**Deep Waters**

by **Nagaem_C**

**Summary**

Greg Lestrade has kept his supernatural gift hidden for decades, from friends and family as well as from the unpredictable genius he guards. But with that secret's integrity steadily crumbling, and grim threats on the horizon, can he trust a growing circle of confidants to help keep Sherlock safe?

**Notes**

This story picks up almost exactly where the last one left off - while Lestrade is at the pub, John is on the tarmac, and Sherlock is in mid-air. Canon compliance will taper off and end, in fairly short order...

My plan is to update this story once per week; it is currently at about 2/3 written.

Comments are MUCH appreciated! <3 M.
Sound the Alarms

1. Sound the Alarms

The crowd in the pub has thinned out considerably. Those who remain are milling about in Greg's peripheral vision, fussing at each other in high, uneasy tones. To his left, the barkeep is fumbling with the remote control. She smacks it fitfully into her palm, but it fails to respond to her commands.

Someone has left the street door open, behind him, or else is holding it open, unsure whether to stay or go. There are horns blaring, and distant shouts; the mismatched sounds filter into Greg's awareness one by one, drawing him back from the narrowed tunnel of his shocked focus.

When he blinks at last and drops his eyes to his open and empty palm, Moriarty's silhouette seems to persist there as well—a shadowed spectre, seared into his retinas. With a harsh, coughing exhalation, he brings the heels of his hands up and grinds them into his eyelids, trying to expel the afterimage, but the disturbed chattering continues.

"Did you miss me? Did you miss me?"

"Fucking Christ," Greg mutters.

He turns away from the bar with a stumbling lurch and forces uncooperative feet to carry him outside. It's not much better there; knots of frightened people stand huddled around the front windows of a clothing shop and a travel agency, gaping at video displays that would normally be looping banal advertisements. Traffic is at a near-standstill. Greg watches confused tourists piling out of a tour bus in the middle of the road. Through the tinted coach windows, he can make out the shape of the man's image on the seat-back screens.

It's not just the pub, then. Of course it isn't. Caught up in the deep, primal revulsion he'd felt ever since his first contact with the madman, his instinct can't help perceiving it as a deeply personal attack, but he knows he's unimportant. All the attention he'd ever drawn from Moriarty was a few leering taunts, really. It's ridiculous to imagine himself being tracked and targeted at his local pub—especially when the true object of Moriarty's obsession is over an hour's drive away from this part of the city, and in fact should be in the air at this very moment, winging his way out of England to embark on his undercover mission—

Oh, God. Greg casts apprehensive eyes to the south, uselessly scanning the most distant clouds as he fumbles in his pocket for his phone. Is this meant to distract from an attack?

Something's happening in Westminster. The telly - it's mad. Everything okay out your way?

He counts the seconds, in time with the faint echoes of the robotic recording that continues up and down the street. No response...

John? All right??
After what seems a short eternity, the mobile buzzes twice in his hand.

Sorry.

We're OK.

"All right, they're all right," he says, and swallows down the pounding of his heart in his throat.

Apparently it's everywhere.
All the screens in the UK, from what they're telling Mycroft.

Shit. This is bad, yeah?

Probably. Look, I can't talk right now, the plane's about to come back in for landing.

Landing? Oh.

Good.

John's reassurance eases a little of the tightness in Greg's chest, at least enough that he can collect himself and set off up the crowded street at a purposeful pace, aiming for the nearest Tube station. If the whole city is like this, there's little chance of getting a cab through the snarl of traffic; he could hoof it to the Yard pretty quickly from here, but showing up to work on his day off isn't his first choice. Maybe he'll go in after a while. For now, though, he sees no reason not to make personal concerns his top priority.

None of these people have met Jim Moriarty, he tells himself, glancing at the confused, nervous faces of the strangers filing on around him to pack the carriage. They're scared, sure—but they've got no idea how scared they should really be; surely things will simmer down soon.

That supposition lasts all of six minutes; he intends to stay on until the Barbican station, for the shortest possible walk, but the train lurches and slows abnormally after only a few stops. By the time it creeps up to the Mansion Hill platform, the announcement regarding temporarily halted service is barely audible over the rising mutters and moans of distressed passengers.

"No need for panic," Greg calls out into the din, "everyone just stay calm..." It's missing the weight of his conviction, though, and his voice fails to cut through the crowd; the words trail off, strangled. Helpless to tap into his usual sense of authority, he breathes in the static tingle of mounting unrest as the sliding doors hitch and hesitate.

The impersonal bump of the first shoulder against his back is a shock that throws an unexpected switch, somewhere in his head: he goes limp, numb, passively jostled along in the mad rush for the exit. When another unintended shove smacks his elbow hard into the stiff rubber-tipped edge of the
door, the white flash of throbbing pain is distant, and unowned—as though he's a passenger within his own head, hovering without seeking a push. In fact, he ends up missing most of the general exodus in this way, as well as the nearly ten minutes' walk that follows. In disjointed flashes he sees the stairs, the crush of moving bodies, then the thin sunlight and still-snarled traffic; eventually, through some miracle of autopilot or herd direction, he shudders back to himself with his destination in sight.

One of the personnel at the Barts entrance desk recognises him, and waves him over with the usual visitors pass already in hand. He clips it onto his belt loop with a brusque nod of thanks, grateful for the frantic ringing phones that mean he can get away without trying (and very likely failing) to speak.

It isn't until he steps up to the open doorway of the pathology lab, currently occupied by three people in deep discussion, that the choking knot in his throat shifts in the slightest. Sighting him from the far end of the room, Dr Amil acknowledges Greg's arrival with a respectful lift of his chin, then leans forward to quietly interrupt whatever's being said to him. A second later, Molly's head snaps around fast enough that Amil flinches from the whip of her braided ponytail. Her wide eyes lock onto Greg's, and he swallows hard.

"Oh," she says, and moves; "oh," she huffs at the tall stool she comes close to knocking over, hands occupied with peeling off her blue gloves; "oh," she sighs at his ear, up on tiptoes to wrap her arms over his shoulders. "Greg."

"Hello, love," he whispers back.

"We'll just go, Inspector, and give you two a few minutes," Dr Amil says hastily. "Come on, Christy. Do excuse us, Dr Hooper."

Molly makes a noise into the side of Greg's neck that somewhat resembles, "Thank you, Carter," and continues to hang on tight until they've been alone at least half a minute. Greg isn't complaining.

Finally she pulls away a little to look up at him, leaning back in the supportive circle of his arms about her waist. "You saw him, too?"

"Yeah, apparently it was the whole of the UK! I don't know much, yet."

"And Sherlock?"

"They turned the plane around," he tells her. "Whatever they thought they were sending him off to do—well. London needs him more, now."

She nods, standing straighter, visibly composing herself. "You're right, of course." She doesn't know that the mission had been conceived as a one-way trip; she had kindly accepted the burden of Greg's myriad anxieties, over the past week, but he'd decided not to disclose anything of his visit yesterday to Sherlock's cell, or at least not yet. He tells himself, therefore, that he's projecting his own selfish relief onto her when she continues, "I know I shouldn't have been so worried. Still, it was certainly a bit startling to see Jim's face again..."

Her expression has firmed into one of pleasant bravery, and her voice is perfectly steady around the name, but Greg frowns at the tension still obvious in her posture. "We'll sort it, Molly, and I'll do everything I can to keep you safe. Never doubt that."

"I know," she says. It seems to take an effort, but she does manage to relax, taking his hand as they..."
turn together to walk slowly towards the door. "I trust you, Greg. And Sherlock's sure to figure this out, whatever it is. I'm glad he's—oh!—"

"What is it?"

"You don't think,"—her voice drops to an anxious whisper—"what if someone did this to make sure he stayed?"

"Surely there'd be a better way than this," Greg says, speaking equally as low. "You should see it out there, Molls. Everyone's on edge, the city's at a standstill. Anything at all could set off outright panic, at this point. If someone wanted to keep him from being sent away, couldn't they have done it without scaring the whole city? Hell, the whole country?"

"True. I suppose you wouldn't have done it that way..."

