His-Name's beetroot-coloured face.

"Hey there, mate – you okay?"

Sherlock closed his eyes. "Bugger."

*
Later, when he'd had a bit of time and space to think, John reflected that although he'd always admired Sherlock's unconscious grace, there was another truth heretofore undiscovered, and that was that Sherlock, unconscious, was anything but graceful.

Before John could act or even blink at Moriarty, Sherlock collapsed to the floor, sheer stupid luck preventing him from banging his head on the coffee table, and wound up in an untidy heap, arms and legs sticking out at odd angles.

"Sherlock – Jesus!" John leapt forward, for the moment ignoring the fact that Jim fucking Moriarty was sitting in Sherlock's chair, legs crossed primly, a placid, expectant smile on that creepy face, and tried to haul Sherlock up without success. He couldn't quite grab under Sherlock's arms to gain purchase, and Sherlock slithered to the floor again. *That's twice in two days. What the hell – tachycardia? That shock yesterday? They checked for that, though.*

"Gee, I've had people excited to see me, but I've never had anyone faint before," Moriarty said. "I feel like one of the Beatles."

*Oh, fuck off!* John didn't speak aloud, because there was no point in compounding the present crisis by setting off Mr. Unpredictable. He settled for a pointed get-stuffed glare and bent at the knees to haul Sherlock up. This time he managed to lock his arms together across Sherlock's chest and pull him off the floor.

"Want some help?" Moriarty inquired.

"Don't move, don't even blink," John wheezed. Sherlock was slender, but not particularly light. John dumped him awkwardly on the sofa, rolled him over to free his airway, and knelt beside him, checking his pulse.

*Breathing's okay, pulse is good, he's eaten – no immediate signs of dehydration, anaemia – vasovagal syncope?*

*Or was Mycroft right about the drugs?*

He didn't want to check for tracks, not with Moriarty sitting there. His bag was under his bed, but he wasn't leaving Sherlock alone with Moriarty for the thirty seconds it would take to retrieve it. He found his pocket flash in his jacket and checked Sherlock's pupils. Sherlock's eyes shifted as if he were dreaming, and he murmured something unintelligible.

"Sherlock? You okay?" John chafed Sherlock's hands. He detected movement in his peripheral vision and snapped his head round to Moriarty. *"Sit."

"Nope." Moriarty got to his feet and strolled to the couch. *"What's the matter with him?"

"I'm not sure," John said through clenched teeth. *"Make yourself useful and get me a glass of water. You put anything funny in it and I'll break both your legs."

"You're bossy. Does Sherlock like that?"
"Just get the water."

Moriarty held up both hands. "Okay, okay. Wow." He sauntered into the kitchen and began to open cupboards.

"Okay, Sherlock," John whispered in Sherlock's ear. "Come on. Wake up. Moriarty's here, and I don't know what he wants, but it's probably not just a quick chat over a cuppa, right? Now my solution to get rid of him would be to chuck his arse out the window, but I know yours is probably a lot more clever, so…come on, please. Wake up. Please."

Sherlock's eyes moved back and forth again under his lids, and he mumbled something. His breath hitched abruptly, and he opened his eyes.

John breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay. You okay?"

"You didn't have any clean glasses." Moriarty thrust a 400-millilitre beaker half-filled with water under John's nose. "Whispering sweet nothings, Johnny-boy? Oh, hey, look, he's up."

"Give it to me," John snarled, and sniffed at the water. It didn't smell funny. He took a sip himself. Tasted okay. If not, he was fucked, but he didn't think Jim Moriarty would take the trouble of breaking into their flat just to poison them.

"Oh, honestly, Dr. Watson. You have the most suspicious soul."

"Yeah." John turned to glare at Moriarty's grinning mug. "Last time we met, you strapped me into five kilos of Semtex. Sorry if your feelings are hurt." He turned back to offer the beaker to Sherlock. "How's your head?"

Sherlock's chest rose and fell sharply, and his eyes were wide. He looked…frightened. He couldn't be frightened of Moriarty, he wasn't afraid of anybody.

"Sherlock? You okay?"

Without a word, Sherlock sat up, his gaze darting between John and Moriarty. He started to push himself to his feet.

"Whoa, hey. Stay down a second." John laid a hand on Sherlock's chest, noting the rapid beating of his heart, far faster than when he'd been unconscious.

"Let. Me. Up," Sherlock hissed, and flung John's hand away. He gained his feet and half-stumbled to the loo, went in, and slammed the door hard enough to rattle the hall sconce.

"Yikes." Moriarty stuffed his hands in his pockets and pulled a face. "Who peed in his Weetabix?"

John sighed and rubbed at his eyes. He rose and faced Moriarty. "What do you want?"

"Just a chat, but maybe I should come back another day, when things aren't so dramatic around here." Moriarty wandered to the mantel and touched a finger to Billy the skull. "Patient of yours, doc?"

"That's a great idea. Come back another day. Better yet, don't come back at all. How does that sound? Hm?" John kept an ear tipped toward the loo, but only heard the sound of running water.

"Ooh. Wish I could, but we've got some business to take care of, the three of us." Moriarty waggled his brows. "Always did fancy a ménage-a-trois."
A sudden unpleasant memory flashed across John's inner vision, one he thought he'd buried: Moriarty's eyes, crawling greedily over John as John sat tied to a locker-room bench, mouth taped shut, watching one of the silent goons who'd kidnapped him stringing his parka with explosives. Moriarty hadn't touched him, hadn't so much as uttered one risqué word, but his eyes had invaded and probed, and as vulnerable as John had been, he couldn't help feeling even more helpless. He hadn't said anything to Sherlock about it, obviously. Obviously! What was he going to say? "Sherlock, Moriarty was giving me the once-over. Make him stop." And even if he had, what could he have reasonably expected Sherlock to do about it anyhow – beat Moriarty senseless?

Though looking into Sherlock's eyes that night…who knows, maybe he might have done.

*No chance you could be overthinking this, is there?*

John turned his attention to Moriarty. "Why don't you tell me what your business is, and I'll tell him."

"Mmm…doesn't work that way." Moriarty strolled along the bookshelves and touched one finger to the crumbling wallpaper. "*Love* what you've done with the place. Sort of bachelor squalor. Very *au courant*." He tilted his head to one side. "Is he running a bath in there? I've got some time, but not *that* much time. Unless he wants to meet in the loo. I'm okay with that." He made as if to walk toward the bathroom.

John held up a forestalling hand. "Just – wait there. I'll see what's keeping him." He gave Moriarty a pointed look. "Why don't you sit down? Make yourself comfortable." Can't believe I just said that.

Moriarty pouted. "Do I have to?"

"Jesus," John breathed, and went down the hall. He stopped at the bathroom door and listened. Sherlock was running the water in the sink, from the sound of it. Softly, he tapped at the door. "Sherlock?" He waited ten seconds, twenty, thirty, and tapped again. "Sherlock? You okay?"

No answer. John put his hand on the knob; the lock didn't work, and it would be easy enough to just barge in – both of them had done that, to his mortification and Sherlock's complete indifference. As he turned the knob, he heard a muttered response. "Can I come in?" he asked.

The knob was tugged from his hand as Sherlock opened the door. "I can't do this."

With growing alarm, John catalogued Sherlock's appearance. His hair was dishevelled, pushed back from his face and plastered down with water. His face was blotchy, and his eyes red-rimmed. If John didn't know better, he'd have thought that Sherlock had been crying. Worse than that, though, was Sherlock's voice. It trembled, and he sounded weary, and…defeated. "Are you…Sherlock, do you need to go back to hospital?" He kept his voice low, hoping that Moriarty wasn't lurking in the corridor. He glanced over his shoulder, but Moriarty was paging through the sheets on Sherlock's music stand. He went into the bathroom, forcing Sherlock to back up against the sink, and closed the door behind him. "I think we need to get you back there. Something's not right." Though you'll die before you tell me.

Sherlock shook his head. "I don't need to go back to hospital." He gave a shuddering sigh.

"Well, I'm not sure that all the tests they did – maybe they weren't thorough enough. Maybe you need an MRI, BSI baseline, something. Look –" John took a deep breath. "I'm going to ask you something, and…no judgement, okay? Just tell me straight out. Are you using again?"

A little smile curled the corners of Sherlock's mouth. He shook his head again. "No, John."

"Okay. Okay. I believe you." He tried to work out what to say next. "I didn't think you had been, I
just…I wanted to be certain."

"Trust issues, John." Sherlock gave a bleak little laugh and lowered the lid of the toilet. He sat and cradled his head in his hands. "I'm okay. Just give me a minute."

You're not okay. "I know you don't want to hear this right now, but there's a psychopath in our flat. I don't know how he got in, but I'd like to get him out as soon as possible. Give me the word and I'll tell him to shove off and break in some other day."

Sherlock nodded slowly. "John, have you ever felt…out of your depth?"

"Me? Yeah, of course."

"Tell me about it."

"God, which time? There must be dozens." John slid to the floor and rested his hands on his upraised knees. "Right, there was this time in Kandahar, my first month, and the supply trucks were held up outside of…Rambasi, I think, some town near the Tarnak River. An administrative glitch, if you can believe that. So the base got hit out of nowhere, the power went out, the emergency generators were fucking destroyed, everyone was scrambling, and there I was trying to put a kid's intestines back into his body with two meds holding a couple of torches overhead. We were all deaf as fucking posts from the discharge, the injuries were stacking up, every few minutes we'd take another hit and stuff would go flying and crashing to the floor. Everywhere there were screams, people I couldn't help right away. I didn't think it would be a garden party, but it was a hell of an introduction. I was elbow-deep in the poor kid's belly, and all I wanted to do was dig a hole and hide."

"But you didn't."

"I couldn't," John said simply. "I had a job to do."

Sherlock sucked on his lower lip and stared into the middle distance. His face had softened, and he seemed less agitated.

"Sherlock, I can get Moriarty to leave," John said. "You don't have to deal with him tonight. Seeing Irene d – seeing her this afternoon shook you up. I saw that. I –"

"Boys!" Moriarty knocked on the door. "Not fair of you to exclude your guest!"

"Bugger off, we'll be out in a minute!" John bellowed, and snapped his mouth shut. Probably not wise to piss him off. Sherlock snorted laughter and stifled it with his hand, and John grinned back.

"Oookay, but if you two come out and I see love bites, I'm going to be vexed that I wasn't invited."

Moriarty's footsteps retreated down the corridor.

John looked steadily at Sherlock. "Everyone has off days. Even you. I mean, this is the first I've seen of it, but still. Tell me what you need, Sherlock. Anything. I'll do it." God, that sounded…but it was true. Fuck it. It was true.

Sherlock returned John's gaze, that clear, intense stare that never failed to make his heart quicken just a bit.

Oh, God. I'm fucked, aren't I?

Sherlock got to his feet and buttoned his jacket. He held out a hand to John. "Let's go talk to Jim."
"Are you sure?"

There was a pause, the rapid systole and diastole of Sherlock’s remarkable mind. "Yes."

John took Sherlock's hand, surprised at the strength in Sherlock's arm as he was pulled to his feet. Sherlock smiled, and John found himself helplessly smiling back.

I am. Yes, yes I am.

*

John was right.

It wasn’t just that Moriarty was waiting outside the loo – though that was a factor, obviously, and its own entirely different and worrisome and possibly highly poisonous kettle of fish. Benedict had never been excessively modest about his intellectual capacities, but he didn’t have Sherlock-level mental gifts, and dealing with a brilliant psychopathic consulting criminal was slightly more than he was capable of even thinking about at the moment. What was more important was that John was right – he had a job to do, in a really weird way, and that John was counting on him. Counting on Sherlock, but since Sherlock was in Benedict's London possibly fucking Benedict's boyfriend and ignoring threatening letters for fuck's sake –

Okay. Deep breaths, and calm blue oceans. Deal with that later. Nothing you can do about it right now.

It was time to move forward. He didn't want to, he was tired and unhappy and he'd fucked things up irrevocably, but there was no room for retreat. John needed him. Trusted him. Sherlock. And if John trusted Sherlock, then maybe Sherlock was trustworthy. Even if he ignored John's eyes. John Watson, who had Martin Freeman's face – wonderful, foul-mouthed, blunt and grumpy Martin – but whose heart was altogether different.

"Would you two ever be open to a kiss?" Mark had asked once. "It wouldn't be much more than that, and who knows if we'd do it at all, but I'm throwing the possibility out there."

Martin had shrugged. "Yeah, why not?"

"Would you really do that?" Benedict had wanted to know. "That's a pretty big liberty to take, God knows how Arthur Conan Doyle fans would react, let alone casual viewers, and if it felt like it came out of nowhere that would be sort of a stretch. You'd have to build up to it –"

"Ben," Mark had said gently, laughing, "it's not set in stone. I'm just asking."

A flush had crawled up Benedict's neck and stained his cheeks. "Right. Right. Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine with it."

But he hadn't been totally fine with it, even though Martin, straight Martin, had accepted it with no problem at all. Had that ambivalence bled through somehow? It was an intriguing thought –

John opened the door and held it for Benedict. He led the way down the hall and into the front room, where Jim Moriarty had seated himself in Sherlock's chair once more.
"Well, well," Moriarty said, his dark eyes agleam in his white face. "Feeling better?"

"What the hell do you want?" Benedict snapped. Moriarty on top of everything – delightful.

"That's gratitude," Moriarty returned brightly. "I brought you water and everything. You could at least offer me a cup of tea. Or maybe Dr. Watson can get it if you haven't quite recovered from your swoon. Corset too tight?"

Benedict rolled his eyes in genuine exasperation and leant against the mantel. "You won't be staying long enough for tea." He wouldn't sit; he wanted to maintain some logistical position of power, though Jim unfortunately didn't seem to care.

"You're a terrible host, Sherlock."

"I don't feel much of an obligation to be a generous host to people who break into my flat."

"Hm. You've got a fair point, I suppose. Well. Down to business then, I guess." Moriarty crossed one leg over the other at the knee. "We've got some left-over problems to deal with, you know. Do you remember what I told you at the pool – what would happen if you continued to meddle in my affairs?" He folded his hands together and smiled up at Sherlock, the smile of a patient teacher encouraging the slowest pupil in the class.

Benedict tensed. He wanted to parrot Jim's lines back at him, inflection and all, but Sherlock wouldn't proceed that way. "Can't quite remember. You said so much that night."

Moriarty's smile thinned. "Try, dear."

Benedict gazed into Jim's eyes for a moment, those fathomless black pools of malice. He felt a strange icy fear coiling round his spine. "Let me think. Something about burning the heart out of me."

"You don't seem to believe me. But I warned you, didn't I, Sherlock? You can't say you weren't warned."

"True," Benedict said with a shrug. *Spit it out, goddamn it.*

"That little stunt you pulled today, for example. With Miss Adler's mobile."

The phone. It was still in his pocket; he had to force himself not to touch it. Lestrade had given it back to him, and Benedict had confirmed that he would give it to Mycroft. He hadn't had the energy to do that. Did Moriarty know? Would he try to remove it forcibly, or –

Oh, God!

"It was you," Benedict whispered. "You killed her."

"Duh! Took you long enough," Moriarty cried happily. "Of course, I've got to back up and correct you just a teensy-weensy bit. *I* didn't do it. Told you, I don't get my hands dirty. I ordered it done. That said, I wouldn't have minded watching. She had those big baby blues – I'd have liked to see them buuulge as she was fighting for her last breath." He widened his eyes and made a show of clawing at his throat with his hands. "Aaack!"

"You're a sick fuck," John said. He was standing behind his chair, and Benedict saw his hands curling into fists.
Moriarty ignored John. "Whew!" he said, settling back into the chair. "Now you're up to speed. Good."

"Wait," John said. "She was working for you?" He turned to Benedict. "Did Mycroft know that?"

Benedict shook his head, nauseated by Moriarty's murderous glee. "Some of it, I think. Bond Air. That's it, isn't it, Jim?" He turned to John. "Moriarty was doing his best to spearhead a terrorist air strike, but he lost a crucial link when I derailed Irene. So he eliminated her." The explanation didn't mitigate the guilt he felt knowing Jim had had her murdered; Benedict wished it had. "Human life means very little to him. Obviously."

"Oh, like you care about human life," Moriarty snorted. "Please."

Silence hung heavily in the air. Benedict glanced at John, who looked uncomfortable. He couldn't out-and-out deny it, given Sherlock's ostensible nonchalance about the value of life in *The Great Game*, but he wanted to rail against the injustice of Moriarty's words. Sherlock *did* care about some lives, at least – John's (all right, perhaps he was absolute pants at showing it, but he did care, if John's affection meant anything at all. And Benedict had known it, and had let that little dagger fly because he was furious at Sherlock's obnoxiousness in that creepy white void), Mrs. Hudson's, Lestrade's. Mycroft, if he was pushed to the limit. But he couldn't say anything; it would be far too touchy-feely for Sherlock Holmes.

"Sherlock saves lives," John said, cutting into the silence. "All you know how to do is take them."

Benedict kept his face still, but he could have kissed John right there, and might have done if Moriarty hadn't still been in the room.

Moriarty cocked his head to one side in a dainty gesture of inquiry. "Do I hear barking?"

He'd always found Andrew's performance as Moriarty scarily good in its unpredictability – they'd been filming the tea-and-apple visit just before this nightmare had happened, and Benedict always drew energy from Andrew's work, but he now thought that Sherlock's impatience with Moriarty's theatricality suddenly seemed warranted. "You're boring us both," Benedict said. "Get on with it."

A soft smile appeared on Moriarty's face. "I told you I'd burn the heart out of you, but I didn't say how." He drew his phone from his inner breast pocket and punched in a number. A raspy male voice answered, and Moriarty said, "Now will be fine. More than fine."

Benedict tensed, half-expecting to see floating red dots on his chest, or John's. But he saw nothing of the sort; instead, he heard footfalls on the staircase, ascending toward the flat. Quickly, John stepped sideways to the bookshelf and rested his hand on a carved wooden box. His fingers moved a latch aside.

"Oh, Johnny. Come on." Moriarty reached behind him and withdrew a firearm in a plastic sack. "You don't think I'm *dumb*, do you?"

It took Benedict a moment to recognise the weapon as John's. *Shit. Shit.* Before he could utter a word, the door burst inward and two men dressed in black - *urban combat gear*, Benedict thought disjointedly – and brandishing short-barrelled automatic weapons (Kalashnikovs, specifically. Looked like custom jobs) strode in.

*The hell? I don't know anything about –*

"Get on your knees," one of the men growled, pointing his rifle at John. "Hands on your head."
John glanced at Benedict and slowly sank to his knees, obediently clasping his hands atop his head. "Right. Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

The other man pointed his rifle at Benedict. "You too."

Benedict's throat felt as if it were packed full of sand. A flurry of terrifying images whirled through his head: South Africa, that dark road, the chaos of that night he thought would be his last. Cautiously, his eyes fixed on the gunman, he sank to his knees, his hands in the air.

Moriarty bit his lower lip and raised his eyebrows. "Not so much as a peep! Good boy, Sherlock." He leant close, and Benedict smelled mint chewing gum. "About time you've sorted out how to behave when the occasion demands it."

Wrenching his eyes away from the gunman, Benedict angled his head to see John. John was okay – wary, his lips pressed tightly together, breath issuing from his nose. His eyes sparked with anger, but he caught Benedict's eye and nodded.

"All right?" John asked softly.

Benedict nodded in return.

"Shut up," the gunman covering John snarled.

"That'll do," Moriarty said. "We need to chat, the three of us." He caressed the barrel of John's gun. "My, my, Dr. Watson. I'm going to make an educated guess, and you tell me if I'm right, 'kay?"

"Piss off," John muttered.

Moriarty smiled, and nodded at the first hired gun, who hauled back and punched John in the jaw, hard enough to send him sprawling to the floor.

"John!" Benedict started forward, but the second gunman shoved the barrel of his weapon into his chest. Benedict froze, staring down at it. His pulse gained speed until he was sure the rapid pounding of his heart was visible through his clothes. "Leave him alone," Benedict said, trying to keep a note of pleading from his voice. "John, are you all right?"

"Yeah." John rose to a half-kneeling position, rubbing his jaw. "Shit."

Benedict turned to Moriarty. Their eyes were at the same level, and though he was frightened, he channelled his fear into brimming contempt. "Get your dogs to heel, Jim."

Moriarty reached out and gently grasped Benedict's chin. "Shut your fucking mouth, darling." He let go and went back to caressing the plastic-wrapped gun. "So, as I was saying, Johnny…this little toy isn't quite legal, is it?"

"None of your goddamned business," John said. A bright red blot marred his face.

"Mm, thought so. How'd you smuggle it in? One of your buddies drop it in the post for you? Or did you bring it in shoved up your bum?"

John stayed silent.

"Uh-huh. Two points for me. It's not legal…and it's not clean."

"What –" John clamped his mouth shut, letting prudence be the better part of valour. He stared at the black-clad knees of the man holding him at gunpoint.
Benedict looked from John to Moriarty and back to John. He didn't understand –

"Jeff Hope." Moriarty smiled, all but plucking an unfortunate canary's feathers from his mouth.

Jeff who? Benedict scowled and then noticed John's face: ashen. What the hell –?

Oh, fuck.

"Now you remember!" Moriarty chortled. "God, you're easy to read, Sherlock. It was all very mysterious. He was terminally ill, poor man, even if he was a serial killer, and some heartless person shot him. It was a good shot, but still – awful." He clucked in mock dismay. "And the gunman was never found. I expect they still have the ballistics report, though, don't you think, Sherlock? What do you suppose the police would do if the weapon turned up and they dug up the owner of record? I mean, it was two years ago in Afghanistan, but there are recent prints on it. Ooh, I don't know. What do you think?"

Benedict glanced at John again and plunged forward. "Well, let me think. He was a serial killer, after all. He forced me to accompany him thanks to his own weapon –"

"Lighter," Moriarty countered.

"And made me choose between two pills, one of which was poisoned." Iocane powder – never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line! "Was, in fact, going to murder me, so the shooting, wherever it came from, was completely justifiable. But what if we gave the police incontrovertible evidence tying Jeff Hope to you? I don't know. What do you think…Jim?" Incandescent with fury, Benedict offered Moriarty a razorblade smile.

"Oh, Sherlock," Jim said. "Honey. I'm rubber, and you're glue, and whatever you say will bounce off me and stick to you." He poked Benedict in the chest. "Believe it, sweetheart."

Benedict felt sick. He'd hit a wall, as solid as the automatic rifle still pointed at him. What was his next move? "So tell me. What is it you want?"

Moriarty rose to his feet and stuffed John's weapon into his pocket. He moved toward the door and stopped between the two gunmen. "I haven't quite decided yet, but I'll let you in on it when I do. Promise. Until then…." He paused and glanced at himself in the mirror over the mantel, then smiled down at Benedict. "The game's on again, and this time it's for keepsies, Sherlock. I owe you."

At that last, raw panic flooded Benedict's throat. It was too early, it was all wrong…. Moriarty beckoned to the two gunmen, and they backed to the door, flanking him. He turned his glistening black gaze on John. He sang softly. "Ashes, ashes…you both…fall…down."

Without another word, Jim Moriarty wriggled his fingers in farewell, and left the flat. His light tread and the hired guns' heavier steps resounded on the creaking stairway and then faded away altogether.

Benedict waited three seconds after the last footfall had died away, and then, heedless of Sherlock's dignity, rose and hurried toward John. "John."

"I'm okay." John got to his feet a bit unsteadily and held a hand up, warding Benedict off. "I'm fine. That fucking bastard." His face was like thunder, and for one second he looked at Benedict with what seemed to be a thorny battery of accusation in his eyes. Why'd you have to drag me into this? You and your boredom, and your stupid fucking games. Bored now, arsehole?

He said none of that, of course, but Benedict felt it, and wanted to turn away. I'm sorry, John.
"Sherlock –"

"We'll think of s –" Benedict halted. *We'll? That's not quite right.* "Give me a minute." He whirled away, pressing his hands together.

"He could go to them tomorrow. The day after. My service records…it's a matter of nothing."

*You can't let this happen, idiot. You've got to fix it somehow. You --*

OH.

"I've got it." Benedict whipped his phone from his pocket. It was a long shot, and oh God it would be terrifying, but what other choice did he have? He found the number he sought and sent a text.

*Need to speak with you tomorrow. Sooner than your earliest convenience.* He pressed SEND and wondered if he should have signed it with SH. Under the circumstances, it didn't seem quite right.

"What?" John asked. His face was returning to its natural colour.

Benedict pivoted on his heel and faced John, smiling in triumph. "Mycroft." If the British Government couldn't sort things out, nobody could.

John sagged a little, relief flooding his eyes. "You think he will? He's not too keen on me."

"Rubbish, he adores you." Benedict heard the ping of a returned text.

*A car will pick you up at noon for luncheon. M.*

Benedict showed John the message. "He'll do it. Don't worry."

"That's not going to be easy, but I'll try." John pressed his hands to his face. "What a day."

"And how," Benedict murmured.

"Right, I'm having a bath." John looked at Benedict closely. "Sherlock…"*

There it was again, that look in his eyes. Benedict wondered if John realised how obvious he was. "Yes?"

"Nothing." He gave Benedict a tight little smile and brushed by him on the way up the stairs.

Benedict sank onto the sofa, only just conscious that his limbs felt weak and rubbery. Moriarty. Guns. IOUs, oh, fuck. He curled up on his side and closed his eyes.

*If we met again, it could happen more often. Maybe it will. There's got to be something we can do when we feel the flash again – grab each other's hand, something. Sherlock can sort this mess out, I can't. I'm an actor, for Christ's sake.*

He heard John coming down the stairs and heading into the loo, and then the sound of running water.

*Maybe I should wander in there while he's in the bath. Give him the thrill of a lifetime.*

Before he'd had a chance to meditate on it more fully, Benedict fell fast asleep.
The click of the closing front door woke him, and he opened his eyes abruptly. For a moment he thought he'd fallen asleep on the set, and then realised that he was still stuck in 221B. An insistent probing finger of disappointment and despair prodded at his insides, and he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, visualising waking up in his own bed, Tom warm and sleepy next to him, one long leg flung over his, a habit that annoyed Benedict slightly but that he'd give anything to endure at the moment, and the knowledge that a good work day was ahead of him.

He opened his eyes. No. Still in 221B Baker Street, lying on a lumpy sofa, a musty-smelling, flattened pillow that had given him a knot in his neck beneath him. He sat up, stretching his neck from side to side, and noticed that while he'd slept, John had covered him with a plaid woollen blanket and had removed his shoes. That was nice.

Benedict stretched and groaned, then saw a note on the coffee table. He picked it up and read:


"Hmph." Benedict folded the note. Nice try, Dr. Watson. Even if the entire Scandal plot had become a complete wash, he was still protesting too much.

Showing a little Holmesian ego there, aren't you?

Well, maybe. So what? Anyway, John having a date was convenient; that gave Benedict a bit of time to explore the flat for some dirt on Mycroft, something to make their impending meeting a bit easier. The thought of being one-on-one with him made Benedict's heart stutter.

He got up, retrieved Sherlock's laptop from the desk, and booted it up. He left it on the sofa and went to hunt up a cup of tea and some toast. It was nine-thirty – dear God, he'd slept forever! – and Mycroft's car was due at noon, but he'd skipped dinner and was hungry. Sherlock didn't eat on cases, but in between he must have stoked up like a camel getting ready for a desert trek. He found tea, got the kettle on, and opened the fridge.

"Oh dear God!" Benedict slammed the door shut.

Thumbs.

He went to the cupboards and threw the doors open. What was that - a mold farm? Christ. Tins of things, furred with dust, jars of what looked like ordinary dirt (probably grave dirt or something horrible). No bread. Some pasta, a box of rice, and there – there. An unopened packet of Cadbury chocolate digestives. He checked the date: recent. Good. He'd drink the tea sans milk, he wasn't going back into the horrorshow that was the Holmes and Watson refrigerator.

Poor John. Puts up with a lot.

He took the tea and biscuits back to the sofa and pulled the laptop close. Password protected. Fuck.

What would he use? Think. Something nobody would understand but him.

Three attempts later, the laptop kicked him out and froze. He tossed it aside with a curse and tore open the biscuits. So it wasn't THESCIENCEOFDEDUCTION, nor was it CARL_POWERS, nor 221B. They were all painfully obvious, proving, Benedict supposed, that he wasn't really God in Sherlock's universe.
"Damn it." He ate biscuits and drank tea, staring moodily at the bookshelf. Sherlock had perfect vision, and the titles were abnormally clear. Odd, these little details that made themselves apparent.

Benedict shook his head. He'd have to go into the meeting with Mycroft unarmed. He didn't want to – God, it was the last thing he wanted, but he couldn't risk John going down on a murder charge.

About his little meet-up with Sherlock last night. Sherlock hadn't appeared to react when Benedict had accused him of indifference toward John, but that high-functioning sociopath stuff was so much bullshit. Even Sherlock couldn't believe that; it was just a front, had to be. And he'd called Benedict all façade. Bastard.

But if that were true, and if Benedict wasn't God, then that indicated the possibility of Sherlock's sexuality being not what Benedict presumed it was. That was to say, mostly asexual. Could one be mostly asexual, anyhow? The real question was: how did Sherlock feel about John? Benedict found himself intensely curious about this, and pondered it, taking out bits of evidence from the programme and examining them.

Sherlock touched John frequently, going so far as to grasp John's face. He interrupted John's dates. He never disputed the frequent assumptions that he and John were a couple – that was John's job. And oh, wasn't it witty, but Sherlock never said anything about it. Was it just that he didn't care?

Somehow, Benedict didn't think so.

Exhaling heavily, he got up, collected his shoes, and went down the hall. He needed a bath and a shave, and to face the meeting with Mycroft. He'd think about the John conundrum later.

After all, it seemed as if he had time.

* 

He was ready ahead of time, dressed in a fresh shirt, obsenely tight, a narrowly cut suit, darkest blue, and another pair of shoes; there had been four identical pairs in the closet. His hair had dried perfectly…miraculously. Stupid fictional universe. He paced nervously in front of the window, now and then picking up a book and setting it down, rifling through the papers on the desk, flipping through the music on the stand. He opened the curtains at frequent intervals, and finally saw the car pulling smoothly to the kerb and idling. Nobody emerged to ring the bell. Benedict checked his watch: twelve on the dot. Lack of punctuality among Mycroft's staff was likely punished with exile or death.

Benedict trotted downstairs and saw Mrs. Hudson settling a potted plant on the hall table. "Mrs. Hudson." He was getting used to all the peculiarities; he couldn't decide if this was encouraging or depressing. Probably a bit of both.

"Oh, hello, dear. What was that awful racket last night? All that thumping and shouting? I thought the roof was about to cave in. It's not the sturdiest of ceilings, Sherlock, you've really got to be –"

"Hired gunmen, Mrs. H. Must dash."

"Oh. Bye-bye, dear."

Benedict went to the car, opened the door, and slid in. Nice car, new.
The driver glanced at him in the rear view mirror. "Mr. Holmes."

Benedict nodded and sank back into the comfortable seat for the ride.

* 

Mycroft's house – not a flat – was sumptuous but staid, exactly the sort of place Benedict expected him to have. Carved-oak staircase, heavy mahogany furnishings, ponderous gilt frames, thick Aubusson carpets – the sort of stuff selected by people with lots of money and indifference cushioned by years of conditioned surroundings. A silent man – butler? Footman? – led him through three overburdened chambers into a long, narrow dining room, where Mycroft sat at the head of a long, narrow table set for two.

Of course Mycroft was at the head.

Mycroft, wearing a crisp navy blazer and what looked like a school tie (Saturday – that's right, it was Saturday. This was Mycroft's version of a t-shirt and jeans, apparently. At least he wasn't wearing tweeds and corduroy), gave Benedict a vulpine smile. "So nice of you to join me for lunch. It's been ages since we've done this."

Benedict was determined not to give a thing away. "For good reason," he said, and thumped into the place set for him. He fiddled with a fork and refused to meet Mycroft's gaze.

"You seem to have recovered from your little mishap."

Benedict went on the offence; seemed to work last time. "Yes. Lovely of you to drop by for no apparent reason."

"I was concerned, Sherlock. Surely that's not a crime? Ah," Mycroft said, nodding as a maid came in with a large tureen. "Thank you, Edith." She served them, ladling what looked like an herbed consommé into shallow bowls.

Benedict tried the soup; it was delicious. "Surely you've got better things to do. Haven't you had anyone assassinated lately?"

Mycroft patted his mouth with his napkin. "If I may remind you, you texted me."

"True. Why don't I tell you what this is all about, then I can go grab some fish and chips." The sooner he was out of here, the better.

"That's lunch. I had Josephina make it especially for you. You might as well stay."

Mycroft daintily dipped the chips into ketchup with a fork, but ate with as much gusto as Benedict.

They didn't speak much as they ate, and Mycroft appeared to ignore Benedict in favour of his food. Maybe that was a carry-over from childhood. In any case, it failed to provide Benedict with added comfort; a silent Mycroft, bolt-upright in his chair and eating methodically, was almost as scary as a verbal Mycroft.

Mycroft blew out a breath. "As ever. She'd appreciate a call."

"No time."

"You said that last month."

"She can call me."

"You ignore her," Mycroft pointed out.

"Best thing, really."

Mycroft nodded. "True. I fail to see why it falls to me to be the dutiful son, however."

"You're the responsible one," Benedict said, hazarding a guess. There hadn't been much discussion of the Holmes parents, but certainly they'd (if there indeed was a living male Holmes Senior) regard Mycroft as the far more dependable of the two.

Edith the maid brought in a bowl of trifle. Benedict's mouth watered as he spooned it up.

"Talking of responsibility, I wanted to discuss another matter with you. I expect John mentioned it to you already, but I do hope you're not…shooting again. It hasn't been so long since the last time."

For one bewildered moment Benedict thought Mycroft was talking about the holes Sherlock had shot into the wall of the flat. "Shooting…you mean shooting up."

"Yes, whatever the terminology is." Mycroft made a small moue of distaste.

Benedict hesitated, then went back to scraping out his dish. "That's none of your business," he said, hoping a snotty answer would cover any ambiguity.

"Mummy is quite worried."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't tell her about it."

"Yes. Perhaps I shouldn't." Mycroft returned to his trifle and didn't speak again until he was finished. When Edith came in to clear, he asked her to put coffee in the drawing room and leave them to their discussion. When the coffee was brought, Mycroft locked the door and stood in the centre of the room. "So. What was it you wanted?"

Benedict explained the situation as succinctly as he could, which still managed to take almost five minutes of rapid-fire delivery. "You can see to it that those records disappear or, barring that, that John doesn't suffer any consequences."

Mycroft raised his eyebrows. "I can, can I?" He went to a gilt table to pour out. "Coffee, Sherlock?"

"No."

Benedict stood still and clasped his hands behind his back. They were sweating. "I need you to do this, Mycroft."

Mycroft sat and sipped. "And why should I do that? You seem to think I have unlimited power, Sherlock. I hate to disabuse you of the notion because I would hate to lose even a particle of the adoration you hold for me —"
Benedict snorted inelegantly.

"—But I'm afraid it's not true. Not entirely, at least. If I were to do this for you, there would be...a penalty to pay."

Mycroft's little smile revealed nothing. Benedict scowled. "What penalty?"

"Oh, I think you know."

Damn it. Was this a long-established tradition of payment? Sorting Mycroft's ties or maybe some childish retribution? He couldn't really see Mycroft sitting on Sherlock and dangling spit over his face, or giving him one of those nasty arm-burns. "Why don't you say it?"

Mycroft got to his feet, took off his blazer, and unhitched a pair of bright red braces. As Benedict watched in utter stupefaction, Mycroft unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers. "I hardly think I need to."

Oh, my God.

He wasn't quite certain, but he thought he heard an audible pop and sizzle as his brain shorted out.

Sherlock...and Mycroft?

He'd always been cheerfully dismissive of fan-fiction, fanfic, whatever. He'd scanned a few, and it was always Sherlock and John, Sherlock and John, a lot of sex, a lot of romance, some creepy stuff, but....

Sherlock and Mycroft?

?

???????

"Come here," Mycroft said softly, "and get on your knees."


"I realise it's been a long time," Mycroft said, "but this is a rather large favour, you understand."

Slowly, he crossed the room — a state room, almost, ridiculous in its quasi-Baroque/Victorian splendour — and stood in front of Benedict.

Oh my God, oh my GOD.

"On your knees, brother mine."

Pretend it's Mark. Pretend it's Mark. You'd have sex with Mark if you weren't attached. Mark's handsome, and sexy, and oh dear GOD. Trembling, Benedict knelt and looked up into pale, pitiless eyes. They do this? Is this why Sherlock doesn't have sex? He and Mycroft? He glanced at the front of Mycroft's trousers and saw an undeniable erection. Oh God, oh God. Mycroft put his hand on Benedict's head, guiding him closer, and then rubbed his thumb over Benedict's lower lip.

Doing his utmost to control the shaking in his hands, Benedict reached for the front of Mycroft's trousers. I can't believe this. Oh, God. Okay. It's Mark. It's Mark, and not scary Mycroft. I'm sucking Mark's cock, and everything will be fine. For John. It's for John.

Hard hands grasped Benedict's. "Sherlock."
Benedict looked up at Mycroft. "What?" he croaked.

"Go home." Mycroft let Benedict's hands go, turned, and refastened his clothing.

Nonplussed, Benedict stayed on his knees, watching Mycroft's quick, efficient movements. "What?" he whispered. What the fuck was going on?

"Go home, I said."

"But…John."

"I'll arrange it." Mycroft walked to the door. He fumbled with the lock a moment, then got it unlatched. He stood still, his back perfectly straight. "You can see yourself out, can't you?" Without another word, he walked out, leaving Benedict on his knees in the middle of the floor.

Benedict waited for almost a full minute before scrambling to his feet and heading for the door. He scarcely drew a breath, hearing his blood thundering in his ears and feeling sweat trickling down his back. He flagged a taxi down, throwing himself inside and giving the driver the Baker Street address. Leaning back, he permitted himself to breathe fully.

What in God's name had that been about? Sherlock and Mycroft were fucking each other? Often enough to require no more than a casual signal to commence? And what – Mycroft had had an attack of remorse?

Good Christ. They'd boot us off the air for that one, wouldn't they?

A strange, shivering laugh hopped out of his throat, and the driver glanced at him in the mirror. "All right, mate?"

Benedict got himself under control. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." He bit the inside of his cheek to stifle the laughter that still threatened to bubble up, and felt some of the tension bleeding out of his body. Dodged a bullet there. Seven inch bullet. The laughter bubbled again.

The taxi driver got a call on his mobile, and Benedict distracted himself by looking out the window. Mycroft lived very near Hyde Park, and it was comforting to see the familiar sights pass by; it was like his London again, on any fine summer day.

Gradually, the sights became less familiar. At first it failed to trouble him; this was Sherlock's universe, after all, and there were bound to be lots of differences. But by and by he realised that even in Sherlock's universe, Baker Street was north of Hyde Park. Wasn't it? The taxi driver was moving south. He'd changed direction.

Benedict knocked on the partition. "Excuse me, I think we're heading in the wrong direction."

"Thought you wanted Byam Street, mate?"

"No, Baker Street. 221B."

"Sorry 'bout that. Got to find a turnaround. Won't charge you for the return."

"It's all right." Benedict settled back as the driver went into a blind alley and stopped the car. He glanced at Benedict again, and Benedict met his eyes. "Er – I think you can probably just –"

There was a bang, and Benedict's door was ripped open. Startled, he leant forward to see who'd opened the door, and caught a glimpse of two dark suits, two innocuous faces. Two pairs of hands
laid hold of his arms and dragged him out of the taxi.

"Hey! What –" Benedict struggled instinctively, and gasped as a fist plowed into his stomach. He choked, and almost lost his lunch as the hands shoved him up against a brick wall, rough and cold against his face.

"Nice and still," a deep voice said.

A bright sting pierced Benedict's neck. He moved to touch the sore spot, and his hand was seized and wrenched upward. He yelped with the sudden pain and belatedly realised what the sting had been.

*Oh, Christ – Moriarty.*

He tried to shout for help, but someone planted a thick hand over his mouth and he was dragged into another car. His field of vision narrowed and greyed, and when he tried to fight, he was pinned and held and smothered, and his consciousness dimmed and faded altogether.

*

His head hurt, and his mouth was parched. He coughed, choking on the lack of moisture in his throat, and sagged forward, stopping involuntarily. He shook his head to clear it and opened his eyes, but saw nothing.

Pressure on his lashes, across the bridge of his nose. Blindfold. He was in a chair, bound across the chest and around his arms. Wrists tightly, painfully fettered as well. Ankles tethered to the legs of the chair. Someone had taken his shoes, his socks, his jacket. He was cold.

Benedict wet his lips. Attacked. The cabbie…ambushed. No, he'd been in on it. Must have been. Moriarty.

A frigid blade of terror stabbed at his chest. Frantically, he twisted his wrists, but whatever bound them – felt like plastic – cut into his skin and didn't budge. He tried a few more times before intense discomfort forced him to abandon the effort.

Whoever had kidnapped him hadn't bothered to gag him – so either he was far enough away from ordinary earshot that nobody would hear him if he screamed, or…they didn't care if he screamed. *Somebody get me out of here….*

He heard a creak, a rush of warm air, and a heavy slam. Someone had entered the room and was walking toward him – leather soles, gritting slightly on what felt like a concrete floor. Benedict shook with fear and felt tears gathering in his eyes, but he kept his lips pressed together.

He gasped as a hand seized his hair and yanked his head back.

"I'm going to ask you a question." The voice was a rough hiss in his ear. "And I'm going to ask it once, and you get one chance to answer. Say yes if you understand."

"Yes," Benedict whispered. "Please –" The hard fingers tightened, and he whimpered in pain.
"Here's the question. Nod if you understand."

Benedict nodded as far as the punishing hand would allow.

"Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?"

*
"Good Lord, what's this?" Another voice joined Henry's: Graham Charles Lowe (why the man had introduced himself with both names was a not-very-interesting puzzle), looking down his long nose at Sherlock's supine form. To be fair, though he certainly wasn't feeling terribly fair, Sherlock was on the floor, so it was difficult to look in any direction but down.

"Thought you only had one glass of wine, mate," Henry said.

"Don't be an idiot, Henry." Graham leant down, his hands planted on his knees. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Sherlock said. "Fine."

"Shall I call a doctor?"

"I've got a –" But no. No, he didn't have a doctor. Not in this universe. "Not necessary," he said. "Thanks all the same." Henry put his hand out to help Sherlock up, but Sherlock waved it away and picked himself up, testing his balance in a crouch before rising to his feet. He felt fine, not dizzy at all, but he was still in Cumberbatch's London in this stupid restaurant with these stupid, stupid, stupid people. "I'm fine," he repeated. "Thanks, though."

Graham searched his face. "Rather alarming, coming in to find you on the floor."

"Some sort of fainting spell," Henry said. "Look, not to tell you your business, Benedict, but Tom's always been a fairly straitlaced sort of fellow – he was at RADA, anyhow. Drank a bit, but wasn't much for drugs. Always disapproved of a bit of blow. Still, that might have changed now that he's a big Hollywood star. Of course, I won't say a word." He winked and nudged Sherlock in the side.

Sherlock gave Henry a tight smile. Amateur.

"Henry, shut up for God's sake," Graham said. His cheeks had turned a mottled pink, contrasting oddly with the lank ginger-blond hair flopping over his forehead. "Besides, I'm certain that Tom's... you're chums, the pair of you, not –"

"Christ, spare us the grizzling, Graham." Henry tossed back the last of his triple Scotch. Difficult to separate the man from his alcohol if he actually brought it into the loo. "You've had your chance." He gave Sherlock a quick conspiratorial smile. "Sure you're okay?"

Sherlock nodded. "I drank that wine pretty quickly and the bone marrow on toast is the first thing I've eaten since breakfast. I think I'm a bit dehydrated as well – I took a long walk in Hampstead in the heat from my place to Tom's and it's sapped my strength a bit. Probably should have slept a bit more this morning, too, and I'm certain that the madhouse of the past few days of filming took a toll on my general health and equilibrium."

Graham regarded Sherlock with an eye that was infinitely colder than it had been a few moments ago. "Well, I must say, that was far more than I needed to know. You say you walked to Tom's?"

He hadn't, actually, but Sherlock found it amusing that Graham was now so chilly. Must be jealous, given the soulful-eyed pining he'd been indulging in at the table. "Well, we don't live terribly far
from each other. I walked quite a bit before returning to his digs."

"I see." Graham's eyes narrowed, and his cheeks were even pinker. "Right." He pivoted quickly and marched out of the loo, swinging the door wide open. His grand trampling exit was a bit spoilt by the soft hiss of the anti-slam device on the door.

"Don't mind him," Henry said. "He's always got his knickers in a knot over Tom. You know how it is. Come on back, if you've finished."

Damn. Sherlock gave one yearning glance at the window before following Henry out to the table.

TWH was getting to his feet, and as they approached he turned and took a half-step toward Sherlock before checking himself. "Ben – Graham said you fainted. Are you all right?" His eyes searched Sherlock's anxiously.

Sherlock glared at Graham, who hurled a smug smile in return, and focused his attention on Tom. "I'm fine. Really." He smiled, letting his lower eyelids crinkle upward – an almost foolproof indicator of sincerity.

"You're certain? I can take you home."

Excellent idea. Still, that would mean an evening at home with TWH, who would undoubtedly try to have sex with him again. Not that the sex was awful, but being the one who did the tying-up got boring very quickly. Besides, sex with Tom made Sherlock feel a bit…odd. He shook his head. "Honestly. I'm all right. I think I just need to eat."

Tom pressed Sherlock's upper arm and guided him back to his chair, as if he were an invalid. "Benedict had a bit of a nasty shock yesterday," he said, pulling Sherlock's chair out. "You don't mind if I tell them, Ben? They won't tattle. He accidentally grabbed a live wire that knocked him out. Awfully frightening – they closed the set down and I think there's an investigation pending, isn't there?"

Sherlock nodded. "Yes."

"My God," Lucy said. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"You should ease up on the speed," Peter observed sourly.

"God, Peter, don't be such a twit!" Fiona said, displaying the first bit of backbone Sherlock had seen all evening. "Sorry, Benedict. You are okay, though?"

"Oh, yes," Tom said, before Sherlock could answer. "They took him to hospital and gave him all sorts of scans. Still, it's got to be wearing. Maybe we should go after all." He rubbed Sherlock's forearm. Clearly some forms of physical affection were acceptable.

Sherlock's peripheral vision caught Graham's furious stare. "No. I'm famished. I really think I need to eat."

TWH conceded, but ordered Sherlock bottles of still and sparkling water and made him drink from each. He also cajoled the waiter into bringing more bone marrow on toast and watched sternly as Sherlock ate. Finally the main courses arrived, and Sherlock sat in silence, tuning out the chatter around him.

_He made sure I was okay and got me to hospital, and he looks at you – at me – like…oh, God, never mind._
Well, of course John made sure Cumberbatch was all right and got him to hospital. He was a doctor, and a bloody good one. Competent, intelligent – well, slightly above average, at any rate – courageous, sensitive to the vagaries of the human heart, or soul, or whatever, kept his head in the worst situations, and almost endlessly patient with Sherlock, long past the time that any ordinary person would have packed and left. Sherlock knew that well enough – he'd lost count of the uni roommates who'd buggered off in varying states of pique until the powers that were gave up and wearily assigned him to a new hall of residence with luxurious private bedrooms. But it had been nearly a year that he and John had been flatmates, and John hadn't buggered off. He'd been furious with Sherlock a few times, but he stayed. He always stayed.

*Looks at him like what?*

What had Cumberbatch meant by that? God, it was infuriating being thrown into that white, featureless space that defied any sort of careful examination – was it even really physical, or was it some sort of bizarre fugue state? – and subjected to the panic of a babbling idiot who got flustered at the very idea of a universe that expanded beyond the staggering selfishness of his own tiny sphere without the opportunity to sort out what was happening to them or even to ask pertinent questions because Cumberbatch was far too busy flailing and bellowing to give Sherlock a chance to think. Pity; he wasn't a half-bad actor.

Good enough to fool John?

Sherlock and Cumberbatch hadn't had time to discuss it in depth – obviously – but it seemed that Cumberbatch was being cautious about revealing his real identity. Sherlock wouldn't have credited him with that degree of prudence. And Jim Moriarty was in the flat. How badly would that end? Certainly it wasn't a given that Moriarty would jump to the truthful conclusion – it wasn't as if multiverse body-swaps happened every day – but he was unpredictable enough to scare the hell out of an ordinary citizen, and Cumberbatch was ordinary. With luck, he'd act well enough to do no more than confuse Jim, and with poor John thinking Cumberbatch was Sherlock….

Sherlock stuck his fingers in his hair and encountered an almost solid wall of nastily grooved hair plastered down to his scalp. Damn it.

God help Cumberbatch if his stupidity led to John getting hurt. And God help him if –

No, that was ridiculous.

If one believed the scandal-rags (and the Puzzle of the Purloined Playthings, John's title of course, in which a famous motion-picture thespian's trove of sex toys was stolen by an obsessed fan – John's blog had become *insanely* popular after that. Typical dimwitted prurient curiosity) most actors were promiscuous, and judging by TWH's amorous proclivities, frequent sex was quite common. Suppose Cumberbatch was the sort of person who couldn't do without sex? What if he'd….

Ridiculous. Absurd to even think of it. John wasn't gay, for one thing; hadn't he said so, over and over and over again?

"*Six months.* Mycroft had offered Sherlock a rather caustic smile. "*I feel as if I should send you both a potted plant, or perhaps one of those gateaux from Amelie's.*"

"I'll bet you ordered one and ended up eating the thing yourself." Sherlock hadn't looked up from his examination of a centipede with suspicious traces of gold dust on its forcipules and maxillae.

"*How droll. Are you drugging him nightly to keep him nearby?*"
"What do you care?"

"I'm merely curious. I don't need to tell you this...relationship is unprecedented in its length and intensity." Mycroft had clasped his hands together and was watching Sherlock closely.

"And yet."

"I'm pleased, actually. It's long past time you had a friend, Sherlock, someone who diverts your attention and keeps you occupied."

"A nanny, you mean?"

"Whatever you'd like to call it," Mycroft had replied with a shrug.

"And you? Are you speaking from your vast store of experience with enduring friendships?"

"Irrelevant. What about Dr. Watson, Sherlock?"

Sherlock had thrown Mycroft a sharp look. "John."

"Yes. John. I've observed his qualities, of course. I see what might draw you toward him. What, I wonder, does he see in you that keeps him so near?"

"Staggering intelligence, good looks, a sense of adventure, a conspicuous absence of dreariness, just to name a few."

"Is that all?"

"That's not enough? I can go on if you like."

"What have you allowed him to see, Sherlock? How far have you let him in?"

"I've got to work," Sherlock had replied, bending back toward the centipede. "Never mind the cake or the plant."

Mycroft had strolled toward the door. Halfway out, he'd paused. "Try to remember what I've told you, Sherlock. I fear you might have left it too late." And before Sherlock could tell him to bugger off, he'd gone, getting the last word in as always.

"Ben?" TWH touched Sherlock's arm.

"What?" Jarred out of his reverie, Sherlock blinked in confusion.

Tom searched Sherlock's face. "You're grimacing like you're in pain," he said quietly. "We can leave if you're not feeling well."

"It's fine," Sherlock said, trying to keep his temper in check. He was tired of being asked. "Honestly, it's fine."

"Okay." Tom gave him a conciliatory pat on the thigh.

"Hang on a minute," Henry said. He gave Sherlock a bright smile. "Have you got a lisp?"

"Henry," TWH said, his brows drawing together.

Sherlock snorted in derision. "No."
"You sure, mate?" Peter asked. "Sounded like it."

"Thanks for listening in, Peter," Tom said. "Height of courtesy." He turned to Sherlock. "Sorry about that. When we're all together, it's -- sometimes diplomacy goes out the window."

"Say something really sibilant," Henry said, gesturing at Sherlock with his wine glass.

"Honestly, you two," Lucy interjected, "that's not on at all."

"Yeah -- how about 'She sells seashells by the seashore. The shells she sells are surely seashells. So if she sells shells on the seashore, I'm sure she sells seashore shells.'" Peter chortled at his own petulant wit.

Graham and Fiona exchanged a glance. Fiona looked mortified, but Graham sat back and spectated, an expression of intense satisfaction and curiosity on his overbred face.

"Peter, for fuck's sake," Tom said. His voice was soft, but there was an edge of steel in it Sherlock hadn't heard before. "I've had just about enough."

No point in getting angry at morons. Nonchalantly waving Tom's protest away, Sherlock gave Peter and Henry a smile that didn't come close to touching his eyes. "Ready? Here goes: she thellth theesh --" Horrified, he stopped as Henry and Peter burst into laughter. Diners at nearby tables stared in puzzlement at their sudden hilarity.

Heat flooded Sherlock's face. Cumberbatch, you imbecile.

"You arseholes." TWH's ordinarily mild blue eyes kindled with rage.

"Oh, come on, Tommy. Sit down," Henry said, wiping at his ruddy face. "We're just taking the piss."

"You're being bastards." Tom clenched his fists.

"Relax," Peter said. "God, it's not like we're going to the Mail to talk about your boyfriend's lisp. Benedict's all right with it, eh Ben? I mean, you've probably had to deal with it all your life, haven't you?"

Sherlock turned to Peter. "Well, we've all got problems that we deal with, haven't we?" He enunciated with exaggerated care, ruthlessly cutting out any possibility of a lisp. "Your pathological need for approbation, for one thing. Really rather obvious despite your studious nonchalance -- clearly you got a lot of attention for your looks in your youth, but it wasn't enough, because you crave it, what with the way you look around after you make a remark of any kind, just to make certain that people are focused on you, the extra decibels -- the restaurant isn't all that loud, but you've become used to talking loudly because everyone's got to hear each golden syllable that comes tripping off your tongue, the conspicuous clothes that you'd love to believe are the pinnacle of nonchalance, but both the jacket and the shoes were purchased yesterday, going by the smell, so it's obvious you haven't got enough confidence to wear something you've already got -- it's a constant game of one-upmanship with Tom who hasn't even got the faintest idea he's in a competition. He feels sorry for you, and he's --"

"Ben."

Sherlock turned to Tom, then noticed that everyone at the table had fallen silent. He turned back to Peter, who was ashen. "I haven't finished."
"We're all finished," Tom said. He got to his feet, dug in his pocket, and pulled out a money clip. Extracting several notes, he dropped them on the table. "Come on. Let's go."

Opening his mouth to continue the counter-attack, Sherlock caught a glimpse of Tom's face. He'd been around John long enough to understand its expression: evidently he'd made some sort of social gaffe. John usually demanded apologies, but Tom simply stood still, waiting for him.

"Tom…." Graham said. "Look here –"

TWH cut Graham off with a quick shake of the head, and turned to walk out of the restaurant, not even waiting for Sherlock.

Everyone (not the surrounding diners – Sherlock's tiny diatribe hadn't been delivered in the sort of foghorn voice that seemed to be Peter's speciality) stared at Sherlock in stupefaction. Clearly the most prudent action to take was departure. Accordingly, Sherlock scraped his chair back and rose.

"Er. Lovely to meet you all." He clasped his hands behind his back and inched toward the door. "Bye."

Nobody responded, and Sherlock concluded that the usual parting pleasantries would not be taking place. He about-faced and strode smoothly from St. John's.

A maroon-jacketed, spotty young man was pulling up in Tom's car. He got out and held one door open whilst another maroon-jacketed, equally spotty young woman held the other. Tom and Sherlock got in, belted up, and Tom drove away.

The car moved smoothly through London traffic. The noise and glittering lights soothed Sherlock's slightly nettled mood. Gaffe or not, how was he meant to have known that Cumberbatch had a lisp? It wasn't on any of the adoring fan pages he'd scanned, nor in the Wikipedia entry nor in the interviews he'd watched. Apparently he'd managed to learn to hide it fairly well. Still – he should have noticed, and now, really thinking about it, there had been some evidence of an interdental lisp in one of the interviews, but not enough to arouse suspicion or merit further investigation. And Sherlock had only spent time with Vertue and Freeman and TWH, who were either accustomed to Cumberbatch's lisp or politely ignored it. Bloody hell, there was always something.

He glanced at TWH, who was sitting straight, staring out into traffic, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "That went south rather quickly. The food wasn't spectacular, though, so I suppose it doesn't matter," Sherlock ventured, trying for some levity.

"They shouldn't have said those things."

Sherlock shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

TWH sighed. "Don't – look, you've told me about it. A lot of people wouldn't agree, but I think some childhood hurts last longer – it can be a deep impression on a tender soul."

That was an astoundingly gluey sentiment, but Sherlock elected to keep silent.

"They can be such arseholes – Peter and Henry, and even Graham. Fi and Lucy are okay, mostly. I'm embarrassed for them, and embarrassed for myself because I've always considered them friends, even when they're stupid. Tonight was a mistake. But Ben –" Tom looked Sherlock full in the face for a few seconds before turning back to the road. "God, I wish you hadn't lashed out like that."

Sherlock hated being chided. It took formidable restraint not to snap back. "Why?"
"It's not you, for one thing. You've been acting oddly all weekend. I can't put my finger on it—"

"We've been together nineteen hours, if that."

Tom bit his lip. "It's not funny. Look, we all get deep into character. It's a hazard of the profession, I know that, even if neither of us approach Daniel Day-Lewis levels of...er, focus. And I know Sherlock's hard to shake. He's a strong, beautiful, astonishing force of nature, and if you changed your approach I'd be bereft. Nobody could do what you do with him, Ben. Nobody. But that rant—you've got to dial it back just a little. If one of them went to the scandal sheets with a story about how you've been acting like Sherlock off set and insulting people, the tide of public opinion could shift against you, and I don't want that. It would be terrible for you. You know how the press can be."

"Terrible for me, or terrible for you by association?" Sherlock inquired sharply. If tiptoeing around for the benefit of the papers was the done thing, Sherlock wanted out. Except there wasn't any out, was there? Damn it, damn it to hell.

Tom was silent for a long moment. "Please don't say that," he said at last. "You know that's not what I meant."

Sherlock looked out the window.

"You know there's nothing I want more than to be open about everything, but...." Tom shook his head. "I can't. Not yet. And neither can you."