He stops walking. "Nobody wanted to stop him going more than me." Perhaps that bald statement shortchanges Mycroft, or John—though Greg's disinclined to trust Mycroft's softer emotions farther than he could throw him, and he has a pretty good idea how powerless and conflicted John's felt since Christmas—but deep down, he believes it must be true. "But even if I could've done the impossible, been allowed to push anyone in the world for it—no. This is too far."

"I agree," Molly assures him, squeezing his hand in both of hers. He's the one who's too tense, now.

"...Right." He lets out a massive sigh, trying to put aside the unspoken other half of Molly's question (what if he's been kept here to make him an easy target?) and looks down to rest his forehead briefly against hers. "You're okay, here? To stay, 'til things calm down? Do you need me to get you anything?" They'd overindulged last night—while deliberately avoiding the topic of Sherlock—but if she has a hangover like his, she's hiding it admirably.

"I'm supposed to be working 'til six," she answers, "but you knew that. I'll be fine, if you need to leave. Have they asked you to go in to work?"

"Not yet." He's sort of hoping he'll hear from John, or better yet Sherlock, before anyone at the Met decides to pull him in. Presumably, they're on their way back from the airfield by now.

"Then why don't you stay a little while? Let me just check in with Carter, and then we can go over to the canteen for lunch."

"If you like," he says, and lets her tug on his hand to lead him down the corridor. "That sounds nice."

Ever since the uproar over the massive triple security breach, years ago—the highly publicised footage of its perpetrator decked out in the Crown Jewels, smug and satisfied—the face of James Moriarty has been drilled over and over into all Londoners' minds. He was first portrayed as the king of criminals, then as Brook the hired victim, and revealed at last to be the master villain once more; hardly a week has gone by without media coverage on the man in some form or another. Photographs of Moriarty standing trial, photographs pulled from Brook's phony CV, and frames from the Tower's security recording have long since faded from their resurgence to the front pages
after Sherlock's supposedly posthumous acquittal, but they've yet to disappear entirely. The idea of the Spider ruling his web is simply too captivating for the public to let it go.

So, the reaction of London as a whole to the sight of that notorious face on every screen? Predictable, certainly. In a quiet corner of the hospital canteen, sitting with a strong coffee and the silent comfort of Molly's presence by his side, Greg's able to set aside his personal fears enough to see that truth. The timing of this stunt has to be deliberate.

"Something's coming," he mutters into his cup.

"So it seems," she says softly. "What will you do?"

*Hide,* suggests his persistent sense of self-preservation. *Keep my head down. Wait to be called, and ride it out alone.*

He answers her, "I'm going to Baker Street."

Outside the hospital, Greg's heartened to see that the rhythm of the city is already returning to normal. Perhaps the public can be easily manipulated into fear, but London's soul is stubborn and solid: vague panic can't be borne for long without reason. The invading signal had run for perhaps fifteen minutes, and most major city services have terrorism-era protocols in place to check and restart their systems in under an hour. Judging by the state of traffic and the snippets of conversations passing him by, it seems no lasting damage has been done.

The driver of the cab he hails confirms it. "Yeah, soon as the trains started running again, things sorted themselves out pretty quick," he says. "It was freaky, sure! But I haven't heard about anything too bad happening. Internet's down still, some places, and the banks probably won't open back up 'til morning. No worse than a power outage, I s'pose."

Greg's paying his fare at the end of the ride when a shiny black car pulls up behind the cab. He ambles over to it as its rear doors open, doing his best to downplay the doom he senses hanging overhead.

"Hullo, John," he says, leaning in for a quick handshake. "Thanks for the texts, before. But I thought you all would've been back here, by now—should I have waited longer?"

"I was waylaid by a government bloodsucker for an inconvenient sampling," Sherlock complains from the opposite side of the vehicle. He snaps his coat collar up peevishly and stalks across the pavement to rap on the door, continuing over his shoulder, "*Completely* unnecessary. Ah, Mrs Hudson! I'll be taking back my key now."

John gives Greg an eye-rolling glance and leans back towards the open door to assist his wife, but she doesn't take his hand.

"What—Mary? Aren't you coming?"

"I don't see why I should," she sniffs. "You can go play, if you like, John, but I have to get a nap in before my appointment. *Do* remember, it's at four, I'll need you home to drive me?"
"Yeah. Yeah, 'course. Fine then." John shuts the door, and the car pulls smoothly away; he stares after it for a moment, stone-faced, before starting for the building.

Greg follows. "What was that about?"

"Ah, she's getting into the third trimester, now. Seems like there's a doctor's appointment every four days, from here on out."

"No," he says, reaching out to catch at John's elbow just before he can step inside, "what Sherlock said. A blood draw?"

"Well, you can't blame them. When the plane landed he was acting funny—said it was a Mind Palace thing, but Mycroft didn't believe a word of it, and then he wasn't making sense at all. He had a list, with enough drug names written on it to stock half a pharmacy, and he was muttering about overdose and a dead bride and MI6 security—"

"You're pulling my leg! He wasn't high, was he?"

"He said he wasn't. I honestly can't say, Greg. If I had to diagnose, I'd like to call it...moderate delirium? Shock, maybe? There won't be results on the blood panel for a while, but I can tell you that if he took a third of what was on that list, he wouldn't be walking and talking."

There's a sharp crack above their heads; Sherlock pops his head out of the upstairs window and glares down. "If the two of you are quite finished discussing me behind my back?"

Together, Greg and John execute a hasty pantomime of sheepish apology, but it doesn't stop John from speaking under his breath on their way upstairs. "Look; I wouldn't expect him to have a firm grasp on reality just yet, if I were you. Last he mentioned you, he seemed to think you were helping him dig a grave."

Greg swallows hard, wondering if that's some kind of oblique reference to his visit yesterday. "Good of you to join us," Sherlock all but sneers as they walk in, glaring at them from the throne of his favourite armchair. He makes an expansive gesture towards the kitchen, where Mrs Hudson is fussing with the kettle. "Shall I offer you some tea, or would you like to begin the search straight away?"

"Now, Sherlock, you know we had good reason to be suspicious," John says.

"Oh, but of course you did! I am a cold-blooded killer, after all. Perfectly logical to assume I've made arrangements to carry out my demise. Sorry—which is it, that my dear brother has convinced you I've done? Have I somehow manipulated a guard, during my heavily isolated stay in a top secret quarantine prison, to provide me with a full pharmacopeia? Or have I planned ahead even further, and sewn caches of various controlled substances into the seams of my coat, long before Christmas?"

"How should I know what you did! I've no idea! And I could do with some explanation, actually. Who's this dead woman you were muttering about?"

"It was an unsolved case," says Sherlock impatiently, "a hundred and twenty years ago. Haven't I already told you this?"

"Er, no. Sorry, are you certain you said this to me when I was actually with you?"

"Yes, of course you were there! It was just as Mary took my phone to see that I'd been reading your
blog on the plane—"

"She never took your phone, Sherlock. I was right there. And why would you have been reading the blog, anyway?"

Retreating into the kitchen, Greg accepts a steaming cup and a significant look from Mrs Hudson as the bickering continues. He stands back from the whole exchange, watching Sherlock's face warily. Whenever those vaguely fevered eyes flicker in his direction, Greg cuts his gaze away, self-conscious.

*Shouldn't have told him*, he thinks for what must be the hundredth time. *He's gotta think I've gone barmy. And from the sounds of it, knowing too much may have sent him a bit mad, as well!*

In the twenty hours or so between Greg's unplanned confession and the ersatz Moriarty's appearance onscreen, Greg had assured himself that months away would likely restore Sherlock's opinion of him. But now that the exile seems to have been canceled, or at the very least postponed...the question remains: how much thought has Sherlock already given to the matter?

Has he decided to tentatively accept the new information, the improbable promise of protection?

Could he be making wary, quiet plans to find a new ally at the Yard, to carefully and diplomatically sever his professional ties to a mentally ill DI?

Might he have deleted the confusing conversation entirely, as he prepared to leave his life and home behind for good?

Or has the implication that the perceived laws of his reality are wrong combined with the guilt of having committed murder and with Moriarty's reappearance to send him into a tailspin of confusion?

Greg's got no idea what his expression is doing—he's trying for the old standard poker face, but the persistent knots in his stomach are making that feel distinctly wobbly. If he lets himself get much more tense, his canteen lunch just might make an embarrassing encore appearance.

Sherlock interrupts his own disjointed explanation of Emilia Ricoletti's mystery to brusquely shoo his hovering landlady off, but as she tuts at him and moves to leave he turns his head towards where Greg stands frozen in the kitchen doorway, and their eyes lock.

The moment is brief, and electrifying: an unmistakable message in a bare twitch of Sherlock's head. *Haven't forgotten you. Later.*

Greg looks down and lets out a breath, bringing a hand up to rub at his chin in stifled relief. There's not much to be read from the man's expression, but the ambiguous signal is better than nothing.

*I've just gotta stop worrying and set this aside for a bit*, he orders himself as Sherlock continues his strange tale. *With what's going on, Sherlock can't afford to split his focus. Especially not for me. Not for this.*

It's impossible for Greg to know which discussion they've deferred, though—one of belief, or one of denial.

Unaware of Greg's anxious state behind him, John sits forward in his own armchair. "So, let me get this straight. You were trying to...insert yourself...into your own memories of a century-old case you'd read about, just so that you could figure out how Moriarty might've done the same thing: shot himself in the head and then come back?"
"He what!" Cooling tea slops over Greg's fingers as the words burst from him in an unexpected shout, and both men in the sitting room jump in surprise. "Sorry, he's—you're saying Moriarty's been dead?"

"Quite dead, yes; by his own hand, while he shook mine. Like so," Sherlock says, miming a handshake and a gun in his comically wide mouth.

"Christ!" He rattles the cup back onto its saucer. "What the fuck was all this, then?"

Sherlock smirks. "Get a hold of yourself, Lestrade! I'm certain zombies don't exist. Well. Relatively certain." He jumps up from his seat to roam the edges of the room, brushing his fingers thoughtfully over knickknacks here and there.

John's expression is less amusement than it is friendly bewilderment. "Oh, did you not know that, Greg? I didn't find out until after Sherlock came back, but I thought, since the Met spent so long investigating 'Brook'..."

"I was kept off the job for months. And nobody would let me anywhere near that investigation, not with my connection to Sherlock! The only reason I found out there was a task force was because Mycroft warned me to stay away from it; he sure as hell didn't mention they were investigating a dead man!"

"Nor would he have," confirms Sherlock. "It was need-to-know; by his estimation, you didn't. Don't take it personally."

While Greg bristles at that, John's attention turns back to his friend. "Was that a yawn?"

"What? No."

"It was. Look, maybe you're coming down off something, or maybe you really have just nearly overdosed on your Mind Palace—"

"That's a ridiculous concept."

"—but either way, you need rest, Sherlock! You absolutely do, don't give me that face. It's been a rough day," he finishes, stepping into the man's path.

"You would know...Doctor."

Again, it's as if Greg's presence is forgotten; toe to toe, they stand locked in a silent communication, their expressions two barely restrained displays of intense emotion. It sends a surge of guilt through Greg, to be a witness to it—he tears his eyes away, scanning over the general disarray of the kitchen table, and then checking his watch to keep them from drifting back.

"Ah," he says after a moment, apologetic, "it's ten past three now, John..."

There's a sudden, sniffing inhale from the next room, in response. "Fuck. I have to get back to Mary. Sleep, please. The long game can wait."

"Yes," says Sherlock, sounding unusually subdued.

Greg remains carefully focused on his own shoes until they move past him, then follows to make his own exit. John hurries down, still cursing under his breath, and it leaves Greg briefly alone with Sherlock at the doorway to the landing; Sherlock gives him a cool, sidewise look.
"You were pushed, on the Tube," he observes curtly.

Greg glances down, nodding at the hard smudge of black on his jacket sleeve. "They stopped the trains running. Got myself caught in a bit of a mob for the exit."

He expects that perhaps the detective will take this opportunity to acknowledge their need to talk, but instead Sherlock blinks seriously at him and says only one word: "Clumsy."

A tiny smile tugs at Greg's lips. He knows this cue, now.

Softly, he answers, "I'm glad you're safe, too," unsurprised when Sherlock twitches his head in a discontent nod and hastily retreats towards his bedroom.

Greg watches after him, thoughtful; he doesn't go until the door at the end of the hall has closed.
Chapter Summary

Then he rolls onto his side, and gives himself over to much-needed rest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2. Eyes and Ears

Waiting for Moriarty to make his next big move from beyond the grave is a study in frustration. For a week or so, Sherlock paces his flat like a caged beast and devises new and interesting ways to irritate the undercover agents watching his every move; John's periodic updates on the situation are amusing, to an extent, but Greg can't let go of the tension dogging his workdays.

"Targets wait," Sherlock repeats tersely every time Greg calls to check in. "Something will happen, I know it."

Well, Greg's got his ear to the ground, as it were, and he's listening so intently that by the start of week two it seems that everything is the pounding of oncoming hoofbeats—or that nothing is.

As Sherlock had breezily predicted, the government's tight guard on him eases off after about a fortnight. He announces the good news by flouncing into Greg's office; the door smacks open, rattling the glass of the office wall, and John catches it on the rebound, trailing apologetically along in the detective's exuberant wake.

"Cases, Lestrade!"

"Yeah, well remembered. That is, in fact, what I deal with in here." Greg has to tip his head far back to meet the intent eyes of the man who towers too-close over his desk; he fights the automatic urge to rise to his feet for the sake of asserting himself.

"Not just yours," Sherlock says, and steps back—thank God—to shift his focus to his phone. "The pivotal events could be happening anywhere! I can't count on you to handle it."

"Hey, thanks," Greg grumbles. "I'm doing my best, here..."

John steps in before Sherlock can continue insulting him. "What he means to say, I think, is what he's looking for might not end up being one of your cases?"

Without looking up from the dancing of his thumbs, Sherlock nods. "Exactly that, thank you John. I need to widen my net! My feelers are already out on the Internet, and with a few farther-flung contacts, but Moriarty knew the depth of my attachment to London. So—" he completes whatever he's typing with a flourish of his wrist, and slips the device into his breast pocket, "—before I announce my availability, I thought I might give you the right of protest, Lestrade. Seemed the
thing to do. Anyone here you'd rather I steer clear of?"

A few dumbfounded seconds later, Greg's overtaxed mental gears finally click into place. "Oh. Yeah, actually—I don't want you talking to Strahan, if you can help it. Or his buddy Phillips, either; they're both complete cocks..." He adds six more names, after a bit more thought; some of them could be put down to complicated office politics, but mostly they're the DIs and division leads who've been the most vicious and insulting about Sherlock over the years. It takes a bit of genuine restraint not to simply run down his entire internal shit-list aloud, but he manages to stop before he gets down into the minor offenders.

"Exactly the names I'd predicted. That's good, it'd be a bit late to revise the email anyway," Sherlock says, smirking. "Come on, then, we've got conference room seven!" With that he throws the door open again, and sweeps out.

John, at least, waits courteously for Greg to close his gaping jaw and stand, instead of simply setting off after him.

"I don't know, sorry; I'm just along for the ride," he says over his shoulder as they go, with a shrug and a sheepish chuckle.

Greg isn't sure what he'd expected out of his Wednesday morning, but witnessing Sherlock's interdepartmental announcement had definitely not been it. The room is full of murmuring officers, enough to comprise a fairly thorough cross-divisional briefing; stragglers are still slipping in at the edges. It seems that the email has provoked dubious curiosity, at the very least.

He stands a few paces to Sherlock's right and one step behind, a stance of silent support to mirror John's, and he stoically ignores the sensation of curious eyes. It's easier to keep his attention on Sherlock than to watch the faces of the many familiar and unfamiliar Yarders reacting to the short speech. Are they resentful of Sherlock's previous disdain for working with anyone else's team? Do they think Greg is being thrown over now, shopped out for replacement? How many of them would actually even want to share cases with the caustic, unpredictable Sherlock Holmes?