...What?

Ohhh.

"You don't know how many times I've thought about it...calling my dad and telling him, and letting it all spill out, but...." Tom took a deep, shuddering breath. "You know, we—I—keep telling myself it's strategic, and I tell you the same damned thing, but maybe...Christ, I don't know. I don't know."

Sherlock heard the shakiness in Tom's voice, and saw tears standing in his eyes.

Might have left it too late.

In a welter of confusion, Sherlock moved to touch Tom's arm, but Tom started like a frightened colt, and Sherlock pulled back abruptly.

"Ben, I'm not feeling well. I've got a splitting headache—too much wine and not enough food, I guess." He made a poor attempt at a smile. "Would you mind terribly if I just drop you off tonight?"

"It's fine," Sherlock replied numbly.

"Okay." Tom pulled up to the kerb and let the car idle. He reached out and grasped Sherlock's hand, squeezing it lightly and rubbing his thumb back and forth across Sherlock's palm. It was a pleasant sensation. "Don't be angry with me. I'm at sixes and sevens tonight. I'm sorry about those twits. I should have stopped seeing Henry and Peter a while ago, but it's hard to cut them off without cutting off the rest."

"It's fine," Sherlock repeated.

"Kiss me?" TWH moved forward and kissed Sherlock on the lips, tracing his tongue round the inside of Sherlock's mouth. He pulled back and cupped the back of Sherlock's clay-ridden head. "See you tomorrow?"
Sherlock nodded, and opened the car door.

"Love you."

"Mm," Sherlock replied, climbing out of the car. He forced himself to return Tom's wave, and watched as the car drove down the road, taillights winking in the darkness.

What now? He couldn't go inside; what in God's name would he do? Watch telly, surf the internet, read a book? He doubted Cumberbatch had any books worth reading at any rate. No, he wouldn't sit on his arse. Sod that.

Resolute, he stepped into the street and waited for a taxi. He checked his watch: only eight-thirty. He took his phone out (he'd charged it at TWH's house; they had the same sort of phone. Twee beyond words) and scrolled through the new messages.

_Call me. K_

_Tons of post for you. Dropping it at CvGG Monday. Change your address, okay? O_

_Times/CM interview now tomorrow at one. Car will pick you up. CALL if problem. K_

_Mum got us new phones. Test run. xx Dad_

_I dropped the old one in the tub._

_She gave me this today. V. sleek. So pleased_

_I absolutely killed her._

That was marginally more intriguing.

_Kissed her._

_This is much beget._

_Better._

_Bloody auto compact._

_Correct._

Oh, for God's sake. Sherlock scrolled through the rest of the texts, finding nothing interesting. And three minutes had passed with no cabs. Ludicrous. Ambulation it was, then. He needed to burn energy off again.

He set a rapid pace, walking back toward central London – a twenty minute journey by car. The night was pleasant and still; out here the light pollution wasn't so bad and he actually saw a star or two overhead. Or a planet. The planets were the ones that didn't twinkle. John had told him that. And the bright reddish one, that was Mars. The stars were the same here. That was a bit reassuring, at least.

"You see, I didn't –" He closed his mouth abruptly.

Idiot. John wasn't beside him. Funny how one got used to companionship.

Viciously, he kicked at a rock on the path and walked faster. He bypassed the tube station – there
was no way he was riding the tube with mouth-breathing morons who gaped and shouted again – and kept walking. He was starting to sweat a bit, but he wasn't hot; instead, he felt profoundly chilled, as if he'd been thrown into icy water. Like that time those human traffickers had shoved Sherlock into the Thames and John had fished him out –

Reminiscing: the first sign of encroaching senility. Only fools and bores reminisced, looking backward instead of forward. But it wasn't the first time he'd done it since all this began, was it?

*If we follow this meandering line of thinking to its invariably bitter end, Sherlock, where does it lead us?*

"Oh, shut up, Mycroft," Sherlock muttered. He was grounding himself in reality, that was all. Even Mycroft would be rattled finding himself in another universe.

London had enclosed him entirely, and he finally found a cab that deigned to stop for him. He leant toward the window and realised he'd no idea where he wanted to go.

The cabbie gazed at him with patient curiosity, waiting for him to speak. "Where to, sir?" she asked politely. Her accent was West African, Cote d'Ivoire if Sherlock wasn't mistaken.

"The M – Scotland Yard, please." He climbed in and sat back, watching the city pass by, pedestrians everywhere: throngs of young men and women in club clothes, theatregoers, gangsters, panhandlers, buskers – a flashier crowd than daytime London, only slightly more intriguing. Usually the cleverest sort of criminal slipped easily into a crowd, living quietly and transgressing flamboyantly in the shadows.

How aggressively dull Cumberbatch's life was. A lisp and hiding in the closet were his darkest secrets.

"You're an actor, aren't you? I've seen some of your films."

Sherlock met the cabbie's eyes in the mirror. He was about to deny her assertion, then nodded wearily. "Yep."

"I saw you in the film about Stephen Hawking. And then in *Atonement*. Such a talent, to play such different people. So sweet and then so evil."

"Thank you."

"I've seen some of your other films too. And *Sherlock*." She smiled. "My daughter wants to be a detective now because of you and Sally Donovan. I tell her it's dangerous work and not glamorous but she's determined. She's twelve. Top marks in school."

Donovan! Sherlock almost smiled. Well, God knew that there was a dearth of competent detectives at the Met, probably in this universe as well. "She'll never be bored."

The cabbie laughed. "School bores her. I think that's Sherlock's fault as well. She wants to fight crime, she and her best chum. I tease them a bit – call them Holmes and Watson."

"Every Holmes should have a Watson," Sherlock said, and the cabbie beamed at him, then turned her attention back to driving. Sherlock sat back, staring at nothing now, conscious of a growing discontentment in his middle that had nothing to do with his current predicament.

Presently they arrived at the Met. "Here we are, sir. My little girl will be so thrilled that I drove you."
Sherlock withdrew Cumberbatch’s money clip, got out the fare, and added a fifty-quid tip. What the hell, it wasn’t his money anyhow. "Tell her…" Children, both ordinary and extraordinary, were a notoriously changeable species; probably in a few years she’d want to be an astronaut or a barrister. "Give her my best. Tell her…tell her she’ll be a marvellous Holmes as long as she has –"

"Watson?" She grinned at him.

"Curiosity," Sherlock said, handing over the money and climbing out of the car.

The woman waved and drove away, leaving Sherlock at the entrance to Scotland Yard.

Christ, what was he doing here? If he went inside, he wouldn't find Lestrade, nor Donovan, nor even Anderson, not even wayward members of his homeless network, only police officers and detectives who would recognise him not as Sherlock Holmes, but as Benedict Cumberbatch who played at being Sherlock Holmes. A façade of himself, an actor alone on a grand-scale stage looking beyond the footlights for shreds of familiarity and comfort.

He turned and began walking back toward Hampstead.

*

The persistent shrill of the doorbell woke him. Sherlock climbed out of bed, dragging the sheet round his body and trudging downstairs. He scratched his head, encountered the unyielding clay, and decided to shower immediately. His hair felt disgusting.

He opened the front door to a woman standing on the step. "Hi!" she said brightly, her enthusiastic greeting at odds with the flowy layers of black she wore. Self-esteem issues; conventionally attractive face by current standards, but body slightly heavier than traditional media expectation. Believed black was both slimming and edgy judging by the garments, mostly of degage Japanese cotton. Untidy pounds of blonde-streaked dark hair, too much eye makeup, glossy mouth.

Sherlock scowled. "Yes?"

Her gaze roamed greedily over his be-sheeted figure. "Oh, dear. Karon said one o’clock would be okay for an interview. She said you'd text or call if it wasn't all right. Didn't you get her texts?"

Evidently this woman and Cumberbatch were acquainted, if her excessive familiarity was any indication of acquaintance. "I was busy last night."

"Well, you can tell me all about it at lunch," the woman said with a cosy smile. "Car's out at the kerb, but I can come in and wait while you shower or…do whatever you need to do." She took a step forward, as if her remark had established terms of intimacy between them.

Sherlock was tired of this celebrity game and disliked journalists on principle. "Not up to an interview. Sorry."

The woman's face fell even further. "I…okay. Tomorrow, perhaps?"

Sherlock's only reply was a negative shake of his head.

"Ben, are you okay?"
God, he wished people would stop asking him that. He bared his teeth in a poor approximation of a smile. "Fantastic," he said, and slammed the door.

The doorbell shrilled again, but he paid it no mind, trudging back up the stairs and into the darkened bedroom, where he slumped back into bed. He'd walked from NSY to Hampstead, surprisingly unbothered and, finding himself exhausted at the end of his trek had collapsed immediately. Now he picked up his phone and discovered he'd slept nearly ten hours. Several more texts and voicemails had come through; he deleted them methodically, without opening a single one.

Except one.

*Sorry about last night. Call me? T*

Almost unwillingly, Sherlock punched in TWH's number.

*"You look good enough to eat," Tom said by way of greeting. He closed the door behind him and wrapped Sherlock in a tight and surprisingly muscular hug, burying his nose in Sherlock's neck. "Mm – just showered. Smells fantastic."

"Yeah, it's, er, Ormonde," Sherlock said. He'd picked it out of a collection in Cumberbatch's loo. Not really a fragrance-wearer, he'd still scoffed at the practise of keeping fragrance in a loo – even in a closed cabinet, worst possible place to store it.

"I love it. And you left the hair slop off as well. Wise move." He held Sherlock away. "Ben. About last night –"

"You don't have to –"

"No, listen, please." Tom put a finger against Sherlock's lips. "You know this is new to me – this," he said, waving a hand between both of them, "the fire and potency of it, and the public scrutiny, all the media attention. I've never been much good at hiding, and the only reason I'm a good liar is because I'm a fair actor. I want to shout about us from every rooftop, and I can't, I know that, but sometimes it makes me a bit barmy, you know? I don't want to fuck it up. I love you." He drew Sherlock close and kissed him.

This time, Sherlock allowed it, opening his mouth against Tom's, yielding to the warm pressure of Tom's lips and tongue. Tom's hand cupped the nape of his neck and massaged, and Sherlock couldn't deny that it felt good.

Tom pulled back a bit and rested his forehead against Sherlock's. "I'm sorry I got angry. Forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you," Sherlock said. Easy enough; Tom hadn't done anything all that terrible, and he'd defended Sherlock - *Cumberbatch* - and his lisp, even though the far more practical thing would have been to pay Cumberbatch the compliment of letting him fight his own battles. Sherlock appreciated it nonetheless as he'd been slightly off-balance, though TWH could never know that, obviously. For good measure, Sherlock gathered Tom in his arms and returned the embrace, probably as Cumberbatch would have done.
"I'd better stop, or I'll end up mauling you and we'll be late for lunch." Tom grinned. "I don't want to muss you. You look very smart."

Of course he looked smart, or as smart as it was possible to look given the state of Cumberbatch's wardrobe. Nothing he could do about the hair, though – that was a total loss, and he resigned himself to it glumly. Sherlock tugged on his suit jacket. "Thank you." He took in Tom's faded tight jeans, white shirt, and cotton cardigan. "So do you." It wasn't a half-bad look, actually.

"Oh, ha-ha. Come on, let's go. And then when we get back, I want a proper shag. I feel cheated." He put his hand on Sherlock's arm and steered him toward the door.

TWH was certainly touchy-feely. It wasn't, Sherlock admitted privately, entirely unpleasant.

He'd worry about the shagging business later.

*

"We should work together, you and I," MG said.

"Oh, I'd love that!" Tom said, digging into his prawns with enthusiasm. "I'm looking at a few projects right now, and there are some tempting offers. Let's sit down and talk about it soon." He smiled at Sherlock. "That's a great idea, don't you think?"

Sherlock managed to nod his head, but it was an effort.

He'd sorted out who MG was, and he'd seen the programme on YouTube, obviously, but it was an entirely different thing to have a man who looked exactly like Mycroft sitting across from him in a casual jumper and khaki trousers and moccasins – moccasins! – and a scruff of beard. Mycroft would have apoplexy at the very thought. Too, he was smiling and…laughing. Sherlock couldn't remember the last time he'd heard more than a sardonic chuckle emerging from Mycroft's mouth.

Gatiss…Mark…had a partner as well, a man named Ian whose informality with MG was positively astonishing. He touched Mark's hand and rubbed his upper arm and even kissed him. And Mark returned the affection wholeheartedly.

Dear God.

"More wine, Ben?" Mark said, proffering a bottle.

Sherlock nodded again. Speaking required more industry than he was able or willing to undertake at the moment.

Mark poured a generous amount into Sherlock's glass. "Well, the latest and greatest news, if you're interested. We resume filming on Wednesday. The break makes things a bit tight, but obviously we've built some time in on the front end for emergencies, and we've got to make absolutely certain that everything's up to safety codes. It's a first for us," he said, addressing Tom. "We've never had to fill out accident-incident reports, and Sue was wild about it. Steven – well, he had his moment of rage and then calmed down. You know how that is. The good news is that the inspectors haven't found anything other than that one cable, which apparently had been nicked pretty hard so that the coating just chipped off. It's been replaced, obviously, and they're still checking everything. We should have it all sorted by Monday afternoon. And you seem fine, Ben, which is the most important thing. Meanwhile, it's a holiday, so –" he raised his glass. "Here's mud in your eye."
Everyone touched glasses, and Sherlock numbly followed suit. He drank his wine off in a gulp and poured more.

Tom laughed. "Glad I'm driving." He poked Sherlock in the arm. "I'm teasing. You've earned it. You've had a peculiar few days, haven't you?"

That, at least, was true. "Yes."

"Actually, Ben's been a little quiet and subdued the past few days," Tom said. He speared another prawn. "I'm glad he went to hospital and they made sure he was okay – otherwise I'd really be worried. But maybe you're just tired, eh?" He put his hand atop Sherlock's and squeezed briefly. "You've been nonstop the past few months."

"The past few years," Mark said. "And he doesn't show any signs of slowing down. I don't know where you get your energy."

"Oh, you've got enough energy," Ian whatever-his-last-name-was said, and hugged Mark around the shoulders.

Sherlock stared at the gesture and drank more wine.

"You've scarcely touched your soufflé," Tom said. "Isn't it any good?"

"It's delicious," Sherlock said.

"Oh." Tom's brow furrowed, but he seemed to accept the answer and went back to his own starter.

The main dishes arrived, and they dug in, chattering, mostly theatre and screen gossip – at least Sherlock thought it was theatre and screen gossip. He wasn't really listening. He pretended intense interest in his steak, which wasn't bad at all, and drank most of the bottle of wine. Cumberbatch must have been a guzzler, because nobody seemed to notice, or they were accustomed to pampering him. MG ordered another bottle without comment and went back to his discussion with TWH, some drivel about a Shakespeare play they'd both seen.

Drivel. It was all drivel. What a ridiculous life this was: self-indulgent, careless, preoccupied with pleasing people, pleasing hordes of idiots who sat on their arses and did nothing but consume endlessly, pleasing a media crowd both greedy and hostile. Where was the purpose? Where was the thrill of discovery, that exquisite mélange of exasperation and passion that drove him through nights and weeks, pushing against enigmas that wouldn't yield without the most dogged persistence? They pretended to be somebody else and called it work. And Sherlock did that, true, but it was an infinitesimal slice of his existence, not the whole of it. He didn't have time for their endless self-gratification and navel-gazing.

He got up, a bit startled at how wobbly his legs felt. "Back in a bit." Tugging his jacket into place, he wove his way to the loo and pushed the door open. He unzipped, had a piss, and washed his hands, staring at his face in the mirror. God, was that a spot on his nose? Wasn't that the cherry on the cake. Sherlock leant over the sink, a little dizzy from the wine. He was as good an actor as any of them, but the pretence was beginning to wear. But if he went back out to the table and said I've got some news for you: I'm not really Benedict Cumberbatch. I'm Sherlock Holmes, and you're a lot of tiresome halfwits - he couldn't think of any possible outcome that would end well. And he still couldn't get back home. How in hell was he going to get back home?

John.
He pressed his hands to his face. John mightn't be able to fix things, in fact he almost surely would have some sort of furious meltdown were he trapped here, but it would be good to have him close by.

The door creaked open. "Ben?"

Sherlock took his hands from his face. "Mark," he said with a smile, wondering if it looked as artificial as it felt. "Hey."

"Are you all right?"

No. No, no, no, no, no. "Great. A bit woozy from the plonk."

Mark shut the door behind him. "Well, you've earned it, as Tom said. Look, I wanted a word with you. It's about the other night."

"Shoot." He tried to view the man standing in front of him as a writer, an actor, but suddenly he only saw Mycroft in awful clothes and a two-day growth of beard. Difficult to reconcile, highly improbable, but not, with a little imagination, entirely impossible.

"It's sort of rotten to ask this, but…we, all of us, would really appreciate it if you didn't mention what happened on set. We've got such good press, and it was honestly a freak accident—"

Ha!

"—that it would be terrible if word got out. Steven's working on a compensation package for you, but he can talk to you about that. It sounds rather sinister when I say it like that, but you understand, don't you?"

Sherlock took a half-step forward, grabbed the edge of the sink, and made a zipping motion across his mouth. Then he tossed an imaginary key away (he hadn't locked his mouth, just zipped it. Why did people do that? It was stupid).

Mark sagged in relief. "Oh, thank you. Honestly, it's beyond generous—" He made a startled muffled noise as Sherlock dove in and kissed him full on the mouth. He struggled away, backing against one of the toilet stalls, and gaped. "Ben!"

Ben. Ben. Been far too long, brother mine. Sherlock pressed himself against Mycroft. "Your pupils are dilating. You know, during the Cold War the Canadian government came up with a pupillometry device to determine the existence of homosexuals in their civil service bureaus. They'd show the subjects risqué imagery and watch pupillary response. They called it the fruit machine. Trouble was, it didn't really work all that well. Not everybody has the same response to graphic imagery, and some people can control mydriasis better than others. But the eyes are still a fair indicator of cognitive, emotional and sensory reaction. We read cues all the time, in the eyes, and in other ways as well." He grasped Mycroft's wrist and pressed his thumb against the pulse. Gatiss wanted Cumberbatch. Had wanted him for a long time.

Mycroft…no, Mark. It didn't matter – wet his lips. "Ben, please." He didn't move, though.

Sherlock pushed him into the wheelchair-accessible toilet stall and closed the door. "I need…I need…" He didn't know what he needed, exactly, but that didn't matter either. He sank to his knees and despite the havoc the alcohol was wreaking on his nervous system, unbuttoned and unzipped Marcroft's trousers with expert precision.

"Ian. Tom."
"Shut up," Sherlock muttered, and pulled the khaki trousers down, revealing claret-coloured stretch-silk briefs. Not something Mycroft would have approved of or indeed allowed to come within two metres of his body. He yanked the front of the briefs down and saw Mark's cock, swelling, reddening. He bent close, inhaling the clean, slightly musky odour, and grasping Mark's hips, drew his tongue up the underside of his brother's cock.

"We've both had too much to – oh Christ." Large hands grasped either side of Sherlock's head, fingers tangling in his hair. "Christ, oh, fuck."

Sherlock worked up more moisture in his mouth, then opened it widely and enclosed the now-jutting prick. He sucked hard, remembering Mycroft's efforts to keep silent, and pulled back to nuzzle the slit and tease at the head, sliding his tongue round and round, dipping his head down, increasing suction, plunging deeper, half-gagging on cock. He slid his hand into his own trousers and rubbed.

Some part of his brain remained detached and aware, coldly observing this nearly unprecedented debauchery in a toilet stall in another universe. It wasn't Mycroft's cock he was sucking, and it wasn't Mark Gatiss' cock. Mycroft hadn't permitted it after that single time, and Gatiss didn't really want it with his emotions or his heart or whatever got the limbic system going, he couldn't quite remember at the moment. He wouldn't open his eyes, wouldn't look up, would not meet this other man's eyes, because if he kept his own eyes closed he could preserve the –

"Oh, God!" The cry, far above him, was a low growl, and Sherlock did gag now as the cock thrust hard into his mouth, down his throat, and he felt the spill of semen, like a flood though it wasn't much, not more than average, and he relaxed his throat and let it trickle downward, wet and warm.

He shivered. He hadn't brought himself off – it always took him a while if he was masturbating, and that hadn't been nearly long enough – but that didn't matter either. He freed his hand and rose shakily to his feet, coming almost nose to nose with a panting, red-faced Gatiss.

Oh, God.

Sherlock stumbled out of the stall and dropped into the little slipper chair at the far end of the loo. He bent forward, forehead nearly touching his knees, and breathed hard.

"Ben…"

Sherlock looked up at Mark, re-ordering his clothes. "I…that was a mistake."

Mark nodded. "Look, we'll just…it was my fault. I shouldn't have…God, please don't say anything about this. It's –" He turned as the door opened and Tom came in.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt your conference, but I've got to make some room. I'm not leaving without pudding, though." He went to the urinal and unzipped, whistling a little.

Sherlock stared at Mark, fierce warning in his eyes. MG's face was still red. Maybe he had a heart condition. He seemed fitter than Mycroft, though.

Tom shook off, zipped up, and went to the sink. "You two are awfully quiet. What are you –" He looked at Sherlock in the mirror with a smile, but the smile gradually faded and his forehead creased. "What?" Drying his hands, he turned to Mark. "What's wrong?"

Mark smiled. "Nothing. Just having a chat." However decent an actor he was, he was a terrible liar.

Tom turned to Sherlock, then took a tentative step forward. His nostrils quivered a bit, and as if by some instinct, he glanced at the toilet stall, then back at Sherlock.
Sherlock found it impossible to meet Tom's gaze. It shouldn't matter, it didn't matter, God damn it all, he wasn't Benedict Cumberbatch and he wasn't accountable to Thomas William Hiddleston for the impulses of his body or the occasional mistakes he made, it wasn't something he'd planned and he wasn't wrong often, but –

Tom took a breath. "Please tell me I'm imagining things."

"Tom, honestly," Mark said, and then fell silent.

Anger and frustration and something ineffable he couldn't work out made Sherlock raise his head and meet Tom's eyes at last. He saw Tom's face crumple and immediately knew what the ineffable was. "Tom…"

Tom shook his head, waved his hand, and turned on his heel, leaving the loo without a word, leaving Mark and Sherlock alone.

Mark dragged his hands through what remained of his hair. "Fucking hell – Ian." He paused at the door, seemed about to say something, and then thought better of it and left.

Sherlock's head was hurting. He drew his knees up, encircled them with his arms, and rested his head on them, curling up and retreating for a moment, just a moment, from this loathsome and inhospitable world.

*

A pile of scripts rested on his lap, untouched for the past twenty minutes at least.

Tom knew it wasn't very environmentally sound to ask for them to be printed out, but Tom still liked the feel of paper, and still collected print books despite the scads of stuff on his mobile and his shiny new iPad. Not that they were doing much good at the moment. He'd tried to read them, moving to another when he couldn't concentrate, but nothing stuck, and eventually he'd ended up staring into space, trying to fight a desolation so profound that he could scarcely breathe. He felt tears threatening again and rubbed his eyes. Better to just let himself cry, probably, but that would be like acceptance, and he couldn't accept it, not yet.

His phone sat on the arm of the chair, silent. He'd set it to Do Not Disturb except for one number, and silent it remained. He couldn't ask himself why it had happened, or how – that wasn't for him to answer. But he wouldn't make the first move, not yet. Stupid and prideful, maybe, but he couldn't bring himself to call first. Tomorrow, if he hadn't heard from Ben by then. Maybe his dad had been right – you really couldn't trust many people.

The doorbell rang. Tom's heart stuttered, and he jumped out of the chair, scattering the scripts to the floor. Mingled fury and relief surged in his blood. He wasn't going to let Ben off so easily. They hadn't discussed infidelity – hell, they'd only begun to discuss commitment a month ago – but it was time for a serious talk.

He looked out the peephole – not that the thing was all that effective – his own mother would look like an axe murderer through the distorting glass – and his stomach sank as he saw two people standing on his doorstep and he finally recognised them. He opened the door.

Tom sagged against the doorframe. "Hi, guys. Look, it's not a great time –"

"We're not staying," Henry said. "We just wanted to apologise for last night. We were pricks. Well, I was a prick, and Peter was a prick."

"You'll notice his conspicuous absence," Graham said. "I tried to get him to come, but he can be obdurate, to say the least."

"Yeah, I know," Tom said. "Well, at least come in for a few minutes." He took the bottle and opened the door wider to let them in. "You didn't have to do this."

"We did, though," Graham said. He ran a hand through his floppy hair. "Fi and Lucy are furious with us, and they're absolutely right to be." He dropped onto Tom's chesterfield. "Whew, warm in here."

"I don't really bother with AC. I can turn it on if you like."

"No, no. As Henry said, we're not staying."

"Stay long enough for a drink, at least," Tom said. He was glad to be taken out of himself for a moment. "I'll open this up."

"I'll do that," Henry said. "Have a seat. Rocks all round?"

"Sounds good. Glasses are in the freezer, too. They're beer glasses, but who cares. Thanks, Henry." Tom sat in his chair, suddenly conscious that he was wearing nothing but jogging shorts and that Graham was not only impeccably dressed in a beige linen suit but also ogling Tom rather avidly. "You look nice."

"Off to dinner with some dot-com billionaire. Trying to extract a few-score thousand pounds for a new lighting system. The old one's going to bash someone's head in soon if we don't get rid of it."

"Oh, that's too bad. Anything I can do to help?"

"Cash always helps," Graham chortled. "If I can tell him you'll match funds, that'll add a bit of lustre. You needn't match the full amount, though."

"That sounds good. What about a five-thousand quid cap?"

"Done!" Graham nodded firmly in lieu of a handshake, and stretched out a hand to Henry, coming in with the drinks. Doubles, Tom noticed. Good. "Thanks, old chap."

"Not at all." Henry gave Graham his drink, then Tom, then seated himself on the chesterfield.

"You're not going out as well? Heading to Tilford?" Tom asked, eyeing Henry's summer-weight cord trousers and sports shirt.

"No, I'm staying in town tonight. Had to run a few errands and told Graham I'd ferry his cheap arse to Jin Kichi, save him eight quid on a cab ride, but made him promise to come here first. I really –" He shifted a bit. "Really sorry about that. Bloody childish. Hope, er, Benedict's not too upset with us."

"He didn't say a lot about it," Tom said. "It was childish, frankly. And it would probably be better if you apologised to him, not me." Though he isn't here to accept an apology, and he needs to issue some apologies of his own.
"We rather thought he'd be here," Henry said. "You two are an item, aren't you?"

Tom sighed. "I'm not really sure what we are." He took a deep drink of the whisky, letting the liquid burn pleasantly down his throat, and scratched his cheek, his nails rasping against the short beard he was growing for his next role. He met Graham's eyes, which were a little too intense for Tom's comfort. "We're still working it out."

"Seemed like a nice chap," Henry said. Graham said nothing.

"Yeah," Tom said wearily. "Look, don't mention that to anyone, okay?"

"Oh, come on," Henry said, and took a swig from the beer glass, draining the whisky in a draught. Ice clinked musically. "Not even Peter is that much of a prick. I tried to get him to come, but he's busy tonight banging some bird, apparently."

"It's okay. Well...you know what I mean," Tom said. "It's not okay, actually. He's always been a bully. I'm a little tired of it."

"We'll have a word with him." Henry looked at his watch. "We'd better dash. His Nibs here is going to be late. Look here, tell Benedict we're sorry, would you? If we get to see him again, we'll tell him as well."

"Okay." Tom got to his feet, finished his drink, and set it down on the floor. "Thanks for stopping by."

"Not at all." Henry steered Graham toward the door. "Cheerio, Tommy."

"'Night," Tom said. "Thanks for the whisky."

"'Night."

Tom closed the door and locked it, then trudged back to his chair. He sank into it, then noticed something on the chesterfield. "Oh -" He rose and scooped up Henry's mobile. "Shit." Running to the door, he threw it open, but Henry's Audi was long gone. "Damn it."

He couldn't call Henry, obviously, and Graham was one of those eccentrics who refused to carry a mobile phone. Tom got his own phone, found Henry's land line in the city, and rang him. "Hey, Henry, it's Tom," he said, after the answerphone had played. "You left your mobile here. I'm staying in tonight, but I can run it over in the morning if you don't feel like picking it up. 'Bye."

Slumping back in the chair, he picked up his spilled scripts and yawned hugely. "Oh, fuck it." He set them on the floor again and stretched his legs out, contemplating his toes. By all rights, he should have been upstairs, getting his brains shagged out, but Ben had decided to be unbelievably weird and even more unbelievably unfaithful, with Mark. Why, for fuck's sake?

_You don't have the answers. Don't jump to conclusions._

Although there didn't seem to be a surfeit of conclusions from which to choose.

He yawned again, and decided to catch up on a few episodes of _Breaking Bad_ before turning in for the night. Maybe he'd have a sad, solitary wank, too.

Walter White was sitting outside Gus' house getting ready to kill him when the doorbell rang. Tom's doorbell. Tom roused himself from utter torpor, paused the programme, and ran to the door, adrenaline surging again, but he moved slower; he was weirdly exhausted. His legs felt like rubber,
as if he'd done a fast run with little preparation. And again he was disappointed; it was Henry, not Ben. Tom mustered a smile. "Hey! I'm glad you came back. You must have –"

"Yeah, left my phone. Do you mind…?"

"No, come on in." Tom let him in and shut the door. "I was about to go to bed, actually. I'm knackered." He yawned in the middle of the sentence. "Sorry. God, rude."

"Don't worry," Henry said. "In and out."

Tom leant over to get the phone from where he'd left it on a side table and got a strange head rush. He stood still for a moment, hunched over, and awkwardly scooped up the phone. He wobbled as he straightened, and Henry grabbed his arm. "Wow."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just…really tired." He turned to Henry. "I'd better get to bed."

"I thought it'd work faster," Henry said.

Tom frowned. His head felt fuzzy. "Huh?"

"Must be your muscle mass. Well…." Henry shrugged and turned away from Tom. He peered out the peephole and turned back with a smile, reaching into his pocket and pulling something out. "Just us chickens."

"Yeah," Tom said. "I don't mean to be abrupt, but I'm really tired." His tongue was thick and uncooperative.

"I know." Henry held a silvery packet in his hand. He steered Tom to his chair and urged him down. "Have a seat." He ripped the packet open, and a sweetish stench filled the air.

Tom tried to focus on it and saw a square of white, like one of those pre-saturated cleansing cloths, shining white in the low light of the table lamps. The smell was awful. A funny apprehension slowly worked its way through Tom's fog. "Henry?"

"You wouldn't believe what I had to go through to get this stuff. The GHB, too. I reckon I didn't calculate the GHB properly, but that's what this is for." Henry gathered up Tom's hands and held his wrists together. "Asset class diversification, you might call it."

Alarm flooded Tom's body, but he was heavy and slow and couldn't form sentences. "Henry, wait. Don't – what –"

Henry jammed the wet cloth over Tom's mouth and nose, pushing him back into the chair and pinning his wrists against his chest. "Just hang on a minute, pal. Won't be long."

Tom found himself leaden-limbed, voiceless, and utterly unable to prevent Henry from mashing the stinking rag over his face. He sucked in fumes, choked, and tried to call out. He imagined his struggles knocking Henry to the floor – he was taller, and probably stronger, but he couldn't quite….

No
"I'm not Sherlock Holmes," Benedict blurted.

From what seemed very far above Benedict's head, there was a hissing sigh, and the fingers twined in his hair pulled even tighter, eliciting a stifled cry. "Don't waste my time with the obvious."

"Sorry, I'm sorry!" Benedict cried, holding very still. Ouch, ouch, THAT HURTS. "My name's Benedict Cumberbatch. I'm an actor. I don't know how all th –"

"Who hired you?"

"Ow! I – what? Nobody hired me, I'm – please, stop!" Benedict tried not to sob aloud as the hand yanked harder. He was certain that another millimetre more and he'd feel the warm trickle of blood down his tender scalp.

"Listen to me. Just outside this door are three men who specialise in what the Americans like to call 'enhanced interrogation techniques.' The United Kingdom does not permit torture of detainees, Mr Cumberbatch. However, you are not officially a detainee. Likewise, these men are not officially employees of the British government; one illustrative aspect of this fact is that they truly enjoy their work. They will extract every sliver of information you're attempting to hide from me, and they will do so with no qualms of any sort. Moreover, they're paid by the hour, which provides them with certain compensatory incentives. Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

"I play Sherlock on a TV programme! I don't know how it happened, but I was on set, we'd just wrapped our scene, Andrew and I, and I – I bent to tie my shoe and lost my balance and grabbed a cable, and it was raw, so I got an electrical shock, and when I came to I was in this sort of weird white void and Sherlock was there, your brother, and he said he'd got a shock too, at least I think he did, and then he said something about a multiverse, and he didn't seem fazed at all by the fact that there was his complete bloody double sat across from him, and we only exchanged a few words but it happened again last night, and…and there was this flash, brilliant flash of light, and I woke up and I was in fucking 221B Baker Street and it wasn't a fucking set in Cardiff, there was traffic and running water, and John was there, John fucking Watson –" Benedict drew a breath, only dimly aware that he was crying. "And I was in a London I thought we'd invented, do you understand? It's not the Doyle canon as it was written, it's mostly a figment of Steven and Mark's imagination, and he looks like you, Mark does, because he plays Mycroft, and the timeline's about the same, but I've changed things by not actually being Sherlock, Irene Adler, the whole IOU thing, Bond Air, everything took a jump forward because we'd shot most of it already, we were close to wrapping, but it's completely fucked up now because of me. I didn't do it deliberately, I knew I'd be carted off to a psychiatric hospital if I told the truth, and you've got to believe me when I say all I want to do is go home." He took in another ragged gasp of air.

Abruptly, the hand tangled in his hair let go. Benedict sagged forward as much as his bonds would allow and breathed hard, trying to gather his wits for another onslaught of attempted persuasion. He quieted when he realised that Mycroft Holmes was still standing beside him, unmoving – doing
what? Watching him cry? Wondering which fingernail to pull out first? Trying to decide where his corpse should be buried?

"I don't believe you."

Now Benedict did sob aloud. "Please. Please. I know it sounds a bit dodgy, well, absolutely barmy actually, but it's-it's true. I'm here and Sherlock's there, he's gone to my London, and I'm trying to solve crime and cocking it up good and proper and I think he's shagging my…my boyfriend, although that wasn't in the script, and neither was –" Benedict bit his lip hard before saying anything about Sherlock and Mycroft's relationship – though that might have been a ruse. Definitely a ruse. "At any rate, I think he's ruining my reputation as an actor because there are some shared traits, that whole lack of social skills thing we worked up, and the arrogance, that's completely accurate, and –"

He gasped as the blindfold was torn away, and brilliant white light seared his vision. Benedict screwed his eyes shut, and his heartbeat thundered in his ears. He waited, shaking with fear.

After a moment he dared to look up. Mycroft Holmes had stepped between him and the blinding whiteness, and was standing perfectly still, staring down at him in inscrutable silence, one brow lifted in delicate disdain.

"Please," Benedict said again. He felt snot running from his nose and was sure Mycroft was staring at it in disgust. "Please, I don't want to be here. I just want to go home."

Mycroft turned on his heel and moved away. Blinking in the still too-bright light, Benedict saw him heading for a table littered with implements that would have been innocuous in any other setting: a few pairs of pliers, some knives, several dry-cleaners' hangers with the paper torn away, a large bowl filled nearly to the brim with water, a stack of towels. Next to the table was a stainless steel trolley, on top of which sat a car battery, a set of wired alligator clamps dangling limply from its terminals. Mycroft paused over the table, then selected a set of wickedly sharp snips and turned back toward Benedict.

"Oh, God," Benedict sobbed. "Please don't. Please." Thrashing fruitlessly against his bonds as Mycroft moved behind him, he tried to shrink away and shouted at the top of his lungs. "Help! Someone please help me! Help!"

"Shut up," Mycroft said, and snipped at the plastic binding Benedict's hands. Without another word, he cut away the fiber tethering him at chest and waist, then went back to the table, depositing the snips and turning round to face Benedict, his arms folded.

Stunned into silence, Benedict lifted his hands, wincing at the sudden pain of elevation and restored circulation. He clasped his hands together – they were cold – and rubbed them tentatively, never taking his eyes away from Sherlock Holmes' genuinely terrifying elder brother. "Why…why'd you do that?"

Mycroft shook his head briefly and closed his eyes as if he were in pain. "Mr Cumberbatch, where is my brother?"

"He's in London. Well, he started in Wales, that's where we were shooting, but he's in London now. I can't explain it more than that. I know it sounds –"

"Mad, yes. You've said that." Mycroft took a snowy handkerchief from his inner breast pocket and handed it to Benedict. "Mop yourself up."

"Sorry." Benedict wiped his eyes and blew his nose a few times. "Sorry," he repeated. "Do you want this…never mind, I'll have it washed for you."
"Oh, do keep it," Mycroft replied flatly. "Is Sherlock unharmed?"

"He's fine, as far as I know," Benedict said. "I've only seen him twice since this whole thing started."

Mycroft perched on the edge of the table and crossed his arms again, a none-too-benevolent judge. "Which was when, precisely?"

"Thursday night. About seven, half seven I guess."

"And what is your connection with Bond Air?"

"Connection? I haven't – I haven't got a connection with it. We were filming the story, *A Scandal in Belgravia* we called it, and it was all about Irene Adler and her scheme, and Bond Air was just one part of it, not exactly a red herring, but a kind of false bottom, you know – there are quite a few of them in the episode and it's all a bit convoluted, but I'm certain they'll sort it all out in editing. But it was the airline bit, the terrorist plot with Moriarty and your lot had the idea to use all those dead bodies –"

"Do you have Miss Adler's mobile?" Mycroft interrupted.

"Oh, God," Benedict said. "It's at the flat. In Sherlock's coat pocket. I meant to bring it and forgot. What…did you know she was dead?"

"I'd heard, yes. An unsurprising event, but one I'd hoped to stave off for a while, at least. Miss Adler would have been a rich fount of information."

"I don't think she knew as much as she pretended to. It was all for protection." Benedict thought of his scornful treatment of her and his face burned with chagrin and regret.

"Goodness, you *are* naïve." Mycroft drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, extracted two, and offered one to Benedict. "You're also suffering rather obviously from nicotine withdrawal. Get hold of yourself."

Benedict eagerly accepted the cigarette and cupped his hand round Mycroft's lighter. He inhaled deeply, exhaled through his nose, and shivered in relief. He hadn't had a cigarette in…three days? He'd been too frightened and scrambling to notice before, but it was just the thing he needed. His body instantly responded to the little coffin nail, relaxing and soothing his frayed nerves. "Thank you."

"I keep trying to quit," Mycroft murmured, regarding the cigarette burning between two elegantly manicured fingers. "So. It was Sherlock who advanced the notion of a multiverse, you said?"

"Yes," Benedict said. "You don't seem too surprised. Do you kn –"

"And who else knows about this…switch?"

"Nobody. I told you, I didn't want to be chucked in the bin. I haven't said anything."

"John has no idea?"

Benedict hesitated. "He's given me a few funny looks. He was there when Sherlock got electrocuted, so I suppose he thinks my behaviour might be connected to that. But I really don't think he's got an inkling."

Mycroft snorted.
"I'm an actor," Benedict snapped. *Go fuck yourself!*

"Mm. So you keep insisting."

"I don't know what I can say that will convince you."

"Oh, I give you marks for acting, Mr Cumberbatch," Mycroft said. "You've managed to pull the wool over John's eyes, and I expect he knows Sherlock better than anyone, myself excepted."

"Right," Benedict said. "What did make you twig, anyhow? Was it…er…that bit in the drawing room?" He wasn't certain he really wanted to know, but it was a poor actor who wasn't willing to hear negative feedback.

A frosty smile edged the corners of Mycroft's mouth. "Mr Cumberbatch, do you have siblings?"

"A half-sister."

"Were you close?"

"Well…not especially. Not as children. She's more than a decade older than I am."

"Living parents? Close friends?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"I think your profession has failed you. You're certainly adept at aping my brother's mannerisms, Mr Cumberbatch, but it was audacious – no, beyond foolish, in fact – to think that you could in the least way deceive me into believing that you were Sherlock. You say you portray my brother on a television programme. I presume it's the crime-solving. People do seem interested in that sort of thing." Mycroft's expression conveyed a wealth of distaste. "Sherlock's predilection for detective work is merely one aspect of a complicated personality, however. It's utter folly to think that you could capture the nuances of our relationship. We have over thirty years of history together." Mycroft drew on his cigarette and tapped the ash against the table. "I give you credit for nerve, but not much for intelligence, I'm afraid. And improvisation is clearly not your strong suit."

"So what, specifically?" Benedict demanded.

Mycroft's brow shot up. "Must I enumerate? Very well. Your timorous entrance into the house. The manner in which you ate your soup. Your lack of comment on the flavour of the soup – Sherlock detests consommé. Your lack of comment on the doneness of the chips. Your choice of condiments. Your remark about –"

"Oh, all right," Benedict said. He heaved a sigh. "I get it. Look, I wouldn't have done, but it was for John. He's in trouble. You will help him, won't you?"

Mycroft regarded Benedict carefully. "Dr Watson has not had a deleterious effect upon my brother thus far. I'll do what I can. You realise that Sherlock would rather cut his own hand off than come to me for help, much less plead earnestly the way you did."

Benedict was a little tired of being told how spectacularly he'd fucked up. "So – do you and he really have sex, or was that just another one of your little ruses to trip me up?" Mycroft's gaze darkened, and Benedict realised that hadn't been the most politic thing to say, particularly as his ankles were still bound to the chair and Mycroft was much closer to the table of frightening instruments.

"What do you imagine you know about that?"
"I don't know anything about it," Benedict said. "It certainly doesn't form any part of our programme."

"Doesn't it?" Mycroft said, and dropped his cigarette to the gritty stained floor, grinding it out thoroughly with the toe of one shoe. "Seems a bit dull."

"Yeah, well – incest doesn't really fly during prime-time programming."

"And yet I'm certain you have no issue with showing butchered corpses and other non-consensual acts of depravity," Mycroft said. He clasped his hands behind his back and strolled the length of the grey room. "I'm not prepared to share real or imagined intimate details of my family relationships with a complete stranger. Sorry," he said. "You're simply not privy."

"You made me privy when you unfastened your trousers." Benedict tried for withering scorn, but his words came out trembling and timorous.

Mycroft appeared to chew on that for a bit. "Fair point," he conceded with a shrug. "Simply put, Sherlock would have had a specific reaction to that. You did not. He can be erratic, but at that last, he is remarkably consistent. I don't think my brother is quite…the past year has changed him, but not, I suspect, entirely. That said, Dr Watson is…good for Sherlock." Mycroft paused, and his shoulders slumped a bit. He turned back to Benedict. "Which is why I've agreed to help him. I'll be in touch with the appropriate parties, and the extant records of the Jeff Hope shooting will be altered or expurgated accordingly."

Benedict sighed a little. "Thank you."

"Meanwhile, there's another problem."

"How to switch places with Sherlock again."

"Precisely. You have his mobile still, I presume."

Benedict fished it from his pocket with hands that were still a bit numb. "Here."

"Keep it. Ensure that it remains fully charged. Don't shut it off, don't absent yourself from it for more than a minute."

"Can you do anything about it?" Benedict asked. "Is it really some sort of space-time thing, a wormhole or something? Has it happened to Sherlock before?"

"I have no answers for you," Mycroft said. "And as far as I know, Sherlock has never experienced this type of anomaly before. I'm certain I'd have heard all about it were that the case. I insist that you remain available while I research the problem." He picked up the snips again, then crouched to cut Benedict's ankles free.

Benedict shivered in mingled apprehension and relief and bent to rub circulation back into his starved limbs. He straightened, coming face to face with Mycroft, who was peering at him curiously. "What – what's wrong?"

"It really is…quite extraordinary," Mycroft replied quietly. "The resemblance."

"I didn't want this to happen."

"No, I expect not." The momentary softness that had stolen over Mycroft's face vanished, replaced by its usual impervious mask. He rose to his feet with a soft grunt. "You're free to go, Mr
Cumberbatch. My PA will return you to Baker Street. You might as well stay there for the time being. It's best if you said nothing about this to Dr Watson. And please don't forget what I've told you about remaining within hailing distance. And don't go off-script. Your ineptitude has already cost us one potential informant. That avenue is now closed to us. Don't permit your juvenile longing for adventure to lead you far from the fold."

"Juvenile –" Benedict spluttered.

Mycroft smiled once more, and in that moment he appeared almost affectionate. "In that, you and my brother are very much alike. If you are to resume your rightful place again, it would be better if you were alive and whole. Avoid Mr Moriarty at all costs. There are limits to my influence, staggering as that might seem, and if his connections are as wide as I'm beginning to suspect, interaction with him would set off unpleasant…ripples. An indiscretion could be disastrous. Therefore, I'm requesting that you steer clear of him. Am I understood?"

It wasn't an unreasonable demand under the circumstances, and he didn't really want to argue with Mycroft Holmes. "Okay." Benedict got shakily to his feet and made for the door. As he drew closer, it clicked open.

"And Mr Cumberbatch?"

Benedict turned. "Yes?"

"Remember – inasmuch as you exactly resemble my brother and you share at least one personality trait, you are not Sherlock Holmes. Make no attempt to emulate him. To be blunt: Adhere to a purely domestic script and avoid any hint of danger or adventure. It clearly doesn't suit you at all."

Stung, Benedict opened his mouth to equivocate, but couldn't think of anything appropriately barbed to say in return. He scowled, nodded shortly, and remembered why he'd come. He didn't want Mycroft to diminish the importance of the request. "John?"

"You'll hear from me before 11:00. Pick up promptly."

Mycroft's PA, Anthea, stood a short distance down the industrial-grey hall, incongruous in a fitted cocoa-coloured silk suit and a modest choker of pearls – summer wear for the go-getting shadowy government personal assistant. "Please follow me, Mr Cumberbatch."

"How did you know my name?" Benedict asked.

Anthea merely smiled in return and led the way down the corridor. At its end was a heavy security door with a blinking card reader. Anthea swiped her card, and the door opened onto a tiny, innocuous underground car park – innocuous except for the four armed guards who stood to attention as Anthea and Benedict stepped out. A sleek black car – probably the same one that had snatched him away – glided to a stop, and the driver stepped out and opened the rear door. Anthea got in, revealing a flash of silk-stockinged thigh beneath her kick pleat, and Benedict followed, settling himself onto soft leather.

The car pulled away, rolling up a few narrow, twisting levels and driving smoothly through a set of ornately scrolled gates. Benedict recognised the area: Whitehall. He gaped as they drove past 10 Downing Street and through another set of gates into traffic. Beside him, Anthea sat calmly, legs crossed, the toe of one greige high-heeled pump tapping against the wood inlay of the car door. She was texting busily, paying no attention to Benedict or her extraordinary surroundings.

Benedict blew out a breath. Surely this only existed here. There was no Mycroft parallel in his
London, no mysterious puppet-master pulling domestic and geo-political strings. It wasn't possible to have documents altered or erased, simply to suit someone's whims.

Was it?

Benedict rested his head against the car window and watched London drift by. He'd never been so lonely in his life.

*

The car stopped at Baker Street. Benedict turned to Anthea. "Thanks for the lift."

She smiled without looking up. "I'll wait while you fetch Irene Adler's phone."

"Oh. All right." Benedict got out of the car, took the stairs in threes, and found the phone, noting John hadn't come home yet. He trotted back downstairs; as he approached the car, the window glided down and Anthea put her hand out. He gave it to her.

"Thanks. What's the password?"

"S-H-E-R."

"Thank you." The window went back up, and the car pulled into traffic and out of sight, leaving Benedict on the pavement.

"You're welcome," Benedict muttered. "Thought you'd already know the bloody password, though." Sarcastic remarks were so much more effective when the recipient hadn't driven away, true, but it needed to be said.

He consulted his watch: four o'clock. He'd been in that room for almost three hours, most of it unconscious. He still had a bit of a drug hangover and needed tea or coffee or – probably a couple of shots of vodka would be best, but he didn't know what the kidnappers had given him and didn't want to mix whatever it was with alcohol.

Benedict went into Speedy's, ordered the biggest coffee they had, purchased a pack of Silk Cuts, and began to walk, feeling aimless, time hanging heavy on his hands. Odd feeling. Lately his calendar was filled almost to the minute, but here he was, strolling along, nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to see. It was difficult to relish the freedom of idleness, though. He rolled his head back and forth, glad that the headache was beginning to dissolve as he drank the coffee. A walk might get him sorted out a bit – best to look at it optimistically. After all, he'd survived the afternoon, hadn't he?

*Getting to be an old hand at this kidnap thing.*

Mad laughter bubbled up inside him. He leant against a large pavement planter, setting his coffee down carefully, clamping a hand over his mouth, and cackled like the world's biggest idiot. A few people passing gave him odd looks, but he paid them no mind, shortling into his hand, tears pouring from his eyes.

*Right, right, right. Get a grip.* He wiped his eyes, picked up his coffee, and continued his walk.

Perhaps he wasn't irreversibly trapped. Mycroft had been a bit cagey when Benedict had asked about
going back, and after his initial disbelief, hadn't really questioned Benedict at all about the switch, or seemed to think he was mad. Maybe, in this universe, switching bodies and worlds with someone was no crazier than stealing corpses to simulate a terrorist attack, or hiring Sherlock to get information from the dominatrix threatening a young, foolish member of the Windsor family.

Benedict sighed loudly. Difficult as it was to trust Mycroft, he hadn't many other options. He'd promised to help John; Benedict only hoped that he was as good as his word. Surely getting Sherlock back was in everybody's best interest.

About Sherlock. Now that Benedict had the luxury of time, he turned the Sherlock problem over in his head. How was he getting on? And that little crack about Tom – what the hell had that meant? Surely he hadn't actually had sex with Tom? He wasn't even interested in sex, for God's sake.

Except for Mycroft, apparently.

That was just bizarre. And Mycroft's answer had been far from satisfying. Well, fuck it, it wasn't his problem. Surely Tom had to have realised something wasn't quite right about Sherlock. He couldn't have had sex with him. Something must have twigged.

Though John doesn't seem terribly bothered, to be fair.

But he wasn't having sex with John. Maybe Sherlock didn't see John's adoration because he only had eyes for Mycroft? Good God, what a family. Evidently the Holmes dynamic was a law unto itself.

Anyhow, leaving all that aside, what was with Sherlock's snide dismissal of the letters? If he was such a bloody amazing detective, he should have sorted out the problem instead of suffering through a boring lunch. That was his job, not ignoring the issue. Christ. Arsehole! If they met again, Benedict was going to have some extremely strong words for his counterpart.

His strides had become longer, and his heels were hitting the pavement so hard he was surprised sparks weren't flying from beneath the leather-covered hardwood. The streets were more crowded now, workers leaving their jobs and heading home for dinner, a beer, maybe some TV or a book or sex with a partner, but nobody stopped to gape at him, or chased him down the road, or stuck camera phones or pictures for autographs in his face. It was pleasant, and a little disconcerting.

Maybe I'm a self-absorbed arsehole myself. Missing what I've bitched and moaned about so frequently – now I've got my wish and I'm grouchy about it. What a piece of work was man. Tom would have understood, or at least listened to him sympathetically. It was childish and petty, but he wanted Tom to feel his absence. He obviously, if one paid attention to Sherlock, wasn't missing Benedict the way Benedict was missing him, but surely there must be something twigging, mustn't there? He couldn't imagine Sherlock grabbing Tom's wrists and pinning them behind his back, pushing Tom up against the marble tile of the shower stall, thrusting forward until he'd pressed Tom almost flat, kicking his ankles apart, and holding his wrists closed with one hand, slowly sliding two soap-slick fingers up Tom's arse, just the way he liked it, the way that made him whimper and bite his lower lip in an effort to keep silent.

Fuck. Fuck. What had they done? And Tom didn't know? How was that possible?

No, Tom would work something out. Benedict couldn't even picture Sherlock having sex with John. How uncomfortable and awkward it would be, no matter if John hadn't ever done it with a guy before – Sherlock would be the huge, clumsy iceberg that brought the steadfast ship John Watson down, and if John didn't immediately move out, there would certainly be weeks if not months of mumbled half-conversations and protracted silences. No good could come of it. Why, Sherlock had barely seemed interested in Benedict's analysis of Sherlock and John's relationship. No real surprises
there.

"Sherlock!"

Benedict stopped in his tracks at the familiar and feminine voice. He waited until the soft touch fell on his back to turn around, then looked with a sort of breathless relief at Molly Hooper, her hair in a messy knot atop her head, a plastic sack of what looked like lab coats slung over her back. Her smile was so warm and full of brimming affection that Benedict couldn't help smiling in return. "Heading to the laundrette?"

"Told them I'd do my own. The hospital laundry gets them really clean and white, but they're stiff and I don't like the scent of the washing powder they use." She giggled a little. "It's a bit fussy, but when you've got to wear them all day…." She trailed off, her gaze darting from his face to his own clothes, decidedly more rumpled than when he'd started for lunch.

"Want some company? I can call for a pizza." It wasn't Loo, granted – Loo was extroverted and funny and loads more confident than Molly Hooper, but it was friendly companionship, more than Benedict had right now.

Molly gaped at him for a moment, then her complexion brightened. "Yeah – yes, definitely! Er – I've got a bottle of red in the fridge, and there's a good pizza takeaway near my flat."

Hadn't he told himself he wasn't going to drink? Fuck it, didn't matter. "Great. You call – it'll be my treat. Where do you live?"

"Stratford." She hefted her bag a little higher on her shoulder. "You're not on a case?"

"No. Why?"

"Oh. Okay. You said you didn't eat when you – never mind."

"Right, yes. No, not working on a case now, so digestion won't be an impediment. Here, hand that over." He took the bag from her and carried it in his arms.

"Thanks." Molly looked a little puzzled, but beamed at him shyly. Benedict felt a little pang. Hadn't Sherlock ever been kind to her? What a bastard.

As they walked to the tube station, Molly rang up the pizza place and ordered a large margherita. She glanced at Benedict. "Is that okay? Sorry, I should have asked."

"Fine." He wanted to link his arm in hers, but she kept stealing glances at him, as if he planned to do a bolt any second, and he didn't want to scare her. He couldn't help seeing Loo, obviously; he and Loo, early on during one of his separations from Olivia, had enjoyed a lovely series of interludes. They hadn't led to anything but mutual affection, but they'd been memorable. Loo was a tiger in bed. He wondered what Molly Hooper was like, and the thought briefly excited him. If everyone in this universe was a super-enhanced version of their programme personalities, would that make her more timid, or wilder than he expected?

Oh, God, don't go down that road. Bad idea.

The tube was crowded with commuters, and Benedict found himself crushed up against Molly a few times. "Sorry," she muttered as her nose came into contact with Benedict's lapel.
Benedict stifled a smile as he saw her nose twitch. Was she sniffing him? He rather thought she was. "How was work today?"

"Great. You'd be proud of me, actually. We've had a man in for a few days – major organ failure, burns over seventy percent of his body, inside and out. Met was thinking poison – he had lots of money, chief financial officer of something or other, lots of business enemies, and his wife hated him too – all sorts of possibilities. Took a while to isolate the cause, but when we did –"

"Not poison?" Benedict asked.

"No, it was, but he'd done it to himself. He was a keen golfer, you see, and had this habit of sticking the tees in his mouth after a hole. They were covered in fungicide, and you can imagine the damage it did."

"Christ," Benedict murmured.

Molly frowned. "What?"

"Nothing. So how long did it take you?"

"Four days." She grinned. "You probably would have sorted it in twenty minutes. I thought of calling you – actually, I did call you, but you were probably busy."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Can I ask you something?"

Benedict nodded. "Of course."

"What do you – I mean, why are you doing this?" She gestured at the bag in his arms. "This, coming to my flat. You've never done that before."

A blush of shame crawled up Benedict's neck. "I just…I can use some company. You don't mind?"

Molly shook her head. Her eyes were soft, and almost unbearably sweet. "No. I don't mind."

_This is a mistake. I'm being too kind to her – when Sherlock comes back – if he comes back – he'll treat her like dirt and she won't know why. God damn it. He should have listened to Mycroft and gone back to Baker Street and not moved until Mycroft called again. God damn it all._

He should have fled with even a flimsy excuse – more than Sherlock would have done – but he didn't. Instead, they got off at Molly's stop and went to the pizza place, then walked the short distance to Molly's flat, a two-bedroom affair over a dilapidated camera shop. It was small, with lots of corners and angles, but she'd made it pretty, sort of shabby chic, with faded green toile wallpaper, flowered chairs, and lace-covered tables littered with books and house plants and science journals.

"Where do you want this?" Benedict indicated the bag in his arms.

"I'll take it." Molly relieved him of his burden. "Sit down, Sherlock. I'll put the TV on." She fetched the wine and glasses, and they ate with the television playing some stupid quiz show.

To soothe his discomfort at having taken advantage of Molly's good will, Benedict drank three glasses of wine. Then a fourth. _Fuck it_. He'd only eaten two slices of pizza, and had a little buzz. He wanted to talk with Molly, to make ordinary conversation, but did Sherlock ever make ordinary conversation when he wasn't busy working or insulting people? Molly kept glancing at him, and
slowly, steadily, moving closer until they were pressed thigh to thigh. Benedict looked down and gave a little hiccupping laugh.

"You okay?" Molly asked, not quite looking at him.

"Mycroft kidnapped me today."

"What?"

"Yep. Just had me grabbed out of a taxi." Benedict set his wineglass down on a copy of *BMJ*.

"Arsehole."

"I've only met him twice. He's –"

"An arsehole," Benedict said, enunciating carefully. "They deserve each other."

"Who does?"

"Mycroft and –" Benedict stopped. "Never mind. I've had a totally shit day, Molly, and I'm fucking tired of being Sherlock Holmes." Oh, *fuck*. He froze in horror. Shut your fucking mouth, you cock!

Oh, God, it was too much, all too fucking much.

But Molly didn't seem to see anything amiss. "It must be hard," she said, and patted Benedict's thigh.

"I mean – oh, God. I mean difficult. Sorry. Sorry."

Benedict stifled a laugh, put his hand on hers – such a little hand, so delicate – and squeezed lightly. She squeezed back. She was so sweet, so gentle, and when he bent to kiss her it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Her mouth opened to his, and in seconds – it seemed like only seconds – she'd swung astride him, her thighs squeezing his hips, grinding against him.

"Oh, God. Molly." He fastened his arms round her waist and pulled her close. *Drunk. You're drunk.* He hadn't had much wine, though, a few glasses, and he was suddenly desperate. He pinned her close, and she thrust her pelvis back and forth, rocking against him. He pushed back, but after a moment or two of grinding he still couldn't quite get hard enough. *Too drunk. Drugged, too. That too. Fuck, fuck.*

Molly unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his naked chest, and rubbed the palms of her hands over it, grazing his nipples. She bent and kissed his neck, beneath his chin, suckled the lobe of one ear. Tiny noises escaped her, and she ground against him harder, rough and urgent. "Come on. Please."

"Molly –" Mistake. This was a mistake. Molly Hooper wasn't any port in a storm, and he couldn't do this.

She yanked the hem of her blouse out of the waistband of her trousers. "Shh." Her hands went to his crotch, slipped between their bodies, and caressed. "Shh."

*God damn it.* He closed his eyes and thought of Tom grinding atop him, Tom's hand.

"I was thinking," Tom said, rubbing his hand in an absent fashion over Benedict's naked stomach. *Benedict smiled, sore and content. "You were? What were you thinking?"

"It's all right if...if we're not on the same page. I don't really expect it."

"Spit it out, then."
"I was thinking about exclusivity."

Benedict was silent for a bit. "I've been thinking about that too."

"We don't have to. I don't intend to push – that's not what this is about."

"No, I know that." Benedict fumbled for his cigarettes. "Let me think about it."

"I mean it," Tom said. "There's no pressure."

"It would call for a lot of manoeuvring. For both of us." Benedict dropped the cigarettes on the night table.

Tom nodded slowly. "I know. I can't even say I'm ready. And my – I think my mum would be fine, but my dad…shit. I mean, I love him to death, but…."

"Your dad should meet my mum," Benedict said with a bitter little laugh. "She loved Olivia. Couldn't understand why we couldn't make it work. Dad couldn't give a fuck. He's not burning for grandchildren. Which…God. I don't know."

"You could still have kids." Tom plucked at the sheet, keeping his gaze fixed downward.

"I don't think I'm ready for that particular conversation just yet." Benedict rolled onto his side and traced a fingertip over Tom's hip and thigh. "Let me think about it. We'll talk about it. I promise. It's just a really big step to make all at once."

"I know." Tom's smile shone forth, brilliant and happy. "I meant it. No pressure."

"I am completely mad about you, if it helps."

"It does." Tom drew him close and kissed him.

Benedict realised that Molly had pulled away and was staring down at him with a peculiar expression. "What?"

Molly's face screwed up, and for a second Benedict thought she was going to cry. "It's…it's odd, that's all. I don't think I…." She held perfectly still, and her cheeks turned scarlet. "Er…I think I'll just…." She climbed off and sat beside him on the sofa, though not nearly as close as before, wrapping her arms round herself.

Oh, God. What did I do now? Benedict longed to sink into the floor. "Molly. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay." Though it clearly wasn't.

You fucking arsehole twat fuckstick buggering cocksucking fucking fuck. "Molly, I –"

"It was lovely." Molly patted his knee, but pulled her hand away quickly. "It was, ah, sweet."

"Sweet."

"Yeah." Molly drained her wine and attempted a smile. "Sweet. I mean, I didn't really expect anything."

Christ, was I that bad? "I don't know quite how to explain this, Molly –" Tell her. Tell everyone. So what if they know? Who the fuck cares, and what does it matter? You've had enough of this. "You see, it's –"
"John."

Benedict gaped. "John."

Molly smiled, then gave a little laugh. "I can see it. I'm not blind. At least, not as blind as you think I am."

"But –"

"And I've got a boyfriend. It wouldn't be right. Even though –" She coloured more deeply. "Even though you think he's gay."

_Oh my God. Jim. Jesus. Jesus Christ._ He'd been about to spill to Molly, who was evidently still dating Jim Moriarty. It wasn't that he couldn't trust her, but if she let something out inadvertently, and Jim realised there was trouble afoot..._oh, dear God._ "Jim." Wait, hadn't they stopped dating a long time ago? Three dates, wasn't it?

"Yes." Molly got to her feet. "Sherlock, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let it get so...it's my fault. Sorry."

Benedict shook his head, half-numb. "No. No, it's mine." He lurched to his feet. _Moriarty, oh God._ "Molly, I –" He bit the inside of his lip hard enough to draw blood. _Perfect, you fucking half-wit. Tell her you don't think she should see Jim and watch as she tells Jim and something else goes unbelievably, horribly wrong. Get the fuck out of here while before you fuck things up more._ "I'd better go. Sorry."

Molly nodded. "Will you be okay? You don't seem exactly steady on your feet."

"Yeah, no. I'm fine." Benedict headed for the door. Well, if this was abrupt and weird it probably wasn't any less weird than Sherlock's behaviour on any given day. "Sorry. Thanks for the pizza. And the wine."

"Okay. It's no bother." Molly accompanied him to the door, then laid a hand on his arm. "Sherlock...."

Benedict couldn't read her face. She seemed sad, but...was she upset that they hadn't gone further? Regretful that they'd progressed as far as they had? Guilty because of Jim? He hadn't a fucking clue. "You know, in another life, we'd probably be fantastic and smouldery together."

Molly looked even sadder. "Oh, Sherlock." She went up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "'Bye."

The door closed in his face. Benedict stood still for a minute, then about-faced and went unsteadily down the stairs.

He had a nagging suspicion that he'd cocked things up again.

* 

"Well. That was great." John leant close to Maisie in order to be heard above the station's clamour of returning day-trippers. He caught her scent, something spicy-ish like patchouli and a tiny bit of salt spray. She was taller than John by a few inches; if he moved just a little closer his nose would be buried in her neck. He wavered, trying to decide if he should kiss her.
"Was it?" Maisie offered him a cool, prim smile and took one graceful step backward.

John blinked. "Wasn't it?"

Her smile dissolved. "You spent the entire time talking about your flatmate."

"That's –" John shook his head and smiled. "No, I didn't."

"Yes. You did."

"No, I –" This was starting to sound like a child's verbal shoving match. "Why would you say that? I mean, I asked you all sorts of questions about your job, and –"

"Yeah. What's it like being a librarian? Sherlock and I once found these crazy Chinese warnings in a library. Where are you from? Oh, Sherlock and I went to Hull a few months ago on a case. Isn't this a great day? Sherlock hates sunshine. I think he might be part vampire.' And on and on and on."

Heat crawled up John's neck. "Well, we're – we work together a lot. And you talked about your life, so it makes sense that I –"

"Aren't you a doctor? Haven't you got a life separate from his?" Maisie pushed a curly lock of hair away from her face. "I like you, John. You're a nice guy. But you don't need Sherlock to make you interesting. You're fine on your own."

"I know that."

"I wonder. I don't think this preoccupation is healthy, you know. You've got to have your own initiative, your own imagination. You can't just go along with whatever he wants and accept everything he hands you. He doesn't even sound like the world's nicest guy, from what you've said."

John scowled. Sherlock wasn't the world's nicest guy. He was downright rude most of the time and exquisitely courteous only when he chose to be; it wasn't as if he didn't know the difference. Probably. But it didn't mean he didn't care, sometimes at least. But it wasn't fair to say John didn't have his own life. "I've got lots of imagination." He moved forward and kissed Maisie lightly on the lips.

After a tense moment, she yielded, then pulled away and ran a hand down John's arm, gripping it loosely above his elbow. "Look, it's late and I've got work in the morning." She took another step backward. "Maybe we can have lunch next week or something. I'll call you."

"Yeah." John tried to give her a cheerful what-the-hell grin, but failed. "Hey – whatever you want to talk about. That's fine with me."

"All right. See you later." She waved and turned, then walked away, the long skirt of her pale green dress switching prettily around her legs.

She wasn't going to call him. It was pretty obvious. She'd transmitted that in every gesture, every word. John couldn't even tell if he was disappointed. He hadn't really said all that about Sherlock, had he?

He found an empty seat on the tube and pulled out his phone. He'd checked it a few times throughout the day, enough that Maisie had remarked on it, but it was 2011, everybody was glued to their phone, even more than he was, and he didn't know what she'd been on about.

Initiative. That just wasn't true. He had plenty. For instance, he hadn't just drifted into the RAMC,
he'd chosen it consciously. He was a product of all the choices he'd made from childhood on, and he was where he'd chosen to be. If there were catalysts – the recruiter at uni, Harry's drunken sprawling at the family gatherings he no longer attended, Mike Stamford on a park bench – that was life. And Sherlock was just another catalyst for the next phase of life. That was all.

Right. He rested his head against the wall; his neck felt as though it had a clenched fist inside it.

He wasn't so stupid that his imagination wouldn't compensate for the reality of his situation, and he knew damn well he hadn't a single comforting reverie to cling to. Sherlock's bursts of affection, if they could be called that, weren't driven by sexual need. Yes, he seemed to like John's company and he smiled at John far more than he smiled at anyone else, but maybe that was a result of John's admiration. Not even the loneliness that might have been engendered by the rest of the world's unwillingness to appreciate Sherlock's brilliance prompted anything that might have resembled longing. He simply hadn't any need for John beyond companionship. And that was all.

Well, it had been a nice day despite Maisie's assertion, and he was pleasantly tired from the salt air and a few invigorating walks on the beach. Maybe it was good to get away from Sherlock for just a while. Though if Maisie was right, he hadn't done, really.

The sky was lilac, with grey drifting plumes of cloud, and John zipped up his cardigan against the cool air as he trotted toward home. He ascended the stairs and came into the flat to see Sherlock lying on the sofa, one arm crooked over his eyes, his jacket off and half-covering him. "Sherlock? You okay?"

Sherlock stirred and mumbled, then took his arm away from his eyes and sat up. "What time is it?"

"Almost half seven."

A gusting sigh escaped Sherlock's lips, and he sank back down. "Nice day?"

"Yeah, lovely. We had lunch, walked a lot, stuck our feet in the water." John thumped into his chair and regarded Sherlock curiously. He looked a bit frazzled. "Er…did you talk to Mycroft?"

"Yep." Sherlock brought his phone out. "He said he'd take care of it."

"That's good." John stifled his sigh of relief. It was telling, clearly, that he hadn't given overmuch thought to the problem of his gun – he had more faith in Mycroft, or at least the extent of Mycroft's power, than he'd suspected. But it was still reassuring to know.

Sherlock's phone pinged with a text. "Maybe that's him…." He thumbed the screen, and John sorted through the post on the side table, determined not to be too eager. Bills. Magazine subscription past-due notices: Lancet, Wired, Scientific American, Vogue. Vogue? That had to be a mistake.

"John. Turn on BBC News."

John glanced up. "Say again?"

"Turn it on. Now." Sherlock's face was deadly pale, his eyes wide. He had dark circles beneath them, as though he hadn't slept for weeks – odd, since Sherlock seemed to thrive on chronic insomnia.

"Are you okay?"

For an answer, Sherlock threw his jacket aside and lunged for the remote control on the table. He switched on the television and found the news channel.
"…today in Brighton following an unexplained fire." The journalist gleamed at the camera, his collar matching the improbable whiteness of his teeth. "After the fire was extinguished, Sussex police identified the body as being that of Darren Christopher Tuttle, a resident of Hackney, East London, and a known underworld figure."

John turned to Sherlock. "What –" He looked back at the screen. A picture of a young, ferrety, and vaguely familiar-looking man had replaced the journalist.

"Although results from the post-mortem examination have yet to be released, sources indicate possible homicide, as Mr Tuttle had been shot and there were multiple wounds on his body from what appeared to be a knife. Mr Tuttle was a member of the criminal organisation popularly known as the New Barnet Six, a smuggling gang apprehended by detective Sherlock Holmes." Now a picture of Sherlock – glamorous, his collar turned up and his hair wild – replaced Tuttle’s. "Tuttle was the only member of the organisation to escape imprisonment and was aiding the police in further inquiries. We now turn to Louis Eckling, forensic psychologist – Mr Eckling, chances are, given the circumstances, that this was a crime perpetrated from within the prison system. Tell us about the motivation that can lead to an event like this."

Sherlock hit the remote, and the screen went blank.

"I don't understand," John said. "I mean, yeah, I remember him now, but –"

Sherlock got to his feet and handed his phone to John.

"What's this?" John squinted at the screen. It was a photo of a body – a bleeding body – with a hand holding a weapon in the foreground. Next to the body was a petrol can. "Oh my God. Is that him?"

"The gun, John," Sherlock said faintly.

John put the phone close to his nose. "Oh. Oh, Christ." If it wasn't his, it looked…no, it was his. No mistake.

Sherlock sat on the sofa again. "Now look at the next message."

John scrolled up.

*Turn on the news. :)*

Both messages were from undisclosed senders.

The room was warm, even close, but suddenly John was freezing. Icy sweat formed between his shoulder blades, under his arms. "Oh, fuck. Fuck." He closed his eyes. Brighton. Oh, fuck. "Sherlock, you said –" He turned, startled, at a sudden thump.

Sherlock was crumpled on the floor.

"Oh –" John shoved the table aside and dropped to his knees. "Not again. Fuck this."

He dialled 999.
Special thanks: as ever, to kimberlite, beta extraordinaire, and to Marnidom, for eagle-eyed Britpicking.

Sorry for the delay on this one. RL has been particularly intrusive.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as ever, to Kimberlite for beta and Marnidom for Britpicking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*  

"Mr Cumberbatch."

"Mr Cumberbatch."

Bugger off.

"Mr. Cumberbatch? Are you all right?"

Sherlock opened his eyes and glared at the man hovering uncertainly above him. Not literally hovering. That would have been something. "What?"

"Are you ill, sir? Shall I call a doctor?"

Yeah. Call Dr Watson, please. Not certain your mobile's up to the task as apparently he's in another universe. "I'm fine."

The man, who wore a narrowly cut blue chalk-striped suit and a fussy moustache, straightened and cleared his throat. "One doesn't like to... that is, ah, you seemed to be asleep, sir."

"Then why did you wake me?"

The man's eyes widened and he took a tiny step backward. "I can call a taxicab for you if you wish, Mr Cumberbatch." His voice and posture went stiff and chilly.

Sherlock refrained from rolling his eyes – it was shockingly tiresome to have to play Benedict Cumberbatch, Glad-Hander and Public Arse-Kisser at all times. He swung himself up and offered the man a grin. His head swam. "Terribly sorry about that. I was feeling a bit faint and had to have a lie-down. It's not really on to fall asleep in the... Where am I again? "...gents'," he finished.

Chalk Stripe Appalling Moustache melted into sticky pudding. "Oh, it's perfectly all right, Mr Cumberbatch. It's just that another patron saw you and was afraid that you might be ill. I wanted to check, just to ensure that you weren't in need of medical attention. I hope it wasn't the food."

He gave a rich, rolling chuckle. "If you're still feeling faint, I can certainly call a doctor, and there won't be any fuss. I can take you to my office."

"Oh, no. I'm fine, absolutely fine," Sherlock said, getting to his feet. Wobbly. Still a bit wobbly. "You're very kind, Mr...?"

"Penfield, sir. Phillip Penfield, manager of the clubroom." He shook Sherlock's hand vigorously. "A
real honour to meet you. I'm a great fan of your work."

Orange Ferragamo tie in flamboyant Balthus knot, pink pocket square folded just so, but paisley shirt in startling combination of pinks and oranges, un-pressed – unusual for someone with such meticulous attention to detail. Thinning hair hastily combed, product distributed with irregularity. Voice roughened, possible recent abuse. Alcohol drifting from pores, poor attempt to cover via liberal application of Eau de Guerlain. Threads of pink in the eyes, errors in shaving, slight smear of toothpaste at corner of mouth. Late, or distracted this morning, screaming match with spouse. No chance to eat or drink or look in the mirror, possibly because he'd been busy having it off with one of the clubroom waiters (vague odour of semen on breath). Likely outcome: divorce within three months, sacking due to escalated drinking and general incompetence in six.

"You might try looking for another job soon."

Chalk Stripe frowned in puzzlement. "I…sorry?"

Right. "Well. It's just that you're so very kind and accommodating, not calling the police because you probably thought I was a vagrant at first. You should just spread yourself around a bit more. You've got so much to give, I can tell." Sherlock patted the man's arm.

"That's…that's really good of you, Mr Cumberbatch. I needed that lift today. Thanks."

"Pleasure's all mine." God.

"If you ever need a table on short notice, please don't hesitate to call me."

"How nice." Sherlock sauntered toward the door. "If it's that ginger waiter with the snake tattoo on his upper arm, you should probably hold off – incipient signs of HHV-1 on his upper lip. 'Bye now."

"What?"

Sherlock banged the loo door shut, stuck his hands in his hair for a hearty rumpling, remembered how awful it looked, then decided it wouldn't make a difference. Just as he'd finished, he heard the door opening and fled, unable to make more conversation with Brainless Adulterer Balthus Knot.

Clear sign of overcompensation anyhow, those knots. Sad, really.

The tepid-bath closeness of the afternoon air engulfed him the moment he stepped outside. Revolting, particularly at this latitude. This universe's global-warming crisis must have been a much grimmer reality than his own. He sniffed: the usual mélange of fuel exhaust, cooking odours, simmering rubbish, and the perfumed, soaped, or unwashed smell of human bodies. Not much different – just hotter. Awful.

"Taxi, sir?" the doorman inquired.

"Please." At least something was going right, he reflected as the cab pulled up promptly. Sherlock tipped the doorman, gave the cabbie his address, and climbed inside, grateful for the quiet, glad to be off his feet – how much wine had he drunk, anyhow? – and happy to be away from the teeming masses.

Okay. A strategic error had been made, certainly. He was prepared to admit that. It had been a bad moment and given another opportunity he wouldn't do it again, but it wasn't really his fault. Wine and temporal-spatial anomalies clearly didn't mix well, and any other person in his predicament would have likely gone off the rails ages ago if Cumberbatch's stammering panic was any measure
by which to judge. Sherlock closed his eyes for a moment, not wanting to imagine the havoc Cumberbatch was wreaking in 221B and beyond. Moriarty in the flat. Absolutely perfect timing. He'd have to trust John to maintain a facsimile of sanity, but with Cumberbatch in the mix there was just no telling.

So, it could have been worse and in fact probably was in Sherlock's universe. It was only a matter of time before things went absolutely pear-shaped, and London went up in flames. Probably. Maybe Mycroft would get wind of things and pull Cumberbatch out of the picture. Mycroft wasn't above forcibly removing Sherlock from a scenario if it suited his needs.

Mycroft wouldn't have reacted to Sherlock's advances as amenable as Gatiss had, either.

Sherlock put his head in his hands and groaned. Strategic error, *ha*. He didn't even need John to tell him that he'd made a hash of things. Of course, had John been with him Sherlock wouldn't have even approached Mycroft. Mark. And Tom. About Tom.

Obviously he and Cumberbatch were in the fledgling stage of their relationship. Given TWH's touchy-feely behaviour and obvious affection, Sherlock would have pegged him for the sort who was desperate for love and grateful for whatever morsel of attention Cumberbatch could spare, but possibly there was a bit more to it. Stupid, stupid and unpredictable, nothing but reward circuitry triggered by dopamine production flooding the limbic system, what should have been a simple, straightforward reaction, but it was never, ever the same. And it wasn't even *interesting*, and it didn't last. On average, mutual sexual obsession lasted six months, give or take a few weeks. Half a year of frantic scrabbling and swollen genitalia before the brain came to the rescue and saved the self from immolation. Murders committed in the throes of passion were boring, too, solved in a day, and when one came right down to it he didn't give a damn about Thomas W Hiddleston's aching heart or manly tears. It wasn't his world and he hadn't asked to be brought here.

*John would be disappointed in you.*

"I don't *need* the reminder," Sherlock hissed, and saw the cabbie glance over his shoulder in puzzlement. He was about to apologise, but to hell with Cumberbatch's reputation. It could probably stand a little dirtying, since he was evidently the crown prince of understanding human emotion. Treating his flatmate like dirt *indeed* - he didn't know a damn thing, so to hell with him. To hell with them all, in fact.

He wasn't far from Cumberbatch's house, but he rapped sharply on the partition just the same. "I'll get out here." He gave the cabbie a generous tip – again, wasn't his money, who cared? – and got out of the cab, striding into the heat. He had to walk, to move and try to purge the frustration that was churning inside him.

"Hey, you're Sherlock!" someone cried. American accent.

"Piss off," Sherlock snarled, and kept moving. He picked up speed, trying to get the heaviness of the wine out of his limbs and brain. Water, lots of it, when he got home. Not home. Not his bloody home.

He made it to the house without further incident, let himself in and slammed the door hard. On the way to the kitchen he shucked his jacket, leaving it on the floor, and kicked his shoes off.

*Powerful act of rebellion there* John's voice tutted drily.
"Shut up." He opened the fridge, found bottles of water labelled Fiji, took two, opened one, and upended it over his head.

Cold, cold, cold, and lovely. He pushed soaking hair out of his eyes, dropped the bottle to the floor, opened the second, and tilted it into his mouth. It wound down his throat into his stomach in a bright little stream, re-energising, irrigating him.

Better.

Standing in his sock feet in a puddle of chilly, expensive water, he let the empty bottle drop to the floor and sighed. That had done it for his body, but not for his restless brain. Yanking Cumberbatch's phone out of his pocket, he glared at it for a moment and then texted TWH.

_It's pointless being angry at me. The science of human sexuality is far more diverse than_ 

No, that wouldn't do it.

_People don't own each other. You_

No.

_Monogamy is a function of_

Damn it.

_You should be angry at your actual boyfriend. I'm not really B_

_God, no!

_I admit that was probably a mis_

The phone vibrated a bit. New text. He'd felt it several times over the course of the afternoon, but had ignored it blithely. Maybe TWH, though. No, someone called Karon. He opened it just the same.

_Still trying to get hold of you. Are you OK? CALL PLEASE. URGENT._

No.

He deleted it and started a new text.

_I can explain, but it's_

No, he couldn't.

_I'm sorry. Call me._

"Stupid," he muttered, and erased it. What the hell was he thinking? It wasn't his problem, not really, and was there anything more tedious than being asked to account for oneself? Not that TWH had asked, specifically, but still. Stupid.

Quickly, he browsed a few other texts.

_You OK? Heard what happened. L_

_Caitlin M called, said you closed door in her face. Please tell me that was a mistake. K_
Dropping some stuff by later, will leave in library. Em

We NEED this interview. Please call. K

Are you back in town? Fancy a drink or twelve? JR

I am a genius. Call me. A

I think I've got the hang of this! XX Dad

Sherlock deleted the rest unread. None of them were from TWH.

The phone trembled again, and he looked at the readout. Text message, MG. Oh God.

I think it's better if we just forget about it.

Good idea. Sherlock put the phone face-down on the sleek, spotless worktop and roamed the house, his socks squelching water. He went from front room to hallway to library (neat package of post and books and thick magazines in a cotton carrier bag sitting by the laptop, a note with 'B' sitting atop it) up to the bedroom, second bedroom, small room holding cardboard boxes and a pile of middling-quality luggage, bathroom, back to bedroom, dressing room. The wild disarray of clothes was gone; the clothes and accessories were back on hangers, folded, stacked on shelves. A single vivid full-blown vermilion-coloured rose stood in a bud vase on the night table.

Sherlock stalked to the table, picked the vase up, and held it in his hand lightly, as if it were a live grenade. He hesitated for an instant, then gave in to impulse and hurled it across the room, where it shattered against the wall, staining the doubtless ruinously expensive wallpaper and leaving shards of crystal and velvety petals scattered on the thick carpet.

He hated this, this excess of luxury, this studied, professionally cleaned perfection. He'd quit reading tabloids when they'd stopped covering gruesome too-hot-for-ordinary-news press and had begun to focus on actors and rock stars and television presenters, because the latter was beyond pointless. Trapped in a body, in an entire world beneath his notice, a cosmic joke of the lowest order, where his work – the work, the only work, had been reduced to a television programme. Entertainment.

That tore it. He had to get out. He couldn't stay a moment longer. There had to be a way back. If he went back to Cardiff, back to that set – possibly there was a portal, for lack of a better word, some way back to his London. He should have stayed put in the first place, but there was nothing else for it now. He'd electrocute himself again if he had to.

Stripping off his wet socks, he found fresh, dry ones and put them on, then bounded downstairs, taking the steps in threes. He scooped up the phone, Cumberbatch's jacket, and was just wrenching Cumberbatch's shoes onto his feet again when the doorbell rang.

"Oh, for God's sake –" If it was that journalist again, he was going to tell her where to go. One shoe in hand, he yanked the door open, glaring.

"Oh, good, you're home!"

Sherlock gaped.

Molly?

Molly Hooper, in a swingy yellow dress with a repeating motif of red high-wheeled Victorian bicycles and pointy red lace-up shoes.
No, not Molly. But the eyes, the smile – warm, yes, but not shrinking and timid like Molly. Altogether different. Molly's actress. Name escaped him.

Not-Molly thrust forward a small package, a pale green and gilt box tied with a white satin ribbon. "Macarons. Proven antidote to electrical shock trauma."

Strangely frozen, Sherlock stared down at the package. What next? Was the Moriarty actor, whatever-his-name-was-Scott-something, and the only reason he remembered that was the name Scott, planning to swan up with a hand-knitted tea cosy and pots of jam? Numb, he reached out and took the package. Red fingernails. Molly didn't paint her fingernails. Too much interference from morgue chemicals, despite gloves. Wasn't worth the time it took, she'd said.

"You going to let me in, or are you going to leave me out here on the doorstep and make all the neighbours talk?"

"Brealey," Sherlock said, remembering. Louise Brealey. Went by Loo. Anyone who permitted themselves to be called after a toilet probably had worse self-esteem than Molly, if that was possible. Except clearly she didn't. Maybe.

Brealey – Loo – winked and laughed. "Oh, good, not all the brain cells got fried." She reached up, cupping his cheek, kissed him lightly on the mouth, and went into the house as Sherlock moved aside. "I'm not staying. I've got a date. But I wanted to see how you were holding up. I expected to find you with all your hair burnt off and your skin blackened, creature-style."

What was she banging on about? Sherlock closed the door and followed her into the kitchen. "Yes. Well. Electrical shocks don't really work that way if the current is low."

"Rumours of your death are greatly exaggerated." She set a small red frame handbag and the box of treats on the gleaming worktop, untied the ribbon, and opened it, revealing three rows of different-coloured macarons. "Pistachio, rose petal, and caramel. Pick one."

Aware that he felt off-balance from more than the afternoon's debacle, Sherlock chose a fragile little biscuit and took a bite. Caramel – light, delicately flavoured, fragrant and crisp, melting on the tongue with the faintest hint of salt. "Mm."

Loo took a pink biscuit and nibbled at it. "Poor baby, you look done in. Was it awful?"

"It wasn't bad - I was out for a moment, not long enough to cause concern. As I said, the current wasn't strong enough to do serious damage. They took me to hospital and looked me over."

"Right," Loo replied with a snicker. "No doubt. Surprised you didn't show up on somebody's Instagram."

Sherlock blinked. "Ultimately they determined that no real harm had been done, and I came back to…to London. With, er, Martin."

"I'm glad he was there to look after you."

He called me a vain fucking numpty. Though John might have done the same, in slightly less vulgar language. But only slightly. "Yes. I'm fine now."

"That's good news. Mark had me scared for a bit. I gather there was a hoo-ha about it on set."

Oh, God. "You spoke to him? When?"
"Yesterday." Molly finished her macaron and daintily brushed at a crumb on her lip. "I've got time for a cup of tea."

"Actually, I was just –"

"Oh, have you got something going on? Sorry. Is it this mystery person you've been seeing? Such secrecy." She glowed at him, impossibly jolly, forward, and not at all giggling or twitching as was Molly's wont. It was unnerving.

"I'm not seeing anybody. At all," Sherlock said sourly, and then realised how sour he sounded. "At the moment," he amended, which was no more than the truth. Sort of.

She peered at him curiously. "Hmm. Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much?"

"You wanted tea." Sherlock lurched to a row of cupboards and began to throw them open. There wasn't a kettle on the range. How could there not be a kettle? Wasn't Cumberbatch a human adult, for God's sake? And tea, where was the tea? He'd seen milk in the fridge, so that was all right –"

"Are you lost?" Loo sounded amused.


"Water's fine. Are you okay?" She tilted her head to one side and watched him curiously.

"Yeah. Yes." Sherlock dove into the fridge and got another bottle of water, handing it to her. She frowned at it for a moment, then shrugged, opened the cap, and drank. "So, back to it on Wednesday, then?"

"What?"

"Filming. Ben, I think you'd better sit down. You're pacing. I'm keeping you from something, I think."

"I was going to go back to Cardiff." Oh. No.

Loo hoisted herself onto the worktop and let her feet dangle back and forth. "Why?"

Oh, no reason. I'm trapped here, I rode to a completely alien London with an obscenity-spewing facsimile of my flatmate, got tossed off by Cumberbatch's boyfriend, tossed him off whilst he was tied up and blindfolded – boring – practically got attacked on the tube, just fellated the man who plays my brother on a television programme, the boyfriend's ignoring me because of it, and now you turn up and you're nothing like Molly at all. I'm either going to go in search of some skag in the next hour or go round the bend and take half of London with me and I don't trust the skag here, so my options appear to be reduced by fifty percent. Why? No reason. Why do you ask? "I just think it's better if I go back. I've got to sort a few things out."

"Oh, darling, I think you're still a bit shaken, aren't you? Come here." She caught his hand and drew him close, embracing him. Reluctantly, he encircled her in his arms. She smelled nice, a pretty accord of citrus, white flowers, and musk. "I'm worried about you," she whispered against his throat.

"I'm all right," he said stiffly.

"Are you really not seeing anybody?"

"No."
"Good." Loo pulled back and smiled at him. "Because you're tense, and I think you need to relax a bit." Slowly, her legs wound round him, pulling him against the lower cupboard. Her knees pressed against his thighs. "And I can think of a few ways to help."

"I –" Sherlock began, but Molly – not Molly, Loo – put a finger to his lips.

"Shh." She threaded her fingers through his hair and gently pulled him close. "Been a while, hasn't it?"

Sherlock, utterly stupefied, found his lips mashed against hers, and then she pushed her tongue into his mouth. She tasted of sugar and roses from the macaron. "Mff –"

Loo wriggled closer, her hands sliding down his back, pinning his upper arms, and pressed herself against him. Amazingly, he found his mouth opening, allowing her to explore, and felt her legs tightening, imprisoning him. Heat greater than the sweltering outdoor temperature enveloped him, and he let her have her way with his mouth, let her hands roam as they would, caressing his back, his arms, his arse. His cock stirred and began to swell, and through the distant thought that Cumberbatch's libido was so out of control it was amazing he didn't have a raging sexually transmitted disease – assuming he didn't, at any rate – he found his hands moving down, clasping her small, tight buttocks and kneading.

Her fingers found his trousers and unbuttoned, unzipped, and fumbled a bit, and his cock was freed from its confinement of fabric. Sherlock stifled a groan as she rubbed, and then did groan as her arms and legs trapped him even more thoroughly. He closed his eyes, grabbed her arse harder, wanting to be overcome, pinned to the floor, rutting, teeth closing on his throat and John whispering exactly what was going to happen into Sherlock's ear, and –

Sherlock cried out as he released, a shuddering orgasm that froze him to the spot. He held perfectly still, conscious that Brealey had pulled away from him, but kept his eyes closed. He'd said it, hadn't he? Even if it had only been in his head.

John.

"Well. That was…quick."

Sherlock opened his eyes and looked down at Loo. Her hair was a bit mussed and she was examining the skirt of her dress carefully, but she didn't seem terribly annoyed. "Mo – my goodness. Erm." His voice shook a bit.

"You are stressed." She gave him a rueful smile. "It's okay."

"What do you mean?"

"Well…." Loo lifted one well-groomed eyebrow and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, keeping her eyes fixed on his. "We can finish upstairs. Not a problem."

Sherlock tried to process this and couldn't. "I am finished."

Loo's mischievous expression dissolved slowly, like time-lapse photography. "Sorry?"

"I really have to leave." Sherlock stepped back and dug in his pocket for a handkerchief. He cleaned up hastily, readjusted his underwear, zipped, tucked, and buttoned, and tossed the soiled handkerchief in the bin. He washed his hands in the sink, then realised that Loo was still sitting on the worktop. He walked over and held out a hand. "Down you go." She didn't move, and her mouth was open in evident surprise; apparently something was wrong. "Sorry, I think that was a mistake."
"A mistake - now hang on just a minute. What about reciprocity? We agreed –"

"Oh, right." Sherlock brushed his lips against her cheek. "I've got to owe you one, I'm afraid." Go. Now. Immediately.

Loo shook her head. "You selfish…oh, for God's sake, never mind," she said in a soft, marvelling voice. Climbing down from the worktop, she gathered up her handbag and marched to the door, then turned around and glared. "You know, if you didn't have time, you should have said so, instead of letting me toss you off and then shoving me out the door. What's got into you?"

"I'm having a bad day," Sherlock snapped, tired of palaver.

"Yeah, I guess so. Thanks for sharing. Enjoy the macarons." She opened the door. "See you Wednesday. And you bloody owe me, you arsehole!" The door banged shut, rattling the little corridor sconce.

Sherlock leant against the wall, suddenly exhausted.

What was that? What the hell? She and Cumberbatch were casual bedmates? Where did TWH fit into that? Did they have ménages-a-trois, or….

Oh, no – right. Mystery person. Cumberbatch wasn't letting on about TWH. Oh, God. Why all the secrecy? Except Gatiss knew, apparently, so was it some sort of top-secret gentlemen's club thing? What was wrong with these people, for God's sake?

Furious, he took out Cumberbatch's phone, erased the last few messages that had come in – all from that Karon person – and texted Tom.

You're being unreasonable.

He erased it. To hell with TWH. Sherlock was declaring him Officially Not His Problem. He didn't have time for bad-telly romantic misunderstandings.

Another text from Karon. "Leave me alone," Sherlock growled, went to delete it, and accidentally opened it instead.

You're trending on Twitter. Not in a good way. I need an explanation.

There was a link; he followed it. User @twoknotszed declared: Benedict Cumberbatch just told me to piss off. #benedictcumberbatch #wanker #fuckwit #fuckyoutoo

Sherlock chuckled and left the phone on the hall table. Morons.

His urgency to leave had diminished. Not only did he not have a destination, he wanted very much to be where other people were not, and at the moment the only place where that was possible was here in Cumberbatch's house. And besides, he was a bit dirty and sticky.

He went upstairs, shed his clothes, and stepped into the shower, luxuriating under the powerful spray. He shampooed his hair, digging his fingertips into his scalp – even the air felt dirtier here – and took up one of those puffy net things to scrub his body with some bright, peppery-smelling body wash.

As he was rinsing off, a bright flash obscured his vision. He wavered, put a hand out to steady himself, and fell forward into whiteness. His kneecaps banged hard onto the floor, and he saw a hundred water droplets spattering on the floor beneath him.
"Oh, fuck."

Sherlock looked up through a curtain of wet hair and saw Cumberbatch glaring down at him. "Oh. Hello."

"You're naked, for Christ's sake!"

"So I am," Sherlock said, and got to his feet with a wince. His knees hurt.

"Dear God," Cumberbatch muttered, and averted his eyes.

"This is your body," Sherlock reminded him, and held out his arms like the Vitruvian Man. *Drink it in, idiot.* "Besides, most people strip before getting in the shower."

Cumberbatch's eyes narrowed. "You're certainly making yourself comfortable in my house."

"If you'd like me to stay dirty, say the word," Sherlock said, and drew his hands through his hair. "By the way, your hair is disastrous. You should think about cutting it short if you can't control it."

"I can't cut it, I'm filming, you twat. Oh, never mind. Look, we probably haven't got a lot of time, considering what happened the last two –"

"Time," Sherlock whispered. He brought his wrist up to look at his watch, then realised he was naked. "Right. What time is it?"

"Half seven-ish."

"Same time as yesterday. Same time as the accident. Accidents," Sherlock said, acknowledging Cumberbatch with a brief sweep of his hand. Definitely a repeating temporal issue." He folded his hands together and closed his eyes.

"What…like *Groundhog Day*?"

Sherlock opened his eyes. "What?"

"Never mind. I had the idea that we could –"

"If it happens again – that is, if we switch back and we're still trapped in each other's universe – I see no reason why it shouldn't happen again, balance of probability and all that, I want you to contact Mycroft."

"I –"

Sherlock steam-rolled over Cumberbatch. "If anybody can help, Mycroft can. He does prove himself useful now and then. At the very least, he can go to England's top physicists with the problem. The Centre for Theoretical Physics, possibly. Maybe CERN, I don't know."

"Yeah, I –"

"Tell him what's happened, if he hasn't already sorted it out. Tell him to the best of your ability, though God knows you'll probably make a hash of it, exactly what happens when we're in this space together, and don't forget to tell him it happens at the same time every –" Sherlock broke off as Cumberbatch's hand flashed out and cracked him across the face.

"Ow."

"Ow."

Cumberbatch examined his palm.
Sherlock touched his burning cheek. "What the hell was that?"

"You wouldn't shut up. I don't like violence, but…." A grin spread across Cumberbatch's face. "I've got to admit that felt really good."

"Not to me!"

"If we switch back and it leaves a mark, I'll just say I was mugged. Which I was. Kidnapped, that is. By your brother." Cumberbatch lunged forward and grabbed Sherlock's hand. "I had the thought that if we were physically connected when the thing happens again –"

"The thing."

"You know what I mean," Cumberbatch said. "Don't get pedantic, for fuck's sake. Your charming brother kidnapped me this afternoon, following a fish-and-chips lunch at his house during which I apparently did not behave as you would have done at all. He had a couple of thugs drag me from my taxi and inject me with a sedative, and then they took me to a torture chamber in Whitehall, and Mycroft threatened to waterboard me, or whatever, until I told him everything. So I did."

Sherlock grinned. "Good old Mycroft."

"Yeah. Lovely guy." Cumberbatch's voice dripped sarcasm. "The point is, he knows, and he's working on the problem." He hesitated. "You two…"

"Yes?"

"You have a…a thing?"

Sherlock's body warmed a bit – maybe not so bad, since he was naked. "Why?"

"He, erm, tested me. You –"

"Did you have sex with my brother? Oh, God, why am I not surprised? Hollywood libidos." Not that it was a particle of Cumberbatch's business. Good God, had they done? And Mycroft took such elaborate pains to pretend that nothing had ever happened between them. Bastard.

"Excuse me? He initiated it, and nothing happened. Besides, you fucked Tom."

Sherlock thought about confessing to the dalliances with Gatiss and Brealey, and thought better of it. "Not recently. He's not very happy with me at the moment."

Cumberbatch's expression grew stormy. "Why?"

_Oh. _"He's awfully clingy," Sherlock hedged. "How do you stand it?"

"He's affectionate, you horse's arse. That's what affection is like, not that you would know. All you've got is your fucked-up relationship with your brother." Cumberbatch flung Sherlock's hand away and stalked to the outermost edge of the white space. "Oh, and not that you give a shit, but your flatmate is being framed for murder by Jim Moriarty. He stole John's gun and used it to commit a murder in Brighton, where John spent the day. I asked Mycroft for help and he said he would, but I don't think he got to the files in time, I'm not certain. So, you know, cheers for asking about him."

Sherlock grew very still. "You can't let that happen."

Cumberbatch wheeled on him. "What the fuck do you expect me to do about it?"
"You go to Brighton, you find out who actually committed the murder, and you have them arrested. Get Mycroft to help you, get Lestrade – Christ, get Donovan and Anderson if you have to, because clearly you're not competent to resolve this on your own."

"I'm not competent? Tom is getting threatening stalker letters, and you blow it off as if it's nothing. As if a threatening fan is *nothing*." 

"Oh, please. My fans threaten me all the time."

"I'm going to hit you again."

Sherlock took a step backward. "I'll hit you back."

"Listen to me, Sherlock. As long as you're there, presumably doing nothing, you could at the very least work out who's sending him the letters. Report them to the police. Help him. He's a good man, a very good man, and he doesn't deserve to be terrorised by some lunatic." Cumberbatch sighed and rubbed his hands back and forth on his thighs. Nervous habit. "Please. I promise to help John as much as I can. I would whether or not you asked me to."

Sherlock searched Cumberbatch's face. *His* face. Eyes red and weary, dark circles beneath, paler than usual. Suit and shirt rumpled, hair a bit awry – though nowhere nearly as awful as Sherlock's in Cumberbatch's body. Clear indicators of stress, unhappiness, worry. For himself? Or, possibly, for John?

"All right," Sherlock said quietly. "I will." He bit his lower lip. "Is John okay?"

"He's upset, obviously, but fairly composed, I guess. He's a tough guy." Cumberbatch smiled a little.

Sherlock couldn't help smiling back, just a twitch of the mouth. "He is."

"He's...he's really fond of you, you know." Cumberbatch cleared his throat a little. "I thought all those fan fiction writers were projecting...it's built into the show, I know that, but it surprised me."

"Fan fi—" Lightning-like sheets of radiance blinded Sherlock. He lifted his arm to block the light.

Cumberbatch's voice boomed out, but distantly, as if he'd been yanked backward into a tunnel. "Your hand —"

Sherlock fell forward, his palms slapping wetly against a black-and-white hexagonally tiled floor. Water cascaded onto his back, his head, dripped into his eyes. He blinked, glanced up at the expensive rainfall showerhead, the recessed lights in the ceiling, and leant back against the cool tiled wall.

"Damn it," he whispered.

*  

Sherlock found a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms that replicated his own clothes with a fair degree of comfort, and went downstairs to boot up the laptop. He made a prosciutto and Gruyere sandwich and after some digging, located the teakettle and tea in the pantry and made a pot, taking it to Cumberbatch's library.
He'd keep his promise to Cumberbatch, though likely TWH would slam the door in his face. It shouldn't take long, and perhaps he'd be able to set everything to rights – if Tom had any sense of gratitude, at least. Though if he'd been really worried, he'd have gone to the police already. Honestly, the whole affair was scarcely worth his time, but he had promised. Though he doubted Cumberbatch could do a thing for John – he'd have to get Mycroft and Lestrade involved. Sherlock's reputation would be scarred for life. Maybe it was best that he didn't get back; he'd never live the shame down. He had a sudden reverie: disappear as Benedict Cumberbatch, move somewhere else for a while – Florence, Stockholm, Boston – resume his career as a consulting detective, and carve out a new life. It was possible. Of course, he'd never see John again, but that….

No. Not an option, not even a shred of an option. Sherlock set down his sandwich, gulped at his tea, and opened Google.

**Fan fiction.**

Fanfiction dot net. World's largest fanfiction archive and forum where fanfic writers and readers around the globe gather to share their passion.

Not an explanation.

Oh! God bless Wikipedia. Simplistic in the extreme, occasionally – as now - useful.

*Fan fiction, or fanfiction (often abbreviated as fan fic, fanfic, or simply fic), is a broadly defined fan labor term for stories about characters or settings written by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creator. Works of fan fiction are rarely commissioned or authorized by the original work's owner, creator, or publisher; also, they are almost never professionally published. Due to these works' not being published, stories often contain a disclaimer stating that the creator of the work owns none of the original characters. Fan fiction is defined by being both related to its subject's canonical fictional universe and simultaneously existing outside the canon of that universe. Most fan fiction writers assume that their work is read primarily by other fans, and therefore tend to presume that their readers have knowledge of the canon universe (created by a professional writer) in which their works are based.*

The original work. So – the programme, *Sherlock* was the original work, those strange Victorian-era stories notwithstanding, and people wrote stories about him and John and their adventures. Presumably. He found the story archive and searched for his own name.

*The Case of the Confused Detective – one-shot, romance. A girl moves into 221C and makes the world's only consulting detective confused! Is this his area? Read & Review!!*  

Safe to say that it wasn't. He moved on and opened one randomly.

"How do you like that, Sherlock?" Moriarty giggled. He stroked the detective's raven-black curls and looked into his silver eyes. "Daddy does, even if you don't!"

Dear God. Moving on.

*The blonde wriggled under the dark-haired man and moaned.*

No.

_Sherlock smiled sardonically, and in that moment his eyes met John's across the space between them. Their gazes held, and John had the curious conviction that Sherlock knew very well that his was more than just an idle interest._
Sherlock paused. Was that what Cumberbatch had meant? Projection, reading into glances or gestures…of course, that was the problem with a work of fiction in the first place, wasn’t it? Absolutely no control on the part of the creators once the thing had been released into the wild. People were free to make all sorts of stupid interpretations. Why, the past few months had seen a bizarre uptick in the number of newspaper articles written about him and John, and there had been some that had been salacious. He’d ignored them properly, but John had been upset, prompting yet another round of protestations, but if what Cumberbatch had said was true, there had been some sort of…underlying emotional subtext, for lack of a better term. That said, it didn't mean that there was subtext in Sherlock and John's life – some kind of weird bleed-over. Granted, Sherlock had always watched John closely, but John didn't reciprocate, and he'd said from their very first day together that he wasn't interested. And so had Sherlock, thus the subject was done and dusted.

John's touch, delicate, yet demanding, as his fingers caressed Sherlock's most private part, evoked a piercingly sweet agony of longing, and his body of his own will began to writhe in rhythm with the movements of John's hand. But this time he was not content with a passive role, and with an urgent touch of John's hair Sherlock brought his mouth close, and his hand went unerringly to where John most wanted it.

"Oh." Florid, awful writing, but….

Fighting as much against himself as John, Sherlock struggled to escape, but there was no escape, not with John's mouth, warm and demanding, moving with half-fierce, half-gentle urgency against his. His arms were locked at his sides and his body crushed next to John's hard strength. He was conscious of so many things as he twisted in John's arms – the taste of him, the feel of his muscled legs, and most of all their naked state, for as his robe parted in his struggles so did John's, and he caught his breath as he brushed against John's member, feeling him full and heavy with desire. It was terrible, cheap romance-novel stuff, but Sherlock's face was hot and his cock stirred. Uneasily, he opened another story.

Was Sherlock ever scared beneath that arrogant exterior? John thought about all the things that he knew about Sherlock, and wondered about what he didn't know. Could you ever know someone inside? Not just the big things, but the little things too. The first case he solved, something that made him happy, something that made him cry...he wanted those parts to be inside him, to carry them around, but all he had were moments.

Of course, that wasn't John thinking those things. It was some fan seeing things that clearly weren't there, scribbling away at nonsense, coming up with absurdities, projecting their own loneliness and longings onto a couple of television actors.

It reminds John of a dance, this strange, strange life he is living now. He has been sentenced to the twenty years of boredom, and now, he is free.
There is one problem, though.

Sherlock is pale like an alien life form, his skin faintly glowing in the dark streets of London. He has the eyes of some strange nighttime creature, so bright that it hurts to look into them sometimes. His body goes on for miles and miles, his cheekbones seems freshly sharpened each morning and his hands are light and white like paper planes. When he plays the violin, one can almost see flames licking through his flesh and stroking the strings. He twirls through his insanity like a dervish, his coat and silver strands of thoughts fluttering behind him like faithful subjects.

In other words, John wants Sherlock to the point of being crazy from it. He stares, helplessly, on and on, day after day, because he cannot not stare; because normal people are unnerved by strange things, and John yearns after them. Soon, he abandons the pretense of not thinking about the flatmate when he brings himself off in the mornings; and in the evenings, the sound of the violin downstairs intertwines with his gasps. One day, he opens the book of that strange, strange man's poetry and finds Sherlock on every single page, in every single word. And he knows he is in it for good.

Did they believe these stories, these fan fiction writers? He'd never been inclined much toward fiction himself; why lose yourself in the unreal when there was limitless potential in the reality of this world, its uproars and enigmas, its visceral tangibilities and idiosyncrasies? And neither he nor John were capable of such exaggerated and passionate emotion. It wasn't them.

He went back to YouTube, to A Study in Pink. Startling, how accurate it was, but from John's point of view, it was…surely they hadn't looked at each other like that? It was true he'd taken to John right away, a feat that couldn't be duplicated, and true that he'd felt something, just a momentary frisson that made him examine John a bit more carefully, but….

Sherlock pushed the laptop away and went to the back garden. It was pretty, quiet, a little oasis of greenery with the city reverberating only faintly around it. He looked up at the indigo-coloured sky, a chill sending a shiver up his spine. The stories had cut oddly. Whether or not they were true, they had cast a shadow over him. He missed the size and shape of his own world; he missed John. He was unmoored and isolated in a universe where he only existed on television, and on pages and pages of stories.

So many people believed in them.

He watched the fading sky shift to black and went back inside. Finding Cumberbatch's phone, he dialled TWH. Maybe Cumberbatch was right. Tom wasn't a bad sort, even if he had the mannerisms of a gangly puppy. And maybe doing what he was meant to do would help him feel anchored.

No answer. Still angry, then. Or he'd shut the phone off. Sherlock tried a text.

I'm sorry. Please call.

He waited a long time, but Tom never replied.

* 

Threads of consciousness snaked into Tom's head slowly, sending stabs of discomfort into his body and brain long before he realised he was actually awake. Pulses of light winked in and out of his vision, a rushing sound assaulted his ears, and he couldn't rid his olfactory nerves of a terrible
chemical reek that hung over him like a noxious cloud.

Gradually the neural net tightened and he became aware of sensation. His cheek pressed against something rough and scratchy, and his arms and legs felt both limp and frozen. Something was moving underneath him. His head ached so badly that he was certain a hearty bout of vomiting was right around the corner. He hated to throw up; desperately, he swallowed until the nausea was beaten down, just a little. He groaned.

"Oh, you up, pal? Your friend Ben just texted you. What an utter cock he was. You're well rid of him, I'd say."

The voice was familiar, but Tom couldn't quite pinpoint who it was. His head hurt so much. He tried to sit up, but his body wouldn't let him and he slumped back down. He couldn't see at all – something soft pressed against his eyes.

"Whoa – hang on just a minute. Almost there. Really good timing. Couldn't have asked for better."

Who was that?

A flash of memory penetrated the fog in his head, and he remembered. He remembered everything. Henry, it's Henry. Spiked the drink. Why, for the love of God? He attempted motion again, but the stabbing agony in his head forced him to stay still. Another inarticulate noise, this time of mingled pain and confusion, escaped him. Henry had attacked him in his own home, and now…now the rushing noise and the perception of movement made sense. He was in a car, on the floor, his face pressed against a scratchy carpet. Henry wasn't one for pranks, and if he had been, drugging was beyond the pale even for an extreme prank, so what the hell was going on?

The day came into focus. He'd gone to lunch with Benedict and Mark and Ian, and apparently Benedict and Mark had had a little liaison in the gents'. Had it been the first, or just one of many? Tom had left, gone home, Henry and Graham had come by, had drinks, Henry had come back for his mobile and had pulled out something awful-smelling and pressed it to Tom's face. Not chloroform, couldn't be. Tom had never smelled it before, but the effect….

He tried to say Henry's name, but didn't get past the first syllable.

"Hold on, hold on, we're here. Won't be a moment."

The car stopped, and Tom heard a creak, and then the chunking noise of a closing door. He heard another creak and felt cold air on his face. He tried again. "Henry." Better.

"Yep. Come on, pal."

The scent of Henry's cologne filled Tom's nostrils as hands grabbed his arms and pulled. Tom grunted as his back and bum scraped over cold, unyielding metal and thumped onto cool grass. The air was damp and chilly, reminding him that he was only wearing running shorts. He planted his hands and tried to sit up.

"There you go, old chap." Henry got close again and heaved Tom up, wrapping an arm round his neck. "Can you walk? Not too far, but there are stairs, so be careful." Henry chuckled.

"What," Tom said, and another bolt of anguish flashed through his head again. He leant forward and retched helplessly, but didn't bring anything up. "Ohh." Nausea choked him.

Henry stopped. "If you're going to chunder, pal, do it now, otherwise you'll be sorry later." His voice had gone from warm and confiding to ice-cold.
"Can't."

"Well then. Right, on we go." He dragged Tom forward. "Christ, you're heavier than you look."

Tom's head swam. He wished Henry would take the thing from his eyes. "Henry. Why."

"All in good time." The jolliness was back in Henry's voice.

They went through a door and across a cold flagstone floor. Tom heard a click, and a rich waft of something sour drifted past his nose. He gagged, swallowed, implored his gorge to stay down, and felt Henry's arm tightening round his body. They went down a flight of wooden stairs, and he was dragged a bit further before Henry simply let go and Tom thudded to the floor, barking his knees and elbows.

"Here we are."

Tom breathed hard, trying to regain some semblance of equilibrium, and all at once the softness was yanked away from his eyes. He squinted, saw only dark grey, then something that felt like an anvil crashed into his kidneys, and he gasped, thrashing for air.

"Oh, fuck, I've waited so long to do that."

The weight slammed into him again – a foot, Henry was kicking him – and Tom curled up to protect himself. The urge to vomit flared again, but he swallowed, tears clouding his eyes, and cried out. "Henry – please –"


Tom managed to turn over and look around. He was in a smallish room, damp, smelly, lit by a bare dangling bulb on a chain. He had an impression of walls crowded by dark, hulking shapes that he realised was furniture: a wardrobe, stacked chairs, trunks. Henry was crouched over one shape, fussing with something. As he straightened and turned, Tom focussed his aching eyes and saw coils of rope in Henry's hands. "Henry…what are you doing? It's…."

"Shut your fucking mouth, Tom." Henry knelt beside Tom and pushed him onto his stomach. He grabbed Tom's arms, pulled his wrists together, and wound the rope round them, then tied them off in the middle.

"Henry, what the fuck – stop, stop!" A hard hand connected with the side of his head, leaving him dizzy.

"I told you –" Henry quickly wrapped rope around Tom's ankles, binding them tightly. "Shut up. I'm going to catch a few hours of sleep, and so are you. Can't have you making too much noise." He regarded Tom in silence for a moment. "Yeah."

"Please, Henry," Tom whispered. "Whatever's wrong, whatever it is I've done to upset you – I promise you, we can sort it out. Please, pl –" He had no chance to say another word. Henry wadded up a tea towel and stuffed it in Tom's mouth, then bound another length of rope around Tom's head. The fibers cut painfully into his skin. He shook his head wildly, trying to dislodge the gag, but Henry had tied it too tightly. Tears streamed from his eyes and he pleaded for release through the stifling cloth.

"You haven't worked it out yet, have you?" Henry smiled at him and patted his cheek. "Those letters? Hm?"
Tom went still.

"Come on, keep up. I know you're not stupid."

Slowly, Tom shook his head. No. No.

"Oh, yes. Mm." Henry, smiling benignly, reached into his pocket and withdrew a syringe. He uncapped it, squirted a bit of liquid out, and examined the tip. "The guy who sold this to me said it would keep a twelve-stone man out for about seven hours, give or take. So –" Swiftly, he injected the needle into Tom's bare upper arm. "Let's see how that works. You sleep awhile, and then we can start. We've got a couple of days. Your boyfriend might be a problem, but I think we can fix that too."

Tom began to struggle, but part of his brain couldn't accept what Henry was saying. Those letters – he'd been getting them for weeks. Why now, why Henry – and Benedict, oh, God –

"You're just accelerating it when you struggle, buddy, but that suits me. Going to have to attach you to something so you don't get too wriggly." He got up and went back to the shadowy piles of furniture against the wall.

*Oh, please, let this be a joke. Please.* He struggled harder and let out a smothered shriek of rage, frustration, and terror. His limbs felt heavy, and his head was swimming again.

As he faded out, he saw Henry's ruddy face, grinning.

* 

Chapter End Notes

A note on some of the italicized text, specifically referring to fanfic: The first through third sections as well as the seventh section are mine, made entirely of whole cloth. The fourth, fifth, and sixth are quoted almost word for word from a romance novel called *Lady Vixen* by Shirlee Busbee. The last is from the lyrical *The Burning Violin* by Moranion, who generously gave me carte blanche to quote from her work. Thank you, Moranion!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

As ever, many thanks to the fantabulous Kimberlite and Marnidom for beta and Britpicking.

*

"Sherlock. Oh, Jesus Christ, Sherlock. Wake up."

Benedict opened his eyes. "I'm up." He tried to rise into a sitting position and John, his face ever so slightly red from exertion – or maybe his day at the beach – gently, but firmly, pushed him back down again.

"Do not move."

"I –"

"Do not move," John said, pointing a finger at him. "You're going back to hospital."

"I'm fine." Benedict sank to the floor, closing his eyes. *Still here. Fuckity fuck.*

"Fine, my arse. That's the third time you've passed out in as many days. That I know of. Has it happened when I'm not with you? Don't you lie to me, Sherlock."

"No," Benedict said drearily. "No, you've been only too privileged to see it happen every time. But I swear, I'm perfectly all right."

"Bollocks. Stay down."

"Can't." Benedict attempted to sit up again, only to have John press him down once more.

"If I have to sit on you, I will."

*Promises, promises* Benedict thought with a touch of mordant wit. "We don't have time for hospital nonsense. We've got to get this sorted out."

"Listen to me. First off, you're not going to be much good to me if you're collapsed on the ground. Recurring syncope is nothing to fool with, and the periods of unconsciousness seem to be getting longer. I don't know what's wrong with you, but we're going to find out. You're getting an EEG and an EKG and I think probably an MRI's in order – you had a CT scan the other day, right?"

"I think so. John, if you let me up, I will demonstrate any sort of hand-eye coordination, proof of a steadily beating heart, motor and balance skills, whatever you like. Just let me –" He surged up again.

"Is this an effective technique on most of your patients?"

"It's an effective technique on stupid gits who don't have the good sense to listen to their doctor."
John held Benedict's gaze for a long moment. His face turned a darker red – maybe it was increasing blood pressure owing to his face-down suspension, but Benedict didn't think so, especially after John cleared his throat loudly and sat up, keeping his knees clamped close to Benedict's body but releasing his wrists and raising his pelvis a handspan, just far enough away to avoid physical contact.
"Anyhow, shut up. The second thing…right, the second thing is if the police have connected the gun to me, it's done. You haven't got time to get to Brighton, if that's what you were planning to do."