It doesn't take Sherlock long to explain the reasoning behind his desire to branch out; Moriarty's name raises a mutter and a loud shifting of feet, and after that the room quiets to attention. Once everyone has been instructed on determining which cases warrant his consideration, Sherlock breaks up the meeting with an impatient dismissal—followed, of course, by a prod from John, and a more polite goodbye. The crowd disperses in all directions, heading back towards their various departments or on to other tasks. Sherlock and John go the direction of the lifts, and Greg follows them down the same corridor, but only because he intends to stop in the loo.

John is preoccupied with something on his phone, and doesn't seem to notice that Sherlock is lagging well behind him. Greg does vaguely register the change in the two men's relative positions ahead of him as he walks, but his thoughts are elsewhere—until a firm hand grasps his elbow and steers him abruptly to the left.

The room is vacant, one of the small and dingy offices usually used for overflow staff or visiting auditors. The only light is that from the open door to the hallway; it chisels Sherlock's features into a pale sliver as he crowds Greg backwards into the dim, closet-like space.
"Jesus," Greg says, when he's sufficiently caught his breath. "Give a bloke some warning, could you?"

"We need to talk."

"Now?"

"Obviously not. John's expecting me."

"So you shoved me in here to talk about talking. All right then!"

Sherlock ignores Greg's sarcasm. "We need to make a plan to meet. You did promise me an explanation for your peculiar knowledge."

Greg grimaces at his directness, and his coolly dubious tone, but it's a relief to have an end in sight. He brought this consequence on himself, after all, and waiting for it to tip one way or the other has been excruciating. He clears his throat. "Yeah. Yeah, I know I did."

There's a beat of silence, two breaths long; they size each other up in the dark. Then Sherlock continues briskly, "Tomorrow night. We can meet for dinner."

"Won't it seem odd, though, that you and I are—" Greg cuts off awkwardly at the strange expression on Sherlock's shadowed face.

"That we're what?" It's clipped, and challenging.

"Come on. You know we never spent all that much time together when we weren't working. 'Specially not after you met John. You think it wouldn't look a little weird, all of a sudden, us getting chummy by ourselves? To the people who're watching?"

"To my brother, you mean," supplies Sherlock flatly.

"I won't apologise for being wary of him." Greg crosses his arms tightly enough that he can almost hear his elbows creak. "Anyone knowing is dangerous, but him knowing would be like—like pulling the pin on a bloody grenade!"

Sherlock sends a glance over his shoulder towards the door; the slice of brightness passes, glittering, over his eyes. "You're really afraid of him," he says, in a tone of reluctantly dawning comprehension.

"No shit, Sherlock."

"All this...it's..."

"Real," Greg finishes for him, gentling his voice with a sigh. "Yes. I promise you it is. And I've spent decades working on being safe, so let me draw the lines, all right?"

"I'll overstep them," Sherlock warns, "if I don't know where they are." His phone sounds a text alert; he produces it from a pocket and glances at the screen, frowning, before putting it away again.

"I know I haven't given you much to work with. Be patient one more day, yeah? Tomorrow, my place, half past eight. I'll order Thai in."

"Mm. Get me the kuey tiew nam—"
"Spicy, with pork, I remember. Now go and catch up with John, before he decides you're not worth holding a cab."

Despite the unresolved matter of Moriarty's supposed plans, Sherlock arrives as promised the next evening. He's even made the trip across town in disguise, forgoing the usual Belstaff for a shabby quilted jacket and a purple knit toque.

Greg goes stiff with the effort not to laugh. "Wasn't expecting an undercover act," he says.

Sherlock sniffs in response and shuffles past him into the flat, visibly straightening his posture the moment he crosses the threshold. "You had concerns," he replies, shedding his ugly outerwear carelessly on the hall floor.

"Well. Thanks."

Sherlock's curious gaze flits about as they settle at the small dining table, where Greg has already unpacked the takeaway spread. Surely there's all sorts of evidence to be gleaned from the disorganised flat—but he makes no comment about the new girlfriend, or Greg's family, or anything else he might read in his unfamiliar surroundings. Instead he meekly accepts a serving of spicy noodle soup.

For a few minutes, all they do is eat. It's unnervingly quiet, without an open case under discussion or a fast patter of irreverent deductions for Greg to contest; there's a mutual understanding that the subject of Moriarty is temporarily off limits. Greg finds himself chewing in time with the muffled ticking of the clock in the corner, and then consciously trying not to, all the while stealing tense glances across at Sherlock, who seems equally at a loss for a way to begin.

Finally Greg fumbles his fork, wincing at the clattering proof of his nerves, and blurts out, "First time I saw you, you were only three months old."

"Out on a nice visit to the East Sussex countryside, were you?"

"Nope, not at all. Back then I only ever left Bristol to stay with my Uncle Clive in Swindon."

"Ten years before the first local government testing of CCTV, and sixteen before Mycroft got his first greedy taste of surveillance powers," Sherlock says, carefully pushing his bowl aside. His voice is pared thin, unreadable. "And at any rate, surely an infant would make for unremarkable viewing."

"You think I did it on purpose? Or had any choice in it?" Greg frowns and picks at the table edge, refusing to look up again as he grumbles, "There wasn't a bloody camera feed. I was a kid. Playing football with a mate, 'bout three in the afternoon, and all of a sudden I couldn't breathe. Like all the air was sucked away, and I couldn't move either; then it went dark and I saw a room with a baby sitting in a folding carrier."

"And?"

"There were two ladies there. I think one was a good bit older than the other; 'course, to me they were just grown-ups chatting over tea. And then the baby—you got hold of, um, a tassel or
something, off the blanket—and you were choking, but your mum didn't notice; they couldn't see me, or hear me trying to shout."

Without looking up, Greg registers the weight of Sherlock's scrutiny; it prickles at his skin and makes him shift in his seat.

"Go on," says Sherlock, still worryingly toneless.

"So I—well, I didn't know what I did; I was fairly distressed—but I slipped into the older woman and pushed her to turn and notice. And when she reached for you, the ripple ended and I came back to myself."

There's a thoughtful pause. "You invented your own terminology."

"Eventually, yeah. Not then. It didn't start happening again 'til a little over two years later. Christ, but you were a curious tyke once you had your feet under you!" Greg huffs out something like a rueful chuckle, leaning back with the fingers of his left hand smudged hard over his eyes. "Straying too close to the stream when it was running high, aiming pins at plug sockets, pulling down table linens after the dishes were set, climbing kitchen drawers like ladders—"

"Yes, yes, I take your point. I was a handful, as Mummy likes to remind me. At least it can't have been boring being my minder."

"Minder," Greg echoes hollowly, dropping his hand to lock eyes with Sherlock at last. "That makes it sound like I watched you in my spare time, for pocket money! Like I could've begged off, once in a while, to have a night out with friends, or a date, like a proper teenager! Anywhere I went, Sherlock; any place, any time, I had to worry I'd get caught up in a ripple."

"Why?" asks Sherlock, shifting in the space of a second from quietly dubious to so innocently bewildered that Greg's reminded of the day he got trapped into explaining death to his then-tiny nephew. Though this voice is deep and rich, the plaintive note threaded through it is the same: "Did it hurt?"

There's no option but honesty, as much as it feels like a tiny betrayal. "Yeah," he says, grimacing at the way it sticks and rasps in his throat, "yeah. Hurts every time, still. Sharp, and squeezing, like—being stabbed, or drowning, or, no—fuck, sorry, I can't describe it to you. Not. Not now. Anyway—point is it could happen anytime, far as I knew; I couldn't ever know what you were up to 'til it was too late! And if anyone saw me in one, they thought I was dying of an asthma attack, or a seizure, or an allergic reaction. They couldn't move me, or make me react; sometimes I'd go well over a minute without breathing—that sort of thing catches people's attention, and makes them panic, see? Mum worried over me for months; if I hadn't got real good at ducking and hiding, she'd have taken me to a specialist, for sure. Nobody was safe. Nobody would've believed me—hell, I wasn't sure I believed me!"

Sherlock's jaw opens, and closes, and opens again. "This does explain quite a lot," he says after a moment.