"Every minute you sit on top of me and crush my ribs is a minute I lose working this mess out. Don't be an idiot, John." Benedict tried to remember everything Sherlock had said. Go to Brighton, call Lestrade – would Lestrade be at the Met on a Saturday evening? It was still Saturday, wasn't it?

"What am I supposed to do – run?"

That sounded like an excellent idea. Benedict studied John's face for a moment. Sherlock had been worried for him. Genuinely worried, even close to panicking. Maybe it hadn't been fair to needle him so much. "Moriarty's not going to touch you again."

John offered Benedict a bitter little smile. "It's not about me, and you know it better than I do. It's the game again. I don't know what the hell he wants, but it's not me. I'm just your pet."

"Is that what you think, John?"

John turned an even darker red. Slowly, he climbed off Benedict and thumped to the floor beside him. "I don't know. I know he thinks that."

Benedict didn't try to rise. "No, he doesn't." He placed the tips of his fingers together and spoke slowly, certainty forming just before the words tumbled out. "Moriarty's mad as a hatter, but he's no fool. If he thought you were only a pet, he'd have no compunction about simply putting a bullet in your head. He knows better. He knows –" Benedict broke off, unsure of what he'd been about to say.

"So he's trying to demoralise you by attacking me. Breaks down the same either way – it's all about you. I'm a pawn." The bitterness was back.

"Not to me."

John looked at Benedict, startled. "Yeah?"

Benedict was off-script again, but he didn't care. If Sherlock really cared about John, he should have let him know somewhere, sometime. That was what friends did for each other. Fuck Sherlock and his deliberate obliviousness. *Alone protects me* made for great television drama, but it was no way to treat a real human being. "John…don't be stupid. *Should keep at least a bit of Sherlock's personality in there.* "Did you think you were just a flatmate? Split the rent, share groceries, divide the chores, occasionally solve a crime? I don't think that's in the lease, though I suppose we could check with Mrs Hudson."

"I do most of the chores. And the grocery shopping, you twit." John grinned wryly.

"My point stands." Cautiously, Benedict sat up. "And as much as I appreciate your concern for my physical well-being, John, we've got to get moving." He glanced at his watch. "When's the next train to Brighton, I wonder?"
"No. The paramedics are going to be here any second. Well done trying to distract me, but it didn't work." The high whining drone of a siren sounded in the distance and drew nearer. "Ah-ha – there they are now."

Benedict listened. "It's...actually, no, that's –"

"A police siren," John said, closing his eyes in resignation. "Fuck. That didn't take long."

"John, run."

John shook his head. "Why?"

Benedict compressed his mouth into a tight line. Moriarty. Moriarty was why. Even if things weren't happening exactly according to the script, there still remained his manipulation of the justice system, elaborate false identity, manoeuvring crimes to discredit Sherlock – and Sherlock wasn't here. Now that they were off-script, Benedict couldn't predict events and react appropriately. He was, in a word, screwed. Never mind that Benedict didn't have Sherlock's genius, that was a given, but if he didn't have John, then what? Why was Moriarty trying to get John out of the way? A sniper's bullet would do it quickly, but this – he didn't understand it. And, as with the Irene Adler tragedy, Benedict had the horrible suspicion that this new turn was his fault. "It's Jim," Benedict replied, and leapt to his feet. "I've set things in motion and –" He let out a hollow laugh. "I should have shot him at the pool. Come on, get up." He hauled John to his feet and began to hustle him toward the bathroom. "It's a jump, but you can do it. I can't let them take you in."

"Have you gone round the twist – Sherlock, stop!" John planted his feet, but couldn't quite overcome Benedict's momentum. "Look, if you're – Sherlock!" He grabbed on to Sherlock's bedroom doorknob and hung on for dear life. "Did it occur to you that jail might be the safest place for me right now if Moriarty's up to something?"

"Jail's never a safe place." Benedict grasped John under the arms and started to drag him. The sirens wailed on, earsplitting now, too fucking close. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"Okay, you're officially out of your head. Damn it –" John grunted and managed to twist out of Benedict's grip. He grabbed Benedict's wrists and squeezed hard enough to hurt. "Listen to me. Listen. I don't know what's going on with you, but something is, and I've got a feeling that you're keeping me in the dark."

"John –"

"Shut it, Sherlock. You're panicking, and the only time I've ever seen you panic is when you were getting the life smothered out of you and that was thirty seconds, tops. This is different – it's weird, and it's happening immediately after your fainting spells. That sounds like neurological disorder to me, and it's got me scared." The sound of a slamming door reverberated loudly from downstairs. "They're here. There's no time, Sherlock. You want to help me? You go to the fucking hospital and you get yourself checked out thoroughly. If everything's okay, then you can work all this out."

I'm not Sherlock fucking Holmes. He wanted to scream it at the top of his lungs, but before he could, heavy footfalls ascended the stairs, and two police officers emerged into the corridor.

"Dr John Watson?" The male officer eyed John and Benedict doubtfully.

John dropped Benedict's hands. "That's me."

"Dr Watson, we have evidence linking you to the shooting of Darren Christopher Tuttle. A weapon was used in that shooting which we have reason to believe belongs to you. We are therefore arresting
you on suspicion of murder. You do not have to say anything but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Will you turn around, please, face the wall, and put your hands behind your back?"

"He didn't do it," Benedict snarled. "He was with his girlfriend all day. Check with her, for God's sake." He couldn't do this on his own.

"We intend to, sir. Will you step away?"

Since Benedict showed no inclination to obey, John turned toward the wall and brought his wrists together. As the female officer fettered his hands, John addressed Benedict calmly. "Sherlock, don't hinder this. I don't want you in jail too. I want you to go to A&E. Recurrent syncope, and your doctor suspects neurological deficit. Tell them. Promise me, Sherlock. Will you promise me?"

"John…" Benedict stole a glance at the police officers' belts, but they weren't carrying guns, only CS spray canisters and batons. So a flatmate hostage situation was right out, apparently. Threatening to make John's eyes tear and sting didn't quite have the same impact as a bullet to the head.

"It's okay. You'll clear this up." John gave Benedict a warm look, full of affection and trust.

"Right, let's go," the male officer said. "Watch your step."

They led John downstairs with a fair degree of solicitude. Benedict followed helplessly, inwardly writhing with rage and shame. Sherlock would have seized the opportunity to do something drastic, with a maximum of drama, but Benedict lacked Sherlock's nerve. It didn't matter that Sherlock's nerve often dug him and John deeper into trouble – it was the principle of the thing.

Mrs Hudson was in the hall, twisting a tea towel in her hands, her face the picture of distress. "Oh… oh, John, what's happened? Sherlock?"

"Not now, Mrs Hudson," Benedict whispered, brushing past her. He followed the police and John outside, into a battery of eye-watering lights. Press. Parasites in every universe. Immediately, the hectoring began.

"Sherlock! Oi, Sherlock! Your flatmate a murderer?"

"Did you do it, Dr Watson?"

"Sherlock, did you deliberately not solve this crime?"

"John! How does it feel to be arrested for murder?"

"Sherlock, where do you get your shirts made? Where's your coat?"

"Are you going to fight this, John?"

John handled the questions like an utter pro; he stared ahead in silence and with amazing composure, nodding politely to the police who handed him into the squad car. Benedict, with far more experience of intrusive paparazzi, felt his hands curling into fists. Someone got close enough to blind him with a flash; instinctively, he lifted his arm to block the light.

"He tried to hit me!" someone bawled. "You fucking bastard!"

Benedict ignored the voice and moved toward the squad car. John leant forward and gave him a
small smile. *Hospital*, he mouthed through the glass, and the car pulled away.

Fuck.

The journalists and photographers crowded around Benedict, blocking his path to the door.

"Sherlock, you going to solve this one?"

"Did he do it?"

"Sherlock, do you have a girlfriend?"

"Mr Holmes, I'm a solicitor, and I'd like to offer..."

"Go on!" Benedict felt someone take his hand, and he blinked through the lights to see Mrs Hudson, flapping her tea towel at the press, a mouse facing a pack of wolves. "Leave him be! Go, he's got nothing to say to you lot. Go!" She grasped Benedict's hand firmly and drew him toward the door. "Come on, dear. Come on."

Benedict allowed himself to be led, and followed Mrs Hudson wordlessly through the crush. She closed the door shut on a dozen goading questions and shook her head. "Vultures. Sherlock, what on earth's happened?"

"John's been arrested for murder, Mrs H."

Mrs Hudson clasped her hands together. "Oh, no." She shook her head. "Well, thank goodness he's got you for a flatmate – you'll sort it out in no time. Do you want some tea, love?"

"No, thank you." Benedict began to trudge upstairs and then turned back. "Actually, some tea would be lovely. Thanks. *Actually, a good cry would be lovely, a portal back to my own universe would be lovely, not being Sherlock fucking Holmes would be lovely.* He made his way up the stairs, clinging to the banister, and into the flat. It was empty, horrendously empty without John. Benedict went to the sofa and collapsed, curling up and clasping an elderly and somewhat moldy-smelling pillow to his stomach as if it were a hot water bottle.

Five minutes. He needed five minutes to pull himself together, and then he'd call Mycroft. It wasn't the arrest that was troubling, though that *was* troubling; it was Moriarty, his cunning and duplicity and the game that was well above Benedict's head. He was drowning in it.

Sudden panic seized and tore at him, cat's claws shredding his insides. His head wasn't in the clouds. He kept up with the news, he voted, he paid taxes, he'd given as much attention as possible to the details of his house and motorbike and car purchases. He lived within his means and was more successful than either of his parents had been at his age, and he was well on his way to complete security. He was a responsible adult, but this was the official end of his tether. He'd never been responsible for someone's life before.

*Alone protects me* was a put-on, Sherlock's thorny defence, but now it seemed like the most clear-thinking strategy possible. And Moriarty was relentless and whimsical and utterly, utterly mad. How could he fight that?

Tears pooled in Benedict's eyes for the third – fourth, fifth, who knew – time that day. He wasn't going to shirk his obligations, not with John's life in the balance – and that wasn't an exaggeration if all this played out the way he suspected it might – but he needed a moment or he was going to snap. He was already stretched too thin.

The doorbell rang, but he ignored it. Fucking paparazzi – was that even legal here? Fuck them.
A cup of tea, he'd call Mycroft, and the wheels of covert justice would be set into motion. It didn't matter now how hard a butterfly flapped its wings; the situation had got far out of hand the moment he'd woken up here.

He pulled out Sherlock's phone, and as he went to call Mycroft, it pinged with a text.

*I'm outside your door. Mind if I come in for a minute to chat? XOXOXO Jim*

Benedict closed his eyes. Well, if that wasn't the crowning fucking glory of the day.

He texted a reply.

*The door's open.*

He moved to Sherlock's chair and sat, listening to Moriarty's light tread on the stairs. When Moriarty ambled in, hands in the pockets of his trousers, he repressed a shudder with some difficulty.

"Hi, Sherlock. Is this a bad time?" Moriarty arched his eyebrows in exaggerated concern.

"Does it matter?"

"Fair cop." Moriarty thumped down into John's chair and stretched his legs out. "You look a little peaky. Everything okay?"

Benedict let the corners of his mouth curl upward and forced himself not to dig his fingertips into the leather of his chair. "Oh, you hadn't heard? John's just been arrested on suspicion of murder. Gangland slaying, apparently."

"Ooh, that's rough. I did see a bit of a fracas outside just a little while ago. Is that what that was?"

"Mm. Evidently John's gun was used in the murder. Which I thought was a bit odd, since you took it yesterday." Benedict fished in his pocket for the phone and scrolled to the photo message. He opened it and showed it to Moriarty. "Can't imagine where this came from."

"Hm." Moriarty stroked his chin. "I'll bet you'll be able to tell, with really sophisticated technology. All that information out there, just floating around in the ether, and if a number gets scrambled here or there…." He shrugged and smiled. "There might even be an app for that. It'd be awful if it really did come from Dr Watson's phone."

More footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Mrs Hudson rounded the corner with a tea tray. "Oh! You've got company, dear."

"He's not staying long, Mrs H." Benedict stared narrowly at Moriarty, but he was terribly afraid that Moriarty saw something – the twitch of an eyelid, his rapid pulse, the tense flexing of the muscles in his legs – and was just holding back his triumph.

"I was going to keep Sherlock company, but – are you his solicitor? Probably better if you two get right to it." She set the tray down next to Moriarty. "I'd have brought something nicer, but hobnobs were all I could find on short notice."

"I love hobnobs," Moriarty said, deftly stealing one from a flowered plate. "Thank you, that's so sweet."

"Oh, it's no trouble, dear. Poor Sherlock was so distraught when John was taken away – I'll just let you get on with it. 'Bye!" She twinkled fingers at them both and disappeared. Benedict watched her
departure with increasing dread. He didn't want to be left alone with Moriarty, but he couldn't drag Mrs Hudson into this. Oh, God.

"Aw, honey, were you sad to see your pet dragged off to the pound?" Moriarty nibbled at his biscuit.

"What do you want?"

"Right to the point. Well…." Moriarty poured a cup of tea and offered it to Benedict, who shook his head. He shrugged, dropped two lumps of sugar into the cup, and stirred. "That hair, and those long legs, for one."

Benedict remained silent. A hard knot of anxiety and rage pressed against his abdomen. He wouldn't be able to take a deep breath without shivering it out.

"People without a sense of humour are boring, you know."

"You can leave any time," Benedict informed him.

"Well, okay, fine, since you put it that way. I wanted John out of the way so that we could chat, you and I."

"He was in Brighton all day if you wanted to chat. I didn't think I'd need to point that out, since you framed him for murder."

"Oh, I know, but that was fun. Come on, did you see his face?" Moriarty grinned and set his spoon on his saucer. "Look up 'stupefied' in the dictionary and there's Captain Watson's hangdog mug. For a minute I almost felt sorry for him. Anyhow, don't worry about him. I'm sure he's going to make all sorts of new friends in jail. Big, hairy, heavily tattooed friends. Such a rough crowd. And John's so petite. Ouch."

"Go on," Benedict said softly. "Hurt one hair on his head. Try it."

Moriarty hooked his fingers into claws. "Oh, Sherlock…rawr! The protective vibe. I dig it." He leant forward. "Entre nous, I've always wondered which of you wore the trousers. Metaphorically speaking, that is. I know that's not your cup of tea. I do wonder what you see in him, though, apart from an adoring audience hanging on every golden syllable that falls from those pretty, pretty lips."

Benedict regarded Jim Moriarty in silence for a moment. Moriarty had had Irene Adler strangled. He'd planned the deaths of God only knew how many more. He'd kidnapped John and strapped him to kilos of plastic explosive. And Benedict was supposed to sit calmly and fire riposte after riposte and then sort it all out.

He had a sudden wild thought: he'd confess all, lay everything out on the table. Surely the sight of Sherlock babbling peculiarities even madder than the whirring and ticking of Moriarty's demented brain would send him over the edge. Benedict opened his mouth, then closed it with an audible snap. Given Jim's unpredictability, that might not actually work out so well, come to think of it. And what would happen to John? Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.

"Wakey-wakey!" Moriarty crowed, snapping his fingers almost under Benedict's nose. "Goodness me, Sherlock. Did someone unplug you, or are you having some sort of wet dream or something? About Johnny? It's that soldier thing, right?" Moriarty fanned himself with his hand. "I get it. I can give you five minutes if you need the loo. A bit awkward with me sitting out here, but you've gotta do what you've gotta do."

"Why don't you just get on with it and tell me what you want?" Benedict sat back, crossed his legs at
the knee, and feigned utter boredom.

"Well, you're no fun." Moriarty said with a pout, and took another hobnob. "But okay. Thing is, Sherlock, I'm not best pleased with you."

"No?"

"No. You muddied my schedule. Naughty of you."

Benedict clicked his tongue. "Sorry."

"Ms Adler paid rather dearly for that little stunt of yours. Too bad, really. I thought the two of you would get along like a house on fire."

"Mm." Benedict kept his face serene, determined not to let Moriarty see his rage and guilt. "I'd avoid matchmaking and stick to my day job if I were you. Larceny, extortion, murder, that sort of thing."

"It's true, I am really good at all that." Moriarty gave Benedict a modest smile. "But you, Sherlock – you're dull. I think we need to shake things up a bit."

"How? Planning to make me jump off a building?"

Moriarty blinked, and his mouth dropped open for a second before he regained his equanimity. "That's a little drastic. Actually, I had a partnership in mind."

That's different. "Partnership."

"Yeah. What do you want, Sherlock? I mean – what do you really want?"

A fragment of the Spice Girls drifted across the threshold of Benedict's mind. "I've got everything I want."

"Oh, come on. There's more to life than this." Moriarty gestured around the flat. "I don't mean money, really, or material acquisition – I know all that doesn't mean much to you. Can I make a guess? Do you mind?"

Benedict rolled his eyes in genuine exasperation. "Oh, please. Be my guest."

"You want recognition. Adulation. You want everyone to point at you and say 'That guy, with the hair and the flappy coat? He's the smartest person I know.' You want to lord it over stupid people and bask in the light of your own brilliance."

Benedict lifted an eyebrow. It wasn't a bad assessment, as things went.

"Don't you know how boring that is?" Moriarty heaved a sigh. "So predictable, so sad."

"And you've got a much better proposition, I take it."

"Yeah, as it happens. I can challenge you, Sherlock. More than John, more than your pals down at NSY, even more than that poky-arse brother of yours. You and I can make nations rise and fall, Sherlock. We can take what we want, and do what we will, and nobody can stop us once we get started. Your friends don't push you. You're getting stale, Sherlock – lazy and complacent. Solving tawdry little murders, thefts, kidnappings – God, who cares?" Moriarty got to his feet and paced the length of the room, stopping at the window and drawing the curtain aside. "I can take you away from all this. I can unlock the treasure and spill it at your feet. I'll show you the abominations and the sublimities, and you can bathe in them." He turned back and beamed. "You'll never be bored again."
"I'll pass," Benedict said curtly.

An expression of weary resignation on his creepy face, Moriarty nodded as if he'd expected no less. "You're making a mistake, you know."

The softness of Moriarty's voice sent a chill down Benedict's spine. "You really expected me to say yes?"

"I'd hoped, but – you really are predictable. In that case, Sherlock, we have a problem. Our final problem."

Benedict got up, unsettled. This was it. Forget *Hounds*. Moriarty was pushing his endgame, and Benedict was in a corner. He plowed ahead, helpless, but furious and unrelenting. "And what's that? You, systematically discrediting me? Staging a theft, a kidnapping, an elaborate hoax that shows me up as a fraud? And who'll do it – you? Jim from IT? Richard Brook, perhaps?" He advanced on Moriarty, maliciously pleased that his face had gone a sickly white. "Do you imagine for one moment that I don't know you better than anyone, that I can't see through your pointless schemes?" He sneered. "Go on and play your games. They're *dull*."

Moriarty took a shuddering inward breath and then smiled. "Oh, Sherlock…angel. You're going to be *sooo* sorry you said that."

"Get out," Benedict said. "And if John so much as stubs his toe in jail, you'll find out exactly what kind of angel I am."

"You're dead," Moriarty whispered. "You just don't know it yet."

Benedict pointed at the door.

Smiling, Moriarty shoved his hands in his pockets and ambled toward the door. "I expect you're going to call Big Brother to spring Johnny Boy. Think about that, Sherlock. Think about that very carefully. Here's a little question for you – a koan, I guess. There's a little bunny rabbit named…oh, whatever you like. The bunny's hopping in the grass, happy and free, when his owner sees a hungry cat watching him. So he puts the bunny in a hutch with three big, aggressive hares, and they're *awfully* nasty to the poor little thing. They bite and claw at him and leave him all battered and bloody. Then the bunny's owner puts him in his own hutch away from the hares, but then realises that the holes in the wire are large enough to let snakes in. By this time, you can imagine the owner's distress. Finally, he papers over the hutch to keep the snakes out, and the bunny gets *so* sad, all cooped up and huddling in the dark, and starts to languish and pine for his old life in the sunshine. What should the bunny's owner do next, Sherlock?" Moriarty paused. "I think that's a koan, anyway. See you later, alligator." He slipped out the door, and the sound of his footsteps echoed on the stairs and faded away.

Benedict fumbled for Mycroft's phone and found his number. It was getting late, Mycroft probably didn't want to be disturbed, but too bloody bad.

"Yes?"

"It's Benedict. I –"

"You realise it's only been a few hours since we spoke. If you expected results that quickly, I'm afraid you're in for considerable disappointment."

"It's not about me. It's about John." Benedict realised he was nearly gasping in anxiety. "He's been arrested for murder. Moriarty's framed him, and he's in jail, and he's not safe. You've got to get him
"I can't simply whisk him away from –"

"You can," Benedict nearly shouted. "Don't bother with denials, there's no time. Get him out, get him to a safe house. Have someone you trust keep a close watch over him. Tell him…tell him it's just for a little while." Benedict paused for breath. That had to be enough for the moment. If he couldn't persuade Mycroft, he didn't know what he'd –

"He paid you a visit, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did. He's fucking insane. I think he's going to try to ruin Sherlock's reputation, and get him to…I'm pretty certain he wants Sherlock dead." Benedict uttered a laugh that sounded as crazy as Moriarty's. "If he manages to kill me, then Sherlock might be stuck in my London forever. Just in case you needed more convincing."

"A car will pick you up in fifteen minutes," Mycroft said crisply. "Pack a week's worth of clothing and wait for three bursts of the horn to indicate that it's safe."

"What about John?"

"You and Dr Watson will be sharing accommodations. You'd do well to bring clothing and toiletries for him as well. I'll speak to you in an hour." Mycroft rang off.

Benedict held the phone tightly, his heart hammering in his ears, sick despair and desperate hope washing over him in a vast simultaneous wave.

"Please," he whispered, and then went to pack.

* 

Jim rolled his head back and forth, snapped his gum, and knocked on the door.

Molly opened it almost immediately. "Oh – Jim!" She wore pink pajamas printed with tiny beige roses and fuzzy pink slippers. No bra, Jim noted with a flickering downward glance that was nonetheless appreciative, and realised with a slight pang that he'd probably never fuck her now. Pity. She might actually have been interesting in the sack.

On the whole, though, it was more fun to fuck with her.

"Hey." Jim proffered a seven-quid Sainsbury's bouquet of mixed flowers and a pizza. "I'm sorry for dropping in on you like this, but it's been almost a week and I miss you."

Watching emotions playing across Molly's face was more entertaining than he'd expected. Vague irritation at the drop-in, guilt, determination to be social and polite, and was that a fleeting glimpse of physical longing? Ooh, still got it.

"Erm – yeah, sure, come on in." Molly opened the door wider and stepped aside to let Jim in. "Sorry it's sort of messy. I –"
"Oh, that's okay. I tried to phone you earlier, but I couldn't get through. Around five-ish?"

She turned bright red. "Sorry, I was...I was busy." Closing the door, she went to the sofa and sat. There was an identical pizza box to Jim's on the low table.

_I know, sweetie._ Jim gave her a gentle smile. "Want to put these in water?"

"Okay." Molly leapt to her feet, all but snatched the flowers, and disappeared into the kitchen. She came back a moment later with the flowers arranged in a drinking glass and set them on the table. "Thank you. They're really pretty. I haven't had cut flowers in forever."

"I never know the names of flowers, so I just point." Jim held out the pizza. "I see you've already eaten."

"It's okay. I love pizza." Molly took the second box and placed it on the first. "Do you want a glass of wine? Erm, sit down."

"No, I'm fine. Thanks anyway." Jim thumped onto the sofa and sprawled comfortably. He'd changed from his suit into jeans and a t-shirt. The t-shirt was Marc Jacobs, not standard IT-guy wear, but Molly didn't know that. He patted the sofa. "Sit. How've you been?"

"Fine. I'm fine. How's the new job?"

"Great!" It had been necessary to leave Bart's. Pretending to work there took more time than actually working there. "The hours are really flexible and the pay's a bit higher. I might be able to get a flat of my own soon. It'd be great to have people over without three flatmates hanging about playing video games and not doing the washing up. I miss being able to come down and see you, though. How's life at Bart's?"

"Good. It's good." Molly averted her eyes and touched the edge of a pale-purple agapanthus. "Jim, I'm actually sort of glad that you stopped by. I need to talk with you."

_{Ooh, here it comes.} "Okay."

"I can't see you anymore."

Jim let five seconds go by. "Okay," he replied quietly. "Was it something I did?"

"Oh, God, no! You're one of the sweetest men I've ever dated. It's not me, it's - sorry, no. It's not you, it's me. Things are really...complicated right now."

_Oh, I expect so, what with that unrequited love thing you've got going, Molly my dear._ "Complicated how? Sorry, that's none of my business. Sorry." Slowly, as if he were afraid she would pull away, Jim reached out and covered her hand briefly with his own.

Molly shook her head and didn't answer.

Slowly, stealthily, Jim twisted the knife. "Are you seeing someone else?"

A choked little laugh flew from Molly's throat. "No, but I - I'm sorry. I know it's not fair to you, but I can't right now."

"You're interested in someone else."

"Yeah." Molly withdrew her hand and sniffled a little. "It's pointless, though."
It was so, so difficult to keep from grinning, but Jim managed. "Is it Sherlock?" he asked, making sure that his voice brimmed with sad-nerd timidity. Considering you manage to work him into almost every conversation we've ever had, even a chat about your favorite flavour of crisps. I mean, really, Molly. Not that it's not interesting to hear that Sherlock doesn't like sour cream and chive. Maybe I'll force-feed them to him soon.

She sniffled again and nodded. "He's in love with somebody else."

Jim froze. In love?

Not Sherlock. Not...she was wrong. Sherlock had his vulnerabilities, to be sure – Johnny Watson, the old lady downstairs, the silver-fox cop – now there was a sexy piece – and maybe, just maybe, his big brother. Mostly John. The look on Sherlock's face at the pool when he'd seen John strapped into the bomb – that had been priceless, but it hadn't been love. First of all, John Watson wasn't gay. He'd told the Mail that in an interview that had probably been a drive-by shout, actually, but the papers still speculated, and it was fun to tease Sherlock about it. But it wasn't a love affair, it was friendship. A bromance. No homo.

He forced himself to speak. "Who's he in love with?"

Molly smiled a little, gulping back tears. "His flatmate, John Watson."

A silvery red haze of pure fury glazed Jim's vision; he sat perfectly still. For the first time in years he had a compulsion, almost too powerful to deny, to commit physical violence, to wrap his hands around Molly's skinny little neck and squeeze and squeeze until her face turned blue and her eyes bulged and her tongue lolled out of her mouth. He hadn't been hands-on in years and years, and now – Sherlock. Sherlock in love with John Watson. That collection of delicately calibrated machinery, tall and dramatic with a glamour that Jim never could have pulled off, even if he'd really wanted to (best to fly under the radar just a bit when it came to looks, though anything less than the absolute best was unacceptable) wasn't capable of falling in love.

And he'd offered Sherlock a partnership. He felt sick. Both of them, together, oh Jesus Mary and Joseph, it would have been perfect symbiosis, but Johnny-boy, Captain Watson of the whatever Northumberland Fusiliers, Doctor Dull? No, and no. Jim didn't like triangles; there was inevitably, invariably, a lowest point to any triangle, and Jim had no intention of being a low point.

And Sherlock wasn't even a nice guy, but John was in love with him – that much was obvious, even given the hysterical denial – as was Molly, and Irene had certainly seemed fascinated with him, though that might have been a physical thing – let's do painful and lovely things to Sherlock's dick. None of them even understood him. Jim did.

Or thought he did, anyway. The notion that Sherlock's casual cruelty had a soft gooey centre was... he couldn't countenance it.

At all.

"I didn't think he was such an...ordinary person," Jim said in a tight little whisper.

"He's not."

Jim got up. "I'd better go. Sorry to barge in on you like this."

Molly got to her feet. "Jim, I'm sorry. I know you probably think I'm an idiot, and I probably am, but
I've got to sort myself out. Maybe one day –"

"It's okay." He couldn't listen to any more. He went to the door, stopped, and pivoted on his heel. He couldn't resist one more tiny twist. "It must hurt to be so close to him and to see that." I hope it hurts. I hope it leaves you drained and empty inside. "I think you're really brave to keep working with him." He leant close, kissed her cheek, and let himself out, thrilling to the tears in Molly's eyes.

He went downstairs and outside, breathing in the cool night air.

Now what? Now what, now what, now what? Regroup, re-form the lines that had just gone arseways. Getting rid of Johnny in jail had been an afterthought, just one bump in Sherlock's road. Now everything was different, because Sherlock had just proven himself the most disappointing individual on God's green earth. Jim would pull it back together, he always did, but he had to think, just a bit.

Sighing, Jim scrubbed at his face with the palms of his hands and started down the street. Before he reached the corner, four black cars pulled to the kerb. Quickly Jim pulled out his phone, affecting not to notice, and sent an eight-digit ciphered text. The recipient would recognise it with no difficulty.

Mountjoy.

"Sir?"

Jim slipped his phone into the pocket of his jeans. "Sherlock, you tattle-tale."

He scarcely felt the needle, or his body dropping. He closed his eyes and let them take him.

*

The people carrier had blacked-out windows and a tiny bar with thermoses of tea and coffee, and it was comfortable, certainly more so than the jail cell John had occupied for an hour or so after processing, but it didn't go very far to assuage John's unease. Neither the driver nor the two silent and stoic security men who accompanied him answered his questions, and John was forced to conclude that this was yet another covert Mycroft operation. At least he hoped it was. He really didn't want to visit with Jim Moriarty again. The security guards had been polite, if nearly wordless, and hadn't belted him to shut him up, so that was a start, at least.

They'd been driving for more than an hour, and John was aching to see outside. If Sherlock had been with him, he'd have figured where they were headed just by the number and direction of turns the van had taken. John had tried that and had got confused after five minutes. No point in making his head hurt; he'd find out their destination eventually.

"If this is going to be a long trip, can we put the radio on?" John asked.

One of the guards raised his eyebrows, then went back to staring straight ahead.

"Okay, then." John sighed and settled back against the seat. Not that it wasn't nice to be out of jail, honestly. He'd had to share a holding cell with three other men (one drunk and belligerent, one drunk and semi-conscious and smelling of sick, and one guy who looked like the poster child for the National Front) as it was evidently a busy Saturday night. He'd wedged himself into the corner and fixed a nasty don't-fuck-with-me scowl to his face, but had been more than relieved when the
security team came for him.

The people carrier slowed, rolled to a stop, and the side door opened. The guards beckoned John out, and he stepped out of the van onto uneven cobble. It was dark, but he smelled the fragrance of grass and water and something sweet like honeysuckle. "Where are we?"

"This way, sir." The security guards led him to the door of a small cottage, opened it, and ushered him inside. The interior was cosily furnished, battered leather chairs and a spacious sofa with cabbage roses and old, nicked wood, and – best of all – Sherlock, leaping up from a chair and rushing to him.

"Thank God," Sherlock said, grasping John's shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Mycroft?" John couldn't hide his flush of pleasure at the warmth of that greeting, and found that he didn't want to.

Sherlock nodded. "Just for the time being."

"Where are we?"

"Sussex. Mycroft said – oh, there you are." Sherlock looked over John's shoulder, his brow clouding.

"Yes." John turned to see Mycroft, impeccably dressed and unruffled as ever, glancing over the cottage with slight distaste. "Because I really didn't have anything better to do this evening."

"Right," John said. "Saturday's your disco night, isn't it?"

Mycroft bared his teeth slightly. "I was actually planning to add to my growing collection of tattoos. John, this is a temporary security measure, but necessary. James Moriarty has been apprehended and will spend the next several weeks undergoing interrogation. Your belongings –" He nodded toward one of the guards who held a plastic sack from the jail. "—are in there, and Sherlock's taken the liberty of gathering clothes for you. Guards will be posted for the duration of your stay. Do not leave the cottage for any reason."

"I wouldn't mind a weapon of my own," John said. He felt certain Mycroft's team was up to the task, but he felt better being able to defend himself.

"I don't think that's possible. Weapons of your own necessitated this operation, after all."

"Nice," John snorted, unable to prevent a hot blush from rising up his neck to his face, and looked at Sherlock for a quick snotty reply, but none seemed forthcoming. In fact, Sherlock had stalked to the sofa and flung himself down and was nervously and repeatedly rubbing the length of his thigh, a gesture John had never seen before. "How long will we be here?"

"A few days at most, I hope." Mycroft sighed heavily. "Sherlock, a word. Outside, please."

Silently, apprehension written on his face, Sherlock got up and followed Mycroft outside, the security detail following. John found himself alone. He did a quick reconnaissance of the cottage – two bedrooms, kitchen, tiny but adequate bath – and went into the bedroom where Sherlock had laid his things out. Two pairs of jeans, a pair of decent trousers, shirts, socks, underpants, a cotton cardigan, extra pair of shoes. And, thoughtfully, a selection of paperbacks from the stack in his bedroom. There was his canvas dopp kit, as well, with his toothbrush, deodorant, razors, and shaving cream. He picked up one of the paperbacks, a medical thriller Sarah had bought for him, and went back into the front room to wait for Sherlock.
He didn't wait long. Sherlock came back looking a bit shaken and dropped onto the sofa again. "John, you're certain you're all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm absolutely fine. I was only in jail for an hour. Knowing your brother has its perks." John frowned at Sherlock's paleness. "How are you? Did you go to hospital?"

"No. I told you I'm fine."

"Jesus Christ…" John dropped his book on a side table. "You know, I don't bother lecturing you about preventative care, because I know you don't give a toss. But we've moved beyond that. You know that, don't you? God – have you even eaten today?"

"Yeah. I had…" Sherlock screwed his eyes shut. "Consommé, fish and chips, trifle, and pizza. Oh, and wine. Couple of glasses of wine. Maybe four."

"Sounds healthy."

Sherlock gave a shrug.

"Listen, Sherlock –" John paused to gather his thoughts. "I know this is all your doing. And I – I appreciate it, don't get me wrong. But there's no point to any of it if you end up sick. I don't know how much clearer I can be."

"I'm not sick, John. But it's good of you to say that." Sherlock smiled at John, one of those smiles John never saw outside the confines of 221B.

"I'm just worried about you, you idiot." John used his most irritable voice to disguise its sudden trembling. His palms felt moist, and his face was hot. He wanted, more than anything, to get up and walk over to Sherlock and…and kiss him. Kiss him senseless. He got up and went to the tiny, clean fireplace. "When we get back to London, you're going. And I'm going with you."

"I'm not sick," Sherlock muttered.

"Yeah, yeah. So…what about Moriarty? You think Mycroft's going to get him to confess to that murder?"

"I don't know. He certainly knows his techniques, though. I'll give him that." Sherlock laced his fingers together and bent them backward. "Don't worry, John. I won't let him hurt you."

"It's not me he's planning –" John broke off with an impatient sigh, disconcerted at the emotion bubbling inside him. Gratitude to Sherlock mingled with desire and irritation and if it was infatuation, oh, fuck, it wasn't, was it. And weirdly, jealousy. Jim Moriarty, twisted as he was, had made Sherlock the centre of his life. Sherlock dismissed that, but it was real to Moriarty. And Sherlock had become the centre of John's life, after living so long without one. Family wasn't reliable. Medicine was fine, better than fine, but it didn't occupy all his empty spaces. Afghanistan had filled those spaces for a while, or at least made him forget he had them.

Then Sherlock had come along, and everything had changed. And John knew that there must have been something that Sherlock, arrogant and thorny and disdainful, had seen in him, but he wasn't quite certain what it was. He wasn't the sort who needed constant reassurance; this sudden imbalance of emotion, though, made him feel wrong-footed and uncomfortable. Three or four or however many days stuck in a cottage with Sherlock was not going to improve matters at all.

John crossed the room and went back to the mantel again, then went to the window. Having to stay confined was a bad idea.
"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." John gave a short bark of a laugh. "Three days in here, we're probably going to end up killing each other."

"I could use a few days of nothing, actually."

"Now I know you're sick." John stared narrowly at Sherlock, then shook his head. "Well, you do have your slothful moments, I'll give you that." He went to the mantel again.

"This is one of them. Look, John, whatever happens —" Sherlock rose to his feet, looking tired. "John, stop pacing."

"Sorry. I don't like being shut up like this."

"Neither do I, but we've just got to bear it for a while."

"I know." John licked his lips. Sherlock was an arm's length away — too close. John wanted to pace again, but held himself still, caught by his own confusion. He forced himself to meet Sherlock's eyes, and his heart ached so badly he felt like roaring with frustration. Handsome, yeah, in that sort of weird way, but like someone cleverer than John once said, loving someone for their looks was like buying a house for its paint. It was Sherlock's brilliance that he admired, his intrepid soul, his raw courage, and those little flashes of a heart even more guarded than John's own. "Sorry. What were you saying? Whatever happens…?"

Sherlock pressed his hands together. "Right. Whatever happens, I want you to know that…I'm not given to speeches, but I think you should know how very highly I regard you. I would be…." His face softened. "Bereft if anything should happen to you." He hesitated, then enfolded John in his arms.

What the fuck? Concussion. Definitely. Nevertheless, John stayed put, frozen, the feeling of Sherlock's arms around him too exquisite to take in properly. And then his cock started to twitch. Oh God, oh God. He detached himself from Sherlock's arms and took a step back.

"Well. That's very…very…oh, fuck it." John grabbed Sherlock's upper arms and pulled him into a kiss. He saw Sherlock's eyes flare widely and squeezed his own shut, just to completely feel it for a few seconds, even if Sherlock pulled away, even if he verbally abused John for the rest of the night. Sherlock's mouth was rigid with shock or disgust. John let the tip of his tongue swipe gently over Sherlock's lower lip, knowing it was all over, and then Sherlock kissed him back, plunging his tongue into John's mouth, cupping the back of his head, and stroking his cheek with his other hand.

Terrified, John kept his eyes closed, but opened his mouth to the kiss and let his hands wander down to caress Sherlock's arse. God, it was nice. He didn't press too close at first, afraid to spook Sherlock, but Sherlock's kissing was so thorough, so expert, that John decided to take the plunge. He moved forward and let his steadily hardening cock brush against Sherlock's trouser front. Triumph seized him. Et tu, Sherlock.

Sherlock moved away abruptly. He stared down at John, his lips parted, his eyes bright and wide. "I knew it," he murmured.

"What." John was panting, desperately horny. "Knew…knew what?"

"John, I have a confession to make."

"Ah…okay." John cleared his throat and tried to lean casually against the mantel, as if his prick
wasn't approaching critical mass.

"It's about the fainting spells."

"Oh God." Sick. Something bad. Heart condition. Brain tumour. Terminal. He was lying the whole time. "Tell me."

"I haven't been fainting because I'm sick. I've been fainting because…well, every time it happens, I enter this really bizarre sort of, erm, spatial and temporal anomaly. Have you ever heard of the multiverse?"

"I don't know." John stared at Sherlock.

"The thing is, I'm not really Sherlock Holmes. I'm an actor. My name's Benedict Cumberbatch, and I play Sherlock on a television programme. There was an accident, and Sherlock and I switched places three days ago, when he was electrocuted in the flat."

John continued to stare.

Sherlock smiled. "I know it sounds absolutely insane, but bear with me and I'll explain everything." He laughed. Actually laughed.

And then, John punched Sherlock.

Hard.

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Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thanks are due, as ever, to kimberlite for beta and Marnidom for Britpicking.

* 

Lacking anything better to do, Sherlock spent another hour reading fan fiction. Not reading, exactly...skimming, really. He'd found another story site that was far more organised and pleasant to read, and a quick search revealed thousands of stories in several categories. Warnings, what was that?

Rape/non-con. Graphic depictions of violence. Underage. Major character death. Good lord, these fans stopped at nothing. He typed incest into the search bar.

Oh my God. Sherlock back-buttoned quickly, but couldn't help the minuscule sensation of triumph that pervaded him. Someone had noticed that Sherlock and Mycroft had a more complicated relationship than ordinary brotherhood. On the other hand, more than a few people thought that he and Moriarty were destined for true love, so obviously there were a few rogue spanners in the works.

A bit of digging revealed that his iteration of Sherlock Holmes was the most popular one on the archive – and rightly so, obviously – but he spent a few minutes marvelling over the differences of the different men who'd played Sherlock Holmes. The very lean and severe man from the black-and-white films with the ridiculous coat and hat – honestly, could one be more obvious and melodramatic? And that Watson was terribly bumbling and stupid; he wouldn't have lasted a day in the real world. Then there was the television version with the rather good-looking older fellow and a Watson who was marginally brighter. Then there was the scruffy Holmes with the large dark eyes and the handsome and sharp-tongued Watson – now there was a Watson to reckon with, though not a patch on his Watson.

Sherlock shut the laptop and drummed his fingers restlessly on the table. If John was harmed as a result of Moriarty's malice and Cumberbatch's ineptitude, Sherlock would hunt them both down. His own helplessness was worse than frustrating, it was untenable. He got up and began to pace. Snatching up Cumberbatch's phone, he looked for a text from TWH but saw none. The latest text was from Em, who'd texted something about wine and cheese the other day.

Karon's really concerned, she can't reach you. Are you OK?

"No," Sherlock muttered, and then got an idea. Sick.

The reply came almost immediately. What's wrong? Should I call a dr? Want me to come over?

Diarrhoea. Probably best to keep your distance.

Predictably, the answer showed up almost five minutes later, well-nigh quivering with discomfort.

Oh no. :( I'll tell her you're under the weather. Stay hydrated & call if you need anything. xx Em
Sherlock grinned and set the phone down. The very word was enough to make even the most thick-headed people back away and avoid eye contact. With luck, he'd have privacy for at least twelve hours. After twenty-four hours he supposed that the hordes of minders would descend again, intent on rushing him to hospital to check for intestinal flu or irritable bowel syndrome or perhaps necrotising enterocolitis.

He dashed upstairs and put a fresh set of clothes on, checked his hair in the mirror – God, no wonder Cumberbatch owned so many hats. Never mind, he wasn't looking again. It was a total loss – and bounded back downstairs, collecting the phone and Cumberbatch's keys and wallet and banging out of the house. It had finally cooled to a manageable temperature, so he decided to walk to TWH's house. He'd get Tom to show him all the letters he'd saved and work things out in a few hours, and things would be sorted again and Cumberbatch would stop nagging him. With luck, Cumberbatch would never know that Sherlock had fellated a Mycroft simulacrum. What a mess all this was.

As he approached TWH's house, he saw a figure leaving and tensed. He waited in the shadows, watching. It was a young man, forgettable face, decent clothes but not the same quality as Tom's, messenger bag slung over one shoulder. Tiredness round the eyes, hands exceedingly dry from extensive handling of paper. A relative? Another secret boyfriend? His stalker? Sherlock strode forward, full of adrenaline and purpose. "Hello there."

The young man glanced up. "Oh, hello. Er – I was just looking for Tom. I haven't heard from him for a while and I've got a few things that he needs to see. Is he at your place?"

Not surprised, and knew Cumberbatch. Moreover, knew that TWH and Cumberbatch were at least friends. Quality of clothes, bag, specific errand – PA, then, or some other glorified underling. "No, he isn't."

The man eyed him up and down. "Going for a walk at this time of night?"

"Problem?"

"No – no, sorry. It's late and I'm...sorry. I just thought he was with you, that's all." Despite his conciliatory tone, his eyes raked Sherlock up and down.

"This time of night is better for walking. Cover of darkness, gives me a bit of space to catch my breath. You know how it is." Sherlock offered him a smile glowing with false modesty. "As you can see, he's not with me. He's probably –" Sherlock bit the inside of his cheek to avoid saying TWH was probably off sulking in a pub or some such. He didn't want to have Tetchy PA who spent Saturday nights chasing his employer defending Tom's honour. "Gone for a run."

"At this time of night?" Tetchy Usually Preoccupied With The Time Of Night PA frowned. "He prefers morning runs. Sorry, never mind. I'm a bit concerned, that's all. He hasn't answered his texts all day."

"He's been with me most of the day."

"I see." The PA gave him another sharp look. "How's filming? Tom said you were in the midst of shooting series two."

"Yeah, it's, er, brilliant. We're on a few days' break while they work out some electrical issues." Sherlock took a step closer. "Did Tom mention any unusual letters that he'd received, erm – oh, God, your name's on the tip of my tongue."

"Right, right, so sorry, my brain's utterly curdled. Luke." I'll just call you Tetchy, shall I? "So. Letters? Any weird ones?"

"They're all sort of weird," Tetchy said.

"Nothing particularly unusual, though. I expect you've seen all sorts of mad stuff."

"People send him things. Gifts, food, drawings. He eats the food. I beg him not to. God knows, someone could put a razor blade in a cupcake or something. Why, has he mentioned something about letters?"

"Not especially. We were just comparing notes." No point in getting Tetchy more involved than he needed to be. Sherlock beamed at him. "I've got some crazy ones."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Tetchy said sourly. "He likes to open his own letters, but we're going to have to hire someone to do that soon enough, I think. He gets more every day." His brow furrowed, and while his tone was hushed and almost worshipful, the look that he gave Sherlock was smoking with suppressed anger.

Ah – fancied Tom, then.

"He's going to be huge soon," Tetchy went on.

Sherlock smirked inwardly. He's already pretty large. He refrained from saying this to Tetchy and felt John would be quite proud of his tact and discretion and general sensitivity. "I know. Well, nice to see you, Liam. Good evening." He kept moving down the street.

"If you speak to him before I do, could you ask him to phone me?" Tetchy called.

No. "Will do!" Sherlock rounded the corner, hovering under the awning of a posh-looking flower shop where a fine curtain of mist bedewed a huge bunch of drowsy cream-coloured peonies in the window.

It was probably nothing. Maybe TWH was off sulking somewhere. He didn't seem like the sulking type, but to be fair he had seen the aftermath of what seemed to be some sort of assignation. Sherlock supposed that was a valid reason to sulk, if only for a short while. But it had been this afternoon – surely he wasn't still seething?

He'd text one last time.

Urgent. Please call as soon as you can.

He began the stroll back to Cumberbatch's house once he'd made certain that Tetchy had left – he didn't feel like coping with more sulking than he absolutely had to. His phone pinged.

Sorry had to leave unexpectedly back in a few days well meet up then! Tom

Well, that was all right, then. Sherlock put the phone in his pocket.

Then he took it out again.

For someone who'd been on the verge of tears at the restaurant, the text was surprisingly cheerful. Sherlock began scrolling through Cumberbatch's saved messages from TWH.

I can't decide between the flowered tie and the pale blue. Help!
I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thine eyes. Tonight, with any luck.

Ye hae a bonnie face.

Do you box? Chris E. is teaching me fundamentals. Yo Adrian!

I've got that song on constant repeat. Earworms can be sublime.

Drat!

You're half a world away, but we're sharing the same moon.

Will you let me teach you those chords?

Don't you think Eustace from Courage looks like James Joyce? Lacking the moustache and the stream of consciousness prose, of course.

I am sworn to murder those illusions that blossom from desire with desperate beauty: and there shall be no falsehood in our failure.

He gazed at the latest text again.

Sorry had to leave unexpectedly back in a few days well meet up then! Tom

Even given that TWH had been upset and was perhaps attempting to assume a jaunty casualness, the style and the tone seemed more than a bit off…and the lack of an apostrophe in 'we'll'…. Tom's texts were grammatical to an admirable standard, ridiculous sentiment notwithstanding, nearly as precise as Sherlock's texts.

And none of them were signed except this one.

Oh.

"Oh. Oh, God." Sherlock hurried back to Tom's house, fumbled through his keys, and fitted one into the lock. Wrong, wrong. The next one didn't work either, but the third did, and he burst through the door.

An alarm shrieked into life. A digital readout next to the door was flashing ENTER CODE – FRONT DOOR, and quickly Sherlock plugged a series of numbers in. The alarm fell silent, and the digital reader switched to SYSTEM ON. He breathed a sigh of relief, and then froze. He wasn't privy to TWH's security system – how the hell had he known those numbers?

No time to think about it at present, he decided, and switched lights on, then moved cautiously into the front room. Pristine, looked as though nobody ever went in there. There was a tiny loo – clean except for a folded flannel on the sink. Wet, recently used.

Sherlock went into the kitchen. Three beer glasses in the sink – he picked one up, sniffed at the centimetre of water – whisky not beer, glass reasonably cool to the touch, recently used. TWH had been entertaining guests. He sniffed at the other two and then dipped his index finger in each glass in turn and tasted the water. Whisky-flavoured water; whisky-flavoured water, slightly salty; whisky-flavoured water….

He tasted the second one again. Distinct salty taste. His mind leapt ahead to the possibilities: amitriptyline, captopril, gamma hydroxybutyric acid, griseofulvin, lithium, penicillamine, procarbazine, rifampin, vinblastine.
Gamma hydroxybutyric acid. GHB. Common date rape drug.

*Don't leap to conclusions, not yet.*

Moving automatically, he went to the pantry, rummaged out some plastic food containers with lids and poured the contents of the second glass into a container. He examined the lip print on the glass. Tom's? No distinctive scarring patterns, just a faint kissing sip on the glass. Fingerprints – the length and spread seemed right, at least.

Sherlock ran upstairs to the bedroom. The bed was made, the room in the same disorder he'd seen yesterday. The clothes Tom had worn to lunch were scattered along the floor, as if he'd begun shedding clothes at the door and stopped when he hit the wall. Indication of commonplace slovenliness or emotional turmoil – second option likely. No evidence of a second presence. He went to the bed, examined the pillows, saw strands of his own hair on them as well as Tom's – nobody else's. No revenge orgies, then.

The remaining upstairs rooms seemed clean, so he went back downstairs and into the second front room, a sort of media centre-cum-library. Slight disarray – a pair of running shoes and socks overturned in a corner, a few books open and weighted with other books, a television remote, a tea mug, a stack of paper near a wing chair. Sherlock went to the stack and picked up a set. Film script, apparently.

He shrugged inwardly – boring – and was about to set it down when a distinctive scent caught his nose. He brought the script close and sniffed.

"Chloroform," he said softly. "Oh, you're clumsy, whoever you are." Who in God's name used chloroform to render someone unconscious nowadays? It was notoriously inefficient as it took forever to take effect and the possibility of permanent damage was high. However, if the victim was dosed with GHB prior to the inhalant, then it would be easier to take someone down. Much easier.

The blood surged in Sherlock's veins. He grinned, ran back upstairs, and began searching Tom's bedroom for the incriminating letters. He tore Tom's room apart – nothing, damn it. Back downstairs, to the much-used front room. Lots of mail stacked on a desk. Just one – ah! There, the one he'd showed Sherlock the other day. Same odours of dog and chicken tikka. Back downstairs to scoop up the little flowered carpet in front of the door and throw it in a bin bag along with the letter and the plastic container of tainted ice melt.

Outside, the street was dark and quiet. *Oh, for Christ's sake!* He dug Cumberbatch's phone from his pocket, looked for the first available taxi service, and rang it. "I need a cab to go to St. Bart's hospital. Hampstead. Now. Yes, immediately. Fifty quid bonus if the driver gets here within five minutes. Fine, ten minutes. What do you mean, safety standards? For God's sake, there's got to be someone who's greedy and fast there. Are you stupid, or just – hello?" He looked at the readout and blinked.

Fine. He'd make his own way there. It was cool enough to run.

He'd got to what passed for the high street, located a cab by some miracle (dashing into the street in front of one and flagging it down, and jumping in while the driver hurled obscenities at him. Fifty quid had smoothed matters considerably) and was halfway to Bart's when he realised that he didn't have free access to the labs. He slammed his fist on the seat beside him, and the driver scowled ferociously at him in the rear-view mirror.

"Sorry," Sherlock said, holding his hands up in perfunctory apology. The driver shook his head and muttered to himself.
How to manage it? He could steal in, filch a set of scrubs or simply an ID tag and talk his way in, but if someone walked into the lab and demanded an explanation, there might be trouble, and he didn’t want to be interrupted. Stalkers who actually went through with abducting their targets – remarkably few in number – usually didn’t wait long before carrying out their threats, and the particulars of the letter had been dwelt upon in loving detail. He’d have to act quickly, or TWH would find himself lacking in certain aspects of anatomy that were considered crucial for a male cinematic heartthrob. There had to be some way….

_Oh._

"Oh."

Of course!

Benedict Cumberbatch was an actor, a _brilliant_ one according to some wildly over-enthusiastic fans, and legendarily charming.

Perfect. They wanted charm? Then charm they would receive.

*

"Hi." Sherlock gleamed at the desk receptionist. "You've probably got no idea who I am, but –"

The young woman's eyes were enormous. "Oh my God." Her hand went to her throat, and she nodded stupidly. "I…I…"

"I'm Benedict," Sherlock said, thrusting his hand out. Timidly, the woman took it. "I wonder if it would be possible to speak to a hospital administrator."

"Erm – it's a bit…." Sherlock gave her a melting smile, which she returned double-strength. "I'll see." She let his hand go after a brief, surreptitious caress – weird – and picked up the telephone.

Keeping a vaguely anxious smile on his face, Sherlock glanced about. Similar to his Bart's, enough to be reassuring. With luck, the labs would be the same, but he'd make do, whatever happened. A few people passing did a double-take, and one small boy being wheeled out tugged on his mother's coat and pointed urgently. The mother glanced at Sherlock and let out a squeak before running over to him, leaving the child with a bewildered porter.

"Mr Cumberbatch. Oh my God. Could I take your picture?"

"Of course," Sherlock said, and watched in amusement as she fumbled her phone out of her pocket. "Maybe you'd like to get your son in on the photo?"

"Oh!" The woman looked over her shoulder. "Right. Ciaran, darling! Come here!" She beckoned urgently, and the porter wheeled the goggle-eyed boy over.

"Hello," Sherlock said, crouching and holding out his hand.

"You're Sherlock!" the boy said gleefully, shaking Sherlock's hand with great enthusiasm.

"That's right."
"Where's John?"

For a moment Sherlock's façade slipped and he couldn't answer for the knot in his throat that constricted his speech. He clasped his hands between his knees. "Well, John's back at 221B working on a really important case right now."

"Are you here solving a mystery?" the sprog asked solemnly.

"I am," Sherlock replied with equal gravity.

"Then why isn't John with you? He's always with you when you solve mysteries."

"Ciaran," the woman said, "You're not being very polite." She shook her head at Sherlock in adult complicity.

"That's an excellent observation," Sherlock said. "The truth is, I wish he were here now, but occasionally and unfortunately, a separation is unavoidable."

Ciaran frowned. "I like John best. He shot the bad man."

"Ciaran!" The woman turned scarlet. "I'm so sorry, I – Ciaran, apologise to Mr Cumberbatch immediately."

"He's not Mr Cumberbatch, he's Sherlock."

"Ciaran….."

Sherlock ignored her and fixed his complete attention on the boy. "I like John best as well. I'll tell him for you, shall I?"

"I think we've taken enough of your time," the woman said, her voice bright and hard. Sherlock peered at her – underslept, clothes unkempt, two days worn from the smell, fresh lines around eyes, fading makeup: worried about son, but jealous of the attention Sherlock was lavishing on him, judging by her tone of voice and tooth-gritting smile. "Maybe I could get that snapshot?"

"Of course," Sherlock said, and straightened to his full height. The woman leant against him, grabbing his arm as if she intended to drag him out the door, aimed the phone, and snapped.

"One more?"

"Why not?" Sherlock smiled for another photo. "What about one with Ciaran?"

"Oh, that's fine – thanks all the same." The woman reluctantly let go of Sherlock's arm. "So nice to meet you. I'm Lily."

"It's been a pleasure, Lily." Sherlock smiled into her eyes, holding her gaze for three seconds, and then dropped back down to Ciaran's height. The boy was eyeing him with some suspicion. Sherlock bent to his ear. "I really am Sherlock," he whispered, and stood up.

Ciaran stared up at him with slowly dawning delight.

Sherlock winked and turned away, beaming at the small crowd that had gathered.

"What did he say to you?" the woman demanded as she led the hapless porter and the boy away. There was an inaudible reply. "What have I told you about lying, Ciaran?"
The receptionist drew Sherlock away and spoke quietly. "I'm afraid the highest authority here is the procurement manager. He's very willing to speak to you, though."

*What, the man in charge of buying the nitrile gloves and syringes?* Sherlock sighed inwardly. "That would be perfect. It's rather urgent, you see. Could we go somewhere private?" More people were gathering, and charm was becoming tedious already.

The young woman turned to a man in scrubs. "Can you stay at the desk for a moment?" She gave Sherlock a brilliant smile. "Follow me, please."

*"

"Of course we're only too delighted to assist." The procurement manager, a cadaverous ginger named Paul Enright, folded his hands atop his desk and gave Sherlock a grin full of capped teeth peculiarly square and homogenous in size, like two crowded rows of sugar lumps. "I've helped the BBC quite often when they've needed supplies – even for *Sherlock*. Very professional, very respectful."

"Oh, they're a fantastic team," Sherlock said, sitting back and crossing his legs. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. I've just got a few items here, and it would really add incredible texture to my work to know that I was getting the process exactly right." Sherlock lifted the bin bag into his lap and patted it gently.

"The equipment's a bit complicated." Fluorescent light illuminated Enright's pink scalp under his flattened stubble of a haircut.

"I'm not half bad at working with it, though. Naturally I'll be careful, and of course if there's any damage I'll be happy to compensate Bart's for it. You have my solemn word." Sherlock let his eyes crinkle in friendly collusion.

"Well…." Enright picked up a pencil and tapped it against his teeth, prevaricating, enjoying his role, surely for the first time, as Supreme Being of Bart's.

Sherlock managed to keep his eyes from rolling upward thanks to herculean effort. "And I was thinking it might be a nice sort of tie-in to sponsor a charity do here. For research. You could…oh, I don't know…auction off a date with me." *Provided Cumberbatch is actually the one who has to go on the date.*

"Oh, don't say that, that's dangerous! My wife would mortgage our house to go on a date with you." Enright snorted laughter. "She's smitten with you. Paid a wad for front-row seats to *Frankenstein*. Think she just wanted to see your wedding tackle. Bit annoying, actually, no offence meant."

"Well, clearly she's got great taste in men." Sherlock nailed a smile to his face.

"Ha! Right, right. Well, let me speak to the powers that be, perhaps we can work something out regarding an event. If my wife did win, she'd be forever grateful to me, I should think. Meanwhile, I'll get you up to the – which lab did you want?"

"Biochemistry should do."

"Right. Well, I've got full access, so I can get you sorted. I'll log you onto our intranet, too, but
you've got to promise not to look at porn, okay?" He slapped Sherlock on the back.
Sherlock simulated hearty laughter. "What, I can't tell them you said it was okay?" Enright laughed
uproariously. Ha ha ha.
Enright stood too close to Sherlock in the lift. "Bit odd, this – isn't it, on a Saturday?"
"How do you mean?"
"Well – it's Saturday night. I'd have thought all you actors were party types."
Oh.
"Thought you'd be out clubbing with a bird on each arm."
Sherlock smelled the gin – not quite masked by the harsh chemical reek of mouthwash – on Enright's
breath, observed the state of his hands, the cuticles ragged from biting, the bad haircut, the
moderately expensive but years-old suit, the indifferently pressed shirt and tie of poor quality.
Parsimonious to the point of clenched, drinking problem, unhappy home life judging by remarks
about wife and copy of The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work on his desk and presence in
hospital on a Saturday night. "What can I say – I just think research is really important."
"It's nice to see a little work ethic now and again." Enright led Sherlock down a corridor and zipped
his pass over the security reader. "There's a loo inside, but once you leave through this door, you
can't get back in."
"Understood."
"Maybe we can fix the bids. My wife really does adore you." Enright flipped a bank of lights on,
bathing the lab in a bright glow.
For a moment Sherlock almost felt sorry for him, thinking a date with Benedict Cumberbatch would
improve matters in a marriage almost certain to fail. "This is very kind of you. I hope you don't mind
if I'm here a while."
"As long as you're gone by five-thirty tomorrow morning. That's when the cleaning crews start."
Enright went to a computer station and logged himself in. "Look, I don't mean to be a pest, but
would you mind signing an autograph? She's going to be furious that I didn't get a photo, but my
phone doesn't take them."
"All right." Sherlock took a notebook from a table and the pen Enright offered him. "Er – what's her
name?"
"Erica."
Sherlock nodded. To Erica. It's not all bad. Sh Benedict Cumberbatch. "There we are." He tore the
sheet from the book and handed it to Enright, who stared at the inscription in utter bewilderment.
"Okay." Enright frowned over the paper again. "Is there anything else you need?"
"Nope. Thanks."
"I could check on you a bit later. I'm afraid we don't allow food or drinks in here, but if you'd like to
call down, I could arrange for –"
"No, not necessary. Thanks very much, I'll be absolutely fine. Let's have lunch." Sherlock ushered


Enright out the door, made sure it closed firmly, and uttered a sigh of relief.

*

John would have scolded him, would have tried to force a sandwich and tea down Sherlock's gullet, but he was in that strange and wonderfully familiar deep, dark cavern of feverish exploration, teasing and prodding at tiny clumps of dirt and droplets of water until they reluctantly yielded up their secrets. Here was what he knew; here was the whim of nature and crisis and work that required the patience he reserved only for these moments. Cumberbatch's world of superficial clamour fell away, and he abandoned himself altogether as he wove outrageous disparities into order and comprehensibility.

The ice melt was ridiculously simple – it was indeed GHB, likely enough to incapacitate TWH but not to knock him out completely, hence the use of chloroform. The little flowered carpet had been a challenge, however. There was plenty of Hampstead Heath dirt in it, petrochemicals, the usual London grit, but also four distinct sets of footprints, strands of horsehair, traces of slightly acid, loamy soil, coniferous vegetation, silver birch, peat, and best of all, evidence of sand and clay belonging to one of the Bagshot Beds. The same sand and clay was embedded in the glue of the letter's envelope. Because the evidence was practically nonexistent, it had taken an embarrassingly long time to narrow the field, but at last he'd done it – all signs pointed to Surrey. Specifically, Farnham.

Sherlock rubbed at his burning eyes and glanced up as the door opened. Two women and a man, all bearing cleaning supplies, stared at him curiously. "Hello," one of the women said.

"Hi." Sherlock swept his evidence back into the bin bag and got to his feet. His body trembled with fatigue and he was dimly conscious of a knot of hunger pressing into his belly, but he ignored it. "Just on my way out." He logged off the computer, snapped the microscope off, but left the slides scattered on the trays he'd located. Didn't need them now. Now all he had to do was find out who in Farnham would want to kidnap Tom.

He stumbled out of the lab, found the lift, and exited the hospital in the violet-grey light of dawn. Astoundingly, a taxi was idling at the kerb, and he got in, giving Tom's address. He had to find a few more letters; even one would help, if its contents were something other than pure torture pornography.

Birds called to each other, invisible in the trees heavy with late-summer leaves as Sherlock let himself into Tom's house. He disarmed the security panel – must remember to puzzle out how he knew the code later – and trudged back into the room Tom used as a study. He took out the letter, opened it, and read.

*I'm going to saw your balls off with rusty clippers and stuff them down your throat.*

Clippers. That had struck him the first time he'd read it. Why clippers and not a knife or an axe or scissors? Who used clippers? Barbers, veterinarians, stable hands, pet groomers –

*Horsehair.*

The recent tread on the carpets had been his own, Tom's, the shoes he'd worn to lunch, a very narrow set, and another, heavier set, where the dirt and clay had been most deeply ground in.
Someone physical – a horse trainer? Plenty of stables in Farnham. Someone who'd taught him to ride and bore a grudge? Difficult to believe given TWH's absurd courtesy, but not impossible. Still, the vitriol and familiarity suggested a more intimate knowledge, even if only in the letter-writer's mind.

I read one of your interviews online yesterday.

You're such a liar.

Level of belief suggested obsession, obviously, but hints of familiarity unusual in a celebrity stalker. Prior relationship possible. Still, writer went unnamed, intimidating TWH and openly stating goals of harm. Little evidence of writer's degree of social skills, but general stalker profiling indicated the majority were single men.

Sherlock held the paper to his nose, inhaling the faint scent of Dunhills. Something about the smell tickled the back of his brain, something only half-remembered and instantly dismissed, implicit not explicit olfactory memory. He closed his eyes and retreated, seeking it out. The smell, something familiar…he'd only been here three bloody days, what could it –

He sat up with a jolt.

Horsehair, country complexion, past history, enough money to buy or hire what he needed, resentment or contempt poorly disguised, familiar enough that TWH wouldn't be suspicious until it was far too late.

Sherlock whipped out Cumberbatch's phone and found a residential search engine.

Henry Burgess.

Nothing.

Snarling, Sherlock went to Tom's desk and began tearing it apart, throwing items aside until he found a battered leather address book.

Henry Burgess
Whitmead Lane
Tilford
Farnham
Surrey
GU10

Sherlock smiled. "There you are. Don't go anywhere."

The keys to TWH's car were in a shallow art-glass bowl on a table in the entryway. Sherlock snatched them up and banged the door behind him.

Cumberbatch, you had better be appropriately grateful for this.

It didn't matter if he was, though. Sherlock was finally having fun.

*
couldn't read let alone comprehend. Worse, he was wearing only a pair of undershorts and he had already put his luggage on the carrier. He started running through the corridors and up and down long, precarious flights of stairs, but the gate remained elusive, and the corridors got longer and longer, and his flight was leaving in moments –

Tom awoke with a jolt. Stress dream, he'd had it before, and it was always unnerving. He breathed out a sigh and felt a wet obstruction in his mouth, and remembered.

Henry.

It had to be a prank. The letters, the kidnapping, all of it. They'd all played practical jokes on each other in uni, at RADA – clothes and papers stolen whilst the victim was in the shower, mashed potatoes in the bed, door handles switched, taping car doors shut with metres and metres of gaffer tape – other stupid, adolescent stuff. They'd moved beyond it for the most part, but every so often something would happen – a year ago Tom had received nearly twenty hard-core pornographic magazines in the post along with polite requests for final payment to complete his subscriptions – Graham had been responsible for that one. This had to be a joke. Henry had been almost jovial about the whole thing.

But his head ached badly from the drugs Henry had forced on him, and his body still hurt from Henry's heavy feet. Grim reality denied him any comfort.

He lay very still, trying to push past the pain in his head and torso and catalogue other points of distress. He was bound at wrist and ankle with rope and something cold and hard, and both his hands and feet were numb, but his arms hurt, too; after trying to move, he realised that his arms were tied to his upper body, pinning them tightly and ruling out the possibility of slipping his legs through the loop of his arms to get his hands in front. His legs were bound together at thigh and knee with what felt like tape. The gag was still in his mouth, sodden now, and the rope holding it in cut cruelly into his face. He'd lain on his side whilst unconscious, probably the only reason he hadn't aspirated the cloth. It felt as if it had expanded instead of compressing with dampness, and his jaw throbbed from the unnatural pressure. He tried to push at the cloth with his tongue, but it was far too big to dislodge. And finally, and perhaps most ominously, he felt rough twine wrapped around his neck. Afraid he'd choke, he decided to stay motionless, breathing harshly through his nose.

Okay. It's going to be okay. Henry will come down and laugh and let you loose and admit he wrote the letters to scare the hell out of you, and you can tell him it fucking worked and then he'll drive you home and everything will be okay oh God please please please let it be okay –

Tears clouded Tom's eyes, but it didn't matter – it was pitch-black and he couldn't see anything. He moaned, then raised his voice to a shout, but his garbled yelling bounced off the close-set walls, terrifying in his own ears. He tried again, and heard running footsteps above him. Let it be anyone but Henry, please! He shrieked as loudly as he could, and when the light came on, blinding him though it was only that dim yellowish bulb, he flinched back but kept shouting, nearly hysterical with fear.

"Hey! Hey, pal!" Henry swung his foot and kicked again, catching Tom in the belly and driving the air out of his lungs. Tom gasped and choked, sucking the cloth back into his throat. He gagged on the fabric tickling at his flesh and rolled forward quickly, pulling at the rope around his neck. He sucked down more fabric and started to panic. I'm choking, dear God I'm going to die –

Henry caught part of the tea towel and tugged, and it slithered out of Tom's mouth bit by bit around the rope keeping it in. Tom tried to push it out but realised it wasn't helping. He attempted to relax his throat and jaw and let Henry work it out of his mouth. Oh, that hurts, Christ! When it was out, Tom
let out a rough sob of relief and let the tears come.

"Oh, stop whinging, for fuck's sake. You're all right." Henry crouched beside Tom and untied the rope from round his head. "Come on," he said, patting Tom's cheek. "Get hold of yourself."

Henry's reassuring tone gave Tom a tiny measure of hope. He pressed his lips together – it hurt to do, but better than having his mouth prised open for hours – and dared to meet Henry's gaze. "Henry," he croaked, "this is a really, really bad joke."

"Yeah. You're right." Henry shook his head. "I'm a twat. Hang on, I'll let you out."

Tom froze. "Are you serious?"

"Course I am. Jesus, sorry about kicking you, though."

"You arsehole," Tom glared up at him. "That really fucking hurt."

"I'll let you have a go at me, how's that? Let me go get something to cut you free." He left the room, and Tom heard footsteps ascending a staircase.

"You fucking bastard," Tom whispered, and rested his cheek against the cool flagstone floor. He let his gaze wander the room. There was no appreciable difference from last night – the room was small, there was old furniture and trunks pushed hither and yon. If Henry's intent had been to scare him with atmosphere as well as the attack, he'd succeeded admirably. Drugging was a bridge too god-damned far, though, and once he was free, he'd have a serious think about hitting Henry hard. He deserved it.

The footsteps returned, and Henry came in with a knife, a large watering can, filled judging from the way he was carrying it, and another tea towel slung over his shoulder. He smiled at Tom.

"It's not funny at all, Henry," Tom said. "You scared me half to death."

Henry bit his lip and sank into a crouch again. His knees popped audibly. He took the knife and held it lightly, letting it dangle between his knees. "Sorry."

"This is the nastiest trick anyone's ever pulled on me. Those letters – Jesus Christ, it was like something a psychopath would write. Well done you, I guess. Untie me, my hands are numb."

"Just a minute."

"Henry, really –" Tom wasn't lying. His hands were completely without feeling, and he was afraid of nerve damage. Shooting for The Hollow Crown wasn't far away, and he couldn't ride properly with mangled hands. "Just untie me, okay? What time is it, anyhow? I haven't really been out for seven hours, have I?"

"You know what your biggest asset is as an actor, Tommy?"

"Can't imagine," Tom snapped.

"It's those eyes of yours. They're so expressive, you know?"

"Thanks," Tom said warily, wondering if this was some sort of weird come-on.

"They're so…credulous. Is that the word? I mean, just now, they were so hopeful. It was really something, you know?"
"What…what do you mean?" Apprehension began to unspool in Tom's stomach.

"That puppy-dog gaze of yours. It got you chosen for all the plum stuff. Well, that and you fucking anyone and everyone connected with the theatre. Cutthroat, but effective, I'll give you that."

"Henry…I don't know what you're –"

Henry struck Tom in the face. "Shut up," he said. "Just shut your fucking mouth for once, can't you?" He bent close. "I mean, good job you worked with a lot of the same people over and over. Branagh. Did you suck his cock? I didn't think he went that way, but hey, who am I to judge?"

"Of course I didn't –" Tom gasped as Henry struck him again.

"See, now that's what I meant about the lying, Tommy. At least own up to it. You stole every fucking role, you and your baby blues and your big cock." Henry was smiling gently.

"You switched to directing, though," Tom whispered, his cheek and eye pulsing with pain. "You said you'd had enough of acting. And then you dropped out. Henry, we were hardly ever up for the same roles – I don't understand why –" He cried out as Henry hit him again.

"Always so easy for you," Henry continued conversationally. "Curly locks and big blue eyes. So easy."

Tom forced himself to meet Henry's gaze. Henry had never been unsuccessful. He had family money, lots of it, a satisfying career, as he told it, and a never-ending supply of casual feminine company. They'd had a few tense moments, but this was…this…. "Henry…Henry, if there's some…unfinished business that you and I have, then we can talk about it calmly. We can bring in a mediator, if you're not comfortable, but…please, this is not necessary."

"Let's just stop pretending you give a shit about me, eh, Tommy? Oh, hey – want to hear something funny? I know you've got a sweet tooth, so a few days ago I tried to get one of your little fans to give you some chocolates that I doctored. Reckoned I'd manoeuvre things once you'd eaten them. She balked, though, the little bitch. Had to take care of that." Henry got up and grabbed another length of rope.

"How?" Sweat ran down Tom's back, his neck, under his arms. "How'd you take care of it?"

"Same way I took care of Katie Thorpe."

Tom shivered. He was freezing. "But Katie –" Katie Thorpe, who'd dated Tom briefly, had disappeared during Tom's second term at RADA. They'd all speculated wildly as to the cause of her disappearance, everything from running off to Paris to outright murder, but she'd never turned up, dead or alive.

Henry moved down to Tom's feet and caught his ankles. He looped rope around them and attached them to the leg of an elderly sideboard. Tom squirmed, but he couldn't move far without pulling at the rope around his neck. "Put her in the vegetable garden. Don't know if it's great for the soil, but nobody's grown vegetables there since it was a victory garden."

"And is that…is that what you're going to do to me?"

For a long moment, Henry regarded Tom in silence. His brow creased a bit, but his eyes were blank. "Eventually," he said at last.

"Henry, please – please –" Tom shrank back as Henry plucked the tea towel from his shoulder and
dragged the watering can forward. He shook his head as realisation dawned quickly. "Henry, please, for God's sake –" A thin wail escaped him as the towel settled over his face, and then cold wetness plastered the fabric to his skin.

*It's not bad, not bad. Doesn't hurt much. Just keep breathing. Use your mouth.*

Hard fingers tangled in his hair, tilting his head backward and holding him still. And then the water streamed in, over his face, into his nose and mouth and down his throat, flooding his larynx and trachea. He was drowning. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he saw flashes of orange and yellow light, sickening. He tried to cough the water out and choked, shock constricting his airway even more. A mewling sound only remotely connected to himself escaped. He was wrong. It hurt, it hurt and he couldn't get air and he'd suffocate and die –

Henry's phone rang. "Oh, fuck." He let Tom go, pulling the tea towel away from his face. Immediately Tom turned his head to the side and brought up water, gasping and spluttering and sobbing, his throat and nose burning.

He couldn't draw a deep breath. There was water in his chest, maybe his lungs, incandescent pain not improved when Henry jammed the tea towel in his mouth and clamped his hand over it. He held the index finger of the hand holding the phone to his lips. "Shh."

Tom could scarcely see through the burning pain. His eyes teared again, streaming freely, but he held as still as he could. Maybe Henry wouldn't kill him if he cooperated. Maybe –

"Hello?" Henry frowned as a high-pitched, excited voice filtered through the speaker. "Who's that?" A deeper frown creased his brow. "Wh – now? Oh, for Christ's sake. Well, can't you –? No. No. I'll be there in ten minutes. Right, right." He rang off and pressed his hands together. "Give me strength."

Tom stared, still sniffling and coughing through the towel. It was soaked, trickling into his throat – not as painful as before, but no treat.

"I've got to interrupt this for a bit," Henry said, and retrieved the rope that had bound Tom's mouth. "Don't go anywhere – ha, ha. I've got lots more planned." He shoved the wet towel deeper into Tom's mouth and tied the rope around his head again. Tom moaned pitifully. "Oh, belt up, for Christ's sake. That was what – fifteen seconds? We haven't even got started yet." He got to his feet. "You're in my house, in case you hadn't twigged, and the staff's on holiday. Nice surprise for them. You remember the layout here, don't you? Quite a ways to the next house – even the cottages are a fair distance. So don't bother screaming – nobody's going to hear you. Of course, if you're keen to try, be my guest. I'll be back within an hour." He waved cheerfully and left the room.

Thirty seconds passed – enough time for Henry to get up the stairs – before Tom broke down and wept. Shaking, he prayed that someone would work out that he'd disappeared. He bitterly regretted his contretemps with Benedict and wished he'd stayed, demanded an explanation and an apology instead of storming off. One infidelity, especially as they hadn't really settled any questions, wasn't the end of the world. Henry's implacable, bewildering, methodical malice, on the other hand…..

Why? For God's sake, it couldn't be simple jealousy. There had to be something else. He had to talk to Henry, work it out. He was persuasive, and he could be charming. Even Henry had remarked on it once. Unless that had been an act.

He couldn't stop crying, and so didn't hear the faint call when it came. Only the sound of footsteps on the stairs silenced him. He wouldn't cry in front of Henry, not so soon, oh God, what was next?
The answer to that came in a wonderful, familiar voice.

"Tom!"

*

The drive to Tilford took forty minutes in Tom's sleek little Audi and would have gone faster had it not been for a plague of Sunday-morning church drivers just off the A3. Sherlock used the time productively, doing a little social history research. He pulled into a petrol station with the unprepossessing name of Hogs Back that only served to remind him that he was peckish. He went in, selected a large coffee and a bacon sandwich, and smiled in a friendly fashion at the elderly man at the counter. "Morning."

"Howeryeh," the old party replied laconically. "That's three-twenty-seven. Petrol today?"

"No, thanks," said Sherlock, and paid with Cumberbatch's credit card, hoping the clerk wouldn't recognise his face. "I'm down from London, passing through, and I've got some time to kill. I understand there are a few houses that do tours hereabouts."

"Aye, there are – none open this early, though." The man sniffed. "It's Sunday." His expression made quite clear his opinion of sleekly besuited men from London with expensive sports cars.

"Maybe on my way back, then. I read about – "Sherlock fumbled his phone from his pocket. "Er, Maddstone House? Owned by the Burgess family."

"They don't do tours in August," the old man said, seating himself on his high stool with a soft grunt. "Mr Henry comes down in August, and again for the shooting."

"Posh guy, huh?" Sherlock tried an ingratiating grin and took a huge bite of his sandwich. Needed ketchup.

The clerk lifted one bushy brow.

"Been reading a bit about them. Looks like they still own a lot of land in Tilford."

"Well now." The clerk considered for a moment. "I reckon so. The great house, of course, and all the cottages on the property. He rents them out. There are...oh, seven, maybe? Eight? One of them's let to a family, couple of brats. There's an artist or an architect or sommat like that, there's another city bloke, friend of his, I think, there's Mrs Sheckley and Miss Van Vogt, they live together, there's –"

"So just the cottages," Sherlock interrupted. He could, when he chose, be polite to the point of paralysis, but time was short.

"Nah, there's the pub on the green as well. His great-granddad bought that ages ago – oh, right before the Great War I should think."

"I don't suppose he's in there every Saturday night pulling pints."

"He's only in there after shooting. Keeps himself to himself the rest of the time."

"Excellent, thank you so much," Sherlock said, dashing out the door. He hastily swallowed half the coffee and pitched the rest, as well as the sub-par bacon sandwich, into a bin, and headed for the
green.

The pub, as was to be expected on a Sunday morning, was deserted. Sherlock examined the façade and the surrounding buildings – quiet little shops, also closed and empty, then went round the back of the pub carrying a tyre jack. He chose a window and smashed it in, then scraped the shards of glass from the frame. No alarm sounded, but that wasn't a problem. He got back in the car and drove the remaining distance to Henry's house.

The house was Regency, well-kept, surrounded by acres of gardens, grasses, and woods. There was a Land Rover in the circular drive. Sherlock parked half a kilometre away and dog-trotted toward the house, jack in hand. He'd neglected to bring anything more lethal, but he didn't suppose Cumberbatch owned a gun. Best thing, really – he probably wouldn't know what the hell to do with it anyhow.

He took refuge in a copse of trees and checked his phone. Two bars, good, good. He dialled Henry's number, purloined from TWH's address book, and waited.

"Is that Mr. Burgess?" Sherlock spoke in a high, quavering voice. "Mr. Burgess, this is Timothy Chalmers. I own Three Bags Full Fibre Arts, a few doors down from you? I'm afraid you've had a break-in. Yes, that's right. The police are here I told them I would phone. Unfortunately nobody answered your land line and I didn't have your mobile number, but one of your tenants was passing by and – sorry, I'm nattering. The police would like you to come at once. I think the damage is quite extensive. I can give them directions to your house, if you like. Are you certain? It would be more convenient for you. Oh, very well. I'll let them know. Goodbye now."

Sherlock waited and watched. A few minutes later, Henry came storming out of the house, got into his Land Rover, swearing angrily, and sped off, bouncing over cobble. Certain that he was well out of sight, Sherlock darted to the door from which Henry had emerged and found it unlocked. Idiot. Too confident and careless by half. He stepped inside. Henry Burgess might have had some henchman lurking about, but it wasn't likely, given the nature of the crime he clearly intended to perpetrate. Too, he'd have sent any staff packing. Still, a quick reconnaissance wouldn't hurt.

The house had three storeys. The ground floor had that musty cheerless air of chambers that were viewed not used, and the rooms were alternately paeans to Empire stiffness and Victorian bad taste and were blessedly empty. The two upper floors, their galleries accessible by means of a ponderous stone staircase, were bedrooms, sitting rooms, servants' rooms, and were also deserted. Briefly Sherlock wondered if Henry had managed to dispatch Tom already, but given the anger and wariness in his voice when Sherlock had mentioned sending the police out, he thought not.

He ran downstairs. "Tom! Where are you?" There had to be somewhere to keep him conveniently – maybe he was in an outbuilding, not the house itself. Henry mightn't have commenced the day’s torture yet. "Tom!"

In the kitchen, he saw a heavy door set into the wall. Recent footprints, headed out. He opened the door carefully and went down the stone stairs. A light at the bottom was burning.

Storage cellar in one direction, wine cellar in another. There was a stink of lye and a fainter odour beneath that Sherlock recognised as human decay. "Tom!"

There was a sharp, muffled cry from the direction of the storage cellar. Sherlock pushed past piles of centuries-old junk and saw a smaller door. He tore it open and beneath the poor light of a single bulb, saw Tom lying on the floor, gagged, bound, stretched between two heavy pieces of furniture. And, thank God, unharmed.
Tom saw him and cried out again. Tears filled his already reddened eyes.

"It's okay," Sherlock said, and hurried to Tom's side. "It's okay. Hang on, hang on." He went for the gag first, pulling the rope down with some effort and easing the cloth from Tom's mouth.

Tom coughed explosively, curling up as much as he was able. "Ben –" He sobbed, unable to get the rest out. "Oh, God, oh, thank God, oh, fuck –" He sobbed again.

Sherlock caressed his cheek. "Shh. It's okay, I promise. Let me cut you free."

"I've got to piss so badly." Tom uttered a shrill laugh that culminated in another sob. "Oh, God, Ben, how'd you find me?"

"Tell you everything later. Let's get you out of this. Is there a knife nearby, or –?" Sherlock looked round quickly. "Of course not. Hang on, let me go get one." He jumped up.

"Are the police coming?"

"Police? No, just me," Sherlock said, and darted out of the room and up the stairs. He found a sharp knife in a block, pulled it out, and ran downstairs again. "Here we are," he said, and deftly cut the rope binding Tom's neck to the handle of a wardrobe.

"Ben – Ben – I'm sorry about yesterday. I didn't mean – I should have stayed and talked it over."

"Talked what over?" Sherlock sawed the rope that went from Tom's ankles to the leg of a sideboard.

"What happened. I – look, we can talk about it, or not, it's up to – oh, Christ, you don't know how happy I am to see you. Henry's – he's fucking insane, Ben. He killed a girl the other day, or maybe a week ago, I don't know, and he killed my mate Katie at RADA – God knows how many people he's got stashed out in the garden. We've got to get out of here."

"We are," Sherlock said, quite patiently if he said so himself, and rolled Tom to his stomach. "Looks as if he wat – oh, for God's sake."

"What?" Tom asked. "What?"

"Handcuffs." Sherlock felt in his pockets, but of course he didn't have a handcuff key, because Cumberbatch didn't carry a handcuff key. Everyone should carry a handcuff key. I'll have to find something to pick them."

"Jesus, Ben."

"What?"

Tom pushed himself up to one elbow. "You're – you're as cool as a cucumber. I'm impressed."

Sherlock shrugged indifferently.

"How'd you find me? Did somebody see him dragging me out? Was it on the news? Wait, why haven't you phoned the police? Are you mad? He's – he was going to kill me, and you came out on your own – oh, God! Is this some sort of – I don't know, some sort of hero-id thing happening? Before you do another thing, please phone the police. Please."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Don't worry."

"I am worried. I'm worried about you."
"I've got to get something to pick the cuffs," Sherlock said, and got to his feet.

"Ben, wait."

Impatience and anger and frustration collided in Sherlock's brain. "I am not 'Ben,'" he spat. "For God's sake – do you actually think that Benedict Cumberbatch, the actor, was sat in front of a microscope all night, trying to sort out dirt molecules and bits of sand and plant matter? Do you think he'd have the brains to work out where you were being held from the contents of your front hall rug and a single sheet of paper? I've met him, you know. He's not exactly aces when it comes to simple cogitation much less complex deductions. And if you haven't been able to work that out, you're even stupider than he is. In fact, you're –" Sherlock halted. Tom was wide-eyed and had shrunk back a bit.

_Timing, Sherlock_, John would have tutted.

"What the hell is going on with you?" Tom whispered.

"Oh, _God._" Sherlock wheeled, left the little storeroom, and marched up the stairs.

As he opened the door, he saw a flash of something shining, wide, and round. He registered it as the scrubbed copper bottom of a pan an instant before it smashed into his face.

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So many thanks to Kimberlite for beta-reading the first section and to Vilestrumpet for Britpicking as well as pinch-hitting for Kimberlite as she's globetrotting. :)

*

If it hadn't been for the easy chair directly behind him, Benedict might have gone arse over tit from the force of John's punch. Instead, he careened backward, hit the chair, and sat down with an ungraceful plop. Stunned, he touched his eye socket gingerly. "Jesus, John!" They're never going to be able to disguise the swelling, goddamn it, even with makeup. Pity we've already shot the punching scene. Oh, wait - Sherlock's body not mine. Well then, who gives a fuck?

John was looking at his hand in dismay.

"Honestly, was that necessary?"

"Fucking hell, Sherlock," John said. His voice was low and his eyes flashed with rage and what looked like impending murder. He pointed at Benedict. "Don't you - don't you dare -"

"Would you let me -"

"You k -" John pressed his lips together and shook his head. Harsh breath issued from his nose. "You kissed me. You kissed me back."

Benedict got shakily to his feet. "I know. It was...it was lovely, John. That's why I had to stop, to tell you -"

"Shut up, Sherlock," John hissed. "All right? Just shut the fuck up before you make this any worse, you arsehole. You fucking wanker."

"I didn't want to lie to you!" Benedict shouted, and touched his eye again. The volume of his own voice hurt his head. "For fuck's sake, just lis -"

"Listen to you," John said, taking a menacing step forward. "Because apparently you're an entirely different person? You know, I knew the whole high-functioning sociopath thing was a fucking pile of bollocks, but I thought, hey, we've all got our fronts, who am I to try to tear yours down? But now you're, what, trying to claim dissociative identity disorder or something? It's old, Sherlock. It's boring. And you hate boring. But -" He uttered the bitterest laugh Benedict had ever heard and held both hands up. "Fine. Whatever. Let's just forget about it, yeah?" He wheeled and stalked toward the bedroom where Benedict had laid out his things.

Frantically, Benedict cast about for something that would convince John he was telling the truth. "John, please. Please listen. The reason I sorted out Irene Adler's mobile code so quickly is because I already knew it. We filmed it weeks ago. Sherlock's brilliant, unquestionably, but he's not a fucking mind reader." In the bedroom, John was pulling his phone and a set of earbuds from his coat pocket.
"And – and in the loo, when Jim showed up, I was desperate, close to tears, and – would Sherlock react like that? Has he ever, ever been uncertain of himself that you've seen?" John plugged the earbuds into his ears, tapped his phone screen a few times, and walked toward him with a stony expression on his face. "Please, John, I've been stuck here for two days and I'm at my wits' end – look, we'll call Mycroft, he'll tell you –" Benedict reached out to John only to have John shove him backward and slam the door in his face. "John!"

The lock clicked firmly.

"God damn it!" Benedict hammered on the wood until he thought he'd splinter it. "John, open the fucking door!"

There was no sound from John's room, but there was a heavy pounding on the cottage's front door. "Mr Holmes! Open up!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake –" Benedict hurried to the other door and opened it to see two men, dressed in special-ops black and toting firearms. "Hi."

"We heard shouting," one of the men said.

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Benedict said, flushing. "Just a little disagreement over, er, sleeping arrangements."

Both men eyed him reflectively, probably examining the growing bruise on his face, but remained impassive. "It's understandable that you're under stress, Mr Holmes, but it's easier for us to do our jobs if you're a little less…volatile," the first man said.

"Right. Sorry. Sorry about that," Benedict said. "Won't happen again. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

They made no move to leave, so Benedict hesitantly swung the door shut, presumably leaving them stranded on the doorstep like a couple of armed Sphinxes. He stood in the middle of the flowered carpet, trying to decide what to do next. He could tap on John's door for hours, but John would probably come out and punch him again, or simply ignore him and leave his earbuds in all night. He could try writing him a note explaining everything, but there was no way to force John to read it. Or he could wait until morning and try again. There was no going back now.

It was the right thing to do. Wasn't it?

Admittedly he could have chosen another moment, but how would John feel if Benedict had allowed the kiss and then the truth emerged? It would have been dishonourable and completely unforgivable to encourage John whilst keeping him in the dark.

Intermingled in Benedict's present tumult of sensibility was a cautious sort of jubilation. He'd been right about John's feelings for Sherlock. Not only physically – he'd felt the evidence of John's arousal against his own (and it was remarkable that Benedict hadn't felt as if he was kissing Martin. No, he was kissing John Watson, without a doubt) – but emotionally as well. And it didn't matter what happened in the real world – in his world, whether they played straight or gay or ambivalent or asexual – in this world, in this time and place, John Watson loved Sherlock Holmes and, God bless him, found the courage to tell him so in his own sort of roundabout way. Even if the result had been a misunderstanding and a punch – Benedict again felt tentatively of the spongy flesh around his eye, and winced – that had taken bravery.

But then, John was brave. Why should that be so surprising?
His eye was really hurting. He went to the kitchen and prised an old-fashioned metal ice tray from the bottom of the wee snowy freezer compartment. He found a tea towel, wrapped it round a few cubes, and went back into the little parlour to sit and hold the cold pack to his eye.

Benedict had been loved, honestly and well. His family, some friends, Olivia, Tom –

He fought tears. Not now, don't think about him right now.

He'd been lucky. The people Benedict had trusted with his affections had loved him with whole hearts; they'd never wanted pieces of him – not his pedigree or his money, such as it was; not his growing fame or his looks, once they'd emerged; not his body or his thirst for living as complete a life as he could. But from the show (and it didn't matter who was living out whose dream; the distinctions were so fine as to be pointless) it seemed clear that Sherlock and John needed each other.

Only five days ago, if he'd been asked, he would have said that romance was irrelevant, that their bond of friendship was more than enough, but just now, seeing John's stricken face, the confusion, embarrassment, and disappointment that he'd imperfectly covered with anger, he couldn't say that in good conscience any longer. Perhaps somewhere out there, there were a thousand iterations of Holmes and Watson, and perhaps nine hundred and ninety-nine of them were content with the bond of friendship. But not here, not now.

How would Sherlock have responded, anyhow? Would he have been brusque, dismissive? He'd had sex with Tom, after all, and Benedict didn't buy that sex was the only option for a single blessed minute. If Sherlock was so god-damned clever he could have worked out an alternative. And then there was Mycroft, and Benedict wasn't stirring up that rat's nest. No, clearly Sherlock enjoyed sex, no matter how much he sublimated it – but were his feelings for John romantic? He was afraid there was only one way to find out, and he wasn't looking forward to it, if indeed the opportunity came.

Benedict hadn't meant to hurt John, though, and it was clear that he had to make amends somehow. How, he hadn't any idea. But the secret was out, and he couldn't back away from it, and in truth didn't want to. He loved playing Sherlock on television. Loved it. But playing Sherlock in real life – Christ, no. He was done.

He got up and went to his tiny bedroom. Exhaustion slowed his steps and dragged out his undressing to a crawl. He'd sort things out in the morning, but he needed sleep so badly. He needed to escape all this for a few hours, to let his body heal, to drift into a universe where he wasn't Sherlock Holmes.

Benedict pulled up the sheet and blanket and immediately, gratefully, slept.

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Birdsong and a gentle, steady rainfall awakened him; he rolled over in the bed and saw grey light filtering through the curtains. The placid normality of the sounds and the dim, soothing illumination of morning lulled him for a moment. He might have been in his own bed, window open, a canopy of lush green surrounding him, luxuriating in softness and comfort for a few moments before jumping out of bed to begin a new day. It was amazing how much pleasure he derived from a few stolen minutes lately. There wasn't much time for being a slugabed.

Unfamiliar church bells pealed in the distance, reminding Benedict that he wasn't home. It was Sunday, and he was in Sussex, in a safe house with guards outside and a very angry John Watson
"Shit," he groaned, and threw the covers back. He hadn't the least idea how to approach the mess he'd made – although he wasn't quite ready to accept blame for John's overreaction which, though understandable, was still an overreaction. He probed delicately at his puffy eye and winced. Perhaps a policy of cautious avoidance for at least a short while was the best plan.

Bitterly, he wondered if Sherlock was availing himself of Tom's proximity, and whether Tom had twigged yet. He climbed out of bed and went to the door, absentely scratching himself, then opened it a crack.

John was in the tiny parlour, curled up on the sofa, reading one of the paperbacks Benedict had brought. Although Benedict's bedroom door creaked horribly, John didn't look up as Benedict emerged and went into the little loo.

He'd planned to just have a piss and wash his face, but he saw the tub and decided on a shower. He ran the water until it was as hot as he could get it, stripped, and jumped in. He lathered briskly with a cake of plain Pears, rinsed off, and got out. He brushed his teeth – new toothbrushes and what seemed to be Sherlock's brand of toothpaste, nice touch – and brushed his hair flat. It would curl up in a bit and look perfect anyhow.

The parlour was empty, but there were noises in the kitchen – John was making breakfast. Benedict smelled sausage and simmering beans, and his stomach registered the delicious odours noisily. He tightened his mouth, crept quietly into his bedroom, and put on fresh clothes – a dark indigo-coloured shirt and dark jeans. Thumping to the bed with his socks in hand, he listened to John's scraping and mixing and tried not to feel hurt.

"It's not about you, you arsehole. He hated not being believed, even if his story was beyond ludicrous. To be fair, he wouldn't have believed it himself. Still.

He pulled on the socks, tied his shoes, and stood up. He was hungry, and even if John was furious, that was no reason for Benedict to stay holed up and starving in his room all day. Even a cup of tea and some toast would tide him over. Resolute, he marched into the kitchen.

John's back was turned toward him, spoiling his firm entrance a bit. Benedict gave the kitchen a once-over glance. Tiny but efficient, it had soft duck-egg blue walls with white trimmings, white appliances, and white broderie anglaise curtains at the single little window. The pot and pan on the cooker were empty, scraped clean of their savoury contents. There was a crisp smell of toast in the air.

On the table, across from John, was a plate with sausage, scrambled eggs, beans, and toast. A cup of tea sat beside the plate, steaming in the cool morning.

A hot blush rising to his face, Benedict cleared his throat. "Good morning," he said as quietly as he could.

John glanced over his shoulder, then turned back and tucked a piece of sausage in his mouth. "Morning," he mumbled in reply.

Benedict gazed hungrily at the food, but forbore from sitting down. Maybe John had invited one of the strapping security guards in, a little sauce for the goose. "That smells nice," he ventured.

"You'd better eat it before it gets cold, then," John said, burying his nose in his book.

"All right." Benedict sat, certain his face was bright pink. Abashed and humbled, he dug into his
eggs and inserted a forkful into his mouth. John had waited until he was up to begin breakfast, and that small consideration, especially in light of what had preceded it last night, made Benedict want to take John by the shoulders and thank him for his thoughtfulness. Perhaps it was an apology. He had to say something. "John –"

"Could I eat in peace, Sherlock?" John set his book face-down on the coarse white linen tablecloth. "I just – just let me eat in peace, all right?"

"Okay." Benedict paused. "I'm sorry."

John grunted and went back to his book.

Benedict stole glances at John from time to time, but John was wholly absorbed in his book, or affected to be. His eyes moved back and forth as if he were reading, at least. Benedict finished his breakfast at a gallop, ahead of John. He got up and took his plate and cup to the sink. He saved the cup for another helping and gathered up the soiled cooking pans, putting them to soak. John had finished, so Benedict deftly scooped up his plate. "More tea?"

"No, thanks." John rose and left the room.

Okay. So this was how it was going to be. And to think that he'd felt good for a few seconds after telling John. Christ almighty. Of course, it was a bit much to expect John to believe him right away. Or at all, really.

Sighing, Benedict made another cup of tea – he longed for a cigarette, but tea would have to do – and started on the dishes. He wasn't ordinarily keen on doing dishes, but it felt good to have something to occupy his hands, and soon he became caught up in the rhythm of his task and let the urgent, high-frequency static that had been thundering in his head the past few days dim to a faint crackle. He scrubbed and rinsed and dried and neatened, and before long the kitchen had been restored to its pristine, shining glory.

He folded the towel over the handle of the cooker and surveyed the kitchen with satisfaction. His mum would have been proud. He was about to go back to his room, then changed direction and headed for the front door. John was on the sofa again, tearing through his book. Elaborately casual, Benedict went to the door and peered out. It had stopped raining; the grass and trees looked newly washed, and the tidy flowerbeds on either side of the stone walk glowed with brilliant colour. There was a black Land Rover in the drive and a guard, not the same as last night, on the path. Benedict raised his hand in greeting and strolled onto the path. "Hello. Would you like some –"

"I'm sorry, Mr Holmes, but I must ask you to go back into the house." 

"Is there any danger? Are there snipers, or is it –"

"One never knows, sir," the guard said. His dark eyes gleamed from his brown, chiselled face. "We're compelled to anticipate that possibility and take every precaution accordingly. So if you don't mind…." He gestured toward the house.

"Right. Sorry." Benedict went back to the door. "I was just wondering if you wanted some tea."

"We've got everything we need out here, sir. Thanks all the same."

"Okay." Chastened, Benedict slipped back into the house and closed the door behind him. "They must have changed shifts during the night."

John neither replied nor looked up from his book.
"I asked him if he wanted tea, but he said no. He told me not to leave the house."

No answer.

"Probably I should have saved him some eggs. He looks –"

"I'm trying to read," John snapped.

Benedict was heartened. Talking, even shouting, was better than the silent treatment. Maybe they could begin again. "John, you've got to listen to me for a –"

"No, you listen." John threw his book aside and leapt to his feet. He stalked toward Benedict, his face like thunder, and pointed to an easy chair. "Sit down, shut your gob, and for once in your life, you fucking listen."

Benedict held up his hands in a gesture of appeasement. "Okay," he said softly, and sat. He tucked one leg under the other and indicated the sofa. "Would you rather –"

"Sherlock. Shut up. Please." John rubbed his eyes.

"Sorry."

"Look, Sherlock, I – you might not realise it, and God knows neither of us are what you'd call –" John groped for a word. "I don't know. Romantic, or whatever. But I don't – I'm not great at the whole relationship thing. I mean, you've met the women I've dated. Or some of them, at least. Some of them I don't think could handle meeting you."

Benedict stifled a sudden grin. That wasn't difficult to picture, for some reason.

"I've never, ever, ever had this happen before," John went on. "And for you to just…to throw it back in my face, Sherlock, you – how could you do that to me? How? Even for you, that was…." He sank back onto the sofa, his averted face the picture of misery.

Appalled, Benedict sat in silence. He hadn't realised until now just how much John had wagered on that kiss, and he'd stepped on the moment and grandstanded with his big revelation. He'd wreathed himself in triumph and thought he was doing the right thing, the decent thing, but he'd been clumsy and thoughtless, and in the end, his timing was no better than Sherlock's. What could he possibly say now that would even begin to mend fences?

"John."

"What?"

"Answer a question for me. Please."

John deflated visibly and sank against the sofa. "What is it?"

"This…attraction…." John's face screwed up a little, but Benedict pressed on. "Just tell me one thing. It hasn't only been the last three days, has it?"

A frown furrowed John's brow. "Why would you –"

"Indulge me," Benedict said sharply. God, now you sound like Sherlock. Steady on, for fuck's sake. He had to know, though. He wasn't so egotistical that he thought that the allure and magnetism of his personality had caused John to fall for him within a few days, but he didn't want something he'd done, some particular gentleness or expression of countenance to have tipped the balance in his
favour, because John would likely never receive that from Sherlock if they ever made it back to their respective universes.

John gazed down at his lap for a long time. His throat worked silently. "I've never believed in love at first sight," he said, addressing his knees. "Still don't. It's bollocks. You can't love somebody you don't know. The day we met, I was...intrigued, I guess. You were different, and a little bit of a nutter – well, a lot –" He chuckled and met Benedict's eyes. "And you weren't afraid of anything, even when you should have been. That first night I knew I wanted to stay. I thought, well, someone's got to keep him from getting himself killed, though I reckon you managed all right before me." He flexed his left hand. His face was scarlet. "Being with you, it's...you know, a lot of people say things like 'you're my other half' or 'you complete me' and I think that's bollocks too. With you – you let me be exactly who I am. It took about a week of living with you to sort that out. And that's when I knew, even if I couldn't admit it to myself." He blew out a breath and looked down at his lap again, as if his mainspring had wound down.

Benedict sat in silence, wishing that he was Sherlock, if only for that moment. Everyone should hear a declaration like that at least once in their lives. He thought of Tom, and though it had only been two and a half days since he'd been stuck here, terrible pain and loss pierced his heart.

He didn't know, though, exactly how Sherlock felt about John, even if he suspected that John had managed to thaw that icy carapace. What could he say that wouldn't ruin everything? He thought a bit and then decided there was no point in stabbing John bit by bit when he'd already stabbed him once. No point and nowhere to go but forward, now that he'd fucked things up.

"John." For the first time since he'd decided to impersonate Sherlock, Benedict allowed his voice to lighten, let the hard, narrow expression on his face soften. "Look at me." John met Benedict's gaze, a heart-rending compound of suspicion and hope in his eyes. Benedict cringed inwardly, steeling himself for his own unintentional cruelty. "I wasn't lying to you. I'm not Sherlock Holmes."

John closed his eyes. "Jesus fucking Christ," he whispered, and got up.

Benedict blocked John's trajectory to his bedroom. Taking a chance, he reached out and grasped John's upper arms. "Listen to me. Listen. You don't think I've seemed out of sorts the past few days?"

"You always seem out of sorts," John said. He stared at Benedict, and let out a derisive little laugh. "Christ, I'm so fucking stupid. Let's just forget about it, yeah? Let go." He struggled to break Benedict's grip.

"Don't move. I swear before God that I'm not lying to you." He was using his own voice, and something must have twigged, because John peered at him, scowling. "I know it sounds crazy, and I chose the worst possible time to tell you, and I'm so sorry, I can't tell you how sorry I am. But it's true. Three days ago I was on set in Cardiff, and at about half seven I grabbed a cable and accidentally fucking electrocuted myself –" Benedict sucked in a quick breath at the sudden question in John's eyes. "And when I woke up I was here. Not here here, but in the flat. In 221B. Christ, don't you remember me flipping out? Asking if it was a joke?"

"Yeah, of course I do. It was only a couple of days ago. But you – you know, you melt down from time to time, throw tantrums, and –" John shook his head. "I can't even believe I'm discussing this with you. Come on, Sherlock, let me go, all right? I just want to read."

"Please," Benedict said, putting every bit of urgency and command he possessed in his voice. "Just wait. Just a moment." He pulled out Sherlock's mobile and dialled, putting the phone on speaker.
"What is it now?" Mycroft's voice said impatiently.

"Mycroft, it's Benedict."

"Yes, I'm well aware."

John's face screwed into an even deeper frown. "What the –"

"I've told John," Benedict said.

There was a lengthy pause. "Have you?" Mycroft replied, his tone dripping polite disinterest.

"Yes. I'm afraid he doesn't believe me, though."

Another silence followed. "I see. May I ask why you chose to do that?"

"I needed to. The situation became…er, untenable."

John found his voice. "Mycroft?"

"Yes, John?"

"What the fuck is going on?"

"Yes. I expect it sounds rather difficult to believe."

John snorted. "In fact, it sounds rather fucking impossible to believe."

"It's extremely complicated, John, and frankly I don't think you'd quite –"

"Well, why don't you take five minutes out of your regular schedule of assassinations and financial collapse and explain it." John glared at Benedict.

A heavy sigh hissed over the phone. "Very well. Am I on speaker-phone? Take me off at once, I detest that."

Benedict bit his lip. "But –"

"Fine. Good." John snatched the phone from Benedict's hand, switched off the speaker, and put the phone to his ear. "It's me. There had better be a bloody convincing explanation for this, Mycroft." He listened for almost a full minute, his eyes fixed on Benedict's face. "How?" As Mycroft continued to speak, his voice only audible as a soft hum, John's expression alchemised from fury into incredulity, then bafflement. "But I don't understand. Oh, that's hilarious. Ha, ha. Fucking hell, Mycroft." He pivoted and faced the window, away from Benedict, listening intently. After another minute he turned back, his countenance pale. He looked Benedict up and down. "Wait. Then…then where's Sherlock?" His mouth dropped open.

Accustomed to scrutiny, Benedict nonetheless felt uneasy beneath John's intense examination. He retreated to the battered chintz wing chair and sat, trying to reassure himself. It's good. No more secrets. Everything's out in the open.

"Then how –? Yeah, but aren't you…of course you are. Yes. No, obviously. When did you –? Oh, of course. Of course you did. Forgive me." John shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me? Yeah. Thanks for that. You let me live with a complete stranger –" He turned back to stare at Benedict. "Do you know what Moriarty's done? And Sherlock off in – yes. Yes, I fucking appreciate it. You're a gem, Mycroft. Don't ever change. How do you expect to get him back if he's a whole…universe
away? And how do you even know he won't – oh. He has?"

Benedict forced himself to meet John's gaze calmly.

"Are you sure it can be done?" John closed his eyes and massaged them. "Well, when, for God's sake? And do I have to let…do we really have to stay here, all things considered? Maybe I could go back to Baker Street."

That stung. Benedict crossed his legs and laced his fingers together over one knee.


Benedict waited, enduring John's inspection.

"I need a few minutes," John said at last.

"Okay."

John spared Benedict a last glance and moved past him. The bedroom door closed firmly.

Benedict sat back to wait.

*

He didn't wait long. Before half an hour had elapsed, John came back into the parlour, skirting Benedict's chair by a good margin, and seated himself on the sofa. He regarded Benedict in silence for a bit, and then took a deep breath. "Benedict Cumberbatch."

Benedict nodded. "That's right."

"And you're an actor. On telly."

"I do films, too. And stage plays and voice work." This isn't the moment to deliver an oral CV, maybe.

"And you're on a programme. About Sherlock."

Benedict smiled a little. "And you."

"Me." John's voice lacked inflection, but curiosity kindled in his eyes.

"Yeah, of course you." Benedict felt his chest loosening a little. This was something he could talk about with utter ease, and who didn't like hearing about themselves, even weird alternate universe versions of themselves? "Martin Freeman plays John Watson. He's brilliant, he's just like…well, he does a really great job at being you."

John shook his head. "This is…crazy."

"Yeah," Benedict agreed. "I know. I've been crazy, the past few days, trying to keep up."

"Why…why didn't you just say what had really happened?"
"I did. You didn't believe me." Benedict grinned wryly. "Not that I blame you. I wouldn't have believed me either."

John pressed his lips together. "Yeah. I guess not. Mycroft said you've seen Sherlock, some sort of… interlude or something."

"The fainting spells," Benedict said. "Yeah. It happens at the same time the shock occurred. It only lasts a couple of minutes. I presume I'm totally unconscious when it takes place."

"Yeah, complete loss of consciousness," John said. "I thought it was ordinary syncope at first, and then when it happened again, I thought maybe it was a heart issue, and then I just started to panic. I… is Sherlock okay?"

"He seems fine," Benedict said. "He's an arsehole, but he hasn't been harmed or anything."

John laughed a little. "I know. Stands to reason, I suppose. I can't really wrap my head round this, er, Benedict."

"Ben is fine."

"Right. Ben." He shook his head. "I've got to hand it to you – you're a good actor. I mean, there were moments, I should have seen it in retrospect, but really – you managed to pull the wool over my eyes. Well done."

Benedict grinned, pleased with himself despite the severity of his predicament. "Thanks. Look, I'm really sorry about all this. I wanted to tell you, but I thought you'd have me sectioned."

"I might have done," John said, and shook his head again. "I can't – this is just too weird, I'm sorry."

"I'm just glad Sherlock's not with Martin," Benedict said. "Martin's really good at taking the piss, and Sherlock would have given himself away. As it is, I suppose he's been able to keep a lid on things at that end as well."

"Martin," John mused. A shy smile lit his face. "What's he like?"

"Deadpan," Benedict said. "Took me a bit to get used to his humour. And he's cool, you know? I think he thought I was a bit of a berk. But we're good mates now. And he's a sweet guy, really – loves his girlfriend, loves his kids –"

"Kids? Girlfriend?"

"Yeah, he's been with Amanda for ages. They're great. And his children are lovely – sweet, naughty little things." Wistful, Benedict smiled.

"Have you got kids?"

"Me? No. Maybe someday."

"Girlfriend?"

"Had a few." Benedict rubbed the length of his thigh. "Have a boyfriend now. We're not out or anything, though." He didn't mention Sherlock being with Tom and their possible sexual exploits.

"You're bisexual."

"Yes," Benedict paused. "Like you."
John flushed and exhaled harshly. "Look, about that."

"You don't have to –"

"No," John said, and exhaled again. "I didn't know it wasn't Sherlock I was talking to. I apologise. For that, and for hitting you. I'm sorry."

"If it helps…." Benedict leant forward. "He was really…he was almost frantic about you when he heard about the Brighton murders. He does care about you, very deeply."

"Yeah, but not –" John waved a hand and laughed uneasily. "Thanks. I guess I got it out of my system. Probably for the best."

Benedict thought of Tom again: his ineffable sweetness, his open heart, his reluctance to tell his family and the world the whole truth, his quailing at the possibility of discovery. "John, I've got no right to say this to you, because I…I'm just an actor. I don't really know you, I can't see inside your heart. But you can't be afraid. You can't wall your heart up like that. If you really do love Sherlock – if you can be your truest self with him – then you've got to be brave, and vulnerable."

John's mouth tightened. "Is that what you do?"

"Not always. I know, it's easy to see someone else's problems and not your own, and easier still to give advice freely."

"Yeah." John sighed.

"If I were home right now, if I had the chance, I'd tell Tom I love him. I don't tell him nearly enough, and he's so generous."

"Tom? That's your boyfriend's name?"

Benedict nodded. "He's fantastic."

"Well, you're lucky, then." John fiddled with the outer seam of his jeans. When he spoke again, his voice was timid. "You think Sherlock cares a lot?"

"I know he does," Benedict said. "And if he doesn't love you, he's a fool."

"Well." John smiled, but said nothing more.

Benedict realised belatedly that he'd been tactless, the king of cold comfort. Shit. "John, I'm sorry I lied to you. I didn't intend to deceive you, not maliciously."

John nodded. "Yeah, I know. Mycroft's working on the problem, at least. Maybe he can put in a call to Stephen Hawking or something."

Benedict almost laughed. Stephen Hawking existed across universes. Wasn't that exquisite? "We've got Stephen Hawking as well. If anyone's got that sort of pull, it's Mycroft."

"You've – what else…? Never mind, another time. Mycroft said he was looking into the Moriarty problem, too."

"He'll have to," Benedict said unhappily. "I'm not Sherlock. I can't outwit Jim Moriarty."

"You held your own pretty well, I thought."
"Thank you. It was exhausting. I don't know how Sherlock manages. He really is brilliant." Benedict slumped in his chair, wiped out from emotion and revelations.

John watched Benedict's face. "Right. Er...I think I'm going to go to my bedroom and have a kip. I didn't sleep fantastically well last night."

"Okay. John, thanks for listening. I know all this is a bit of a mind-fuck."

John nodded, then heaved himself to his feet. "I'll see you in a bit." He disappeared again, leaving Benedict alone.

Benedict rested his hands on the arms of the chintz chair and gazed up at the ceiling. He felt a little better. Confession really was good for the soul.

Now all he needed to do was get home.

*

Jim wasn't great at waiting; he knew that. A little self-awareness never killed anybody. Too much was pointless, though. It only paid to probe into certain corners. Even Sherlock, that big doofus, knew better than to navel-gaze. Usually, anyway. Considering Molly's recent upsetting revelation, it seemed he'd revised that policy.

He squeezed his hands into tight little fists and felt his nails digging into the soft skin of his palms. He squeezed and squeezed until there was pain, and the bright hot trickle of blood slippery against his fingertips. Jim looked up at the flickering bluish fluorescent light trapped behind its wire cage and smiled dreamily.

People who knew him, who knew what he did, thought that he was an agent of chaos, and that was fine, that was more than okay. Because people were stupid, they didn't have the wit or the imagination to comprehend the truth about him: it was symmetry that mattered, not chaos. His actions prompted equal and opposite reactions. Arrange a murder, watch a family collapse and shatter. Organise a heist and sit back as institutions curdle and operations grind to a halt. Infuse a subculture with the correct amount of illegal drugs and enjoy the spectacle of eroding trust and spiraling betrayal. It was the finite subdivision rule taken to its outermost point, the delicate tilting of the world's axis into a Mandelbrot set of infinite shifting beauty. If nobody got it, that wasn't his problem.

He had to admit, though, that he was just the tiniest bit disappointed that Sherlock didn't seem to understand it. They were chiral, the two of them, certainly, but that had its joys, and he'd taken such pleasure in watching Sherlock for so long, and once he'd revealed himself at the pool, he'd thought that Sherlock's delightful curiosity would have taken over, and the process of balance would begin. Possibly he should have seen it coming; he'd left the room, waited for Sherlock for a couple of minutes, and then had got impatient.

* Should have blown the doggie up then. My bad.*

Well, that wouldn't happen again. He knew what he had to do. It was a shame, honestly, but Sherlock had already upset the equation. Now all he had to do was wait. It was terrible to be stuck here, wherever here was, dressed in a cheap t-shirt and polyester prison trousers. They'd brought him a cheese and tomato roll, or what had looked like a cheese and tomato roll, and a cup of weak coffee, and had left him to stew in his own juices. The lack of urgency seemed to indicate that they thought
he'd be locked up for a very long time, and he supposed he couldn't blame them for total ignorance.

Jim closed his eyes and retreated for a bit. He couldn't sleep, not with the spectre of Sherlock and Johnny Watson behind his eyelids. He thought about the two of them kissing, Sherlock's hands cupping the doggie's head and their lips touching.

He gasped in sudden joy. Oh, he'd make them pay. For a couple of hours at least.

After what seemed days and days, there was a scraping at his door, and a groan of hinges. Jim kept his eyes closed.

"Up," a gruff voice commanded.

* * *

It was just a day for disappointments, and that was all there was to it. Jim hadn't expected to see Mycroft Holmes, but he'd hoped for someone more imposing than the officious little man in a Hong Kong Cerruti knockoff who was arguing with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (a Conservative, in Ermenegildo Zegna, hilariouser and hilariouser).

"Sir, I am obliged to express concern. We must consider this an unprecedented action at this level of security, and channels –"

"Your concern is noted," the Under-Secretary said. Tall, with the build of the ageing rugby player he was, he handed the glorified screw a sheet of flimsy. "The code words are correct, I believe?"

"Yes…"

Jim, dressed in his regular clothes, crossed his legs and gave the guard standing over him a friendly smile. *Sorry for all the bother.*

"Then I see no further reason for delay. Contact my office with further questions. Mr Moriarty, if you're ready –" The Under-Secretary turned on his heel and left the room.

Jim rose to his feet nonchalantly and gave the faux-Cerruti screw a shrug. "No hard feelings." Not *altogether* true. He might wake up in a box of his own one day. Buried alive – tit for tat. The screw didn't answer, merely giving him a hard stare, so Jim sauntered down the hall and out the door that another guard held for him. "Thanks."

Outside, a helicopter waited, its blades furiously churning the air. The Under-Secretary was already sitting inside. Jim took his time, noting the sun in the sky – late morning – and the location – oh, God! – Scotland, going by the terrain. Two hours to get back home. Well, at least they weren't driving.