"I told myself I wouldn't, but sod it—I need a drink. You want something?"

"Go ahead, I'm fine."

Greg takes his time in the kitchen, hesitating over glass and ice in an effort to banish the sudden rush of long-forgotten bitterness. "Like a proper teenager," he mutters under his breath, draining the drink in one harsh gulp before filling it again. Thus bolstered he returns to Sherlock, whom he
finds pacing slowly about the living room, his fingertips twitching at his lips.

"Approximate frequency—well, that's roughly determinable by my own memories, for the most part. The viability of effect is clear, merely given the circumstances surrounding two of the five specific incidents you've so far mentioned. I need to know—" Sherlock spins towards where Greg stands frozen in the doorway. "What kind of warning period do you get? Judging by your habitually preferred proximity to exits and sheltered spaces, I'm guessing...seven seconds, on average? That is fascinating, given the combined factors of entropy and free will..."

"I, uh. Never thought about it that way," Greg manages, cradling his glass close as Sherlock wraps a perfunctory arm about his shoulders to chivvy him towards his armchair.

"And how, exactly, does this 'pushing' work? Unequivocal mind control, or do you have to convince the recipient to act? How long does it take you to initiate an action? Do you see me in real time, or do you experience consistent time dilation? Ah! What about side effects—physical symptoms, beyond the occurrences themselves?"

"Slow down, bloody hell, you'll give me an anxiety attack! Um. Right..." He sifts through Sherlock's inquiries and attempts to tackle them one by one. "The, uh, people I push can't hear me, I don't think...I can't exactly read minds either, just a general sense of emotions and intent. Time slows down—well, not consistently, though. It's actually kind of weird to see you talking to people. Like...a film in slo-mo with the audio patched in here and there at full speed. And after, I'm sore," he says, and rubs absently at his chest. "Worse, if it happens more than once in a day. Then of course there's always the new bit of grey hair, the next morning."

"Really," says Sherlock, fascinated.

The stream of questions seems to go on and on; Greg answers what he can, but it isn't long before he's at his limit—it's exhausting, keeping up with his charge's voracious appetite for knowledge. He reminds Sherlock, none too gently, of the late hour and the more important matters still at hand, and convinces him to save some of his curiosity for next time. It's clear they'll have more than a few secret meetings ahead of them.

When Sherlock dons his disguise at last and hunches into himself to slouch out the door, Greg snags his shoulder and pulls him briefly backwards.

"Look both ways before crossing the bloody road," he warns in a low growl at the man's ear, then sends him off with a little push out into the night.

Meeting with Sherlock, getting it all out into the open after so many years, has been like the strange culmination of an unreachable fantasy. Soon after he's alone, Greg takes himself to bed, physically and emotionally drained—but sleep eludes him for hours.

What is it, about tonight, that's nagging at him so? The question of prudence is moot, at this point. Even if confessing to Sherlock was the wrong choice, there's no going back now. And for the most part, Greg's accepted this headlong rush towards whatever consequences are to come, and the surprises Sherlock will surely throw his way. But it's something else that's keeping him up.

Something Sherlock had said, tonight?
Something he didn't say...

Greg rolls and gropes for the phone on his bedside table, squinting at its hard-edged glow to tap out a text.

You don't seem upset?

He sets his head back on the pillow, and watches the fading bruise-coloured afterimage float between his eyes and the ceiling. Seconds later, Sherlock returns a reply.

Should I be?
SH

I lied to you. For years.
And it's not scientific, is it?
You always have hated the unexplainable. Faith.

I suppose I figured you'd think I just made it all up.

The heavy, swishing anti-silence of rain outside is punctuated, at length, by three separate lorries clattering past in the distance as Greg chews his lip and waits.

Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent.
SH

Go to sleep, Grant.
SH

"It's Greg," he murmurs fondly, returning phone to table. Then he rolls onto his side, and gives himself over to much-needed rest.

-----

Chapter End Notes

Also, since I was apparently too excited to think clearly last week, shout-out to my fantastic betas HarmonyLover and Silvergirl! :)
See you next week! <3 M.
And now that he's beginning to realise he has this, against all odds...he never, ever wants to let it go.

3. Laid Bare

Over the course of the next two weeks, Sherlock is a buzzing whirlwind of action, hardly seeming to still his focus long enough to complete a sentence. Greg sees him regularly, but only in very small doses: half a minute here and there, on the way to or from some other investigator's office with folders in one hand and bleating phone in the other.

"No, it was obviously the sister-in-law, just look for the missing glasses lens," he says impatiently as Greg intercepts him at the lifts one day, and before the poor sod on the other end of the line can react he's already whipped the phone down from his ear and begun texting someone.

"So, how's that case for Dimmock going?" asks Greg, craning his neck to peer curiously over the flying thumbs.

"The torso? Solved it, ages ago. Do keep up, Gerard. Going down?"

"I just came up from—oh, okay—" Greg gives in when Sherlock sweeps one straight arm around behind his back, herding him through into the empty lift just arrived. A perky-looking DC hurries up behind them and shoves her hand in the sensor's path at the last moment, but when the doors bounce back Sherlock's outraged glare sends her backing away with a startled exclamation.

"You never answered my final text, last night," says Sherlock, the moment they're alone and moving.

Greg doesn't say, I barely answered the ones before that, either; the latest round of questions had involved the possibility of genetic inheritance, and he'd felt a strong need to remain circumspect on the topic of his uncle and niece. "I don't keep my calendar in bed with me," he replies instead. "And I forgot this morning, sorry. Anyway, I've got plans Wednesday, but Thursday night's free?"

"No good, I'll be in Scotland looking at a crypt."

"Well, I have the late shift Tuesday and Friday, and I'll be in Bristol all day Saturday." Mum has a list of home projects she wants done over the next few months; she wants the house in top shape for the family visit preceding Mike's wedding.

"Boring. No matter, I expect I'll be busy with Mycroft's tedious security meetings, that day," Sherlock says, rolling his eyes. He's made it clear he detests having to participate in what he terms the bureaucratic shitshow, but so far it seems to be a non-negotiable caveat of his release: whatever it is they've done to keep Magnussen's death quiet, it must have been impressive enough
to put Sherlock firmly in the government's debt.

"Okay, then, maybe next week..."

Sherlock's mobile pings in chorus with the lift as it judders to a stop on the ground floor. "I'll just continue texting with any pressing questions in the meantime," he promises, flashing a rare split-second smile that crinkles his eyes disarmingly—Greg can't help the rush of charmed affection that thuds in his chest, but it's simultaneously tempered by automatic apprehension.

"I wish you wouldn't—" But Greg's protest is too late; Sherlock is already halfway across the lobby, long strides eating up the distance as he puts the phone to his ear and begins berating someone for their chronic inattention.

It's convenient that no one is nearby to see Greg just then, standing alone in the open lift with fond, bewildered exasperation practically written all over his face in embarrassing capitals. "Mad bugger," he mutters at last, as the doors glide closed to break his view, and he punches the button to ride up again.

"Another night, another needless stabbing case," Sally quips, glancing over at Greg from the driver's seat. "Why exactly is three AM such a popular choice for domestic homicide, I wonder?"

"I dunno, when I have to be awake at three o'clock I can kind of almost understand the urge to stab somebody," he answers.

"Ooh, grumpy. Someone's getting too old for the night beat!"

Greg silently waves off her teasing, and turns his head towards the window while he struggles to yawn with his mouth clamped shut. It fogs the glass, turning city lights into passing wraiths.

"You know, you might not have so much trouble staying awake if you took a turn doing the driving once in a while." She pauses to consider her own statement, then shrugs. "Or you'd fall asleep at the wheel and kill us both, I suppose, but at least that'd be interesting."

"I like letting you drive, Sal. You never complain."

His phone chimes, vibrating against his thigh; he fishes it out.

    Proximity restrictions?
    SH

It makes no sense, as a question, and he's not sure fatigue is to blame; Greg stares at the text long enough that the two words seem to lose what little meaning he can ascribe to them individually. Finally, he gives in and admits his inadequacy.