* * *

Two cars waited nose to nose at the launch pad: a black Mercedes and his own steel-grey Bentley. He got out of the 'copter first and headed for the cars, waiting for the Under-Secretary, who hadn't
spoken a word during their ride. It was a little loud for conversation, true, but no time like the present. Jim's driver got out of the car and opened the rear door. "Not yet," Jim said. "Unfinished business." When the man joined him, Jim smiled. "Thanks for that. Another hour and I might have had to eat lunch."

"I trust this means that my obligation to you is at its end." The Under-Secretary stood ramrod straight; he looked a decade older than he had at the beginning of their journey. "I think my debt to you is well and truly paid, is it not?"

"Oh, come on," Jim said. "I thought we were just getting to be friends!" He chuckled and fished a container of chewing gum from his coat, popping a piece in his mouth. "Anyhow, I might need you again."

"I can't," the Under-Secretary hissed. "Don't you realise that I'm jeopardising my career simply by standing here and talking to you? My God, I could go to prison for what I've done. I could lose everything. Everything."

"Yikes. You're not Parliament's brightest bulb, are you? You won't go to prison," Jim said. "In order for you to be of any use to me, I need you right where you are. You see how that works?"

The Under-Secretary lifted his chin. "I tell you I'm through. This…relationship is at its end."

"Oh," Jim compressed his lips and nodded. "Okay, I get it." He blew out a breath, puffing his cheeks, and let his shoulders slump a little. "Well, I'm not going to pretend that doesn't sting a little." He smiled at the Under-Secretary. "But I guess we're even, so…"

The Under-Secretary peered at him warily. "I'll say goodbye, then."

"Okay. Bye." He watched the man walk to his car. "Oh, wait a second." Jim dug his phone out and hit a few buttons. "Got something you should look at before you go." The Under-Secretary halted, but didn't turn, so Jim caught up and showed him the screen. "I think that's your browser history, but I could be wrong, I guess. 'Loli-town' – hmm. Here's a site called 'The Lonely Doll.' Do you collect toys?" He glanced at the screen. "Ooh, this one takes three levels of security. It's called 'World's Cutest Babies' though, so I guess it's pretty innocuous. Oh, and – hey, this isn't on your browser history, but it was taken from your hard drive. Isn't...isn't that your daughter?" Jim showed the ashen Under-Secretary the phone again. "Hard to tell in that dim light, and a lot of kids look alike when they're asleep." He smiled and patted the man on the arm. "Well, thanks for everything. I guess I won't see you again...unless you've decided to change your mind."

The Under-Secretary nodded slowly. His complexion was a little alarming.

"Okay. See you around, then." Jim went back to his car and slid inside.

As they drove past the Mercedes, Jim saw that the Under-Secretary was weeping.

So sad, too bad. He dialled a number and waited. A voice answered.

"Pack them up."
John lay on his bed and tried to sleep, but it wasn't any good. He tossed and turned and tried to find comfortable spots, but his brain wouldn't shut down. Finally he got up and paced restlessly, wishing he could go outside and walk for hours. It was a beautiful section of Sussex they were in from the little he saw, he didn't get to the countryside nearly enough, and a walk in the fresh air would have been just the ticket, but if the guards had hustled Sherlock back inside –

No, Benedict.

Fuck's sake.

He was still trapped between belief and disbelief; he didn't know what to think. He'd have guessed it was a practical joke, but as far as he could tell, Mycroft Holmes didn't have a sense of humour and probably had never played a joke in his life. And all the rot Mycroft was talking, quantum events and cosmic inflation and strings and whatever else the ever-loving fuck – John wasn't an idiot, and until he'd lived with Sherlock he'd never had cause to question his own intelligence, but time travel, or space travel, or whatever, was beyond his capacity to understand in a three-minute conversation.

"Jesus." John pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

So not only was there a complete stranger out there occupying his best friend's body, but his best friend was trapped in the stranger's world. And God only knew that Mycroft would sooner cheerfully fall upon the tip of his stupid umbrella before he'd admit to being flustered, but surely this must have thrown him for a loop. Mycroft had assured John that Sherlock was safe and well, and so had Benedict – Ben, whatever – but oh, God, Sherlock could get himself in trouble taking a bath, and John wasn't comforted in the least. And of course this had to happen in the midst of some Jim Moriarty scheme.

An actor. On telly, on a show about the pair of them. It beggared belief. John had seen some pretty strange stuff as a doctor – his enthusiastic recounting of a soldier's mysteriously glowing teeth had been roundly scoffed at by Sherlock, who explained it as a result of excessive phosphorous intake from a spring near Kabul loaded with the stuff – perfectly commonplace, apparently – and even Sherlock couldn't explain it all (the zig-zagging lights in the sky in a rainbow of colour was met with a shrug of indifference) but this beat all. He wondered if Sherlock was busy trying to work out how to get back, or how it had happened. He couldn't imagine him just sitting back and accepting it.

He must be champing at the bit. Unless it's better there. Maybe he's found a case to occupy himself.

He'd come back. He had to come back. Mycroft was working on the problem, and he sounded perfectly at ease about the whole thing, but still – what if Sherlock never returned? John couldn't be friends with…Ben. It was like a weird sort of possession.

Maybe we need a priest.

John sat on the bed. Ben had done pretty well, all things considered. John should have been suspicious at the mini-meltdown in the loo, and what he'd thought was some extraordinarily courteous behaviour, for Sherlock, but Sherlock wasn't always predictable, and that was part of what made him Sherlock.

And you kissed him. Well done.

He was relieved, in retrospect. Because it hadn't been Sherlock after all, and now he didn't have to deal with the fallout that would have almost certainly occurred. And it hadn't been one of his finer moments, anyhow; he'd never have just grabbed a woman and snogged her without at least tacit permission, much less chided her angrily about not responding properly afterwards. Anyone who'd
do that was an arsehole, in John's book, and deserved to be slugged. But John had been the one doing the slugging. Oh, God, what a mess. Best to put the whole thing behind him.

It was past time for lunch, but John wasn't hungry, and he couldn't bring himself to go out and speak to Ben, nice as he seemed to be. Though who the fuck was he to give love advice? He didn't know John at all, and he certainly didn't know Sherlock. Making himself vulnerable – ha. Sherlock had a shark's instinct for vulnerability, and didn't give a fuck about trampling on it if it suited his purposes. Sherlock would have rolled his eyes at John's clumsy advances, or put him off with a sneer and a few razor-edged words.

So here he was, trapped in a cottage in Sussex with a stranger occupying his flatmate's body, a scenario out of some bad science fiction film, while his idiot fucking flatmate, with whom he was hopelessly, helplessly in love, was apparently trapped in some other world with an actor's boyfriend, and there was the added complication of crazy fucking Jim Moriarty out to get them both. Truth was fucking stranger than fiction.

Maybe he could text Moriarty and tell him to hold off for a couple of weeks until Sherlock came back.

He turned his musings back to the actor in Sherlock's body. Oh, God, so weird. He had acquitted himself well – he was a better than fair actor, John supposed, and he'd been cool in the face of danger. Though maybe he was acting, and didn't really understand what a real threat Moriarty was. Although maybe he had some idea now, given that they'd been taken to a safe house.

Poor guy. He had to be feeling awfully lost himself.

John hesitated, then put his hand on the doorknob and stepped out.

There he was, sitting in the wing chair where John had left him nearly two hours ago. He was reading a newspaper, and looked up when John came in. He smiled shyly. "It's sort of reassuring to see the same petty problems exist from universe to universe as well as the massive and upsetting ones. China and the Middle East have issues right now at home as well, and a pop star's divorce gets more press."

Christ. He wasn't Sherlock. A dart of loneliness pierced John's middle. "Yeah, that's...do you look like this where you're from, Ben?" He gestured toward Benedict's face.

Benedict nodded. "Exactly the same. There are a few differences. Sherlock has better hair and skin. Takes a while for me to get all this." He tugged at a curl with a rueful grin. "His eyesight's better, too, and I guess he doesn't need to work out or eat in a particularly healthy fashion to stay in shape."

John shook his head. "I still can't sort it all out. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I've had a couple of days to get used to it, and I'm still not used to it."

"You must miss home."

"Very much," Benedict said quietly, and John peered at him and couldn't see Sherlock at all.

Oh, God.

There was a knock at the door. "Maybe they want tea after all," Benedict ventured with a smile.

"Maybe." John went to the door and opened it to a burly man in black combat gear. "Hi."
"Hello." The man gave John a mirthless smile, and then John saw a fist coming at his face like a meteor. Pain exploded in his vision, and he staggered backwards and fell. Through the inverted V of his assailant's legs, he saw two black-clad men carrying the body of a third.

_Oh, no_ –

John rolled over and tried to scramble away, but a hard hand grabbed the back of his collar and dragged him up. Out of his working eye, he saw Benedict had risen from his seat and was staring, frozen in horror.

"Run!" John shouted, and clawed at the arm that settled round his neck. Something sharp drove into his upper arm, and heat permeated the flesh and travelled outward from the tiny pinpoint of discomfort. He struggled harder, aware that more men had entered the room and were moving toward Benedict, who hadn't run.

"John!" There was a sharp cry of pain. "No!"

John was fading; he felt it in his limbs, his suddenly thick tongue, his tired, already-fogged brain. He heard Benedict cry out again, and wanted to help, but he wasn't capable of it. His vision dimmed and his eyes slipped closed.

_Sherlock wouldn't have run either_ was his last disjointed thought.

*
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Too stunned to equivocate, Tom watched Benedict stalk away, his posture betraying nothing but annoyance.

*What in God's name is wrong with him?* He'd been bizarre all weekend. First his odd indifference, his lack of affection in bed, his insulting manner at dinner, the...thing with Mark...all that had been upsetting, but Tom had tried to shrug them off and not collect grievances. Filming was intense and did strange things to the psyche sometimes. But now he was charging in like a superhero without, evidently, having bothered to phone the police, without even having thought about it, and furthermore, didn't seem at all upset at Tom's distressing predicament. Something was wrong, completely off in fact.

Just above him, there was a hollow metallic crash, and a heavy thump, very like a body hitting the floor. Tom froze. "Ben?" he called softly.

"God damn it, fucking hell!"

"Oh, Jesus," Tom moaned, recognising the voice. "Henry. Henry!" There was no answer, but Tom heard cupboards yanked open and slammed closed, and solid, angry footfalls, and a counterpoint of low, furious muttering. "Henry! Ben!" Furious tears hazed his vision. "Benedict—"

The footfalls came closer, and Tom shrank back as he heard booted feet – not Benedict's, Benedict's tread was lighter, springier – descending the stairs. Fury at his inability to tamp down his fear overwhelmed him as Henry appeared in the doorway. "What did you do to him, you fucking bastard? What did you do?"

Henry's face was red as he marched to Tom's side. His foot swung, and before Tom could curl up protectively, it slammed into the muscle of Tom's thigh.

Tom howled in pain, trying to clench his teeth and breathe through the sudden blinding yellow-green nausea that swamped him. He rocked back and forth convulsively, wanting to throw up. Tears of agony and rage rolled from his tightly closed eyes. More pain seared through him as Henry grasped his hair and gave his head a good hard shake.

"You smug little *fuck.*" Henry picked up the wet and now soiled gag and rolled it into a large wad.

"No —" Tom adored sexual, consensual bondage – though he fleetingly wondered if he ever would again, if indeed he lived to contemplate it – but couldn't stand the sensation of any obstruction in his mouth. Tom abandoned the sudden two-second mental aside. "Henry, please, please think about this." He wriggled backward, getting leverage with his feet as Henry lunged toward him. "Henry –"

Henry grabbed his hair again, aggravating Tom's already thriving headache and the new pain in his thigh. "Shut up. Shut up. Shut up." He punctuated each short sentence with a hard slap to Tom's cheek.
Tom gritted his teeth and shook his head despite the pain of the repeated blows. He whimpered as Henry grasped his jaw and dug in with iron-hard fingers – practised fingers, Tom realised with horror – and finally relented beneath the pain. A defeated sob escaped him as Henry crammed the wet cloth into his mouth again, stretching his jaw too widely. He tasted dirt and something metallic and wondered if there had been blood on the floor. How many people had been bound and helpless on this floor before Henry had brought him here?

Henry dragged the rope up from round Tom's neck and secured the cloth again. He rocked back on his heels, then noticed the knife Benedict had used to cut the ropes on Tom's wrists. "Well now. That was a close shave, wasn't it?" He held the point under Tom's chin. "Those are my good knives, you spoilt little shit." Heaving himself to his feet with a grunt, Henry stared down at Tom, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He bit his lower lip in consternation, then bent and sliced at the rope binding Tom's ankles.

The edge of the knife sliced into Tom's naked flesh, and he cringed, but stayed silent. His cramped and cold feet flooded with pins and needles as the blood flowed freely again, and he flexed his toes in discomfort.

"Get up." Henry grasped Tom's arm and pulled. "Up!"

Tom stumbled to his still numb feet, wobbling back and forth. Henry held the knife point at Tom's lower back and pushed. "Upstairs. Shift it." Half-blinded by tears, Tom did his best to comply, moving out of the storeroom and toward the dark staircase. He hesitated at the bottom. He could get nearly to the top, turn sharply, kick Henry, catching him in the balls or even the kneecap. He could –

The knife's point pierced his skin just enough to make him jump. "Don't try anything, pal," Henry said softly. "Or I'll cut your boyfriend's cock off in slices."

"No," Tom tried to say, but it emerged as a piteous garble of sound.

"All right, then. Up you get."

*Ben, why didn't you call the police?* His entire body trembling – and he needed to pee still, but it had faded a bit to an embarrassing inconvenience – Tom ascended the chilly stairs. His heart gave an unpleasant lurch as he got to the top and saw Benedict tied up on the floor, mouth taped, his eyes fluttering. A copper stir-fry pan sat on a wooden island, and Tom suspected that was the source of the awful clang he'd heard. Henry had knocked Ben unconscious.

Benedict stirred and looked uncomprehendingly at Tom. He groaned behind the tape.

Tom wanted to say something reassuring, but he couldn't speak an intelligible word. His stomach clenched. If he couldn't speak, he couldn't persuade Henry to delay and possibly give them time to effect some sort of escape. If he couldn't persuade Henry to delay, Henry would think nothing of torturing him again, or Benedict. And if Henry got started again, he might not stop.

"Move," Henry snarled, shoving Tom forward into the island. He grabbed Benedict by the arm and hauled him up. Benedict staggered and found his feet. He caught Tom's eye, then glared feebly at Henry. "Right," Henry said in a brisk, take-charge tone. "Change of plan. We're going to one of the tenant cottages, the three of us." He looped an arm through Benedict's and held the edge of the knife against his vulnerable throat. Benedict lifted his chin sharply. "Tommy, you make the least fuss and Benny here gets a severed artery. *Tu me comprends?*"

Mute and nearly insensate with terror, Tom nodded. He couldn't quite relinquish a final glimmer of hope. If someone saw them – someone walking her dog, or gathering from his garden, some
courageous soul who'd phone the police immediately – oh, God, was this what all of Henry's victims thought? Waiting, hoping, praying for help that never arrived?

"Let's go. You first, Tom," Henry said, and jerked his chin toward the door. "Out to the car." When Tom hesitated, Henry dug the point of the knife into Benedict's neck. "Now." Benedict grunted in surprise and discomfort, and Tom saw a red smear against Ben's throat. He moved to the door and waited for Henry to open it, then walked outside.

It was a beautiful, beautiful day. Henry's house was set amongst a number of lush variegated trees, all fully leafed in late-summer green, and a sweet breeze carrying the scent of flowers brushed past Tom's face. He heard birds singing, and high overhead, the engine of a recreational aeroplane.

*It's too pretty a day to die.*

"Go, for fuck's sake," Henry frog-marched Benedict to the Land Rover and opened the back. He turned to Tom. "Stand right there and don't fucking move or make a sound." Without another word he shoved Benedict inside, took a roll of gaffer tape from a capacious pocket, and looped Benedict's hands and feet together.

Tom's body shook with fear and exhaustion and the aftermath of the sedative Henry had given him. His lower face burned from the chloroform pad and the rope digging into his cheeks. The urge to piss was stronger now. Tiny, irregular stones on the cobble drive dug into the soles of his bare feet, and he was uncomfortably aware of his near-nakedness. His brain was screaming imperatives at his body: *Run! Run, you fucking arsehole. You're fast. There's got to be a shop nearby, a petrol station, even a road. MOVE YOUR FEET.* He couldn't, though – not with Benedict helpless and at Henry's mercy, not even for a minute.

He watched Henry securing Ben; Ben's face was turned away, toward the interior of the vehicle, and his posture was utterly limp. His hands curled loosely, his spine was relaxed, not rigid, and his shoulders slumped as if he were asleep or unconscious. Oh, God. Concussion, maybe? Then the bitter irony of his concern struck him. *You're worrying about concussion and you should probably be worrying about Henry scooping his intestines out with a kitchen knife.*

Henry turned toward Tom. "Now you."

Not cooperating would likely earn Tom abuse, but he couldn't bring himself to be a model prisoner. He planted his feet as Henry took his arm and shook his head. *Fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

"Every little act of rebellion is one fingernail I slowly pull off your boyfriend's hand with pliers, Tom." Henry smiled almost sadly. "Trying to escape is one. Not opening your mouth when I wanted you to is two. This is three. Do you want to try for four?"

Tom shook his head in mingled negation and pleading. *As if it's going to make a difference whether or not I cooperate.* Suddenly he wondered if Henry had raped his female victims. He thought of Katie, missing for so long, her parents bewildered, then frantic, then finally grieving, and whoever the young female fan had been. Oh, Christ almighty, poor little girl. Had Henry brutalised her? Would he assault Tom and Ben too? Desperately, he threw a wild glance toward the road. *Please –*

"Four."

Turning back to Henry, Tom snarled at him through the wadded tea towel, trying to mask utter defeat. There had to be a way out of this, had to –
"That's the feisty Tom we know and love. No, not back with the boyfriend." Henry slammed the hatch closed, put his hand round Tom's arm – a detached, impersonal grasp, not intimate or sexual, Tom thought – and dragged him toward the rear passenger seat, opening the door and pushing him inside. "On your tummy." Tom reluctantly lay on his side, then rolled to his belly. He let Henry tape his ankles together, then secure them to his wrists. Henry tested the tensile strength of Tom's bonds by yanking his ankles backwards. Tom yelped at the sudden pain in his shoulders and felt a pat on his thigh. "Good boy. Right, I've got to gather some stuff up, won't be a minute. You and Benny behave yourselves. Take a tip from the boyfriend, Tom." He closed the door, and Tom heard the locks depress.

He's going to kill us.

Tom moaned, then started thrashing as much as he could against his punishing bonds. He folded his thumbs inward and pulled at the cuffs, but they held solid, immovable. He struggled hard, shrieking at the top of his lungs, hoping that someone, anyone would pass by.

Benedict's silence from the rear terrified Tom; surely their combined efforts would attract someone's attention. Tom tried to surge up in order to get a look at Ben – had he fainted? – but the hогtie was brutally effective, and he could scarcely move at all. He writhed in fury and terror, and managed to fall heavily to the floor, wedging himself uncomfortably in the space between the front and rear seats. His cheek scraped against the carpet. It had been recently shampooed – removing bloodstains Tom thought morbidly. He rubbed his burning cheek against the floor in an attempt to dislodge the rope from around his face.

Scream, scream bloody murder oh God, oh fuck no, please –

The locks popped up, and the rear hatch opened. Something heavy thudded into the back, and the hatch went down again. Tom heard the front driver-side door opening, and a laugh.

"Can't say you haven't got spirit, Tommy."

As Henry climbed into the car and drove away, Tom wept.

Please, no. Please, please, no. No.

*

His head ached abominably, but Sherlock ignored it as best he could, lying in the rear of the Land Rover and listening to Tom's muffled crying. Tom seemed a bit ahead of schedule. Typical victim responses to the actions of a serial killer were remarkably similar to Kubler-Ross' five stages of grieving model, and Tom had apparently reached the Depression stage already, quite quickly after the Anger stage and having bypassed the Bargaining stage due to inability to communicate. Sherlock was certain his hormones hadn't quite caught up yet. He'd done a paper at uni: Fight, Flight, or Die: Neurochemical reaction and process in victims of serial killers. It had been very poorly received by his peers, such as they were – idiots, the lot of them.

He'd have advised Tom to stay still and calm and conserve his energy for escape, but obviously that was a bit of a problem. It wasn't critical, though. Henry was making mistake after mistake in his panic. He hadn't bothered to determine whether Sherlock had phoned the police, though admittedly he might have heard his conversation with Tom and made a determination on his own. He'd hustled them out in broad daylight, risking someone seeing them. He hadn't looked for Sherlock's phone. He had two victims now instead of one, and though he'd likely enjoy the process of torment and murder,
shipping and handling had suddenly become a much greater issue. He'd thrown a heavy bag into the back of the Land Rover, presumably containing some basic implements of torture, but away from his home base his methods and technique would suffer, a decided spanner in the works of any power/control killer, who preferred to exercise the tightest discipline over their choice of crime scene. Scattering forensic evidence willy-nilly – oh, that was a very telling move indeed. Serial killers who made mistakes were easier to escape or overpower. All that was required was the right opportunity. It had to be fairly soon, though – once Henry secured them both in their new location, they had perhaps an hour, possibly two, before he began to torture one or both of them. Weakened and in pain, they had a much slimmer chance of survival. He had to be patient and constantly alert.

Henry drove at a deliberate speed, but even his minor actions demonstrated his shaken psyche: he braked far too abruptly at a traffic sign, took the corner too fast, and overcorrected as the Land Rover swerved slightly. Sherlock winced; the headache was a knife slicing into his brain. He'd managed to turn his head and pull back just enough so that his cheek and temple took the greatest impact from the pan, which wasn't all that heavy – not that it hadn't hurt. He'd been stunned long enough for Henry to bind and gag him and had roused himself to full awareness as Henry was in the cellar abusing Tom. Sherlock had taken a moment to orient himself and then had swept his surroundings for something useful. He'd struggled up as quietly as he could, turned awkwardly, opened a drawer, and found a small paring knife – not terribly sharp, but adequate to cut the tape around his wrists with a little effort. He'd tucked it down the back of his underwear and had swept his surroundings for something useful. He'd struggled up as quietly as he could, turned awkwardly, opened a drawer, and found a small paring knife – not terribly sharp, but adequate to cut the tape around his wrists with a little effort. He'd tuck it down the back of his underwear and got on the floor again, his head already throbbing. It was easy to feign grogginess as Henry forced Tom up the stairs and pushed him into the kitchen. Henry was in too much of a rush to realise that Sherlock was a full half metre away from where he'd left him, and Tom was terrified and concerned at once. He'd seen that expression in varying light and shade on John's face from time to time, and it never failed to soothe Sherlock a bit even under the most distressing circumstances. John rarely touched Sherlock unless Sherlock was hurt or otherwise incapacitated, and then he was gentle and kind. It was a trifle puzzling but not entirely unpleasant that Sherlock's occasional – very occasional helplessness seemed to arouse John's more protective and affectionate instincts, though obviously Sherlock would have never mentioned that aloud.

Sherlock felt the edge of the knife pressing against his left arse cheek. That was going to be difficult to explain if Henry saw it, but there was nothing for it now. He was grateful that Cumberbatch appeared to favour rather form-fitting underwear; with a bit of luck it wouldn't slide down his trouser leg. He gauged the route they were taking, out of the tiny village and onto a bumpy, ancient macadam back road. Blinking hard to clear his head – no concussion, but there'd be a hell of a mark – he glanced around the interior of the Land Rover as far as his limited vision would allow.

The carpet on the floor had been recently laundered, but not quite enough to disguise some telltale bloodstains ground into the fibres, nor the faint odour and gritty white powder of the quicklime that had settled into the seams of the leather seats. Sherlock almost laughed. Evidently Henry wasn't the sort to check on or revisit the bodies he'd deposited, if he was still using quicklime; had he been, he'd have discovered that quicklime was rubbish for disintegrating a corpse; it merely mummified the body, preserving it to a reasonable degree in the long run. DNA testing would be a cinch. If he'd done his research – and really, when did murderers, even the clever ones, do the proper amount of research? Never, that's when – he'd have found that potassium hydroxide or sulphuric acid would have done a much faster, cleaner job. Not that those methods were perfect, no caustic compound was despite what sensationalistic literature and tabloids would have the credulous reader believe, but quicklime – really. Though disposal didn't seem to be too much of an issue, if Henry owned as much land as the petrol station clerk had asserted.

The Land Rover braked to a stop, and Henry got out. In the rear seat, Tom had stopped crying, but was still struggling to free himself. Annoyed, Sherlock thumped against the back of the seat in an effort to get Tom to calm down, but it didn't seem to help. Attempting speech was pointless, so
Sherlock sighed loudly through his nose and went limp as Henry opened the hatch.

"All cosy back here?" Henry's voice was breathless, falsely jolly.

Sherlock turned his head and looked Henry in the eye, feigning loss of focus. He squinted, frowned, and mumbled behind the tape.

"A bit out of it still? Never mind, we'll bring you round in no time. Right, here we are." Henry leant close and cut the tape round Sherlock's ankles – carefully, Sherlock noted. No point, evidently, in drawing a single drop of accidental blood, if one didn't count the knife slicing at his throat. Sherlock let his legs flop to the floor and groaned. He lifted his head and allowed it to fall again as if the effort was too much.

"Holy Norah, I didn't hit you all that hard! Maybe you're concussed. Is that it? Tommy, I thought your pal here was made of sterner stuff."

Tom let out a muffled string of what sounded like obscenities and profanities. Back to the Anger stage, apparently.

"That's five, Tom." Tom went silent, and Henry smiled at Sherlock. "Good boy. You're learning. That's a whole hand, in case you'd lost count."

Sherlock blinked and frowned again, and emitted a questioning grunt, hoping Henry wouldn't start on him right away. It would be difficult to fight denailed.

"Oh, you must have missed it. Never mind, we'll keep it for a surprise. Come on, up you get." Henry caught Sherlock's arm and dragged him forward until he was half-dangling out of the rear. He righted Sherlock and eased him out the back, steadying him with a solicitousness that exceeded absurdity. "All right? Keep your feet, I've got to look after Tom." He retrieved his bag, slammed the hatch, and went round to the rear passenger door.

After risking a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure that Henry wasn't watching him, Sherlock lifted his head a little and rapidly catalogued his surroundings. They'd gone about five kilometres – first over a smooth municipal road, then onto an inadequately maintained single lane that branched off due northwest to what was still Henry's property, in this instance a farmhouse and stables in a sort of quasi-Normandy style. Judging by the unkempt grass and general disrepair of the structures, the place had been neglected for years, probably too much trouble for Henry to modernise for rent or repurpose. There might be running water, but in all likelihood there wasn't the comfort and convenience of Henry's house, all the little touches Henry had no doubt added over the years, if Tom's half-hysterical assertion had been correct, in order to facilitate a really satisfying kill or two or twenty.

How many he'd murdered was a far more interesting question than Henry's methods or motivations. His eagerness to make both him and Tom suffer was beyond obvious, the letters were indicative of classic revenge-obsession and narcissism – probably Tom didn't even realise that he'd somehow inadvertently triggered Henry's rage – and it was disappointing to see exactly how much money smoothed the way in all walks of life, even a murderer's. Give him a really clever and moderately impoverished serial killer any day – they had to be so much more resourceful.

Henry pushed Tom ahead of him, prodding him with the sharp knife. Tom searched Sherlock's eyes anxiously, then moved close and pressed his cheek against Sherlock's, a defiant and…and admittedly a touching little gesture. Sherlock inhaled the sharp tinge of Tom's fear-infused sweat, and leant into Tom's body, just to reassure him a bit, but swayed a little to maintain his demeanour of disorientation.
Henry clicked his tongue. "That's sweet. Come on, you two – maybe I'll let you have a snog before we get started." He took Sherlock by the arm and put the knife to his throat again. "Shall we, gents?"

Sherlock refrained from snorting with some difficulty. The false urbanity had grey hairs and a pension; he was more curious to see more of the rage that lay behind the mask. The sticky bit would be seeing it without losing life and limb, much less a couple of fingernails. He felt Henry's fingers digging into the flesh of his arm and thought that he'd be afforded the chance very soon. Good.

They went to the farmhouse door. Henry produced an old-fashioned key and turned the rusty lock, then pushed them both inside. It was just as run-down and inhospitable as Sherlock had guessed. The walls were raw stone and mortar, quaintly charming in some houses, but this house was a mere shell. There was a rotting sofa and a club chair clawed by several generations of cats at the end of the room they occupied. Further away in the kitchen area – this place was ahead of the great-room trend by a few hundred years – was a small cast-iron oven, a bare, dark hearth, a wooden cupboard, and a table with two crude chairs. As murder houses went, it wasn't half bad.

Henry let Sherlock go and frowned, looking round the place. "Well. I suppose the chairs will do for now." He gestured at the kitchen chairs with the knife. "Sit. Both of you."

Sherlock wobbled over to the chairs and took one, surreptitiously adjusting the knife tucked into his briefs so that he wasn't dead on it when he sat. Moaning, he leant forward and breathed hard.

"Relax, you'll get yours, Benedict." Henry kicked the other chair over a bit and nodded curtly at Tom. "Now."

Tom thumped into the chair sullenly and glared at Henry with red-rimmed eyes. Sherlock turned away to hide the sudden twinkle in his eyes. TWH wasn't in the least like John, but Henry was right – he did have spirit.

Opening his canvas satchel, Henry withdrew his roll of gaffer tape. He moved behind Tom, started the end of the tape, and wrapped several lengths tightly around Tom's upper torso, securing him to the chair. Then he moved to Sherlock. "Oh, for God's sake." He grasped Sherlock's hair and dragged him upward, holding him as he ripped off more tape with the help of his teeth. He bound Sherlock to the chair, but Sherlock made it difficult; he moaned again and slid down a few centimetres, then sagged forward once more. When Henry had finished, he was fettered loosely enough that a few energetic struggles would free him once he had the chance.

So far, so good.

Panting with effort – he was really out of shape – Henry moved round to face Sherlock and Tom and stared at them for a long minute, his mouth curved in a smile that was almost gentle. Sherlock heard Tom's increasingly agitated breathing and smelled the ammoniac tang of his fear, but forced himself to concentrate on Henry, and on stealthily moving his hand toward the paring knife, easing it up millimetre by millimetre. Henry, if he was anything like a typical stalker-cum-serial killer, and he certainly seemed typical, would take some time to chat – well, gloat – and ratchet up his victims' terror and helplessness before he got down to business.

Henry stared awhile more, then moved forward, scraped at the edge of the tape covering Sherlock's mouth, and ripped it off.

**OUCH that HURTS you sodding BLOODY ARSEHOLE**
Sherlock blinked hard and let out another moan. He focussed on Henry's chin and wet his lips. **OUCH.** "What…." He blinked again. "Why…why are you…." He trailed off and let out a shuddering breath.

"I'm going to ask you a question, Benny, and I want the truth now. That was you ringing me from the shop, wasn't it?"

"I don't…I don't know what you mean." Sherlock squirmed a bit in the chair, then teetered backward as Henry cracked him across the face.

"Wrong fucking answer, darling." Henry grasped Sherlock's hair and wrenched his head back. "Tell the truth, now."

Sherlock let out a soft little cry and screwed his eyes shut. "Please…my head…"

"Never mind your head. Was that you?" Henry gave Sherlock's head a hard shake.

"Ah! Yes, yes –" Sherlock let tears well up in his eyes. "Please don't –"

Henry let Sherlock's hair go and straightened up, folding his arms and grinning. "And did you call the police, Benedict?"

Sherlock sniffled and cringed away, noticing Henry's relaxed stance, the way his tongue crept out to swipe at the corner of his mouth, the confident upward tilt of his chin. **Doesn't care if I did.** "Yes." A tear rolled down Sherlock's cheek, then another.

"And what did they tell you?"

"They…they said they'd send someone round to look into it." Sherlock sniffled again and lifted his own chin in a show of defiance. "And they will, too. Y-you'd better let us go or you'll suffer the consequences."

Henry's smile widened. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to hear that conversation. I've known those chaps all my life. They won't send anybody, you know. The police are our friends. Public servants. Reading about you, I'd have thought that you'd understand. Our sort flies beneath the radar. Hatch, match, and despatch, and God willing that's the only mention you'll ever see of me in the papers – and we've got our local police force to thank for that, in part." He bit his lip thoughtfully. "Well, I don't think 'match' is quite in the picture, but the single life has its compensations."

"Like murdering people." Sherlock shrank further back in his chair. Slowly, he fumbled beneath his jacket and into his trousers, and with his fingertips located the edge of the knife and began to ease it upward. "Tom –" He winced and screwed his eyes shut again. "Tom said you'd killed his friend. And a fan."

"You two had quite a conversation before I got back. Surprised you, didn't I?"

Sherlock said nothing, but stared down at his knees. The handle of the knife slipped obligingly into his palm.

"Took a short-cut. The coppers won't come, Benedict, and if they do, they'll find me at home, alone, reading a book. I'll invite them to have a look around, and they won't find a single scrap of evidence." Henry cast a loving glance at Tom. "It's too bad, really. I'd almost rather that they found you. Then everyone would know. The Burgess Method, they'd call it. But it's early days. We've plenty of time, the three of us."
Sherlock bit his lip to keep from smirking. Burgess Method indeed, as if Henry was that original. Original killers came along every fifty years, if that. And obviously Henry had lived with the odour of corpses so long that he’d become desensitised to it. Any officer worth his salt would recognise it the moment he stepped into the cellar. Covertly, moving only his hand, he began sawing delicately at the tape that bound his wrists. "It was you. The letters."

"Yeah." Henry perched gingerly on the edge of the table. "I'm actually sort of surprised he told you. I'd been sending them for a while now, and he never mentioned them at any of the RADA gatherings. Tommy's the noble, stoic type," he said with a sneer. "Bit of a climber, too, but so many people are, you hardly notice one more, eh?"

Well, here we go. Sherlock closed his eyes again and rolled them. It had been a while since he'd had personal contact with a serial killer. He'd have fallen asleep if he hadn't a job to do. Keeping Henry talking was imperative. He blinked, shook his head a little as if wooziness was taking over and frowned. "He...he did tell me." He glanced over at TWH, who was sitting bolt upright, the rapid rise and fall of his chest clearly indicating his agitation and fright. Tom met his eyes and shook his head as if he'd wished Sherlock had kept quiet.

"I know," Henry snapped. "That's what I just said. Keep up." He shook his head. "He didn't tell the Metropolitan police either. Not word one. I'd watch you, Tommy, after you'd get one. You never noticed that our dinners coincided with those letters, did you? Oh, God." Henry rose and began to pace in front of them. "Some people, like you, Tom...they manage for years, they grow up and they look all right, they look strong and capable, but they're so soft on the inside, and eventually they break. The world never hardens them. You wonder why nature fails to provide for their survival." Moving forward, he clasped Tom's face between his hands, tangling his fingers in Tom's hair and yanking when Tom tried to flinch backward. "You took so fucking much from me."

TWH shook his head and emitted a muffled noise. His respiration gathered intensity and speed along with Henry's.

Sherlock felt the tape round his wrists give. Good. Better still, Henry hadn't bound his feet. Best of all, Henry was physically unfit and wouldn't recognise a mixed martial art if it flipped him upside down and brained him with a chair. Which it was about to do.

Henry was still talking, still holding Tom's head between his hands. Judging by the gleam of sweat on his brow, the pressure on TWH's head indicated by his paling skin where Henry's fingers dug into his face, and the way he'd begun to bite off words and spit them out, he was very close to committing violence. He had Tom's full attention, his silent reactions. In a moment he'd likely demand an actual dialogue – not dialogue at all, but a laundry list of grievances. Anything TWH said would be a mere excuse for torture.

"...Katie," Henry said. "The very same. You should have seen her at the end, Tommy. Begging, pleading, promising me anything." Eagerly, predictably, he fumbled with the knot of the rope holding the gag in Tom's mouth and yanked it down when it wouldn't give easily. He pulled the gag out and let it drop to the floor. "What'll you promise me?"

Tom breathed hard, pulling deep gulps of air into his mouth.

"Come on, Tommy. Tell me. What'll you give me?" Henry's voice shook with mingled rage and pleasure.

Sherlock cut his eyes down and saw the erection in Henry's trousers. Ugh.

"Go fuck yourself," Tom snarled. He reared back and spat at Henry, though it wasn't much of an
attempt as his mouth had been leached of moisture.

Still. *Oh, dear.* Sherlock twisted his hand upward and began to tear at the tape binding his arms down, hoping Henry wouldn't notice.

He didn't. Henry wiped the spittle off with the back of his hand and stared at it in comic amazement. Then he smiled. "You just earned yourself a fuck." He turned and dug in his bag, withdrawing a narrow garden trowel about thirty centimetres long, with a sharp point on the digging end.

*Hell.* Sherlock sawed faster. The knife handle was slippery with sweat.

"You're not my type, Tommy, but this hasn't got a preference." He waved the trowel back and forth. "I imagine you'll be able to accommodate it. Your boyfriend here has probably got you nice and stretched." He made a small moue of disgust, as if violent assault with a garden implement was a perfectly quotidian experience, but ordinary anal sex was too gauche to be borne.

"No!" Tom struggled wildly against the tape, nearly tipping the chair over in the process. "Get the fuck away from me, you fucking bastard!" Frantic, he kicked at Henry awkwardly. "Get away! *SOMEBODY H –*"

Henry slammed a hand over Tom's mouth, then snatched it back with a cry. "You *cunt!*"

Sherlock grinned, seeing the tooth marks on Henry's hand. *Well done, Tom!* He was no wilting flower.

Henry lifted the trowel to strike Tom across the face, and Sherlock sprang. The top strip of tape still pinned him to the chair, but it wasn't enough to impede his movement completely. He lashed out with a well-aimed kick in his soft middle. Henry whooshed out a great gust of air and dropped to his knees, gasping.

Sherlock ripped the last of the tape from his upper torso and spun the chair round, lifting it in his hands and bringing it crashing down on Henry's head. Henry slumped to the floor, unconscious. In a flash Sherlock grabbed for the tape and securely bound Henry's wrists and ankles, then put him in the same tight hogtie he'd endured. He shoved the wet, dirty cloth that had gagged TWH in Henry's mouth, then wound tape several times round his head. Satisfied, but already experiencing a pang of anticlimax, he leant back on his heels and regarded TWH's would-be murderer. "Incompetent arsehole," he muttered, and got to his feet. He turned to Tom. "Are you okay?"

Tom nodded, clamping his lips shut. "Yes. I –" A great, choking sob escaped him.

There wasn't time for consolation or coddling. Tom could cry in the car on the way home. Sherlock retrieved Henry's knife and crouched behind Tom's chair, cutting him free and gathered up the tape that had bound them both, stuffing it in his pockets. The handcuffs he'd have to deal with in London.

"Come on," he said brusquely, getting to his feet. "Let's go."

TWH didn't move. He sat in the chair, trembling, trying to catch his breath but not quite getting there.

"Tom," Sherlock said. "Tom, we've really got to –" He sighed; TWH wasn't paying attention to a single word. John wouldn't cry and carry on like this. Fine, he'd give Tom a moment. He went back to Henry's side, bent, checked to ensure that the bonds wouldn't give and that Henry couldn't move, and then pulled Henry's eye open, watching as the pupil contracted ever so slightly. Not dead, then. He fished Henry's keys from his pocket and slipped them in his own. And Tom was still weeping.

Still! Apparently actors just overflowed with emotion. The ordeal was over, the killer apprehended,
and Tom was safe, for God's sake – what was there to cry about?

In a flash he saw John's face: disappointed. Human lives, Sherlock. Do you care about that at all?

Sherlock pressed his lips together, then took a few cautious steps towards Tom. "Tom," he said, as gently as he could, "it's time to go." He slipped an arm round Tom's shoulders and eased him up carefully. "Come on. It's okay. I've got you." Murmuring nonsense reassurances, he steered TWH to the door and outside. He unlocked the passenger door of the Land Rover and helped Tom onto the seat.

"Wait. Wait. I've got to piss. I'm bursting." TWH sniffled, and wiped his cheek against his shoulder.

Sherlock smiled tightly. "Righto. Er...let's just step over here." He took Tom's arm, then guided him to the side of the run-down cottage. "I'll...er...just take these down..." He dragged the running shorts down to Tom's thighs.

Tom nodded. "Ben, would you mind --? I can't."

Uncomfortable warmth crept up Sherlock's neck. This was a bit too intimate, which was distinctly odd since he'd had sex with the man, but it would be odder still to refuse since apparently his little diatribe about not being Cumberbatch hadn't penetrated and perhaps now wasn't the time to reiterate. "Of course." He took Tom's cock in his hand and helped him piss, then gingerly shook him off and pulled his shorts back up. "All right, we're off." He handed TWH back into the Land Rover, got in himself, and drove away from the cottage.

TWH leant his head against the window and was silent for the duration of the ride – four and a half kilometres, not five as Sherlock had supposed. Sherlock glanced at him a few times. His experience with kidnap victims post rescue wasn't vast; once the case was solved, he was gone, on to the next thing. He usually hung about long enough to see them delivered to paramedics and didn't bother much with conversation. They generally weren't up for a chat in their state, and in any event rarely had little illuminating information to contribute. Tom seemed no different from the typical victim. That was fine.

As they pulled into the drive and rolled toward the house, Tom asked, "How'd you know the route?" The question was delivered in an incurious tone, though, as if the answer didn't matter much.

"Paid attention," Sherlock replied curtly, and cut the engine.

"He killed a fan of mine. A young girl."

Sherlock frowned. "Stay here. I'm locking the doors." He got out, trotted up to the door, and went inside. A quick reconnaissance of the cellar told him what he needed to know, and he was back up to the main level in moments. He went to the kitchen, picked up the phone, and dialled the Met's Homicide and Serious Crime division, trusting the number was the same.

Of course it was. Sherlock snorted quietly as the voice on the other end answered. "Listen very carefully. I'm calling from the residence of Henry Burgess in Tilford." He gave the address. "A series of violent crimes, among them rape and murder, has been committed here. No, I'm phoning you because Mr Burgess seems to believe he has the local police force in his pocket. Don't interrupt me again. The cellar of the house contains a variety of restraints and implements of torture, as well as chemicals to dispatch the bodies upon their death. The grounds are extensive and I have reason to believe that he's buried his victims within reasonable distance of the house. Ground-penetrating radar and chemical analysis should be adequate to find what you need, but he's been at it for more than ten years so you've quite a job ahead of you. Given that he's a serial killer, though, you should be able to
discern his methodology quickly enough. His last victim was a young woman – don't ask her name, I
don't know it. I –" He sighed impatiently. "I was coming to that. He's been apprehended and is
bound in an abandoned tenant cottage four and a half kilometres northwest of the house. Send
someone immediately."

Sherlock rang off and heaved a sigh. They'd send someone local first, of course, but the unusual
circumstances would prevent Henry from escaping. He hoped.

He went back to the Land Rover, unlocked it, and got in. Tom was in the same position, leaning
against the window. Sherlock sniffed and grimaced, then depressed the window button on his side.
TWH was ripe; Sherlock would have urged him out to walk to his own car, but time was of the
essence now. He drove to the Audi, left the keys on the seat of the Land Rover after wiping them
and the steering wheel clean, then opened Tom's door using his jacket to mask his fingers.

Tom met his eyes once, frowned, started to speak, then went quiet again.

"Come on," Sherlock urged him, and propelled him into the Audi, buckling his safety belt when he
showed no inclination to do so. He pulled away at a sedate pace; as he reached the traffic
intersection, a squad car raced by, lights flashing. Not a bad response time, all in all.

He swung back on the motorway to London and drove in silence for a while. Traffic was heavier,
and the going was slower, so he eased up on the accelerator accordingly, though the temptation to
weave the sleek little car through the mass of machinery was strong. He felt the adrenaline draining
from his body and the onset of exhaustion and mild letdown that often followed a case. True, there
was nothing much more to investigate, though working out exactly how many people he'd killed and
how would have been diverting, but it was the only really interesting thing that had happened in the
last few days and he wouldn't have minded sticking with it a bit longer. Inter-universe travel was
duller than he'd have guessed, not that he'd given it much thought. If he was stuck here for a while
longer, he'd have to find something else to divert him.

Truth was, he didn't want to stay here, not at all. He wanted his London, its teeming underbelly. He
wanted to remain unbothered by show-business people and reporters and assistants and fans, and he
wanted his un-luxurious, cluttered, comfortable flat. He wanted Lestrade and Donovan and even
Anderson. And most of all –

Sherlock swallowed past an uncomfortable thickness in his throat. He'd never been one to give
himself up to any flux of emotion; independence had been paramount, the ability to choose the paths
in his life without hesitation or encumbrance. Mycroft had understood that as no-one else had, and
perhaps that was why they'd shared those interludes – they were alike in that way, at least.

But John….

John and Sherlock were nothing alike. John was emotional, not brilliant, not particularly
independent. The stream of girlfriends proved that last; he was obviously one of those people who
couldn't bear to be without a partner no matter how stupid or volatile or tedious, the sort of person
who engendered Sherlock's contempt. Having a flatmate, or amiable company on a case, wasn't the
same thing as a partner. Partners, as far as Sherlock understood, were people who spent their free
time together, had the same interests, the same friends, the same tastes, the same gloppy sentiments
about each other, who were so lockstep-deadly-boring that Sherlock itched just thinking about it.

John probably hadn't even noticed the differences between him and Cumberbatch.

Sherlock shook his head angrily and looked over at TWH again. He hadn't moved; it was starting to
get a little strange. "Are you all right?"
Tom lifted his head and turned to Sherlock. His eyes were red, and tears had cut clean salt tracks down his dirty face. "Why were you like that?"

"Like what?"

"So…composed. Was it because of South Africa?"

Sherlock frowned in puzzlement. South Africa? Oh, of course, the carjacking thing. A whole two-hour ordeal. Again, this was probably not the optimal time to remind TWH that he wasn't Benedict Cumberbatch. "Maybe," he said cautiously.

"You know, I always thought if that ever happened to me, something similar, it would be…strangers, someone who wanted a ransom. I didn't think it would be a fr…someone I knew."

"Violence committed by family, friends, or acquaintances isn't at all uncommon," Sherlock said. The first time he'd been kidnapped (he had, by his own count, been abducted or taken hostage sixteen times) the perpetrators had been one of Mycroft's colleagues, hoping to glean information entrusted to Mycroft, specifically locations of missile sites in Pakistan to sell to interested and remunerative parties. Aged fifteen, snatched away from his room at college whilst revising for a chemistry exam and bundled into an ancient Volvo, he'd languished in a tiny room in Sheffield for almost four days before he'd been rescued. He recalled being frightened, but after the initial fear, he'd begun to catalogue facts, and during the phone call they'd allowed him, he'd managed to surreptitiously deliver enough clues to Mycroft for rescue to come a day and a half later. The colleague had been rounded up, drugged, and quietly and summarily dispatched to Pakistan with the information sewn into the lining of his jacket where, acting upon an anyonymous tip, the authorities discovered him trying to re-cross the border. What happened afterward was, Mycroft told Sherlock, simply the appropriate punishment for a kidnapper and a traitor. It just proved that one really couldn't trust anybody. "At least you managed to escape."

"I didn't escape. You saved me. You saved my life. I can't ever repay that."

Sherlock stared out at the road. "It's fine," he muttered.

"No. I really need to –"

"Maybe we can talk about it later," Sherlock said. "I think we both need a rest." He was, in fact, exhausted.

"Shouldn't I have stayed behind, though?"

"Why?"

"Well, to…to aid the police. I'm sure they had questions."

"I doubt there was anything you could have told them," Sherlock replied.

"Yes, but I – surely Henry will say something. He'll say I was there. There'll be forensic evidence."

Sherlock smiled a little. Tom wasn't entirely stupid. He grudgingly admitted to himself that Cumberbatch's choice of partner was not altogether awful. "You really want to embroil yourself in a gigantic scandal? Have you got any idea of how the press will prod at you? You think you're famous now – wait until you emerge as the centre of a serial killing."

"No, you're right," Tom said soberly. "But what if they ask me questions?"
"You're an actor. Act. Besides, you've got an alibi."

Tom frowned, the first expression to overtake his blank dreaminess in an hour or more. "I do?"

Sherlock chuckled. "Me."

"Oh." Tom sighed. "Yes, of course. Stupid of me." He sank back against the plush leather seat and closed his eyes.

The rest of the drive took place in blessed silence. Sherlock drove to Cumberbatch's house and escorted Tom inside, leading him to Cumberbatch's library-cum-office. It was the work of a moment to locate a paper clip and pick the low-quality cuffs.

TWH rubbed his sore, reddened wrists. "Thank you." He peered curiously at Sherlock, but said nothing more.

"Why don't you have a shower?" Sherlock suggested tactfully. You smell awful. "You can borrow something of mine to wear."

"Okay." Tom trudged off to the bathroom, and Sherlock went into the bedroom to change clothes. His were dirty, and if by some miracle the police did happen to stop by, it would be better not to have clothes soiled with dirt from the Burgess property as well as sticky gaffer tape residue. He found an old, soft grey t-shirt with some sort of architectural design on it and a pair of tracksuit bottoms.

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. A short while later – at least he thought it was a short while later – he felt a weight on the bed beside him, then the warmth of a long body pressed against his. Damp hair tickled his neck, and an arm draped itself across his chest. A droplet of water splashed his collarbone and cooled rapidly.

"Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Distantly, Sherlock realised Tom was weeping, though why was anybody's guess. He brought a hand up and stroked Tom's hair. "It's all right," he murmured sleepily. "It's okay." His chest ached and he couldn't think why. The touching and embracing upset him, and yet he didn't want it to stop.

Tom's body shook next to his, and gradually Sherlock understood that it wasn't necessarily the apology that was the source of Tom's emotions. "You're safe now. You're safe." He rolled on his side and embraced Tom. Tom clung to him tightly.

It wasn't…it was nice, actually. Sherlock let his eyes drift closed again.

* 

The glare was unbearable; for a moment Sherlock thought he'd fallen asleep in the sun. At the North Pole. He winced and covered his eyes. Then it hit him:

*Half seven.*

He sat up, and sure enough, there was Cumberbatch. But he…. Cumberbatch lay in a heap, eyes closed, his wrists tightly bound with wire.
Any semblance of sleep fled at once. "Cumberbatch," Sherlock said harshly, and scrambled to his side. He shook his shoulder roughly. "Cumberbatch, wake up! What's happening?"

There was no response; Cumberbatch's face was white, his body frighteningly still.

"God damn it – wake up! Benedict!"

*

Chapter End Notes

I'll be heading out of town this week and then dealing with the beginning of the semester at the university where I work, so there will be a delay before I post the next chapter. I apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience.
Chapter 19

* 

It was fitting to come back here. Entirely appropriate, since this was the place they'd first met.

Not, of course, that he hadn't had the chance to observe Sherlock at close range before that day. Jim had a trick of making himself small and beneath anyone's notice. The first time he'd watched had been on the Tube. He'd stood in the corner of the car in jeans and a hoodie and nerd glasses, scrutinising the boy who'd made the fuss about Carl Powers' shoes a few years before. Arrogant and gawky at the same time, his seventeen-year-old face still rounded and unfinished, his hair cut almost brutally short, a school scarf wound round his throat (some sartorial habits died hard, alas and alack) Sherlock had had his nose buried in a book the entire time and hadn't noticed Jim at all.

After that it had been easy to establish his patterns, to follow him at will. He'd watched him more than a dozen times on the Tube, to his music lessons (he'd quit at eighteen, following an angry argument with his instructor – Jim had strained to hear but the walls had been too thick), to concerts (it was the only time he'd ever seen those glacial eyes soften, watching Itzhak Perlman), to classes (chemistry, chemistry, chemistry – snore), once to a scary house in Bromley where, hours later, Sherlock had stumbled out glassy-eyed, high as a kite, and it had been a real temptation to catch up with him. Later, he followed Sherlock on a few cases, to watch him work, darting here and there, hands flashing, eyes blazing. It had been impressive, and James Padraic Hubert Moriarty was not among the easily impressed. Only then did Jim think of himself as a fan. The thing with Carl's shoes hadn't been a fluke.

He didn't much like the connotations of the word, though. The gruesome statistic about most fans was that no matter how much they adored the object of their attention, what ultimately mattered when they met the object was not that the fan met the object, but that the object noticed the fan. The fan wanted to leave a permanent mark, to walk away and hear Wait! and to turn to see the object running to catch up, to learn more about the intriguing soul who'd suddenly and most unexpectedly captivated them. It's you...all this time it's been you...and I never knew it before...where've you been all my life?

Jim couldn't pretend (to himself; fooling everyone else was ridiculously easy) that it didn't sting the tiniest bit that Johnny Watson had sort of beaten him to the punch in that department.

He'd done his little trick that time at Bart's. Small, meek, clumsy. Don't notice me, don't look, oh God look at me. That had been fun, dragging Molly along and all, but it had been a test, too – would the great Sherlock Holmes discern the truth behind Jim From IT's affable mask? He'd even added layers, hoping for more than a superficial analysis, but he'd been disappointed on a few counts. Molly had asked him a few nervous questions – You don't like boys, too, do you? It's okay if you do, though! - but hadn't probed more deeply. And Sherlock had never called. He hadn't responded to the marvellous little double bluff Jim had constructed, and Jim had waited, checked his phone, made certain that it had been functioning properly.... Nothing. Nyet. Nein. Nada. Non. Nihil.

That had stung a little, too. So when he said he thought Sherlock might call, he wasn't joking, not entirely, not altogether. But at least he had Sherlock's attention now – or he would, if Sherlock ever woke up.

It had been too easy to manoeuvre the whole thing. He already had access to Bart's – a little bit of
efficient hired muscle and a couple of laundry carts, easy-peasy. The pair of them lay crumpled on
the gritty grey surface of the roof, snugged up against the ledge (best to avoid satellite snapshots),
wrists bound and gobs taped shut, and completely out cold.

Jim turned to his employees, uniformly burly in their scrubs. "I think we can start phase two," he
said. "Shouldn't they be awake by now?"

Coddington, the most competent of the three, frowned. "We did an eight hour dose."

*Oh, for the love of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.* Jim closed his eyes for a moment and counted to ten.
"Eight. Eight hours. *Eight* hours."

"You said you wouldn't be starting anything 'til nightfall, Mr Moriarty," Coddington said.

"Eight hours. Eight." He turned his face upward and addressed the sky. "Why is it so hard to find
good help these days?"

"Mr Moriarty –"

"I said the fun wouldn't commence until it got dark. Did you think I wanted to stare at them for three
hours? *Huh*?" Jim took a step toward Coddington and bared his teeth. "Did it not occur to you that I
might want a bit of a chat before things got going?"

Coddington turned a bit pale. "I'm so sorry –"

Jim blew out a breath and waved a hand. He was close to melting down, and he wanted to save his
energy. "Never mind. Just take your places and wait for my signal."

"I'm not comfortable leaving you alone with both of them, sir," Coddington said. "Slippery, the pair
of them."

"Well, you won't have to worry for the next few hours, at least," Jim snarled. "Go on, get out. I can
manage." He drew his Glock – sexy little thing – out of his pocket and caressed it before repocketing
it.

"I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again." Coddington cringed, actually cringed. That was good. Sort of
soothing, actually. He backed away as if Jim were the Queen of England.

Well. He sort of was, really.

Jim turned back to his unconscious captives. Ignoring the faithful pet, Jim crouched next to Sherlock
and tenderly brushed his hair away from his forehead, throwing a purpling bruise over Sherlock's eye
into stark relief. How had that happened, anyhow? Interesting. "I had it planned differently,
Sherlock," he said softly. He glanced over at Johnny and tightened his mouth. "Very differently."

It was hard to believe, looking at them both. Sherlock was so…and John Watson…no, he didn't
quite believe it, truth be told. That was what this whole thing was about, really. He'd had ample time
to think about it in prison. Made it easy to ignore what was happening on the outside, and that had its
own little joys.

He touched Sherlock's hair, one springy curl, winding it round his forefinger, then traced over the
outline of Sherlock's mouth under the wide white bands of medical tape. Whoever had applied the
tape had pressed extra hard; even the little teardrop indentation above his upper lip was visible. That
was going to hurt coming off, probably.
Jim spared John an irritated glare, then turned back to Sherlock. It wasn't possible, was it? He couldn't see it. Granted, Sherlock hadn't always been attractive. He'd grown into his face, so much more interesting now with its hollows and prominences, the little character lines that had been ten or so years in the making. He saw a little pearly thread of grey amongst the dark curls here and there, that was nice. The eyebrows were a little out of control, but they suited him. His dress sense had improved immeasurably over time, except for the scarf – that was just dumb. You couldn't have everything.

Did some people become beautiful over time, or was it that they'd always been beautiful, but it took a while to notice? The changes in Sherlock's face and body had been so gradual, a slow-bending shadow in the sun. Jim had watched him so long. He'd given Sherlock so much space. There'd been ample time for contemplation, or so he'd thought.

It was really, really awful when you thought you knew someone, and it turned out you didn't know them half as well as you'd thought. Wasn't quite fair, really.

Jim scratched his chin reflectively, straightened, and strolled to the stairway door. Locked. Good. He wished they had more time. With more time, he could draw the truth from the two of them bit by bit. He could break them down slowly, incrementally, making one watch while the other suffered for them (they would suffer, too, if what Molly said was true – oh, heavens). He wanted to leave them both shattered, egoless, lacking even the will to die. And then he'd start over from the ground up. Sherlock could be rehabilitated; John would make a great domesticated pet, for a while at least, until Jim got bored with him. Wouldn't take long.

But there wasn't time. Sherlock had...he'd surged, somehow, and he and Jim didn't quite fit any longer. He'd find out for certain in a few hours.

All he had to do was wait.

Jim looked up at the lowering sky, then closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the sky was slate-grey, with gilt-edged clouds. Sherlock's eyes were fluttering, and he was moaning beneath the tape. It was a pretty sound, but Jim hadn't brought him up here to listen to moaning. Unfortunately.

He dropped to Sherlock's side and peeled a tiny corner of the tape down, careful not to injure Sherlock's skin. Then he paused.

"Oh, sod it. Right?" He ripped the tape off, and Sherlock flinched, though his eyes still only fluttered. "Sherlock," Jim said, patting Sherlock's reddened cheek. "Sherrr-lock. Wake up, darling. Early bird gets the worm."

Jim regretted this bitterly. He hated to be rushed.

But it wasn't as if Sherlock had given him a choice.

*
"Cumberbatch."

Go away and leave me alone. I'm sleeping.

A rough hand shook his shoulder. "Cumberbatch, wake up! What's happening?"

Oh. That was nice. His name. His own name. Christ, what a dream he'd been having. *It was all a dream*, oldest movie cliché in the world, but there it was. Without moving a muscle, he relaxed entirely, feeling as if his whole body had been a tightly knotted fist, clenched for weeks without respite. He didn't want to stir quite yet; he was sure that he had a million things on today – it was the rare day when he didn't – but another few minutes, surely, wouldn't throw a spanner into everybody's works. What day was it, anyway? He didn't even feel like reaching for his phone. *Fuck it. Alarm didn't go off, who cares.*

"God damn it – wake up! *Benedict!*"

Hang on a minute.

"I know you can hear me, you stupid, self-centred arsehole *actor*. Open your eyes!"

Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no.

Everything came back in a huge, unpleasant rush. Sussex. The cottage. Breakfast. Explaining everything to John – oh, thank God, that was out of the way at least. The attack. Oh, God, they'd been attacked. Where was he now? And who –?

The flat of someone's hand struck his cheek with enough force to cause pain. "Wake up. What did they give you?"

Benedict opened his eyes, or tried to, but they were heavy, iron weights for eyelids. His face hurt, three separate points of discomfort: his eye where John had punched him, his cheek where he'd been slapped, and his mouth, which burned and stung inexplicably. His hands hurt, too, and so did his shoulders. He groaned.

"Is it Moriarty?"

Sherlock. That was Sherlock. Half seven already, then. And yes, yes it was Moriarty. Benedict tried to shape his mouth into a *yes* and managed another groan.

"Nod your head if it was Moriarty."

He tried and wasn't sure he succeeded.

"Right. Okay. Is John all right?"

*Was* John all right? Benedict didn't know. The last he'd seen of John was his prone figure on the floor of the cottage, unceremoniously dragged over its threshold.

"For *God's sake.* Sherlock was breathing hard, clearly furious – but there was a quaver in his voice that sounded like fear. He wasn't afraid, was he?

"Listen to me. You've been drugged. I know it's difficult, but you've got to pull yourself together and talk to me. It's the only way I can help you out of this. But we've only got a few moments, so you've got to do it quickly."

*Drugged. Again.* What melodrama. Benedict opened his eyes again and saw Sherlock crouching
over him, wearing his favourite grey t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms. There was a huge bruise on his cheek, spreading up toward his eye. Benedict frowned. "Uh."

Sherlock blew a breath out and stuck his fingers in his hair, ruffling it vigorously. "God." He pushed Benedict to his stomach and began fiddling with something. "Wire. Good lord, what on earth's wrong with cable ties?"

Ah. That was the source of the pain in his hands and shoulders. He tried to speak again. "Muh." His tongue was thick and wholly uncooperative. No, *Arthur, the phonetic alphabet version of the letter M is not 'muh.'*

"Moriarty, yes, we've established that. Is John with you?"

"Uh. Huh."

"Did they drug him as well?"

"Mm. Huh." Benedict moaned as his shoulders sagged forward, his hands dropped to his sides, and blood flowed back into starved tissue. He felt himself rolled over again and lifted up. Sherlock was propping him up. His head lolled backward, and the light stung his eyes even through closed lids.

"Do you know what Moriarty is planning?"

Frustration seized Benedict, galvanising enough for him to reach up with one bloodless hand and catch the bottom of Sherlock's – of *his* t-shirt. "End," he said. He attempted the word *final* but couldn't catch his bottom lip with his top teeth. "Game."

"Game. End game. Do you mean…the pool? Are you back at the pool?"

*God damn it, God damn it!* Benedict shook his head. "Rushed things," he slurred. "Ahead. Schedule." He needed Sherlock's help, and he couldn't even speak. *FUCK."

"All right. All right." Sherlock's hand gripped Benedict's, hard enough to hurt. "He's rushing things. There's another game. He said he'd burn my heart –" The hand gripped tighter. "Burn my heart out."

"Yeh. Yes." *Now you've got it, old chum.*

"John." Sherlock half-stuttered the name out in the smallest voice Benedict had ever heard him use. "Okay. Okay." His respiration speeded up. "Benedict, listen carefully. You're going to have to overpower him physically, because you won't be able to outwit him."

"Hey." That emerged a little more strongly.

"Shut up. I'm going to re-position you and put the wire back, but I won't wrap it tightly. It's the illusion of restraint, do you understand?" Sherlock rolled Benedict over once more and began replacing the wire cuffs. "Don't let him see if you can help it. You know Jim Moriarty, or a version of him. I saw it on the television programme, he's not much different. He prides himself on his unpredictability – he *thinks* logically, or at least he's capable of it now and then, otherwise he wouldn't be able to pull off all those schemes, but he plays up the mad bit. He'll try to keep you off-balance if he can. He'll have guards, snipers. He's arrogant. I thought he might bide his time longer, plan something grandiose, but…I don't know."

"John," Benedict said. "He's in danger." He still slurred, but not as strongly as before.

"I know. You've got to divert Moriarty's attention from him as much as you can. Keep him focused
on you. What happened to your face?"

"John."

"John? He hit you?"

"Told him. Truth."

"Oh, my." Sherlock chuckled. "Oh, John."

Benedict stiffened and turned back to Sherlock. "Tom."

"He's fine. We caught the stalker. Tom is absolutely fine. Benedict – you said you'd help me if you could. I need you to help John." Sherlock swallowed audibly. "Please."

"I'll. Try." Benedict attempted a reassuring nod, but he was fucked, wasn't he? He rather thought he was. But Tom was okay. That was good. Good.

"You can do it, Cumberbatch. You're – you're quite good at being me. Be me for just a little while longer. Keep John safe. Please."

"What. Should I –" Benedict squinted at the whiteness that flared, blinding him and obscuring Sherlock from view. He flinched back, hitting his head against something hard.

"There you are!"

He knew that creepy singsong lilt.

"C'mon, Sherlock. Up and at 'em."

Oh, God. He didn't want this anymore. He couldn't sustain this fiction. It was killing him, hard on his body and murderous to his psyche. The responsibility of it all – Christ, he hadn't even owned a dog in years because his life wouldn't allow for it, and now he wasn't even sure he could manage a pet on his own. He hadn't been ready for children. He'd spent the last year in an increasingly thick and pleasant bubble, burdens and duties gently prised from his grip (Oh, Benedict, there's no need to make your own flight reservations. We can take care of that for you. Of course you should have your own driver on set. You need to rest when you can. Why shouldn't you have a bigger per diem? It'd be awful to be caught short, wouldn't it? Gosh, Ben, you still go to the shops on your own? You realise we can have all that delivered, don't you?) and while he wasn't entirely carefree now, he no longer had to worry about most of the quotidian things that troubled ordinary people. He'd got soft somewhere along the way to this point. Mycroft had been right. All he could do was ape Sherlock's mannerisms. He couldn't be Sherlock – no-one could. How the fuck could he save John Watson's life if he couldn't even shop for his own fucking groceries?

On the other hand, he didn't have a whole lot of other fucking options. Resentfully, he opened his eyes to see Jim Moriarty's ferrety smile.

"Finally! It was getting really boring here, Sherlock."

Benedict sighed and licked his lips with a tongue that felt furry and twice its usual size. "What," he began, and let out a croaking cough. He was about to put his hand to his mouth and remembered what Sherlock had told him. Doubling up, he hacked loudly for a moment. When he straightened, he felt his hands pressed up against something rough and solid. "What do you want?"

"A lot," Moriarty replied solemnly. "How'd you get that bruise on your face? Was that my guys?"
"What do you care?" Benedict stepped hard on his steadily encroaching fear. It was physically loathsome to be this close to Moriarty. He smelled of a decent men's cologne, starched cotton, and mint gum, but the combination was noxious, stomach-churning.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter now, but I was just making conversation. You still seem a little out of it." Moriarty rose to his full height and stepped back, his lips twisted into a strange smile.

Relieved at the slight gain in personal space, Benedict kept his hands, loosely wrapped in the wire, pressed to the rough surface, and struggled into a sitting position. He turned his head a bit creakily and saw John lying on the ground, bound and gagged and evidently still unconscious. *Fuck.*

No, it wasn't the ground. It was grey stone, or tile of some kind. A floor. And he was leaning against a wall. But there was a breeze, and above them, a darkening sky. His head swimming, Benedict blinked hard and looked around. He saw the Old Bailey. The Barbican. Smithfield Market. Familiar rooftops all. The sound of distant traffic drifted upward, seeming to coil lazily around his head and then disappearing.

Cold terror raked his insides as he realised where they were.

*Bart's. It's St. Bart's.*

"Gee whiz. I didn't think pharmaceuticals would be all that effective, considering your history, but I guess I was wrong. That doesn't happen often."

"Depends on the pharmaceutical," Benedict rasped. He made a show of glancing round casually, feigning boredom. "Where's your little army of hired help?" What luck if Moriarty actually happened to be alone. He didn't think he'd have much trouble taking him in a fight.

Moriarty grinned. "Oh, they're around." He lifted his arm above his head and snapped his fingers. Benedict frowned, then caught a sharp flash out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head and saw five or six little red dots dancing over John's body.

Oh, *fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.*

"I reckon why take chances?" Moriarty asked with a shrug. "This is a private chat – you, me, and Johnny here. Well, you and me. I don't think I'll take the tape off his mouth. It's not like he ever has anything interesting to say anyhow."

Benedict clenched his teeth and glared, but despair chewed at his gut. For a moment he was – irrationally, he knew – angry at Steven and Mark, who'd agreed on a glib, facile, saved-by-the-bell solution to the pool dilemma when they should have cobbled together a resolution that required strategic or at least intelligent tactical thinking. What the hell was he supposed to do to get them out of this? It wasn't as if Irene Adler would be calling and interrupting things – Benedict had put paid to that nicely.

"So," Moriarty said, sticking his hands in his pockets, "I've got a question for you."

"Yes?" *Fuck everything.*

"You mentioned a hoax the other day. And Richard Brook." Moriarty's voice had gone quiet, edged with molten rage. "Who's Richard Brook?"

Horrified, Benedict met Moriarty's sombre gaze. *Oh, no. No.* Sneering about Jim Moriarty's endgame was all well and good when he wasn't actually at his mercy. He'd fucked up spectacularly. Again. "Wh-what?"
"You heard me." Moriarty crouched down again.

Oh, God, Benedict wished he could wrap his hands round Moriarty's slender neck and squeeze until his tongue and eyes bulged. But with those restless red sight points... he couldn't, no matter how much he longed to do it. Desperately, he tried to parry. "Don't you know?"

"I want to know how you know, honey."

Still curled up on the grey stone, John shifted and let out a muffled noise.

Moriarty looked at John and a gentle smile curved his mouth. He reached into his jacket pocket, withdrew a handgun – a very real and deadly-looking handgun – and placed it under John's chin. Benedict heard a click – the safety catch. "Tell me."

*Christ al-fucking-mighty.* Cold sweat ran down Benedict's back and sides. His head throbbed. "You're the criminal mastermind – you tell me," he said through parched, burning lips. *Tape, that's why my face hurts. Must have taped my mouth too, but took it off, because he wanted to talk to me. Jesus.*

" Hmm." Moriarty drew the gun back. "If I get it right, you'll tell me. You won't lie."

"Cross my heart," Benedict said. His heart pounded wildly in his chest. He was sure that Moriarty saw the sweat on his brow and upper lip.

"And hope to die?" Moriarty grinned again. "Okay, here goes. You couldn't have known all that unless you've really, really been paying close attention to me. Like, obsession-level attention. Spying on me. Watching me, listening in on my phone calls. And getting Big Brother to help you out. Every breath you take," he sang, off-key. "Every mooooove you maaaake... am I warm?"

It was an out, even though it was probably a trap. "Not bad," Benedict allowed with a shrug.

"I knew it!" Jim hopped to his feet and executed a weird little relevé. "I knew it, Sherlock. God! You can keep a secret, can't you?"

John was safe, for the moment. Benedict wondered if there was a way to move him beyond the red sights. "It's one of my strong suits."

"Did you get it, the Rich Brook thing?"

"Rich Brook. Reichenbach. Hilarious."

"Good! I'm impressed, I admit it. Oh, look, Johnny-boy's stirring." Moriarty stopped moving and stared flatly down at John. "And that's just it, isn't it? That's why none of this is quite adding up." He swung his gaze back to Benedict. "You see?"

Benedict kept still and silent, not daring to look at John who was by now decidedly stirring to full consciousness. He registered John's sudden thrashing as he realised he was bound, and his angry, muffled grunts, but didn't turn his head. Showing concern could prove John's undoing.

*Not that it matters, because we're both completely fucked.*

Moriarty swung his foot and kicked John hard in the calf. John let out a stifled yell and curled in on himself. "I said, do you see?"

"Clearly not," Benedict spat. "Why don't you enlighten me?"
"I'm disappointed in you, Sherlock," Moriarty said petulantly. "I mean…I go to all this trouble to engage you because I know how bored you are, and I know you were intrigued – you couldn't fake that, I know you tried, and hey, maybe I didn't do it soon enough, because you went and got a flatmate, which is just…okay, I didn't know you needed the money. I could have lent you some dosh, and that's on me. I fully admit that. But now –" Moriarty dragged a hand through his hair. "I know you were watching me, and that just doesn't line up with what I heard about you."

Caught off guard, Benedict blinked. "What? What have you heard?"

"It's hard to believe," Moriarty said. "Maybe you can enlighten me, huh? I mean, the Sherlock I know wouldn't just –" A chilling little giggle escaped him. "You're going to make me say it, aren't you? Fine. The Sherlock I know wouldn't just fall for his flatmate. The most dull, pathetic, boring, ordinary person on the face of the earth. Look at him, for God's sake! He's got a face like a potato. A little round potato. It's just so sad."

Benedict thought John, and Martin, had a very nice face, but he didn't bother contradicting Moriarty, since he was clearly not in rational mode. He looked down at John, who was staring up at him. "Are you okay?"

John nodded, his eyes wide.

"I'm so sorry about this," Benedict said softly.

"God doesn't like it when we speak in whispers!" Moriarty trilled.

"Must need a hearing aid," Benedict retorted, brimming with utter fury. *Fuck it, if I'm going to die, then I'm not going to die cringing. Sherlock wouldn't. He didn't want to die. Life was too precious to let go. He had so much. He was terrified. But he wouldn't cower and plead, and even if he did, Moriarty wouldn't care. He looked Moriarty full in the face. "Is that what you wanted, Jim? A boyfriend? You thought we'd trapse around the world and run some sort of crime-for-hire outfit and whisper sweet nothings in each other's ear?"

All the colour had drained from Moriarty's face. He stared at Benedict as if he'd been unceremoniously unplugged.

Benedict risked another look at John. John was still staring at him. "John –"

"Oh." Moriarty's voice was shaky. "He doesn't know. He doesn't know, Sherlock." He began to pace. "That is so soap opera, I may cry."

"Who told you I'd fallen for John?" Benedict asked.

"A little bird." Moriarty gave his ferret's smile again.

"Molly," Benedict half-whispered.

"Good. Good, Sherlock. Yeah, we're still dating. Thanks for not spilling the beans."

Sherlock hadn't breathed a word about Moriarty being a consulting criminal. Why? God, what a bastard….

"So how long were you going to suffer in silence? Forever? Until John came round? He's not gay, you know. He's only said so fifty thousand times." Moriarty pointed the gun at John's chest and hiccupped out a sobbing giggle. "I mean, how many times does he have to tell you?" He drew his foot back and kicked John again.
John grunted and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Stop it!" Benedict cried. He couldn't take his eyes away from the gaping black bore of the gun. His body quivered with suppressed energy. The dots still roamed over John's body.

"Make me," Moriarty crooned, and kicked John once more, sinking his foot into the muscle of John's thigh. John writhed in pain. "That moment in Bart's when the pair of you met, those show-offy deductions about him – ooh, Afghanistan or Iraq?" Moriarty's face was a twisted mask of rage. "That putrid little meet-cute – did you think I didn't know about that? How stupid are you, Sherlock? Honestly."

"What do you want from me?" Benedict trembled, drenched in sweat.

Moriarty stopped and considered a moment. "I think it's too late for that, darling." He nodded mournfully. "Yeah…it's too late. Get up."

*Oh, God, no. Benedict was certain, as certain as he'd ever been of anything, that in a moment he'd be standing on the ledge of the roof, and there was no emergency net, no army of helpful minions, no bungee cords to stop his vulnerable body from plummeting six storeys down and shattering on the pavement.

*What can I do? Oh, God, what am I going to do?

There were options, none of which appealed. He could: 1) Tell Jim to fuck off. 2) Tell him he was right, it was Jim he loved, and agree to go with him if he let John go. 3) Tell Jim the truth - he wasn't who Jim thought he was.

No.

"I said, get up."

*John had never been one to sit idly by and let other people pick up the lion's share of burden, and he especially didn't want to do that now, when Jim Moriarty was verbally sparring with an actor who looked just like Sherlock. Or had Sherlock's body, or some such bizarre rubbish. He still couldn't get it straight. At any rate, it wasn't his best friend, it was an actor, and now he couldn't believe that he'd been hoodwinked for so long. Benedict, or Ben, had done a fine job, no question, but there were so many little things that added up wrongly – that little breakdown in the loo the other day should have tipped him off, but who would have possibly guessed that something so strange was happening?

Benedict was sweating. John had never seen Sherlock break a sweat. And his replies weren't nearly as mocking and confident as Sherlock's would have been. It was amazing that Moriarty hadn't twigged.

John struggled with his bonds, but they were metal, felt like strong wire, and impossible to break or to reach whatever held them secure. He pushed at the tape over his mouth with his tongue, but that wouldn't budge either. Fucking hell, he was 0 for 2. He saw the little red dots travelling in short, stuttering arcs over his torso and decided to ignore them. Wasn't as if he could stop a bullet. Furiously, he yanked at the cuffs again and a sharp jab of pain shot up his arms. He was only half-listening to Moriarty's conversation with Ben as he focussed on freeing himself, but then Moriarty
said something that snagged John's attention.
"The Sherlock I know wouldn't just fall for his flatmate."

What?

John stared at Sherlock. No, Ben, god damn it.

That couldn't be right. Sherlock didn't fancy him. Sherlock didn't fancy anybody.

Benedict met John's gaze. "Are you okay?"

John managed a nod. No, that couldn't be right.

"I'm so sorry about this."

What the hell?

"Oh." Moriarty's voice trembled. "He doesn't know."

And now they were talking about Molly, and John, still muzzy-headed, could scarcely gather his thoughts before Moriarty kicked him twice, his foot like a leather-covered brick slamming into his vastus lateralis, a dead-on shot. John gasped and curled up to try to avoid the blows, but it didn't do any good. Through the pain he heard Ben shouting and Moriarty answering, and then he saw Ben rising awkwardly to his feet and pressing his backside against a low wall. John blinked hard and tried to clear his head.

What the hell was all this, anyhow? Moriarty was angry because he thought Sherlock harboured a thing for John? It made a crazy kind of sense; Jim Moriarty was the very definition of obsessive, luring Sherlock into those games, playing with lives because he was bored, but surely he didn't desire Sherlock that way. He didn't seem…well, he'd never given much thought to Moriarty's sexuality, which was probably for the best.

"John. Johnny." Moriarty was pointing the gun at him. "Look at Sherlock. He'd do anything for you, wouldn't you, Sherlock?"

John glared at Moriarty for a second, then swivelled his head to meet Ben's gaze. Oh, God, Ben was terrified, though it was obvious he was doing his best to maintain a stoic demeanour. How could Jim not see that? He shook his head, attempting to communicate with his eyes. Sorry, Ben. Sorry you got dragged into this.

"Yes," Ben said shakily.

"Even die? Would you die for him, Sherlock?" The fading light from the setting sun cast shadows on Moriarty's face.

John's heart had been beating heavily, but slowly, a result of the dampening effects of whatever drug they'd administered. Now his heartbeat quickened. Die? Moriarty wouldn't…he wouldn't kill Sherlock. Sherlock was too brilliant, too fascinating, too –

"Y'see, like I said, I'm disappointed in you, Sherlock. I thought we had something in common."

"Decent tailors," Ben said. "I think that's the extent of it."

John snorted a little. Sherlock might have said something like that.
"Don't be glib," Moriarty said, raising his hand as if he were stopping traffic. "Not now, Sherlock, not when you're to blame for all this. Do you know how long I've been keeping tabs on you?"

"No," Benedict said hollowly.

"Years now. Years. You've always been so self-contained. I admired it, I don't mind telling you. Just a pretty robot, running here and there and driving that parade of flatmates out one by one, ever since uni. Some of them were so ridiculously hurt, too, did you ever notice that? So attracted to you, and you brushed them off like flies. I'd talk to them sometimes afterward, in a pub, listening to them whine and moan, and I knew they just didn't get you."

"And I suppose you get me," Benedict said, sounding genuinely bored.

"I do, I do. And I had something bigger planned. That offer I made you – it was a good one. We could have had something, you and me. But on the off chance that you'd refuse, I had this sort of scheme hatched – you know all this, I guess. I was going to discredit you systematically, watch you wriggle in the web, and then –" Moriarty held both hands up and snapped them into fists. "It was elaborate, but you know, I had some downtime."

John watched Ben's face, then Moriarty's. Benedict didn't seem terribly surprised by anything Moriarty was saying, but the fear was still evident. And Moriarty didn't see it.

Bitterly, he wondered if Sherlock would evidence any fear at – oh, God. Of course he had. The pool. His face. And how shaky he was, freeing John from the Semtex. Saving John and Sarah from the Black Lotus gang. The incident with the Clarence House Cannibal. The Talbot Conundrum, when John had been strung upside-down over a churning smelting vat. And other times, almost too many to count. Maybe Molly had it wrong – she was a romantic anyhow – and maybe Sherlock did love John, only not the way she thought. Maybe it would never be love the way John hoped, but that was okay. It was okay. You didn't risk your life for someone, over and over, unless you felt strongly about them. It was what you did, not what you said, that mattered. Yeah, Sherlock was an insufferable dick, but it was true, what John had told Ben – he'd allowed John to be exactly who he was.

That was more than John had ever had in his life, and it was enough. It would be enough.

"So now what?" Benedict asked.

"Now, everything's changed."

"So you believe what Molly told you."

"I'm not big on faith," Moriarty said. Sweat stood out on his brow. "I'm a little bit of a Doubting Thomas. So I'm going to put my finger in your wounds, if that's okay with you. Actually, I'm going to do it even if it's not okay with you."

John didn't like the direction the conversation was taking. Frantically, he pushed at the tape over his mouth and scrubbed his chin against his shoulder in an effort to peel it off. Why was Benedict playing along? Wouldn't it be smarter to tell him the truth?

"Up on the ledge, sweetheart."

John heard Ben's sharp intake of breath and realised exactly what was happening. Oh my God. He propped himself up and looked at the surrounding buildings. Bart's roof, six storeys down. Fuck, no. He turned to Benedict and shouted a muffled protest. Tell him! Tell him, for fuck's sake! It didn't matter if it wasn't Sherlock – he couldn't just let him die. Oh, God –
"What if I refuse?"

"Then Johnny goes overboard, and I'll kill you anyhow."

"You'll kill him if I jump. What's the difference?" Benedict's voice shook.

"I won't, though. I promise."

"You promise," Benedict sneered. "Since you're so trustworthy."

"But I do! If you jump, I'll let him live. I'll take him with me for a while, and hang on to him for...oh, a year, year and a half. We'll have lots and lots to talk about. And he'll be an entirely different man when he leaves. I guarantee that. Of course, people are going to be talking about him— I mean, he disappears right after his best friend takes a dive off a tall building. Okay, that might be a teensy bit problematic for him, I admit. He might take some heat when he reappears. But hey, he'll be alive." Moriarty's voice dropped suddenly. "But if you don't jump, Sherlock, you get to watch him die. And then I will tear you apart, bit by infinitesimal bit. You don't want that, do you?"

John locked eyes with Benedict and all but saw his thoughts: *None of this is worth it, I didn't sign up for any of this, I don't even know him, what do I care if John dies, it's Sherlock Moriarty wants anyhow* - and on and on and on. John shook his head, silently giving Benedict permission to choose. They were screwed any way one sliced it.

Benedict turned to Moriarty. "Will you let me say goodbye first?"


Like a magician performing a particularly clever trick, Benedict brought his hands from behind his back with a flourish.

Moriarty let out a giggle. "Oh, nice one. How'd you manage that?"

"Magic." Benedict turned and crouched next to John. He began to unwind the wire round John's wrists.

"Hey, hey, I didn't tell you that you could do that!"

"I want a proper goodbye." Benedict didn't stop what he was doing.

"Fine," Moriarty said sulkily. "You've got the rest of your life." He prudently took the handgun from his pocket again and aimed it. "Just making sure you don't try anything funny."

Ben snorted disdainfully. He took the wire from John's wrists and tossed it aside, then began to pluck at the tape over John's mouth. "This might hurt a bit. Sorry." John winced as the tape came off, taking a little skin with it. "Sorry."

"It's okay. You—"

"Shh." Benedict helped John to his feet.

John glanced at Moriarty. "You don't have to do this."

Ben smiled wryly. "I don't have much choice."

"I am." Benedict took John's face in his hands, bent, and kissed him.

Shocked, John flinched, then stiffened, staring at Benedict with wide eyes. He felt the gentle swipe of Ben's tongue, no, Sherlock's tongue – oh, what the fuck was he playing at? This was mad – across his lip, and tightened his mouth, then opened it and accepted the kiss.

Ben's hands caressed the back of John's head, then slid lower, down his shoulders, his back, stopping briefly at his waist, then slipping down to cup his arse. He pulled them tightly together and deepened the kiss – Christ, his mouth was so full and warm and wet, fucking glorious – and then pulled away. He touched John's cheek and smiled. "Goodbye, John." He turned to Moriarty, who was watching them, frozen, his eyes huge and round.

"No," Moriarty whispered. "That's not right."

The night had grown dark, the noises of traffic diminished. An almost cathedral-like silence hung in the air, and something had shifted. John glanced down – the red dots were still there, unmoving now. Waiting.

Ben took John's hand. "That wasn't convincing enough for you?"

"It's not right. It's not." Moriarty's breath came rapid and sharp.

"You'll never understand, Jim," Benedict said softly. "You'll never comprehend how good John is, how decent. There's no reward for virtue at the end of the life we're given, so we have to make our own and learn the secret of living. Sometimes we have to struggle for it, and sometimes it's given to us, if we're very, very lucky. It's not always what poets would have us believe, and it doesn't mean there won't be pain or disillusionment or loss. The game's changed, Jim. You can steal anything and everything, except this."

Jim shook his head, wild-eyed. "You're not…I don't know how, but you're not…you're not Sherlock. Sherlock would never say those things. Never." He took a step forward, then another, holding the gun shakily. "Who are you?"

Benedict shook his head. "Cleverness only gets you so far." He had to raise his voice above the sound of an approaching helicopter.

"Who are you?" Moriarty shrieked. "Huh?" He jammed the weapon against John's temple. "What'd you do with him, you brainless little –" Abruptly, a white light illuminated them, and Moriarty stepped away, yanking John backward, his gun still propped against John's head.

The helicopter hovered above them, bathing them in brilliant light. John heard a voice booming out, cold and commanding and blessedly familiar.

"James Moriarty. Drop the weapon immediately."

Moriarty laughed and stepped away. He glanced at John and laughed again, his voice spiralling upward in hysteria. John looked down and saw that the red dots had disappeared.

"It's over, Jim," Benedict shouted. "Give yourself up!"

Jim grinned, then put the gun in his mouth and fired.

Benedict jumped back with a cry and dragged John back a few steps. They crashed into the low ledge; John tripped, plowed into Ben, and knocked them both to the rooftop. They scrambled up, righted each other unsteadily, and stared down at the bleeding body.
The stairwell door burst open, and black-clad figures toting weapons streamed through. Above them, the 'copter hovered, its blades whirling, its spotlight blinding in its brilliance.

*

John cradled a mug of tea in his hands. He'd offered one to Mycroft, but Mycroft had refused, his expression vaguely disgusted, as if John had offered him a dirty snotrag. "How did you know where we were?"

Mycroth shrugged. "Simple enough. Sherlock's phone has a GPS system. I'm glad you decided to take my advice and keep it," he said to Benedict. "And that Moriarty's henchmen were too foolish to remove it."

"Mm." Ben was curled up in Sherlock's chair, looking a bit shell-shocked.

"Did you know what was going to happen?" John demanded, suddenly suspicious. Mycroft's perpetual composure was annoying at best.

"It was among the probabilities of occurrence."

"Nice," John snapped. "Two of your men died, you know."

"And you almost died but for my intervention, Dr Watson," Mycroft retorted. He got hold of himself again and cleared his throat. "They didn't die in vain. Moriarty's network was vast, and the number of human lives he's destroyed nearly countless. They played a small but crucial role in its dismantling."

John bit his lip. That was true enough. Benedict's ploy had confused Moriarty, but probably wouldn't have deterred him, in the end. "Well. Thanks for that."

"Yes. Your gratitude is remarkably touching," Mycroft heaved a sigh. "I'll be back tomorrow. I believe everything's in place with regard to your return, Mr Cumberbatch."

Benedict blinked. "You – I can go?"

"I fervently hope so. My team and I will be here tomorrow at seven o'clock with the necessary equipment to, we believe, facilitate your departure and ensure a smooth transference."

"You seem pretty confident," John remarked. Mycroft only offered him a wintry smile in return.


"One of our doctors pronounced him dead," Mycroft said, clearly nettled at being questioned. "Would you like to examine the body yourself? Would that help your acting career?"

"No," Ben murmured, and dropped into the chair again.

"Very well. I'll be off. Good night, then." Mycroft marched out of the flat and closed the door firmly.

John waited until his footsteps had died away altogether. "Well."
Benedict smiled tiredly. "Hell of a day."

"That's putting it mildly."

"I think I'll get some sleep."

"Okay." John watched Benedict trudge toward Sherlock's bedroom, then got up and rushed after him. "Ben?"

Benedict turned back. "Yeah?"

"That was –" John pursed his lips and nodded abruptly. "Thanks for that. What you said tonight."

"You're a good man, John Watson." Benedict gave John a sweet smile, Sherlock's secret smile. It was a pleasant shock to see.

Impulsively, John put his hand out.

"Oh, none of that," Ben said, and drew John into an embrace. John hugged him hard, his heart aching just a little. Ben was sweet, Ben was lovely…but it should have been Sherlock. Ben drew back. "Good night," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Right. 'Night, then." John turned and went upstairs to his room. He undressed and got into bed. Exhausted, he nonetheless played the events of the evening over in his head, wondering what Sherlock would have thought of everything. Probably his most dominant emotion would have been disappointment at the loss of his nemesis.

Well, there was always another adventure round the corner. He hoped, anyhow.

Meditating on that, John slipped into a deep sleep.

*
"Nice interview today."

"Oh, you heard it? Yeah, I guess it wasn’t bad. There’s something comforting about doing radio, apart from not having to get all tarted up." Benedict lit a cigarette, inhaled, and expelled smoke through his nose.

"You’re probably sick of telling the South Africa story by now."

"Yeah, well –" Ben inhaled again and idly rubbed the back of his hand over Tom’s inner thigh. "I expect I’ll be asked about it for a long while yet, so I might as well get accustomed to it."

Tom concentrated on the sensation of Ben’s fingers caressing his skin. "Mm. Doesn’t it – do you feel like you’re reliving it, telling it over and over? Isn’t that upsetting?"

"Erm…not exactly. It’s hard to explain. You can’t ever forget something like that. I mean, even if you’re in a dangerous part of the world, the Gaza Strip or the Khyber Pass or something, most people don’t think that anything traumatic is going to happen to them, so when it does, it leaves an indelible mark. I’ve got the details seared into my brain so when I do talk about it, it feels a bit more immediate, but at the same time I think I’ve managed to compartmentalise it properly. Also, I wasn’t truly hurt – they didn’t beat me or cut me or rape me, so I can be a bit more sanguine about it."

"Jesus, Ben." Tom shuddered. He rested his hand on Ben’s chest, discerning the calm, steady beating of his heart.

"If it happened again, I couldn’t guarantee that I wouldn’t fall apart, but as it stands, I’m okay."

Benedict drew on his cigarette again. "Besides, it was a long time ago. Time does wonders to heal, you know. Everybody agreed that it would be the worst sort of publicity to talk about it, so we didn’t. Besides, even if we had, nobody would have given a fuck because nobody knew who the fuck I was, even if it was a definitive incident in my life. The only reason I get asked about it is because I’m a bold-type or boldface, whatever, name right now, and the press adores traumatic backgrounds."

"As long as you’re okay with it."

"Yeah, I’m fine." Benedict stubbed out his cigarette and turned on his side to face Tom. "Talked to a therapist and everything. She said that statistically, kidnap victims are largely okay after the event is over. There’s less PTSD involved than you’d think. I don’t want to be ‘Benedict Cumberbatch, the actor who was once violently carjacked’ for the rest of my life, but right now it’s fine. It’s a good story." Ben smiled, and slid his hand a bit higher. "Talking of kidnapping, I came up with a brilliant bit of roleplay this morning in the shower that requires an absolutely obscene quantity of rope, if you’re up for it."

Tom found he was very much up for it indeed.
The bed dipped beneath Tom's body. Benedict was wriggling out of Tom's arms and pushing himself into a sitting position at the edge of the bed. Through sleep-hazed eyes Tom watched Ben sink his head into his hands for a long, still moment, then ruffle his hair angrily and stand up, a bit wobbly on his feet.

"God-damned idiot," Ben muttered, and stalked out of the room.

"You okay?" Tom called softly, but Ben hadn't heard him or had chosen to ignore him. Could have been either; Ben's mood was a little – well, a lot – erratic lately. Even the post-kidnap cuddle had been a bit on the awkward side. Reticent as Benedict could be in public, with good reason obviously, he was warm and affectionate in private, and though maybe Tom's own needy psyche was to blame, he craved more than a few hugs and murmured assurances. Probably it was Tom's fault, extraordinarily high and unrealistic expectations. Still, he'd hoped for more empathy, considering that Ben had undergone a similarly traumatic event.

Benedict had gone downstairs, stomping emphatically like an angry child. Tom heard his thumping footsteps, heard the fridge door open and bang shut, heard various mutterings and thudding until Ben went into his study and threw himself onto the sofa. Tom waited for the sound of the television – Ben liked to soothe himself with movies, an excellent habit – but only silence followed the thud of twelve stone on cushioned leather.

Tom sighed and turned over onto his belly, hugging Ben's pillow in lieu of his body. He did feel a bit better, all things considered; obviously he'd have to cope with the aftermath in his own fashion, and in private – he still wasn't certain that leaving was the right thing to have done. Henry might still talk, and leaving a crime scene, even as a victim, was probably a crime – but Ben was right: the public fallout would be horrible. Might be anyhow. Christ, people were still asking Ben about the carjacking that had happened seven years ago. He didn't want to be Tom Hiddleston, Serial Killer Almost-Victim for the rest of his life.

On the other hand, he'd have to dissemble in front of Graham and Fi and the others forever. Chances were the connection between them would be discovered regardless of his participation and it would come up in interviews. You've known Henry Walter Burgess since you were at RADA together, haven't you? The press loved the three-name serial killer format. Did you have any inkling that he was unhinged? You knew some of his victims, didn't you?

Too, there was the young girl Henry had just killed, Tom's fan – God rest her soul, whatever her name was. He hadn't killed her, but he might as well have done – she'd died because of him. That would be on his conscience until the day he drew his last breath.

Pushing his face into Ben's pillow, he bedewed it with a few bitter tears. The only person he could talk to about this was Benedict, and Benedict hadn't seemed inclined. And the rescue…! Jesus Christ, that training for Sherlock had paid off handsomely. He'd never seen anyone so ruthlessly calculating and competent – not that Ben wasn't fit, but that escape and rescue had been Tarantino-worthy. It was a debt Tom couldn't hope to repay, not that he would mind trying, if Benedict allowed it. Maybe after a few years had passed, he'd follow Ben's example and talk about it.

A long, drawn-out note wended its way upstairs and into the bedroom. Benedict was evidently attempting to tune his violin. Tom groaned a little and stuck his head under the pillow. Benedict was a man of vast talents, but music wasn't among them. Even extreme gratitude wouldn't make it so. That was okay. Real-life action hero trumped accomplished musician.
Below, Benedict played a few arpeggios – he'd got better at that, at least – and then, sweet, upward-spiralling notes that wound into near silence, and then a tune that was familiar, something lovely and romantic, almost gentle. Tom hummed along, trying to place the piece. It grew, quick-tempo, playful and a little whimsical, then returned to the familiar theme, and –

Tom's body froze; his humming stopped abruptly.

Moving like a somnambulist, he pulled his head out from beneath the pillow and got up from the bed. The music surrounded him, brilliant and sweet, full of joy and virtuosity.

Virtuosity.

The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood up as he tiptoed downstairs and toward the library. He stopped at the threshold and stared, open-mouthed; Benedict was standing facing away from Tom, his fingers moving with nimble grace and surety over the strings, his bow ripping purest beauty out of the inexpensive violin that had never yielded more than a few clumsy scales and beginner pieces for kids.

He stood transfixed, listening, watching, until Benedict half-turned and caught sight of him. The music came to an abrupt halt.

Tom caught his breath, though it wasn't easy; he was light-headed with hunger and complete stupefaction. "How…." He wet his lips. "Where the fuck did you learn to play like that?"

Benedict lowered the instrument and tapped the bow against his thigh. He exhaled, a deep, weary sigh that seemed to come from the tips of his toes. "I've been playing since I was six years old."

"No, you haven't. You hardly even touched a violin until you started filming Sherlock. That's what you told me, anyhow." What else was Ben hiding? Astounding musical ability, action-hero prowess – what was next, he fucking hunted big game with a blowdart in his spare time?

"Small wonder the bowing's so tragic on the programme if he learnt on this rubbish thing." Benedict lifted the violin and sneered at it. "Bow's all right, though. Miraculously." He smiled at Tom, but the smile curdled on his lips and didn't travel upward. His eyes were icy, calculating.

A slender ribbon of fear curled round Tom's spine, tangling there. "I…what the hell's going on?"

Benedict only shrugged. He lifted the bow and inspected it.

"Ben?"

Slowly, Ben shook his head. "No."

Tom backed up a step. "What's wrong with you?" Adrenaline flooded his system, but after the night and morning he'd had, it exhausted him instead of galvanising him. He'd have said that Benedict was in character, but Ben didn't do that, he didn't need to, it wasn't part of his process. But here he was, cold-eyed, his posture altogether different, his speech patterns familiar but nothing like his own, playing as if the devil had granted him some mad, fervent wish.

"I told you earlier, but you didn't listen."

"Told me? Told me what?" It was utterly crazy, but…this wasn't Benedict. Christ, I'm too far fucking gone for this!

"You still think Cumberbatch could have sorted out what happened to you and then rescued you?"
Please.” Benedict's lip curled, and he took another step forward.

Thoroughly creeped out, Tom staggered against the door frame and put a hand out, warding him off. He wasn't a Catholic and neither was Ben, but he wouldn't have been averse to an exorcist at this moment. "You're scaring me."

"There's absolutely nothing to be frightened about. It's a simple matter of physics." Benedict halted and frowned. "Well, maybe not completely simple, but straightforward. You haven't got any idea of who I am? Can't you take a stab at it, for God's sake?"

I could, but that would make me completely fucking insane. "You're my…my…" Weirdly, he couldn't say boyfriend, not with Ben being so bizarre. "You're Ben."

Ben rolled his eyes. "You haven't noticed anything amiss beginning with Thursday night. Come on. I'm good, but I'm not omniscient, not quite. No alarm bells for you at all?"

Tom wet parched lips. "The…the rescue. You were like Bruce Lee, or Chuck Norris or something."

"No idea who those people are, but that's a start." Ben tossed the violin to the sofa and folded his arms, the bow still in one hand. "Go on."

This is fucking crazy. But slowly, so slowly it hurt, little things occurred to him, coalescing into a notion so beyond rationality it made Scientology seem completely plausible. "You wouldn't run on Friday morning."

"Running for recreation is pointless." Benedict nodded. "Don't stop."

"You didn't eat the food I ordered, even though it's your favourite."

"I prefer Thai, or Vietnamese at a pinch."

He'd been storing anomalies subconsciously all along. Tom realised, small incidents that he'd chalked up to Ben's accident, but now…. "You tried to gag me during sex, when you knew I didn't like it." Knew. He knew that. Sex, oh what the FUCK –

Benedict – was it Benedict? – shrugged. "Insufficient data."

"You fucked Mark in the loo." Tom let a little animosity pour out. "Well. That term's a bit strong, I think. If we're splitting hairs, I only –"

"Never mind, I get the general picture." Tom stared, unable to take it in, but then the last item clicked into place. "That first night. That –" Tom stared into chilly, pale eyes. "You called me John."

Benedict It had to be him, what the fucking fuck smiled. "You remembered that. Not bad."

"Jesus," Tom breathed. "Jesus Christ." He stumbled backward and hit the opposite wall, his back scraping against a sharp picture-frame. His phone, where was his phone? He had to call the police. Madman, I'm trapped in here with a madman, oh God I can't take this any longer!

And where the fuck was Benedict?

He felt slippery wood under his bare feet and curled his toes forward, ready to sprint, to get the fuck out of Ben's house and find the nearest police officer, get a neighbour to call, had he been in on everything with Henry, was it a ploy, dear Christ was Benedict with Henry right now?
Tom opened his mouth to say God only knew what, and whooshed air out harshly as a body slammed him up against the wall and pinned his wrists. He wanted to scream, but no sound emerged from his throat.

"Tom. Tom. Get hold of yourself, for God's sake. I've dealt with more temperamental actors in the past few days than anybody deserves, and I'm sick of it. Calm yourself. Think rationally." The voice was soft in his ear, and familiar. Familiar.

"Rationally!" Tom's voice was unnaturally high. "You're trying to tell me you're – you're –" He couldn't say it. Multiple personality disorder. He never told me. It's okay, I can cope with that, I had a pal who suffered from it, he was –

"Who? Go on. Say it."

Tom's heart was slamming against his ribcage, but he didn't dare break the hold on his wrists. He swallowed, and shivered.

He was a rational person, and reasonably intelligent. There had been a few times in his life that had required what had felt like an extraordinary leap of faith: first time on the football pitch, surrounded by bigger boys. Asking a girl to dance. First time he'd had sex, with a girl, then with a boy. His first oration in Greek. First time onstage. First time in front of the cameras. Afterwards, he'd marvelled at his own fright – sometimes, it was simply a matter of taking a deep breath and accepting the outcome of a decision. And he liked to think that he was still open to the world's extraordinary surprises.

*There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.* He believed that – not necessarily as some airy manifesto of the supernatural, but as a student, always learning, always receptive to new and, yes, even outrageous ideas. And sometimes, even a rational soul required an extraordinary leap of faith. And if anything required a leap of faith, the events of the last few days, considered as a whole, certainly did.

Tom took another deep breath and then said it. "Sherlock. Holmes."

As he spoke, he felt uncertainty melting away, snows caught in the sun beneath time-lapse photography. It was mad, it was round the twist, but it felt true. He trusted his instincts.

"There. Was that so hard?" Sherlock sighed.

"Sherlock."

"Ye-es," Sherlock said, and let Tom go. He went back to the sofa and sat down with a thump, stretching out his legs and contemplating his toes.

Tentatively, Tom took a step forward, watching the figure on the sofa. "Sherlock," he whispered again.

"It's not actually necessary for you to keep saying my name," Sherlock replied irritably.

"I'm just trying to wrap my head round it," Tom said. He crouched next to the sofa and peered curiously at the familiar face.

"Yes, it's Cumberbatch's body. We switched." Sherlock rolled his eyes and shook his head in a manner that suggested the entire affair was altogether too tiresome for words.

Tom stifled a laugh, then stiffened. "Ben."
"Oh, he's fine. At least, I think he's fine. He was fine when I last saw him, anyhow. Of course, he'd been taken prisoner by Moriarty, and John –"


Sherlock sighed. "Obviously. It's Moriarty."

"When you last saw him – when did you see him?"

"It's a bit of a long story. Are you up to hearing about it?"

Tom had made the leap; no point in going back now.

"Yes. Tell me."

*

When Sherlock finished talking, he leant back against the sofa and blew a breath out. His throat was dry, his voice raspy. TWH was staring at him with wide eyes. To his credit, though, he hadn't interrupted Sherlock's explanation with a million inane questions. He'd simply listened with enormous interest.

Reminded him of John, a little.

Sherlock's heart thudded in double time. He gazed down at his lap and plucked at a worn thread at the edge of the grey t-shirt he wore.

"That's amazing."

Damn it.

Sherlock's mouth twisted upward. "What's amazing?"

"The whole thing, really. Do you suppose – do you think this happens a lot? It's not a completely foreign concept. I don't know if you know about this, but Plato, the philosopher, had this allegory or parable about a cave – there's a fire burning within this cave, you see, and there's a row of people bound to the wall, and all they can see are shadows –"

"Yes, I know about it," Sherlock said, waving a hand. "It hardly explains the concept of an alternate universe."

"No, it's about humankind's perception of reality, at its basest level. But it raises the question –"

Sherlock overrode him. "I'm positive that anyone who's experienced this has kept his or her mouth shut. To speak of it would mean certain ridicule and probably institutionalisation. In the mental health sense."

"And it might drive an ordinarily stable individual to a breakdown." Tom gave Sherlock a stormy look. "You've criticised Ben pretty liberally, but it sounds as if he's held things together well, all things considered."

"He could have done much worse," Sherlock allowed grudgingly. "He might yet."

TWH got to his feet and paced back and forth. "So you won't see him until tomorrow at 7:30?"
"7:35, as far as I can determine."

"What if he's hurt? It's... it's Moriarty, after all. Criminal mastermind."

"Oh, I think 'mastermind' is debatable," Sherlock scoffed, but his heart clenched again. Moriarty was clever enough to find Sherlock's weakness. And if John was with Cumberbatch, he'd found it already. He didn't value John, Sherlock knew, except as a pawn. Which, on reflection, made the term mastermind iffy. He had no idea of John Watson's true worth.

"Isn't there anything we can do to help him?"

We? "I tried to give him advice, but he was only semi-conscious. God knows if he retained any of it."

TWH stopped and bit at his thumbnail. "Well, if real life –" He grimaced oddly. "If real life is anything like fiction, he'll be just fine. You're difficult to kill."

"It's true," Sherlock agreed modestly.

Tom glanced at Sherlock and chortled. "Wow." He resumed pacing. "I suppose we can't affect what we can't control - we can only hope for the best and wait."

"Obviously. That's what I've been doing since Thursday."

"Are you hungry?" Tom asked suddenly. "I'm famished."

Sherlock had been ignoring his muttering stomach for the past eight or so hours. "I could eat something," he admitted.

"Takeaway? No, never mind, I don't feel like seeing anyone right now. I'll whip something up." He about-faced and stalked out of the library.

Sherlock heaved himself up and followed. "Not an egg-white omelette with kale or whatever."

"Ha!" The interjection came like a distant explosion. "That should have tipped me off, too. Spag bog? Won't take long."

"All right," Sherlock said indifferently, though his belly rumbled in enthusiastic agreement.

Tom was already bustling around the kitchen, pulling out pots and boxes and tins. "He's always got the makings for that, it's sort of comfort food. Mine's better, though." He opened the freezer compartment and stuck his head inside. "I'll have to quick-defrost the meat in the micro. Do you mind?"

"Nope."

"I saw some plonk in the fridge. Want some?"

"Why not?" Sherlock was thirsty, and a couple of glasses might be just the thing. It was shaping up to be a really peculiar night, even as the past few nights went. He sat at the table and watched Tom dash back and forth, getting glasses and more cooking utensils, then pulling out a block of Pecorino and a bottle.

"Oh, Veuve Clicquot. Better than I'd thought. Ben's got great taste, and I don't think he'll mind if we drink the whole fucking thing under the circumstances. Open that, will you?"
Sherlock took the champagne amiably and wrestled the cork out without popping it. He poured two glasses and waited for the foam to settle.

Tom came to the table and picked his glass up. "I feel like we should toast."


"No, we need something a bit more memorable."

Sherlock frowned. "Toasts aren't really my area."

"I shouldn't think so," Tom replied, lifting a brow. "What about…." He laughed and raised his glass. "Truth is stranger than fiction."

"I'll drink to that," Sherlock muttered, and downed half his drink in a gulp.

Tom drained his and set the glass down. "Sherlock…God, that's –" He shook his head. "I have to thank you for the rescue."

"Ah." Sherlock poured them both another glass. "It's fine."

"No, it's – I do thank you. You didn't have to, you know. You don't really know me." Tom sipped more carefully.

"Hm. It made for a tolerably diverting case in the midst of extreme boredom," Sherlock said. He twirled the stem in his hand, watching the bubbles, the liquid's low-protein, low-surfactant qualities causing rapid ascent, counter-rotational vortices near the axis of the glass, hardly a movement along the glass's periphery. He made a mental note for a cold case Lestrade had given him a few months ago, a man sealed in a beer keg. Kegs. Well, bits of him in different kegs. "Besides, Cumberbatch asked me to help you."

Tom's expression, already a bit sloppily sentimental, softened more. "He did?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I wasn't otherwise occupied."

"Well, thank you," Tom said, grasping Sherlock's shoulder before pulling back abruptly. "Sorry," he said, and held his glass out for more. Behind him, the microwave beeped. "Oh, meat's done."

"It's okay," Sherlock mumbled, and took another drink.

Tom worked with admirable and quick precision, and in almost no time they were sat at the kitchen table in front of heaping platters of aromatic pasta, the half-drunk bottle of wine and a softly glowing beeswax taper between them. Sherlock's head was buzzing pleasantly; a good thing, he reflected soberly, that he was about to eat. Lots of alcohol and too little food hadn't been a good combination a few days ago.

Tom had found some music on Cumberbatch's laptop, and it poured smoothly from the speakers in the other room – Boccherini, that was nice. He'd opened the back garden door, and a soft night breeze drifted in, setting the candle flame dancing and introducing the odours of *Matthiola incana* and *Erysimum cheiri*. Sherlock ate hungrily and tried not to think of the innumerable dinners John had made for him, trying to stave off malnutrition. Silly – Sherlock ate when it was necessary. But he'd appreciated the gestures, even if he hadn't actually said so.

Maybe he should have done.
For a long while the only sounds in the kitchen were the clinking of cutlery against the heavy pottery plates, the music, and occasional approving grunts as they ate. The level of the champagne dropped steadily, and finally Sherlock sat back, his stomach almost uncomfortably full.

TWH cocked an eyebrow at Sherlock's plate. "Didn't think you were much of an eater."

Sherlock patted his mouth with a napkin, discreetly stifling a burp. "No, that's Mycroft's department."

"Mycroft." Tom whistled softly, then his brow clouded.

Oh, dear.

"All right, look. I was thinking about just keeping shut, but…what was that?"

"What was what?" Sherlock inquired innocently.

Tom snorted. "Oh, come on. Don't give me that— that puppy-dog stare, you know perfectly well what I mean. Mark."

"Ah."

"Yeah." Tom scowled. "I mean, I'm glad it wasn't really Ben, but what the hell?" He held the bottle up to the light, then set it down again. "Christ, it's…all right, tell me. What did you get up to? I might as well know the truth."

Sherlock's face grew warm. Must have been the champers. "I can't see why it matters."

"Try."


"Do you have a thing for your brother or something?" Tom pushed his plate away. "God, never mind, don't answer that. And you had sex with me! I knew something was wrong—"

"Didn't seem to stop you," Sherlock retorted. He wanted a cigarette badly.

"Well, no, because I thought you were my god-damned boyfriend! Why didn't you say something?"

"What? 'Oh, hey, Tom, by the way, let's not have sex, okay? I'm feeling under the weather because I'm not really Benedict Cumberbatch.' That would have gone over well."

"You didn't try very hard. That's all I'm saying. I don't pressure Ben into sex when he doesn't want it."

"And I'm sure that he rarely wants it," Sherlock said in his most acid tone.

"Oh, is that what you thought?" Tom stabbed a finger at him. "You think because he's an actor he's got some sort of uncontrollable libido? Christ's sake, Mark didn't even look particularly happy when I walked in, and I don't mean just guilty. Did you even say may-I?"

"He didn't object."

"Wow." Tom got up and cleared the plates from the table. "I thought you were meant to be asexual, anyhow."

"Who said that?" Sherlock demanded.
"It's canon," Tom said, putting the plates in the sink. He started to clean up the cooking detritus. "Pretty explicitly, too. Sherlock Holmes is not interested in women."

Sherlock remained smugly silent.

"Oh."

_Ha._

Tom turned round to face Sherlock. "I see. Girlfriends. Not your area." He folded his arms. "So you've never had a girlfriend?"

"Nothing that lasted."

"Can't imagine why," TWH murmured. "Well, I suppose it's just as well. If you'd canoodled with anyone here --" He broke off, watching Sherlock's face.

Sherlock coughed and poured the rest of the wine.

"Oh, dear God. Who, for God's sake?"

"Brealey," Sherlock muttered.

"Who?"

"Brealey!" Sherlock got up and faced Tom, swaying a little with the champagne.

"Brealey. Loo Brealey?" Tom's eyes were huge.

"She didn't seem to mind either."

"No, I don't suppose so. They had a casual thing for a while. A _while._ Anyone else? Rupert? Andrew Scott? Ms Stubbs?"

"That's all," Sherlock said. He sat down again. His head was starting to spin.

"That's all," TWH snorted. "You certainly made the most of your time here."

"Hmph. Have you got a cigarette?"

"No." Tom's eyes narrowed. "What else were you doing? Shredding Ben's reputation with your rapier wit?"

"His reputation?" Sherlock sniffed. "What about mine? Nobody's going to want to hire me if I ever get back home."

"If?" Tom paled and staggered back to his chair. "If?"

"Well, it's entirely possible that I'm going to be stuck here for a long while, you know. It's not as if we have a means of controlling inflationary expansion. Cumberbatch said that Mycroft's working on the problem, I told you that if you recall, but Christ knows how long it'll be."

"Oh my God in heaven," Tom said softly. "That's...."

Sherlock nodded. "Precisely."

They sat in silence for a while. Boccherini slipped into Vivaldi, and it rippled through the air in
imperfect but still harmonious counterpoint to the crickets singing in the garden.

Sherlock thought about never seeing John again. He couldn't accept that, he wouldn't. Even four days without him had been terrible. With John, all this might have been an adventure, and it still could be, if he got the opportunity to go back and tell him all about it. But if he didn't get that opportunity….

A small, bitter chuckle escaped him. All his extraordinary abilities, all his intellectual prowess, his insight, his deductive skills, his inherent superiority to almost every person who crossed his path, and what he wanted most was to be back with John Watson.

I never told him. Never told him anything at all.

It was the wine, making him maudlin, affecting him the way it did any common idiot. His throat tightened, and his eyes itched.

There was a touch on his arm. He looked up.

"I'm sure if Mycroft's half the genius he is on the programme, he'll get you home in no time." Tom's hand squeezed Sherlock's arm. His eyes were full of warmth.

Sherlock nodded, his stupid body unable to respond in any other way.

"We'd better go to bed. It's really late, and I'm still exhausted. It's been a jam-packed day." Tom smiled tiredly. "We can…I guess we can sort this out in the morning."

"Okay." Sherlock got to his feet and trudged upstairs and into the bedroom, TWH following closely behind him after turning off the music and lights and closing the door.

"Good night." Tom hovered in the doorway, then stepped away.

Sherlock frowned. "Aren't you…?"

"I think I'll take the guest bedroom." Tom gave Sherlock an apologetic half-smile.

"Oh. Right. Quite right. Good night, then."

"Night." Tom disappeared down the corridor.

Sherlock crawled back onto the bed, his body heavy with food and wine and weariness. Naturally Tom didn't want to sleep with him after he'd discovered the truth. Sherlock would have felt the same way. Not that he had anybody to sleep with on a regular basis.

Despite his exhaustion, he stayed awake for a long while, peering unhappily into the darkness.

* 

"Sherlock, wake up."

"Mm?" Sherlock opened one eye. TWH was sitting on the bed with a very grim expression.
"What?"
"Sorry. I need to talk to you."

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, Sherlock struggled to sit up. His head ached. "What time is it?"

"Half noon. Sorry to wake you, but I'm worried about Ben."

Sherlock's post-case fatigue usually resulted in lots of sleep. John always tutted, but it didn't seem to have any long-term ill effects, and so Sherlock saw no reason not to yield to the urge even if the case was a minor one, as yesterday's had been. "Don't suppose you could manage a cup of tea."

"Okay. But could we talk about Ben for a bit?"

"Why? You said it yourself – there's nothing to be done but wait. Besides, it's not Cumberbatch who's –" He broke off, tightening his mouth.

"What? It's not Ben who's what?"

"Forget I said anything." Sherlock slid out of bed and stumbled into the loo. He yanked Cumberbatch's warm-ups down and pissed for hours. Felt glorious.

"What's wrong?"

Sherlock glared at Tom over his shoulder. "Do you mind?"

"Sorry, force of habit." Tom turned and went back into the bedroom. "You don't think Ben's in serious trouble?"

"I never said that." Sherlock flushed and washed his hands.

"You were about to, though."

Sherlock frowned at Tom, who was wearing what looked like rugby shorts and nothing else, sprawling across Cumberbatch's bed as if he owned it, all legs and arms. He had a brief flashback to their short intimate encounters, and his face got warm again. "I don't think that hurting me is the aim. Not physically."

"Not you – oh, dear. John."

"Correct."

"Ben's a great actor," Tom said. "He's managed so far, hasn't he?"

"With the occasional spectacular foul-up here and there, yes, I suppose he has," Sherlock said reluctantly.
"And John's smart, and brave. He won't let anything terrible happen."