    I honestly have no idea
    what you mean by that...

"Who's texting you, this time of night? Girlfriend?" When two more chimes sound in too-quick succession, one look at the expression on his face is enough to change Sally's mind. "Nope, gotta
be Holmes. What's he want?"

What if it happened when
you were nearby?
SH

Same room? Close enough
to make a move yourself?
SH

"Fucking hell," he mutters, then remembers himself and adds, "Yeah, it's Sherlock. Just bragging about another case he's just solved, is all. That's five this week, I think he's going for a personal record."

"He's certainly been spreading himself around, hasn't he! He hasn't looked at one of our cases since before Christmas. I could swear I even saw him shadowing your buddy Drake, the other day—whatever happened to 'sorry mate, he won't work with anyone else,' huh?"

"Mm." Most of Greg's attention is on his phone. When will Sherlock learn to save his invasive questions for face-to-face meetings? Sure, he hasn't flat-out named the it he's referencing here, but he could certainly stand to be more vague.

No idea. Maybe it would depend what needed done. Hope to God it never does.

Long before his confessions were made—long before John's first appearance, actually—he'd once suffered a vivid nightmare that had run similarly. He'd been alone with Sherlock on a dark rooftop, hurrying along a narrow parapet walkway, armed as a bodyguard with the gun given him by Mycroft's mandate. The dream's version of the ripple had consisted of a disorienting change of perspective, and a numb, sensationless paralysis: a strange shorthand to represent the pain and physical incapacity of the real experience, but clear enough.

He'd watched from outside himself, then, incoherent with fear as Sherlock had reacted to his companion's distress in predictable confusion and attempted to help him move--and as they'd stood exposed, stuck in the centre of the walkway, their shadowy pursuer had come into range to take his shot. Sherlock, too focused on Greg to see the danger—Greg, perplexedly unable to seek a push, and locked away from lifting his own weapon—the gun, the gun, why is it always guns, two deafening reports and they'd both been hit, tumbling over the railing to their certain deaths—

*It doesn't bear thinking about. Just leave it,* he thumbs out, blinking too-fast at the phone's glowing screen.

"...You okay, sir?" Sally's giving him a wary look. "Hey, uh, I don't mean to tease; if the two of you have had a fight, or something... Y'know what, why don't I just shut up, now?"

"It's fine. It's nothing," he says, shaking his head. "Don't worry about it."

Spoilsport.
SH
Finally, they make the time to meet again: a few hours carved out in the dark anonymity of late night, set apart from the outside world and the mad juggling act of Sherlock's cases. The initial shock of it all has eased—Sherlock's frantic need to know everything, now has calmed to a low-level hum of quiet curiosity. Now it's not so much about the technical minutiae of Greg's abilities, but more about learning to coexist with the new knowledge, and with each other in light of it.

Greg understands that giving Sherlock this time, making himself available in this way, is fully as important as answering his many questions. It's not easy, though. Not for either of them. They're trying to build something, here, that neither of them knows the shape of. Their slow, standoffish half-friendship, the one-sided wordless trust that each of them has cultivated on his own for years—is it even possible, after so long, to fumble those loose ends into real, mutual connections?

Will it always feel so strange?

Greg eyes Sherlock's pensive expression, and tilts his glass just enough to wet his lips, and tries to visualise a world in which the other man's casual presence in his flat is anything like normal.

They sit, tonight, at either end of Greg's sofa: nursing matching gin-and-tonics for something to hold, trading occasional murmurs of meaningless small talk while the clash between present and past realities simmers, unacknowledged, beneath the surface.

"You never asked," Sherlock says, rousing Greg from his discomfited thoughts.

"What's that?"

"About Moriarty. You never asked me what happened to him."

"Ah, so we're back on this. "I wouldn't have known to ask, would I? 'Scuse me for being a bit shocked, the other week, to find out the star of my bloody nightmares actually blew his brains out —"

"Honestly? You didn't know?"

"No, I've told you. I wasn't there when you jumped! Whatever planning you did, it was apparently enough precaution to satisfy—whatever," he huffs, waving his free hand vaguely at the ceiling to indicate the unknown. "I honestly thought you were dead. For two and a half months."

The reminder drops Sherlock's eyes to the floor.

"Look, it's fine," says Greg, biting back a sigh. "I couldn't have expected you to consult with me beforehand. You didn't know." He's already made his peace with this—after Sherlock had been caught in that storm of suspicion and slander, his decision to slip away from London as a dead man had made a sort of awful sense.

"It wasn't as premeditated a choice as you seem to think, Lestrade. Yes, I had an idea of what I might need to do, and I had a few hours to make arrangements—but all of that was meant as a last resort! When Moriarty played his final card, and I realised I'd find no other way to stop the snipers —"

"Wait, sorry?"

"You never asked," Sherlock repeats hastily, shifting in his seat, but Greg cuts him off.
"I did, matter of fact. Night you came home." And I almost asked again, dozens of other times. At least John already knew Moriarty was dead, so you must've eventually told him something...

Sherlock tries to cover his grimace with a long sip of his drink. "There were three," he eventually says, "ordered to take out their targets if I was not seen dead. One with his sights on John—the witness to my suicide, and one of Moriarty's top men. The other two working in disguise, already too close to their respective marks to be neutralised without probable casualty. Even with Mycroft's assistance—we were unprepared." The word unprepared falls from his lips, hollow and resigned, a wound more than three years old reopened to bleed afresh.

It's Greg's turn to fidget miserably, this time. This is a subject that his charge has neatly, cryptically sidestepped at every possible turn; do I really want to know, now?

"Sherlock," he begins, uncertain.

"I dealt with them, later, though," Sherlock bites out before he can get any further. "I tracked each of them down, separately; unlike most of the other targets, I refused to leave those three to either my brother's agents or local authorities. They won't threaten anyone I care for again."

"...Okay."

He slumps forward, staring into the now-empty glass between his palms, and completes his unexpected confession in a flat, matter-of-fact tone. "The man who would have cheerfully shot Mrs Hudson over tea died in Ireland. John's assassin, I chased through seven countries and four up-and-coming crime rings before it came down to a knife fight on a bridge in Malaysia."

It draws an involuntary gasp from Greg. "God. I remember that," he says.

Sherlock's gaze snaps up to pin him in place for a few silent, assessing seconds before he continues, with a tiny nod. "He was slippery, but he liked being in charge and running things his way: he couldn't keep his hands to himself long enough to shake me from his trail. It was the third who took the longest to track down, though I blame myself for not predicting he'd gravitate to his favoured line of work; Markus Gwerder had of course moved on to insinuate himself into the Hamburg police force. You won't have seen that confrontation, Lestrade, but I can assure you: he's living out his days as a nameless vegetable, plugged into the wall at a care facility in Volksdorf."

"Jesus, Sher—" Whatever comment Greg was about to make evaporates, in the space of a shocked heartbeat, as realisation thunders down his spine.

Sherlock quirks one eyebrow very slightly upwards and waits, his mouth a hard and expectant line.

"It was—that sergeant that sat in on Frank's team, the one who quit the Met right after I was put out? Breiter? It was, wasn't it. Oh God. Oh—oh, God."

"You see. I shouldn't have told you." The near-empty glass is plucked from Greg's hand as Sherlock sweeps past him and disappears in the direction of the kitchen.

"Shouldn't have told me?" asks Greg, pushing himself off the sofa to follow. "That you killed a man I worked with?"

"Lured him out of town, drugged his Dunkel, stripped him of identification and left him half-dead in an alley. To be perfectly precise," Sherlock enunciates, crisp and brittle. He's at the far worktop—almost pressed up against it, really, as if he'd only reluctantly stopped upon encountering its barrier—and his back is turned emphatically to the door.
"Or, that you did it in the name of protecting my life, specifically?"

Sherlock's knuckles go white around the gin bottle he isn't yet pouring. He says nothing, but his shoulders begin to creep stiffly towards his ears.

"I...don't know how I'm supposed to feel," Greg admits quietly, behind him. "For John, yes, I understand it. Mrs Hudson, well, she's practically mothered you; it makes sense. But, I was never..." He trails off, feeling strangely adrift and small, stood as he is in the middle of the room with nothing solid in arm's reach.

"You were. More than I liked to admit. Less than you apparently deserved."

A pause. "Because I brought you the work."

"Because—yes, that of course, but even Moriarty could see that I trusted you beyond reasonable logic! That you were needlessly indulgent of my myriad flaws—"

"Turn around."

"—it was an obvious weakness, and he exploited it—"

"Turn around."

"What?"

"Look at me, Sherlock!"

It rings off the walls of the room, more sharply than Greg had intended. For a moment Sherlock remains frozen; then, slowly, he turns in place, stretching his hands at either side to clamp them around the edge of the worktop, and only after that does he lift sullen eyes.

"If I was a weakness to you," Greg's voice shakes around the words, then steadies, "blame me; I kept trying to tell myself it'd be safest to push you away, those first few years. But I don't see how remaining friendless could possibly have made you stronger than—than a man who could do what you did."

"What I did," parrots Sherlock, a cold sneer of self-loathing twisting his features. "What I did was deceive my 'friends' in probably the cruellest possible manner, and abandon them without a thought for the consequences. What I did was kill eight men and one woman, and maim or seriously injure dozens more. What I did was blunder around the globe unsupervised, incompetently playing at secret agent, taking out my frustration in fist fights and careless chases! Which relentless stupidity I now realise I survived only through divine intervention!"

Greg stands pinned under Sherlock's challenging, angry stare; the words Sherlock needs to hear must be here, somewhere, among this terrible jumble of emotions squeezing his heart. Desperate to ease his charge's obvious pain, he pushes his own firmly aside and reaches deep.

"I saw you," he says at last, "out there all alone. I saw the people you were fighting, and how they outgunned you, and outnumbered you. I saw you exhausted, Sherlock, pushing yourself on when anyone else would give up—and you could have. You could've taken one of those fake ID's I'm sure you had and settled down on some tropical island somewhere, just started over, and nobody would've been the wiser!"

"Well—"
"Yeah, I know, I know; your brother. That isn't my point. Just—I saw you out there, okay, and I guess—I could've been angry at you for leaving. For tricking us. But even if I couldn't understand what was going on, I knew it was important."

"Mycroft called it a holiday," Sherlock mutters.

"He's an arse. I know damn well you never would've put yourself through all that for a lark! You're not a killer, Sherlock, or a sociopath. Moriarty backed you into a corner, did his level best to ruin everything you had, and not only did you find a way to save our lives—" Greg swipes at his eyes with one hand, coughing awkwardly over the crack in his voice. "—You saw an opportunity to do good in the world. To bring justice down on a lot of people who richly deserved it. And...you need to forgive yourself."

Sherlock appears to be stunned silent, staring as if the solution to some great puzzle is stamped across Greg's face in obscure hieroglyphics. Greg waits, still somehow rooted to the centre of his kitchen floor, increasingly uncomfortable in the hanging pause.

"I should go," Sherlock finally says. It comes out so softly, lips barely moving and expression nigh unreadable; Greg thinks for a heartbeat that he's imagined it.

"Sherlock—"

"I should go," he repeats, and pushes himself into lurching motion. His arm brushes against Greg's on his way past, a tiny shock of contact that shakes Greg from his trance; half-held breath gusts out and then in, frozen muscles spring free as he spins wrong-footed to watch Sherlock disappear to the hall.

The door opens, and closes, before Greg can even catch his balance to follow. Through the blurry fisheye of the peep-hole, he sees the other man hurry across the street, slouching and shoving ungainly arms into his brown tweed coat as he goes.

Over the course of the next week, despite the recurrent emotional earthquakes triggered by having opened up to Sherlock, the rest of Greg's life continues to go on around him. At work, he handles his typical caseload with only a little envy for Iverson and the other investigators who currently have Sherlock's ear; Evan and Sally are now firmly under the impression that he and his consultant must be feuding, which suits his continued paranoia over their secret meetings just fine. Dropping ambiguous comments, here and there, is sufficient confirmation to keep the Yard's gossip mill off track—the knowledge is reassuring, though it does only a little for the ever-present worry that Mycroft is watching.

Still, he feels a little sorry for using lies to manipulate his team this way. Sally, especially, has demonstrated steadfast support over the years; she's prickly and stubborn on her best days, but she obviously does care about Greg's well-being. So he makes a point of mentioning his girlfriend, watching Sally's eyes light up with pleased interest every time he hints at having plans.

When he goes into work for the Sunday evening shift tonight, he won't even try to disguise the spring in his step; he knows he's bound to be walking on clouds for hours, after an afternoon like this. Sally may tease him for looking so obviously lovestruck and well-shagged, but he knows she's
thrilled for him.

He hasn't yet told her who it is that's made him so much happier, of course. That's one piece of gossip he's not ready to have spread around...they can all speculate as they like. He knows the truth to be far better.

In the years Greg spent living alone, he'd amused himself with plenty of lewd fantasies. And after his divorce, despite pervasive feelings of guilt and inadequacy, a good number of those fantasies had starred Molly Hooper. Much as he liked to tell himself that his admiration of her was at heart a pure and honest thing, he was only a man, in the end; it was only natural that she would crop up in his occasional dirtier thoughts.

But in all his imaginings, he'd never come close to the reality of sex with Molly.

The first time was tentative and quick, stammering and electric; the second time was a bit too tipsy to succeed, dissolving into laughter and warm, messy kisses; the third time slow and nearly silent, both of them wrapped up in the weight of their worries and reaching out for comfort. Since then, though—as they've learned each other more and more, her confidence has bloomed in surprising ways.

For instance, she's no longer as hesitant to say what's on her mind during their lovemaking—whether it's a reassurance, or a request, or even an unrelated comment. Her thoughts always seem to be running in the background; Greg finds it charming, more than anything else.

Today, they've taken advantage of a three hour window between their respective working hours to meet for lunch at her flat. They'll probably remember to get around to the eating part before Greg has to leave, but for now the promised meal is far from either of their minds.

Beneath the sweetness of expensive floral hand lotion, her regular end-of-shift indulgence, Molly smells faintly of latex and the hospital's antiseptic soap. It's a scent that Greg's apparently begun to subconsciously associate with arousal. Just the other day, he'd followed a lead to the St Mary's A&E, and he'd inadvertently let his attention wander while waiting; he'd had to keep his coat folded over his arm throughout his brief interview with the doctor, in order to conceal an embarrassing and wholly unexpected problem.

At this moment, though, that olfactory association is doing him no disservice. One of Molly's deft, pretty hands is firmly planted just below his sternum, while the other delicately strokes at the place where they're joined. Greg's been relegated to a supporting role for now; he's merely resting his hands along her shifting thighs to lend her balance, starry-eyed with the thrill of watching her unashamedly take her own pleasure.

"Greg," she gasps, and it's not just an exclamation. He feels proud, fleetingly, that he already knows the difference.

"Yes, love?"

Her cheeks flush prettily at the word, her eyelashes fanning downwards, but the hesitation lasts only as long as two more delicious swivels of her hips. Licking her lips, she asks, "If you ever push me, you'll tell me afterwards, won't you?"

He stills in surprise, and her steady rhythm falters in the absence of his small, accommodating motions.

"I, um." He blinks up at her, trying to gauge her intent—is this merely another example of her mind
running along on its own, unstoppable despite her body's occupation, like the time she'd suddenly blurted out part of her shopping list? "Sure, of course," he stammers. "I mean, I wouldn't, if you didn't want to know..."

"I want to," she says. "I definitely want to."

Their forward momentum has slowed, though she's still moving languidly atop him. *Deliberate*—the word floats through his mind without clear context; in contrast to Molly's persistent two-track focus, pleasure always tends to lay a confounding haze across his thoughts.

A scientific inquiry, or an unexpected kink?

*Or both. One way to find out,* he thinks, and abruptly pushes himself up on his elbows.

Were he a younger man, he might have been able to sit up underneath her and tumble her onto her back *without* the use of his hands, but he manages well enough. Molly's eyes go wide, and she lets out an endearing squeak as she lands with her head cradled between his palm and the pillow.