"You're underestimating Jim Moriarty." Sherlock folded his arms.

"Am I? All right, maybe I am. He does seem a bit...cartoonish and silly, though, don't you think?"

"Seems, yes. I assure you that he's quite capable of lethal malice, though."

Tom nodded. "You'd know better than I would, of course. Look, it's only -- you've got seven hours left before you learn what's happened. Let's go downstairs. I'll make you some tea and toast, and then we can...erm, work out what to do the rest of the day."

"Oh, are you my nanny now?" Sherlock returned. "Lovely." He got up, though, and followed TWH downstairs.

Tom put the kettle on to boil and made toast. "Someone on Twitter said Ben told them to piss off the other day. Is that true?"

"Well, how would I know that?"

"I think you know what I mean," Tom said, sliding a plate of toast toward Sherlock.

"Fine. Yes, I told some intrusive moron to piss off. It's ridiculous and more than slightly surreal that actors get so much attention. For play-acting, no less." Sherlock bit into the toast, crisp and buttery and perfect.

"Ben's good enough at play-acting to pass himself off as you," Tom reminded him.

"Hmph."

Tom removed the whistling kettle. "How do you take it?"

"Milk, two sugars."

"Who else did you annoy, just out of curiosity?"

"Who knows?" Sherlock shrugged. "I hardly keep track of that sort of thing."

TWH shook his head. "Ben has a good working relationship with most people. I'd hate to see it damaged. The thing with Mark --" He shook his head. "That alone is going to cost him God knows what. You can use the shock as --"

Sherlock, sipping his tea, watched Tom's face. "What?"

"I've got it." Tom grinned. "It's brilliant."

Brilliant. Sherlock doubted that. "Got what?"

"To the internet, my good man. I don't approve of self-diagnosis via the World Wide Web, but a little research should reveal all."

*
Sherlock set Cumberbatch's phone on the kitchen table. "No."

"I told you that you should have called him first."

"I don't see why I should." Sherlock was peevish. Prevaricating for three hours had exhausted him more than the most physically and mentally demanding case ever had. "He's a grown man; surely he's had his share of meaningless acts of…intimate…erm, congress."

"Because it's the right thing to do, that's why." TWH was stern, inexorable. It was oddly appealing, though certainly not what Tom preferred in bed. Though bed and related areas was the cause of all this insincere glad-handing, so perhaps best not to think about that right now. "You practically attacked him, from what I can work out. You owe him an apology."

"He didn't say no."

"I see. So that makes it perfectly okay?" Tom rubbed his face; there was a faint rasp of beard against skin. "Have you ever had an ordinary sexual relationship, Sherlock? Boyfriend, girlfriend?"

"I fail to see how that's relevant."

"Have you ever been pressured into having sex? Ever been reluctant?"

"Certainly." Sherlock spread his hands wide. "Who hasn't?"

Tom looked at him for a long while. Sherlock scowled beneath his scrutiny and was about to snap something insulting when Tom said, "Do you think you and John will ever have a romantic relationship?"

Blood surged to Sherlock's cheeks. "What—why do you ask that? Just because you're attempting to hide what too many people still think are deviant practices in order to maintain some sort of impossible glossy façade, you believe you can pick me apart? See what makes me tick? Haven't you got autographs to sign or journalists' arses to kiss?"

TWH gave him a soft, maddening smile. "That's what I thought."

"Oh, sod off." Sherlock pushed away from the table and stalked away.

"Sherlock."

Sherlock stopped. *Keep walking. You've got nothing to learn from some smug, self-important actor.*

"It's okay. He does love you. Can't you tell?"

"He's not gay." Sherlock bit off each word and spat it out. "He's said so, numerous times."

"You don't think it's a case of protesting too much?"

Sherlock turned on his heel and went back into the kitchen. "He's got girlfriends, lots of them, an endless parade, in point of fact. I've never seen him exhibit the slightest interest in other men, and I've looked, thanks very much. Despite the *reams* of fanfiction – you do know what fanfiction is, don't you? Piles of romantic, empty-headed drivel in which the two of us are endowed to a point of utter absurdity and shatter headboards on a routine basis whilst solving the most banal cases known to humankind, and I assure you, most of it is not fit to line the bottom of a birdcage – he is not interested in me, either romantically or sexually. I'm his colleague. That's all."

Tom's face was irritating in its obvious compassion. "Have you ever asked him?"
"Of course I haven't! For God's sake!"

"You should try."

"Oh, that's sweet, really. I can't, in case you hadn't noticed."

TWH reached out his hand. Sherlock was prepared to snatch his own away if Tom got gluey and patted him again, but Tom only grasped Cumberbatch's phone and drew it close. He tapped the screen a few times, then held it up to his ear. "Mark? Hi, it's Tom Hiddleston. Hi."

Surprised into docility, Sherlock sat.

"I'm good. Yeah, I'm – look, about that. I have a bit of upsetting news. It seems Ben's suffering some side effects from the shock the other day. Yeah, yeah, I'm afraid so. I had to get him back to hospital yesterday. What? Oh, God, it was sort of – no. Anxiety, agitation, erratic behaviour – really sort of scary. His doctor said they were common side effects, and he's coming home tonight, he's going to be just fine, but they recommend a week of recuperation. I'm afraid that's going to put a dent in your filming schedule. I don't suppose you can work around him for a week?"

Sherlock wasn't unimpressed. TWH was a cool liar.

"Yeah. It kind of explains a few things, from what the doctors said." Tom glanced at Sherlock. "No – look, you don't have to say a word. Ben's going to be terribly embarrassed about everything, though. You know how he is. No, of course I do. You know, as weird as this sounds, I think it's best if we just write this week off. No, I don't think he will. He's trustworthy, and obviously – yes. No, he elected to have private home visits, and I think it's best if we just let him have some peace and quiet this week. Yeah. Yeah. Oh, absolutely I will. What? Oh, God, Mark, please, don't give it another thought. Yes, let's absolutely find something to do together. Shakespeare? That'd be brilliant. Yes. Okay. I'll have him call you soon, but it might not be for a few days. Right. Yes. Okay, 'bye now."

He hung up. "God forgive me."

"What did he say?" Sherlock demanded.

"Poor Mark. That was unbelievably deceitful. If there's a hell, I'm headed there."

"There's no hell," Sherlock snorted. "What did he say?"

"He's embarrassed, obviously, even though that little incident was your fault. He's concerned for you, too. I just told that man a huge pack of lies."

"Not precisely. Those are some of the side effects of electrical shock. Besides, you didn't have any trouble telling all those other people the same thing."

"Yeah, but you didn't have sex with all those other people, except Loo. Thank God she's cool." TWH sighed. "Anyhow, I've bought you some time. I don't know what's going to happen when the week's up and you have to go back to work."

"Christ, I hope I won't have to deal with all this in a week."

"You made this bed," Tom said sharply. "You deserve to lie in it."

Sherlock lifted one shoulder in studied indifference, but drummed his fingers on the table nervously. "Well, it's sorted for the moment."

Tom nodded and got up, stretching. "Well, I'm off for a while. I've got to have a word with my PA.
and then I've got some scripts to catch up on. I'll be back seven-ish, though. Don't leave the house. I've told the world that you're having some serious issues – don't screw me by going out in public, please."

"Fine. See you later." Sherlock marched upstairs to shower.

*

The afternoon dragged by with excruciating slowness. Sherlock showered, drank three cups of tea in rapid succession, sawed away at the low-quality violin, and finally sat down in front of Cumberbatch's laptop and read more fanfiction. It really was awful, most of it.

The doorbell shrilled, and Sherlock glanced at the clock. Three hours? He'd lost three hours to this rubbish? God. He got up, stiff from sitting in one position for so long, and went to the door, affecting a face full of anguish in case it was somebody TWH had phoned. But no, it was Tom, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, looking suspicious. Sherlock let the mask drop.

"Everything okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Sherlock let Tom in, noting that the sky was darkening. Autumn was coming with its crisp days and chilly nights. Statistically, fewer murders were committed in autumn, but there was always a pleasant anomaly now and then.

"Just checking. Did anybody call you?"

"Probably. I didn't notice." Sherlock went down the hall and into the library. Hastily, he shut the laptop.

"Sorry I'm late. I left a lot undone this weekend." Tom looked round. "Nothing's happened yet, has it?"

"No, not yet." Sherlock sat on the sofa, and Tom sat beside him.

"Did you watch the news?"

"No."

"Henry's the big story right now." Tom's lips thinned into a stern line. "Luke mentioned it to me – he knows Henry slightly – but nobody's called, nor stopped round. I can't believe he hasn't said something."

"He might yet, but if you deny it innocently enough no-one will believe him."

"He and Graham stopped by earlier that evening. That's how Henry managed to knock me out. What if they find traces of my DNA at the crime scene?"

"Good Lord, what sort of television programmes have you been watching? You're severely overestimating the success of DNA testing. Even if they do find some hair, for example, conceivably the only thing besides fingerprints you could have left behind, and given how you were bound between two pieces of furniture, I doubt you left any decent ones, they'd still have to sort it out from all the other hair that's likely down there. They've got a slew of bodies to choose from on his
property, I suspect, and because they'll be predominantly female despite the sexual threat you received, I'm certain they're going to work the rape angle more intensely than any other factor. If he starts jabbering about you, you can calmly state that you've been friends for a long time and yes, you get the odd letter or two now and then, but nothing worth worrying about. Act, for goodness' sake. "All that said, I do have to admit that you handled yourself fairly well, considering the situation. Granted there was a good deal more crying than I'd expected, but still."

"Thanks for the glowing compliment." Tom gave a wry laugh. "I feel...okay, actually. That is, I'm still upset and rattled, and I might talk to a therapist anyhow, but generally I'm doing okay. If you hadn't acted so quickly I might not even be here. I owe you a lot."

Sherlock smiled tightly. "It's fine."

Tom glanced at his watch. "Seven thirty-four."

"Right." Sherlock folded his legs inward and waited.

"Give Ben my love, would you?"

"Oh, Lord. If I must. I will if he's still alive."

Tom smiled. "Thanks."

"Mm." Sherlock settled back against the sofa so he wouldn't fall and closed his eyes, waiting.

The light flashed, blinding white.

He opened his eyes.

"Oh."

* 

Sherlock's room was dark and pleasantly cool, but Benedict's hunger was so intense it drove him out of bed. He went to Sherlock's closet and found a dressing gown, deep merlot silk, shrugged into it, and made his way into the kitchen. When was the last time he'd eaten? John's lovely breakfast, that was it.

"Morning." John was sitting at the table, reading the newspaper, a mug of tea beside him. "Or afternoon, rather."

"God, did I sleep that long?"

"I didn't want to wake you. I reckoned you needed the rest."

Benedict went to the fridge and looked inside, then belatedly remembered the body parts. He shut the door hastily. "I did need the rest, honestly. Thanks for that." He found the Cadbury biscuits from the other day and took them to the table. "I thought you'd be at work," he said after demolishing a biscuit in two bites.

"I called in sick." John folded his section of the paper. "I thought you could use some company,
considering the day we had yesterday."

"John, I'm touched. Thank you." Benedict smiled openly at John, and saw John's mouth compress, his eyes dart back to the newspaper. "Erm – what do you and Sherlock usually do when you're not working and he doesn't have a case on?"

"Oh, I don't know. Nothing out of the ordinary, actually. I potter around the flat, read, watch telly. He'll do research or experiments, or play the violin. Once in a while we'll play a board game, though that didn't go well last time."

Benedict grinned. "Cluedo?"

"How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess. Do you talk, the two of you?"

John laughed a little. "Of course we talk. We talk all the time, when he's not having a sulk."

"Sorry, of course you do. It's just difficult to imagine a life of cosy domesticity with you two."

"Well." John laced his hands together and looked round the flat. "It's home, you know. I don't think either of us are due for pipes and slippers warmed at the fire quite yet, but we can't run round London all the time."

Benedict munched on another biscuit, delicious but empty calories. He craved real food. "Look, I don't know what you've got on for the day, but I was wondering...I know it's presumptuous, but I was wondering if you'd mind if we did run round London a bit. I'd love to see your London, maybe some of the places where you and Sherlock shared adventures." John gave Benedict an odd look. "It would help my research for the programme," Benedict went on hastily, "and...well, I thought it might be fun. We could have lunch first. My treat. Well, Sherlock's treat."

Looking bemused, John scratched his head. "God, that's not something Sherlock would ever say."

"That something would be fun? Or that he was treating you to lunch?"

"No, that he wanted to revisit something. He never looks back. Ever."

There was something in that last that sounded slightly bitter, but Benedict might have been imagining things. "We don't have to, if it bothers you."

"No, no, it's fine," John said, and cleared his throat. "Fine. Yeah, it might be fun at that. It's just..." He waved his hand vaguely. "It's just...seeing Sherlock and hearing you. It's still a little odd. Sorry."

"It's fine. I know it must still be a shock. But I'll only be here until the end of the day, if all goes well."

John nodded and got to his feet. "Right. We'd better get a move on, then. Why don't you have a quick shower and I'll think of some place to eat."

"Angelo's?" Benedict suggested, and saw John's face contract a little, as if he had a sharp pain. "Or maybe not. You two probably eat there all the time."

"Yeah. Let's go somewhere else, if that's okay." John gave Benedict a conciliatory smile and walked into the front room, pulling out his phone.

Benedict watched him for a moment, his compact body, his tidy haircut, his neat, economical
movements, the way his shoulders moved beneath the thin cream-and-blue striped cotton jumper he wore. His heart twisted for a moment, and he held the flat of his hand to his chest in wonder. Did the heart have its own memory? How could Sherlock not look at John Watson and understand that before him was the great love of his life?

*Oh, Sherlock. You idiot.*

"Good Lord," Benedict murmured, staring up at the façade of 23-24 Leinster Gardens. "He won it in a poker game?"

"Yeah." John stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned. "Those were the stakes – that and several of our internal organs."

"It's not very useful, though, is it?"

"You never know," John said cheerfully. "Might come in handy one day."

"I reckon it could." Benedict started to walk again. "So was she arrested, the Clarence House Cannibal?"

"Oh, God no." John laughed.

"What? What's so funny?"

"Nothing," John said. "She just wasn't the sort of person who ends up in prison, that's all."

"Why? Who was she?"


"Hm." Benedict strolled in silence for a while, and John seemed content to walk beside him without talking as well, though every so often Benedict caught John stealing glances at him. He wanted to say something reassuring, but every time he made even a mildly sentimental remark, John looked upset. Best not to stir the pot. He's had a hell of a shock and less time to get used to it than I have. "So…where does Sherlock's money come from? It's sort of vague on the programme. Gambling?"

"No, no. That amuses him every once in a while, but he claims it's too easy and gets boring. He's got a little family money that's just about enough to live on, but we do take payment for cases. He sort of charges by whim, though, and only if the client's got money to burn. He's not entirely heartless. Sometimes clients give him gifts, too, and most of the valuable ones get sold on eBay. He's got a really high seller rating."

Benedict laughed. "I'd always pegged him as being really careless about money."

"He's pretty methodical, actually. He pays the bills, does all the budgeting. I mostly just give him cash for the rent and utilities and tax and stuff. It's worked so far."

"That's good to know," Benedict said truthfully. He and Martin had cooked up an approximation of what Sherlock and John's domestic life might be like, but in their version, John was the responsible financial party. Interesting that it was the other way round.
"Hey, Ben – can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, of course."

"All those things you knew about Irene Adler. Was that because it already happened…on the programme?"

Benedict pressed his lips together hard, unsure how to proceed. "We…we were in the process of shooting the second series when I got the electrical shock. The first episode in the series deals with Irene. So yes, in a sense it already did happen, though we've got a few pickups to film yet."

"How many episodes in a series?"

"Three." Benedict started to get uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"And how much time passes in a series? Are you ahead of us, if you know what I mean?"

"Erm…it's…I haven't done the arithmetic but I think it's about a year, year and a half. But John, things aren't the same at all. That is – that visit to Buckingham Palace, that was in the script, but everything that happened afterward…none of it was the same. So if you're asking me if I know what's going to happen in your future, I don't –"

"No." John stopped walking and held up a hand. "Christ, no. I don't want to know. Even if it's not the same, I…I don't think that would do any of us much good."

Relieved, Benedict nodded. He was amazed at John's restraint, though; he'd have burned with curiosity to know what was going to happen. "I do wish I could show you the series, though. I think you'd love it. One of the really brilliant things about it is that we really focus on John's internal process, a lot more than any of the other adaptations."

John frowned. "Other adaptations?"

"Oh my God. I didn't – didn't I say? You're famous, you are, John Watson, and have been since the late eighteen hundreds. A man by the name of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote dozens of stories about Holmes and Watson, and they've been best-sellers forever. There have been movies, earlier television series, animated versions, radio plays, et cetera, et cetera. Everyone loves you, and Sherlock too. The whole world knows the names of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. It's wonderful to be a part of that. I love it to bits."

The bemused expression returned. After a while, John simply said, "Wow." Then he smiled. "Both of us?"

"Absolutely. Sherlock Holmes wouldn't be half the man he is without John Watson."

"Fancy that."

They walked on companionably. Benedict gloriied in the day, just cool enough to walk a long distance without breaking a sweat. Too, now that the pressure of his false identity was off and the return home was, he hoped, imminent, he was able to enjoy John's company without distraction or worry, and he was delighted to discover that John was lovely – quick-tempered, to be sure, but generally calm, considerate, and good-hearted. And if he knew that John wished that it were Sherlock walking beside him, Benedict didn't begrudge John a thing.

John's emotions were palpable, though; he was crap at concealing them, even though he thought he presented a stoic front. It might have been poking at a wasps' nest, but Benedict couldn't help it.
"Can I ask you something, John?"

"That's only fair."

"What do you think about what Jim said? Moriarty, I mean."

John's smile dissolved. "He said a lot. What do you mean specifically?"

As if you didn't know. "About Sherlock's feelings for you."

"Oh." John laughed, a bit scornfully. "That's Molly, isn't it? She's a romantic."

"Maybe," Benedict allowed. "John, you've got to tell her about Jim. Don't let Sherlock do it. Be kind to her – Sherlock won't be. You know he doesn't know a thing about handling people gently. It takes a kick in the head to make him do it."

"Poor Molly. She loves him, you know."

"I know." Poor Molly; lucky John. "John, you've got to say something to him."

John sighed. "Ben –"

"Please, just let me finish. Sherlock's such a fucking stubborn arsehole, he'll cheerfully die before he admits to a tender emotion. He'll never say one word – he probably doesn't even understand how because normal human feelings are incomprehensible to him."

"Not always, though."

Benedict frowned. "How so?"

"He's not always a prick. Seventy-five, eighty percent of the time, yeah. But the rest of the time –" John smiled. "I don't think he even realises it. He's got a lot invested in that prick façade of his. But I've seen him being unbelievably sweet with Mrs Hudson, and he's actually not bad with kids, though you'd think he'd send them away crying ten times out of ten. And he's…he's a good flatmate. A good friend. He'd cringe to hear me say it, but it's true."

"But…Saturday night, in Sussex, you –"

"Are we a couple on your programme?" John interrupted.

"Well…not as –"

"In the stories? The movies?"

"But you can't expect the Victorian Holmes and Watson to be a couple, they'd never – some of them, though, the romantic themes are really strong. Holmes and Watson are practically bywords for romantic male friendship –"

"Friendship," John repeated firmly. "That's love, too. There are all sorts of love, Ben. It doesn't have to be about romance, or sex. Okay?" He walked faster, ahead of Benedict. 

But you do love him. Romantically and sexually. It doesn't matter what the other Holmeses and Watsons do. This is your reality, John. Grab it with both hands and don't let go.

He couldn't say that. He didn't want to make John angry, not for the short duration of time that they had together. And considering the past few days, he didn't want to take any action that might result in
a horrible ripple effect. If he pushed, who knew but that John might decide that moving out was the best thing to do?

*He's braver than that, though. I know he is. He was brave on Saturday night.*

No. He couldn't fuck things up more.

He caught up to John and plucked at his sleeve. "Sorry. I'm a pushy bastard sometimes."

"It's okay." John was still tight-lipped.

"No, I – I'm sorry. You're right, there are all sorts of love. I've just got sex on the brain, that's all. I'm an actor. We're ninety percent libido." He grinned hopefully, and John finally smiled back. "John, thanks for showing me round. You're a sweetheart. It's been a great day. I've enjoyed myself for the first time since Thursday night."

John chuckled a little uncomfortably. "Thanks." He seemed to lighten up. "I had a good time too."

"I suppose we'd better head back, though. Mycroft will be at the flat."

"Yeah, I guess so." John gazed at Benedict for a moment, opened his mouth as if to speak, and then walked on.

Benedict followed. It had always been difficult to repress his strongest convictions, and he was nearly bursting with a thousand pieces of advice and pleading. He'd keep his lips zipped, though.

No matter how much it ached, God damn it.

*

Mycroft had already installed himself in 221B, along with his assistant Not-Anthea who tapped away at her phone, ignoring the dozen men and women, technical people, Benedict presumed, with laptops, obscure scientific equipment, medical gear, and what looked like several hundred polystyrene cups of coffee. He regarded both of them flatly. "How nice of you to turn up."

"We're five minutes late, if that, and you didn't give us any special instructions," John said. "Thanks for knocking and waiting, by the way."

Benedict marvelled at John's courage. Mycroft Holmes was the most terrifying person he'd ever clapped eyes on.

"The equipment has been thoroughly vetted – well, inasmuch as it can be – but I saw no reason why our technicians should loiter on your doorstep when they could be using their time wisely." Mycroft sat in Sherlock's chair and crossed one leg over the other. One pale, well-tended hand caressed the smooth hook of his umbrella handle.

Benedict hovered uncertainly in the doorway, watching the techs bustle about. They looked like ordinary tech people, obscurely sloganed t-shirts and jeans or khakis and scuffed trainers, but he regarded them a little fearfully nonetheless, unsure what they were about to do to him. "Should I – erm – do anything?"

"Yes." A woman with short, bright red hair and horn-rimmed glasses moved toward him, iPad in
hand. "I'm Dr Paisley – I'm the project leader. I have some questions for you, if you'd like to take a
seat on the sofa, please." Benedict went obediently to the sofa and answered a few health questions
and queries about the circumstances of his accident. When Dr Paisley finished, she made a few rapid
taps on her iPad and met Benedict's gaze. "We've got about ten minutes. Any questions before we
get started?"

Benedict shook his head. "No. Wait, yes! This is a little odd, and it's been bothering me just a bit.
I've felt things – or known things that aren't in my ordinary scope of comprehension. Sherlock's
mobile number, for one. Also, I had this stray, weird burst of knowledge about automatic weapons,
and just this morning, or afternoon, rather, I had…I felt…." He glanced at John, watching the
proceedings with concern, then at Mycroft, who was peering at him curiously. "It was just an
emotion that was unfamiliar to me."

Dr Paisley smiled a little. "I can't speak to the emotional aspect of matters, but it's entirely possible
the other occurrences mean that you're simply experiencing Mr Holmes' ordinary cognitive functions
– his mental muscle memory, so to speak. It's also possible that you've experienced a loss of density
in what you might term the personal inflaton field between you and Mr Holmes. The veil becomes
thin, in other words. Don't let it alarm you." She turned to the technician beside her who was
recording their conversation. "We're ready for the monitors."

"I don't quite understand," Benedict said.

"Not to worry, Mr Cumberbatch. You'll be home in no time at all."

"Do you do this sort of thing a lot, then? Get errant travellers back home?"

Dr Paisley's mouth curved upward. "Just relax. We won't be long." She moved aside, and two techs
came in with what looked like some very expensive and sophisticated electronic equipment. They
gently urged Benedict to remove his shirt, then attached sticky electrode bits to his temples, chest,
arms, and belly. They wired the bits to the machine.

"Seven minutes," someone said.

"Still recording," someone else replied.

"Novikov unit functional."

"Feynman unit functional."

"Shapley unit functional."

"Accelerate, please."

Through the bustle, Mycroft stood and walked toward Benedict. He held a small carbon-steel box in
his hand, and as he sat beside Benedict, palpable tension rendered his movements stiff and even
slightly nervous. "Mr Cumberbatch, in this box are two spherical objects. One is for you, and one is
for my brother. When you make contact with him, please give him one. In order to complete the
exchange, you must then make physical contact whilst holding the spheres. A simple handshake will
suffice, but it's important that you maintain contact until the exchange is complete and you find
yourself back in your own universe. Do you understand?"

Benedict swallowed, and nodded. "Okay. Erm…will it hurt?"

"I've no idea. I recommend you not break contact even if you do experience discomfort."
'Discomfort' – that was a nice word. It was usually the physician's euphemism for 'excruciating pain' but fuck it – he wanted to get home. "All right." He met Mycroft's scarcely intense gaze. "Thanks for this."

Mycroft coloured a bit. "This is for my brother, Mr Cumberbatch, not you. However, I appreciate your position, and I must congratulate you for your relative equanimity. Well done."

Benedict grinned ruefully. High praise indeed from Mycroft Holmes.

"Four minutes."

Benedict glanced up; John was still watching anxiously. "Could I have a word with John? A private word?"

"I'm afraid we must keep recording," Mycroft said, rising to his feet, "but bid farewell if you wish. However, keep it brief – we're short on time." He turned to John. "John, Mr Cumberbatch would like a word with you."

John nodded and hastened forward, sitting on the sofa next to Benedict, and Mycroft stepped back.

"Mr Cumberbatch," John said sotto voce, mocking Mycroft's intonation.

Benedict snorted laughter, then sobered. "I'm going to miss you. You're brilliant, John."

John bit his lip. "That's usually my line."

"Yeah, I know. Thought I'd turn the tables. How does it feel?"

"Nice, actually," John said, and grinned. "It's been good getting to know you."

Benedict wanted to give John one last exhortation to follow his heart, but instead, he leant forward, careful of the wires and stickers, and embraced John warmly. "Take care of yourself," he said, and moved back. "And Sherlock too. He needs you more than he'll ever admit."

"All right. I will." John squeezed Benedict's hand. "Thank you."

That was enough. It had to be. Benedict nodded, then turned to Mycroft. "I'm ready."

Mycroft addressed Dr Paisley. "Time?"

"Two minutes."

"Very well." Mycroft stepped forward, proffering the box. "I'll open it. Please take the items carefully."

He opened the box, and a golden glow suffused the room, soft and brilliant at once. Benedict gasped, and cautiously peered inside at two tiny spheres of what looked like gold glass, no bigger than marbles, unfaceted, tiny pinpoints of black dancing within their coruscating depths.

"Jesus," John breathed.

No-one else spoke. The only sound was the electronic and digital whirring of multiple pieces of equipment.

A Pulp Fiction crack occurred to Benedict but scampered away as he stared at the little globes. They looked like globes, he realised – two minuscule worlds, or maybe suns. They were beautiful.
"What are they?" he whispered.

"Difficult to explain," Mycroft said. "All in all, though, a rather elegant solution to get you home. Please take them."

Hesitantly, Benedict reached inside the box, afraid that they would be searing-hot, that his flesh would blister and crack, and the blood would pour – but then he touched them, and they were warm, pleasantly warm to the touch. He picked them up and held them in one hand. They seemed to hum, like little fat glowing bees. He closed his fingers over them, and the light spilled from the narrow spaces between his knuckles, radiant beams flashing as he moved his hand slightly to and fro.

"Please lie supine, Mr Cumberbatch," Dr Paisley said.

Benedict lay full-length on the sofa. His heart hammered in his chest; he was suddenly terrified. What if something bizarre happened – if he was sucked into another universe, or the things in his hand exploded or imploded, or if the switch didn't work? Oh, God, please let it work. He cast his gaze frantically around the room, staring through the beams of light, and met John's eyes.

John nodded and smiled. "Take care, Ben."

"Bye, John."

The golden beams transmuted to brilliant white. Benedict shut his eyes, wincing.

The light dimmed, softened, no longer searing his eyelids. Carefully, so carefully, he opened his eyes, and gave a soft cry of wonder.

"Oh."

Benedict looked at Sherlock, standing only a short distance away, but his attention was diverted by the room around them – no longer a white box, but a deep black pierced with tiny pinpoints of light, like stage backdrop stars. "Hi. This is --" He glanced around again. "Different."

"Yes," Sherlock said softly. He frowned and straightened his spine. "You're all right? You and John?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we're both fine," Benedict blew out a sharp breath. "Moriarty's dead."

Sherlock's eyes widened. "You killed him?"

"He killed himself. It was totally unexpected. Mycroft was closing in, and I suppose it was that or be captured. Drastic solution, though." Benedict thought of the scene they'd filmed on the rooftop. Moriarty... well, Mycroft had emphatically stated that he was dead. If Mycroft Holmes said something...  

"What a boring solution," Sherlock said, shaking his head. "John's all right, though."

"He's fine. He's looking forward to seeing you again."

Sherlock's face softened for a moment, then slid back into its cold, impervious mask. "Did Mycroft sort everything out?"

"So he says." Benedict opened his tightly closed hand, and the little golden spheres beamed brilliantly anew. "I get one of these, you get one, and we maintain physical contact." Sherlock scowled. "We don't have to do anything but shake hands, Mycroft said."
"Oh. All right. Give it here." Sherlock held out a hand.

"Hang on just a minute," Benedict said, closing his fingers over the warm spheres again. "We should have a moment to talk. I...I just wanted to say that I feel like I gained a lot of insight into your life and your world. You really do live on the edge. It's more than my heart can take." He smiled.

"Hm. I suppose I gained some insight into your life as well. To wit: it's ridiculous."

Coming from another person, that might have been hurtful. "Think so?"

Sherlock lifted one eyebrow. "Well. It's not quite as easy as I'd have surmised, but it's still overwhelmingly silly. People say they love you, and they don't even know you." He cleared his throat. "Although it seems you do have a few sincere friends."

"Oh? Such as?"

"TWH, for one."

"TW – oh, Tom. Yes, Tom's wonderful." Benedict's chest expanded a little. "Yes, he is."

"He trusts you implicitly. That's probably a dangerous vulnerability."

"I trust him, so I reckon we're both vulnerable."

"If you like that sort of thing," Sherlock shrugged. "He's not a complete washout in the intelligence department, at least."

Benedict grinned. "He's great, isn't he?"

A reluctant smile stretched Sherlock's mouth. "He's not bad."

"It's nice to have someone you love by your side." Benedict couldn't resist a tiny bit of needling. He opened his hand again and held the spheres out, extending his other hand. "Ready?"

Sherlock took Benedict's hand. "Thank you for keeping him safe."

"It was my absolute pleasure," Benedict said. "I'd do anything for John."

Sherlock gave Benedict a shaky smile. "So would I," he murmured, and took one of the little spheres. He locked eyes with Benedict for a moment, then looked up. "Is something supposed to happen?"

"I hope so," Benedict said uneasily. "I – oh, God!" He jumped a little as the spheres in their hands brightened suddenly, expanding balls of pure gold light, bathing them in it, enveloping them in a warm glow. The spheres dimmed then, and the black walls around them seemed to expand, falling away into deeper blackness, a rich ink spattered with colour Benedict had never seen in such profusion and beauty, and it took him a moment to realise that what he was seeing couldn't possibly be real.

It was a celestial sea, teeming with life. Stars of yellow and green and icy blue; swirling clouds of pink gas, golden-grey plumes of nebulae, spiral galaxies, embryonic solar systems, all round them, above and below, though they still occupied solid ground. And then, faintly, almost too faintly to discern, a massive web or net or hive of gossamer golden light surrounding them, with other figures dimmed to near transparency. Were they people? Human? Their figures seemed so, some of them at least. He swore he saw two men in medieval monk-like garments, two women in Renaissance dress,
two tall, lean figures that bore only slight resemblance to humans, two thick filaments of orange light. Pairs, so many pairs. What did it mean? Could other people, or whoever they were, see him and Sherlock as well? Tears of awe stood in his eyes and escaped, rolling down his cheeks. He squeezed Sherlock's hand. Sherlock squeezed back.

And then, Sherlock's grasp became ephemeral. Benedict clutched at the insubstantial hand, but his grip slipped away. The sphere in his hand glowed brighter and brighter still until its radiance blotted out the deep ocean of space and blinded him, and he felt himself fall. "Sherlock!"

Benedict's head hit something soft, and the hand gripping his became corporeal again. His body gave a convulsive twitch, and he opened his eyes.

There was a desk, with bookshelves next to it, a closed laptop. His desk, his books, his computer. Drawing a shuddering breath, he turned his head. "Oh my God. Tom."

Tom's hand tightened. "Are you all right?"

"Tom." Tears welled in Benedict's eyes again. "It's me. It's Ben." He lunged forward and tackled Tom in a crushing embrace. "I'm back. Oh, fuck. I'm home."

"Ben." Tom wheezed a bit from the strength of Benedict's embrace. "Ben." He wrapped his arms round Benedict's body and squeezed hard, then found Benedict's mouth with his own.

Oh, God, he was home. Home. Benedict kissed Tom deeply, tangling his fingers in Tom's auburn curls. "I'm home," he whispered in between kisses. "Love you."

"It's really you?"

"It's me." Benedict held Tom away for a moment. "Let me look at you. Christ, you look fucking amazing."

Tom smiled and took Benedict's face in his hands. "It is you." He kissed Benedict and caressed him, his back, his hips, back up to his hair, then his face. "I only just found out last night – you have to tell me everything. Everything."

"You didn't know it was me?" Benedict teased. "Was he that good?"

"I knew something was wrong, but body-swapping wasn't on the list of probable causes." Tom kissed him again. "Oh, Ben. Tell me."

Benedict wanted to drag Tom upstairs and fuck him senseless, but he forebore, for the moment. "All right." He leant back on the sofa, then jumped up. "I can't sit still for this. Let's go for a walk. I'll tell you everything."

* 

Sherlock opened his eyes and scowled at the anxious faces hanging over him. No-one familiar. Hadn't it worked?

"Sherlock?"
"Mycroft." Sherlock sat up, hampered by wires and electrodes. He was on his comfortable, sprung-in-all-the-right-places sofa. Relief flooded him, leaving him weak. He wouldn't stand quite yet. "What the hell is all this?" He sought Mycroft out and found him, standing slightly behind a group of what looked like IT administrators.

Mycroft pushed neatly through the small throng and stood over Sherlock, a small, infuriatingly smug smile on his face. "Welcome back."

"Don't sound so thrilled."

Mycroft turned to a woman in glasses. "Excellent work, Dr Paisley. I'm delighted that the sphere performed so well."

Sherlock remembered what had got him back home and opened his hand, but the sphere had disappeared. "It's gone. Did I drop it?"

The woman shook her head. "No, it dissolved. Spherical disintegration is almost always inevitable."

She pushed a pair of horn-rimmed glasses up on her nose and crouched down beside Sherlock. "How are you feeling, Mr Holmes?"

Sherlock took her in at a glance. Late forties, married, fond of 99s – small smudge of chocolate and blot of ice cream on her shirt. One precocious daughter (science-expo flyer sticking out of right pocket) and several dogs (hair, three different colours and varying thickness). "Fine."

"Good." She began removing the electrodes, and several techs jumped forward to help. Sherlock sat silently, his gaze roaming, until he found the object of his search.

John was standing on the threshold of the kitchen, worry – at least Sherlock thought it was worry… he hoped, just a little, that it was worry – creasing John's face, making him look slightly haggard. He didn't move, but watched the proceedings closely, his left hand opening and closing over and over again. Sherlock winked, and John's eyes lit up. "Hey," he said.

"Hi," Sherlock replied, and couldn't keep a grin from spreading across his face. John grinned in return, and his body sagged. Relieved, then. Happy to have Sherlock back.

That was good.

The techs clustered round him, making notes and murmuring to each other, peppering him with questions until Mycroft intervened. "I think we can arrange for Sherlock to meet your team in a few days, Dr Paisley. It would be best to give him some time to collect himself."

"Yes, we can do that." She directed her minions to pack up, and within fifteen minutes they were trooping out the door, leaving Mycroft, Anthea, and John alone with Sherlock.

"That wasn't tedious," Sherlock said. He stretched and yawned. Oh, God, it was good to be back home.

"Walk with us, Sherlock," Mycroft said. He turned to John. "John, you'll give us a moment?"

"Sure," John said. "Erm, I'll start some dinner, yeah? Sherlock, want some pasta?"

"Sounds marvellous," Sherlock said. Pasta in 221B with John Watson sounded, in fact, like heaven. He got up and followed Mycroft and Anthea down the staircase and out into the street.

Mycroft ushered Anthea into the car and stood beside it, regarding Sherlock thoughtfully. "I'm glad
you're home. We were all quite worried."

"Oh, God, you didn't tell Mummy and Dad, did you?"

"No, no, don't be ridiculous! Can you imagine? The moment I told them, they'd be on my back until I got it sorted and I wouldn't have had a moment's peace. No need to alarm them now, I think."

Sherlock nodded in agreement. "Suppose not."

"I expect you to fully cooperate with Dr Paisley and her team. A good many taxpayer pounds went toward retrieving you. And I want to hear whatever you fail to impart to her."

"It's not as interesting as you might think."

"Nevertheless." Mycroft coughed, his cheeks flushing. "I should tell you that I had to resort to… unorthodox methods to get to the bottom of things."

"I heard," Sherlock replied drily.

"Yes. Well... it was necessary. Obviously, it's best that it's behind us. Best for both of us."

"Obviously." Sherlock felt good enough not to take any more jabs at Mycroft, his pompous, self-righteous, priggish, annoying brother. He wondered what would happen if he were to grab Mycroft and hug the stuffing out of him. No, he'd save it for another day when Mycroft was really off guard, if that day ever happened. And he might tell him about Mark Gatiss as well. He'd see about that. "Thanks. For this."

"Ah. Certainly. As I said, I'm glad to see you back."

Mycroft twirled his umbrella in one hand, then nodded abruptly. "I'll be in touch. Good night, brother." He climbed into the rear seat of the car and closed the door.

Sherlock watched the car pull into traffic, its taillights winking red and vanishing into the night, like distant stars. He looked up, but saw only clouds, dark lilac-grey, concealing the heavens.

He smiled and trotted upstairs.

John was bustling about, dropping wet leaves of lettuce onto a tea towel, opening a can of tomatoes, wiping down the table. When Sherlock came in, he stopped and gazed openly. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. That's good. You feel okay?"

"Yes."

"Good," John said again. He wiped his hands on the seat of his jeans. "Do you... do you remember what happened to you?"

"Certainly I do, John. I remember every moment. I haven't been afflicted with amnesia."

"Right, I wasn't sure. It got pretty weird here, though not much weirder than any other week, when I really think about it." John smiled.

A knot formed in Sherlock's throat. Four days of absence – an infinitesimal drop in a gigantic bucket. He'd lost weeks to ennui and malcontent and drugs and counted it as nothing, but four days without John had been endless. Seeing him now, so blessedly ordinary, his sturdy practicality in the midst of
their lives of clamour and riot, his generosity, for not even Sherlock's own brother was as patient with Sherlock as John –

He thought of that other world. Millions of words about Sherlock and John.

"Sherlock, you okay?"

Sherlock took a step forward, and wrapped John in a tight embrace.

*

"My goodness," Tom said. "All that in four days. It's hard to believe."

"You do believe me, though, don't you?" Benedict pleaded in a raspy voice. They'd walked for hours in softly lit Hampstead darkness as he'd told his story, and come back to Benedict's house to drink beer and snack on cheese.

"What? God, of course I do. Not just because you're telling me, but because…well, I've got some stories as well."

"I heard a bit," Benedict said. "Your stalker."

"Yeah. But I'll save that for later. You must be tired."

Benedict finished his beer in a long draught. "Oh, fuck, that's good." He set the bottle down and eyed Tom lasciviously. "Not that tired."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You feel like a shower?"

For an answer, Tom turned and walked out of the kitchen, casting a come-hither look over one shoulder.

Benedict followed him up to the bathroom, shedding clothes along the way. He rummaged in a cabinet and couldn't locate the lube, but found a sample-sized jar of Crème de la Mer from a recent swag bag. Good enough. He turned on the shower, then pivoted so that Tom got a good look at his erect cock. "Get in."

Tom stripped off his shirt and kicked off his trainers, then slid off his socks and jeans, revealing his own erection. He stepped into the shower and let the water run over his long, lean body. Tilting his head back, he shook his head under the spray and braced his hands against the glass sides of the enclosure. "Come on in. Water's fine."

"Since you insist." Benedict went into the stall and closed the glass door. Impatient to touch Tom everywhere, he held himself back with an effort, and leant forward to kiss his mouth. He allowed his cock to brush against Tom's lightly and rocked his hips forward in the smallest motion, rubbing with delicate pressure, enough to tantalise.

"Oh." Tom slipped his hands down to cup Benedict's arse.

"Hands back on the wall."
"You're killing me." But Tom obeyed, thrusting his hips forward.

Benedict brushed his fingertips across Tom's right nipple, then bent to suck at it, teasing it with his tongue, feeling it harden in his mouth. He moved to the left nipple, swirling it with wet warmth, then traced his tongue upward until he fastened his mouth on Tom's throat. "Missed you, love."

"I missed you." Tom's voice was ragged; he gasped as Benedict rubbed their cocks together, both enclosed in Benedict's hand. "Fuck."

"What did you and Sherlock do?"

"Nothing like this. He wasn't – ah! – he wasn't nearly as good."

"Good." Benedict unscrewed the jar of obscenely expensive seaweed cream and dipped his fingers inside. He moved his hand, grasping Tom's tight round arse for a moment before he worked two fingers into Tom's body.

"Oh, fuck –"

"Shhh." They were pressed up against the shower wall, warm water cascading over them. Benedict urged Tom round and pulled him back a bit. "Bend down. Just a bit."

"Fuck. Hurry."

Benedict slapped Tom's thigh gently. "Who gives the orders here, darling?"

"You do," Tom rasped. "Please, Ben."

Stifling a groan, his cock so hard it hurt, Benedict found the cream again and slicked himself up. He positioned his cock against Tom's arse, then eased in, shivering in pleasure. "Take it. Take it all."

"Oh God. Ben…."

Benedict thrust forward, careful not to bang Tom's head into the wall. For a moment he wished he'd chosen the bed; he wanted to be face-to-face with Tom, to kiss him and cling to him. But there'd be time for that. He felt Tom's muscles clenching round him and moaned.

"Harder. Please…." Tom was pulling at his own cock frantically, his other hand braced against the wall, white-knuckled.

Rhythmic plundering fogged Benedict's sensibilities to all else. He grasped Tom's hips and thrust, harder and harder until he cried out as his climax washed over his body. He half-collapsed over Tom's back, feeling the tight muscles round his cock clench tighter as Tom finished with a shuddering moan. They stood still, panting, until Benedict slipped out and lowered himself to the shower floor.

Tom smiled down at him. "You're all red."

"Hot. Can you cool the water a bit?"

Obligingly, Tom turned the hot tap down and knelt on the tile beside Benedict. "Better?"

"Much." Benedict opened his arms, and Tom melted into his embrace. Benedict's chest tightened, and tears filled his eyes. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"It's okay, sweetling. It's okay. You're back home."
"I love you." Benedict clung to Tom tightly.

"I love you, Ben." Tom kissed him with tender affection. "Love you."

Benedict felt his body relaxing, and closed his eyes, grateful for the warm retreat of Tom's sinewy strength, his soft voice, his effusive heart. In Tom's arms, the crushing grip of the last four days began, slowly but surely, to ease.

*

Never in his life had John so desperately and paradoxically wanted to wriggle out of an embrace. He screwed his eyes shut, reluctantly pressed the palms of his hands against the scant flesh of Sherlock's shoulder blades, and endured.

Hey, John, come on in! Welcome to As Far As You're Going To Get. Population: You.

His head swam with purest misery. He should be happy, he knew, getting Sherlock back safe and sound. Ecstatic, even. He'd missed Sherlock terribly over the…God, it had only been two and a half days total, really; Benedict had pulled the wool over his eyes pretty well.

Stifling a shudder, he remembered the kiss he'd given Benedict, the passionate declaration. He couldn't do that again, and all at once he wondered if he'd only summoned the courage because he'd known, on some level, that it wasn't really Sherlock he was kissing and addressing. It was a soul-shrivelling thought, but it made sense. Sherlock would have stopped John cold if he'd begun to tell him he loved him, never mind actually kissing him.

Sherlock was still holding on, and John started to get a little queasy, terrified that he'd end up with a hard-on and disgust Sherlock right out of the flat. He started to step back, and Sherlock pulled away, keeping his hands on John's shoulders and staring deeply into his eyes, that hypnotic stare that John was never quite able to match no matter how hard he tried.

"It's okay," John said.

"It isn't."

Confused, John gaped for a moment. "Huh?"

"I don't believe in fate or coincidence, John." Sherlock stepped away and rested his hands on his hips. "Why are you here?"

John hesitated, though something in him relaxed at the odd question. "I…I live here?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes in exasperation but heroically refrained from making a snotty remark. "When we moved in together, I understood your reasons for doing so: stagnation coupled with financial need. When you began to accompany me to cases, I understood that as well. You are, in popular parlance, an adrenaline junkie. Accordingly, it's simple to comprehend your reasons for continuing to work on cases. However, you're fiscally solvent now. You could move out if you wanted to, have a flat of your own. Furnish it with three-piece suites, something nicer than what you termed my…what was it you called my furniture? Charity-shop castoffs, wasn't it?"

John flushed. "Well…it's a bit—"
"What I can't understand," Sherlock continued, as if John hadn't spoken, "is why you insist upon staying. I've never had a flatmate who lasted longer than three months. My habits aren't tidy, save my personal hygiene, I use the kitchen as a lab, I play the violin at all hours, and I stole your good shoes to test speed of fungal growth on a pair of feet I borrowed from Molly. Sorry about that, by the way."

"I wondered where they'd got to."

"I'm rude and thoughtless, and evidently I manage to say the wrong thing at the wrong time on a fairly regular basis."

"True." John smiled a little.

"On the two occasions that we've gone to a pub, you had to intervene before I was beaten to a pulp. Though I'd have thought it was fairly obvious that those rugby players were there to buy cocaine, and that incident with the MP and the under-aged girl was even more painfully obvious."

"You are a bit high-maintenance. I can dress you up, but I can't take you out."

"So it seems. The past few days have been moderately enlightening, John, but they also beg the question of why you choose to stay on, other than my razor-edged mental capacity, my knack of finding the best possible work in London, and the cheap rent."

John thought about repeating what he'd told Benedict on Saturday night in the Sussex cottage, but he couldn't make the leap again. The first blow had been too painful, and he still felt raw. He scratched the back of his neck, shrugged, and exhaled sharply. "I guess I've just…got used to you. I missed you when you weren't here."

Sherlock blinked. "You did?"

John chuckled. "Yeah, 'course I did." He turned away, his heart sore, and lifted the pasta from the cooker, pouring it into a colander to drain. There it is. Life goes on.

"John."

"Yeah?" John turned around, and jumped when he saw that Sherlock was only a few centimetres away. "Christ, you –"

Sherlock bent and kissed him, resting his hand on John's cheek.

John stood frozen, shocked, disbelieving, terrified that it was a huge joke. Sherlock's lips were warm and soft, the same as a few nights ago, but this was Sherlock, it wasn't Ben, and this was fucking crazy and couldn't possibly be –

Slowly, Sherlock broke the kiss and pulled away. "I missed you as well."

"Jesus." John touched his fingertips to his mouth, collecting the last of Sherlock's warmth. "Sherlock…"

Standing statue-still, Sherlock merely watched him.

"You…oh, Sherlock." John reached out and grasped Sherlock's hands, then kissed him back. He pulled Sherlock close, holding his body tight, tighter, until his arms hurt and he was sure Sherlock could scarcely breathe, but he couldn't let him go. Sherlock didn't protest; he opened his mouth for John's kiss, yielding to him, then kissing back just as hungrily. At last, John drew back. Sherlock's
eyes blazed. His mouth was full and wet. "Sherlock, how long…how long have you…." He couldn't bring himself to ask the question; he wasn't even sure what the question was.

A frown laddered Sherlock's brow. "Does it matter?"

"Yeah, it does." John stepped away, his prick aching with need. "I'm mad about you, all right? I love every little fucking thing about you, and like I told Ben, it took me all of a week to fall hard. Those few days without you were horrible, and when I thought that you might not come back I wanted to…I felt the way I did before I met you, before Mike introduced us. And I know you don't give a fuck about feelings, but --" He shook his head. "If this is some sort of experiment, Sherlock…I can't. Do you understand? I can't do it."

Sherlock was silent for a long time. "John," he said at last.

John regarded him warily. "Yeah?"

"I promise you that I will never, ever experiment on your heart." Sherlock reached out and pressed his hand to John's chest. "It's far too valuable for that."

*Did I say that neither of us were romantic? What a fucking idiot I am.* He pulled Sherlock into his arms again. Between kisses, he made free with his hands, touching and caressing, drinking in Sherlock's body through his fingertips. He tried to be tender, but there was hardly room for tenderness or tranquility. John devoured Sherlock's mouth, stroking warm flesh trapped in crisp cotton, summer-weight wool. Unwilling to break contact, he urged Sherlock into the front room and dragged him to the sagging sofa, lying half on, half off his taut body. His prick throbbed, hard and needful. Sherlock arched his body upward, grinding against John's crotch, rutting.

"John…stop….""What? Are you okay?" John rolled off, afraid he'd pushed Sherlock too far. Sherlock wasn't terribly experienced, after all.

"Sit." Sherlock slid off the sofa and knelt between John's legs. He undid the button of John's jeans and slid the zipper down. "Be very still." He tugged John's pants down, letting his erection spring free.

"Sherlock, are you sure you -- *oh God.*" Sherlock's lush mouth closed over his cock, and the wet suction was exquisite. "Oh, God, oh, fucking hell." John placed his hands on Sherlock's head, caressing his hair, guiding him down. "Wait, can you really *oh fuck!*" Sherlock drew back, swirling his tongue round and round, then bent low again.

John tried to keep himself from bucking forward like a kid, all untaught force and no control. He forced himself to stay still, but Sherlock was enclosing him, deep-throating, his muscles clenching and unclenching, and at last John couldn't keep still a moment longer. He thrust forward, fucking Sherlock's mouth, until he came in violent, racking shudders that left him exhausted. He sprawled on the sofa, trying to catch his breath and caress Sherlock's hair at the same time.

Sherlock slipped deftly from beneath John's hands and moved up to the sofa. He pushed John's limp body forward and wriggled behind him, curling close, his belly pressed to the small of John's back. John felt Sherlock's erection, but was too exhausted, for the moment, to attend to it.

"Okay," John rasped. "Where'd you learn that?"

"College."
"I thought you were a virgin."

Sherlock snorted. "What ever gave you that idea?"

John leant back, relaxing into Sherlock's lean body. "Dunno. I just reckoned you were, Mr Not My Area."

"Hmm. You make far too many leaps of logic, John. One of your many faults."

"It's a wonder you bother with me at all." John turned and kissed Sherlock's neck. "So tell me... what else do you know how to do?"

"Quite a lot, actually. Shall I show you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, show me. But first, let's see what I can do for you."

"In a minute." Sherlock took John's hand. "First tell me what you told... Ben."

John smiled. "That I loved you. And a lot more."

"Oh, you'll tell him, but you won't tell me. I see."

"I will, I will. You're too impatient. One of your many faults."

Sherlock laughed soundlessly. "I suppose we're stuck with each other."

John pressed his thumb into the palm of Sherlock's hand. "Guess so." I hope so. Oh, God, I hope so.

*

In a chilled, white room, a body bag lay on a table, smooth, black, ordinary bulges here and there. An attendant unzipped it briskly, revealing the body of Jim Moriarty, pale as milk, utterly still.

"It's all right," the attendant said.

Jim opened his eyes. He smiled at the attendant, Coddington, and at the trembling doctor who'd pronounced him dead. "Crikey, that's a long time to stay still." He sat up and stretched, twisting his spine this way and that. "We've got a way out?"

"Lift's clear, sir," Coddington replied.

"Great." Jim wriggled out of the body bag and slid off the table. Dried faux blood encrusted the back of his head and neck and had probably ruined his suit. Hard to explain that one to the cleaners.

"Right, let's get going." He beckoned to Coddington and went to the door. "Oh, jeez – forgot!" He turned to the doctor. "I'll let your wife go tomorrow. And hey, she can probably still give you a hand job with four fingers. Who uses their little finger for anything, anyhow?" He twinkled a wave with his own fingers in farewell. "'Bye, doc. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

He exited the morgue, whistling merrily.

It was a good day to be alive.
Benedict poked Tom in the side as Tom fumbled with his lock. "Weren't you cheeky!" he exclaimed. "Calling me darling. The internet's going to have a field day with that."

"Sorry, darling." Tom returned the poke. "It wasn't any worse than you climbing onto my lap, though."

"I think we were both punchy. I fucking hate press junkets."

"A necessary evil. Let's get a drink." Tom took Benedict by the hand and led him past his Christmas tree twinkling with tinsel and bright ornaments even in the darkness of the front room, and into the kitchen. "What's your poison?"

"Don't care."

Tom got out two bottles of Guinness, opened them, and handed one to Benedict. "To the internet," he toasted, clinking his bottle against Benedict's. "I doubt they'll care."

"You'll see. Even the journalist felt the bromance." Benedict leant in and kissed Tom. "Thank fuck that's over." He loosened his tie.

Tom took a deep swig of his beer and set it on the worktop. He bit his lower lip and stared at the tie dangling from Benedict's hand. "Is that a good tie?"

Benedict regarded it and shrugged. "Oswald Boateng."

"I'll buy you a new one if you use it on me."

"Ooh. Tempting. Right, you're on. Get upstairs. Be naked by the time I finish my beer." Benedict swatted Tom's arse and watched him leave, his cock already standing to attention. He leant against the cupboards and drank leisurely.

Life was good, his bitching about junkets notwithstanding. War Horse was doing wonderfully well, he was pleased with their scenes, and both his and Tom's dockets were bursting at the seams. They were hot, and getting hotter, and they intended to ride the wave as long as possible, to spend sensibly, and to choose their projects with care. They weren't out; there were still too many complications for that. But it was okay. Maybe someday. Maybe.

His phone buzzed with an unfamiliar text. He pulled it out. Private number.

_Happy New Year, Cumberbatch._

_Regards to TWH._

_John and I are well._

_SH_

Benedict gaped. "What the fuck…?"

A cold chill settled over his body. It wasn't…it couldn't be. Tom, playing a joke? No…Tom's phone was on the worktop. And he hadn't told anyone else what had happened. Tom's side-effects ruse had worked perfectly. Though he'd had trouble meeting Mark's eyes for a few weeks, and Mark
apparently felt the same. But even that had blown over, eventually.

"Can't be," Benedict whispered.

Unless it was. Stranger things….

He hesitated, then hit REPLY.

The text sent, he placed the phone gently on the worktop next to Tom's. He shook his head, laughed, and hurried upstairs, to the brilliant warm reality that awaited him.

*

Sherlock opened the message.

He's fine, thanks. I'm glad you are, too. My very best to John. I won't ever forget our grand adventure. Happy New Year. Benedict xx

He grinned and set his phone down. There were moments, now and then, when he felt something unusual, like a ripple in the fabric of existence (given that amorphous feelings were hardly evidence of spatial anomalies, and he'd experimented, sending texts to Cumberbatch, testing his hazy hypotheses. There was never a response, but this time he'd got lucky, apparently. New Year's Day was a few days away, but it never hurt to be cordial, so John had told him. Pain and effort were two very different things though, obviously.

He stretched and opened his naked legs invitingly, but John was ignoring him, poring over a stack of CVs. "Just pick one, for God's sake, and come back to bed."

"Yeah, yeah. Give me a minute."

"John, you've been looking at them for an hour and a half. How different can they be? It's 31K a year to weigh people and take their blood pressure and ask if they've had any medication changes. Just pick the one who's had the most experience and doesn't seem unbelievably stupid and be done with it."

"They all seem to have commensurate experience. And they all seem pretty smart."

"Doubt it."


Sherlock pointed to one CV. "That one."

John pulled it. "Elaine McGregor. Fine. Done and done." He tossed the stack aside, shucked his bathrobe, and climbed into bed. "Freezing."

"There happens to be thirty-seven degrees of available warmth right under your nose, but if you fail to take advantage of it, I can hardly sympathise with you."

"Smartarse." John wrapped his arms round Sherlock and nuzzled his neck. "Shut it, or I'll host another drinks party."
"Oh, God, spare me." Sherlock enclosed John's hips with his thighs, pressing his knees close. "Never again. Never."

"Not until next Christmas, anyhow," John said. He bent to kiss Sherlock's mouth.

Sherlock's phone buzzed with a text.

"Don't pick it up. Don't," John murmured.

"Hang on," Sherlock said, and grabbed the phone. John rolled over, groaning. "Oh, hush, John."

*Two murders, looks like weapon is a blowpipe. Interested?*

Sherlock grinned. *Give me an hour. SH* He sent the message, then considered and sent another text.

*Make that two hours. SH*

He set the phone down. "We're expected at the Yard in two hours. Gives us just enough time."

"You are a *pain* in my arse."

"Mm." Sherlock rolled over onto his belly and caressed John's calf with his foot. "Two hours."

John laughed. "Right. No time to lose, then." He tackled Sherlock to the bed.

They had their disagreements, their out-and-out arguments, their pockets of cold anger and disappointment. It wasn't perfect, but he'd never expected that. Had, in fact, never expected anything more than companionship. To be given more was an unexpected gift, and though gratitude wasn't Sherlock's strong point, he did his best. What he was *most* grateful for was not having to admit that spending time with a too-tall, overfriendly actor had shifted his perspective slightly, or that something as ridiculous as a story written by a mooning fan had helped to unlock his heart just a little. He'd moved beyond all that, anyhow. Whatever happened, it wasn't according to anybody's conscious design but his and John's. Not many people realised that; he was lucky.

Maybe that was why he'd sent the text. Besides experimentation, maybe there was a bit of gratitude. Just a bit.

They were writing their own story now, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. And whatever happened, it was sure to be a grand adventure.

    The End.
some content that was outside your comfort zone, I appreciate it, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. This fic was a treat to write, and sharing it and reading feedback has given me immense joy.

Alex

Works inspired by this one: [Inexplicable by emmagrant01](#)

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