"You want to know what it feels like, hmm?" He lets his voice drop into a sultry growl, curving a smile into the shell of her ear. "To have me—*inside* you—"

"Oh—"

"—*moving* you, where I want you, is that right?"

"Oh my god. Oh—oh—*Greg*..."

Never in all his years had he imagined that sharing his secrets could feel like this. That having a partner, a *confidante*, could be more than the foolish risk that he (and his uncle) had always believed it to be—that it could be a rewarding connection, a safe haven, and most endlessly surprising of all, a *turn-on*.

And now that he's beginning to realise he *has* this, against all odds...he never, ever wants to let it go.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock's moved to stand so close beside him their shoulders brush; they face her, and the game, as one.

4. Your Move

When Greg receives a summons to Baker Street, the night after St Valentine's Day, he presumes he'll be seeing all the usual faces. Despite everything that's happened over the last few years, the image of the flat at 221B automatically conjures itself up complete with the landlady's benevolent fluttering up and down stairs, and with John Watson standing by, attentive and bemused.

What he finds, instead, is quiet.

The street door isn't locked, which isn't too unusual in itself, but the hall is dark. No light filters through the pane of Mrs Hudson's door; the red and green coloured glass of the Moroccan pendant lamp looks a dull black without bulbs shining warm behind it, and it hangs over stairs barely limned by the suggestion of a glow above.

He creeps up to the first floor, unsure what he will find. The sitting room door is cracked open, but even there the light is less than he expects; a nudge reveals that Sherlock is seated cross legged on the floor, facing the fire that burns low in the grate, hands pressed together beneath his chin in a prayerful pose.

Greg steps in quietly, glancing around. Has the power gone out in the building? No—the clock on the microwave is glowing green-blue, in the next room. "Uh, you rang?" he asks tentatively.

Shadows shift over Sherlock's face as he opens his eyes, but he doesn't look in Greg's direction. "It's not working," he says.

"Oh." Comprehension drops a sick weight in the pit of Greg's stomach; he wets his lips and shifts unhappily on his feet. "Oh. Um. Sorry. I'm sorry, Sherlock. It's a lot to deal with, I know. I should have just kept it to myself, and not—"

"No, no," says Sherlock, unfolding and springing up in a sudden flurry of long limbs. "Not that!"

The rush of relief loosens Greg's knees, and he drops into the red armchair as Sherlock begins to pace. "What's not working?"

"Waiting. Solving every worthless case that comes my way, paying my network to gather useless gossip, making myself conspicuous. Hoping the clue will simply drop into my net! It's been six weeks, Lestrade, and it's not working!"

"Are you sure there even is a clue?"
"Of course there is, don't be stupid! What good is a game, without someone to play it?"

Hearing it called a game sets Greg instantly on edge. Nearly five years have passed since the bomb vests, and the taunting messages, and the pool—but he still grits his teeth over those memories, even now. Even knowing that the madman behind all that is long since dead.

"I've got to put myself in Moriarty's shoes." Sherlock muses aloud, paying no mind to Greg's obvious tension.

"Is that what you're doing here, all alone in the dark? Trying to inhabit the role?"

He rolls his eyes at that. "Mrs Hudson's away on a spinsters' weekend with some of her friends. John hasn't got time for me right now; I believe the term is 'nesting'. I was attempting to spur inspiration by paring down external stimuli. And I'm not alone, Lestrade, now am I?"

"No, fair point. All right, then; go on. You have to stand in his shoes..."

"Yes, and think back to the final days of his life. What did he expect would happen? He must have known he wouldn't survive to see it play out, that day, and he wouldn't see what's happening now; he planned to kill himself, whatever I said! So why...why?"

Greg scoffs. "How could you possibly know what he was thinking? He was suicidal, Sherlock! He was thinking oh, hey, this'll be hilarious, what if I just blow my sodding brains out!"

"But it was more than that! Don't you see, Lestrade?" Sherlock resumes his pacing, clenching the knuckles of one fist against his forehead as if threatening to beat the answer from his uncooperative brain. "He was desperate to end the tedium of his existence, yes—the final problem, he called it—but he wanted a guaranteed victory, despite human unpredictability. He wanted to damage my heart, my soul, my legacy."

"Well. He did that, didn't he? At least for a while."

"For a while, yes. But events become less and less possible to predict, the farther one spools out along a hypothetical timeline. Moriarty knew this. Therefore he must have anticipated the need for a long-term gambit, and so, here we are."

"Here we are," Greg agrees. "Wherever 'here' is. Jumping at shadows, and trying to watch every angle at once. You're certain there's more coming?"

"Most definitely." Sherlock drops heavily into his chair and stares into the fire. "The opening move is on the board. The clock's been started. And there's no game if he's the only one holding the pieces. He knows the only way to draw me in is to give me a fighting chance, however slim. Therefore, a clue. He's planted one somewhere; I just have to find it."

"Sounds like bloody wizard chess," mutters Greg, scowling at hearing the dead man brought back into the present tense. He pushes himself to his feet. "Is there anything good in the fridge?"

"Dunno. John might've left something when he was staying here. What chess?"

"Wizard chess. You know, from Harry Potter? I have a niece and nephew, okay, I'm required to know these things..." Three bottles of lager are hidden on the lower shelf, behind an ominous cardboard box that Greg has absolutely no desire to investigate. Retrieving one triumphantly and returning to his seat, he explains, "Living pieces. Whenever one gets taken, there's a battle and the loser's smashed to bits. Look, forget it; I'm just hoping you go into this game of yours thinking about who your pawns are."
One side of Sherlock's mouth tugs upwards. "Oh, don't sell yourself short. You're at least a white knight."

Having spent those dim evening hours with Sherlock, discussing Moriarty's grand plans at length by the light of the slowly dying fire, manages to infect Greg's mood throughout the following week. Everything routine feels freshly ominous, with the anticipatory tension of early January having returned in full force.

Greg continues to sift through his caseload for anything notable, anything out of place, regularly reporting the all-clear while Sherlock powers through the glut of neglected Yard cases and private clients from all over. It doesn't quite seem fair that Sherlock is staying so intensely busy while Greg plods along on his own, trusted to notice anything suspicious in his own territory with minimal assistance. Granted, the cases Sherlock's solving don't exactly measure up to his usual standards—while most of his frequent texts are veiled inquiries in regards to the ripples, or less-veiled arrangements for meetings about same, at least a third are complaints about the idiocy of various personnel at Scotland Yard and of the public as a whole. Still, it's wearing on Greg's sanity, waiting for the worst.

It might be easier if he could at least pull a really good case to keep his attention: a grand, complicated heist or a properly devilish murder, with no ties to any invisible game. He wouldn't even mind not having Sherlock's support for it—he knows what he's capable of handling. But it's like the city is holding its breath, as if even the criminals are waiting for something bigger.

The last time Greg had felt weighed down with such a sense of vague, impending doom, it had ended with his speaking at Sherlock's funeral.

By Friday he's ready to crack under the pressure. But while he'd left Baker Street five nights ago with a mad, murderous ghost cackling over his shoulder, Sherlock had apparently taken comfort and reassurance from their talk, somehow—he's doubled down on his belief that the all-important clue will present itself before disaster strikes.

So, it stands to reason that Greg should be able to drop in for a visit, case or not, and ask for a little of that reassurance back, in return.

It's about two in the afternoon when Greg lets himself in and starts upstairs. He's surprised to see a woman on the upper landing, waiting by the closed door to the sitting room. Her dark hair is done up in a long ponytail, and she turns at hearing his approach; recognising her, he relaxes into a grin, which she returns widely.

"Oh-ho! Is that Detective Inspector Hopkins, or are my poor, aged eyes deceiving me?"

"Greg Lestrade, you old goat! Long time no see! How's Homicide been treating you?"
"Running me ragged, most days. But you know how I like to run, Stella. And you? Still liaising with those jolly fellows at Interpol?"

She makes a face. "I tried to transfer, but I believe the actual phrase the Chief used was, 'no takesy-backsies!' "

"Well," he says, and barks out a laugh. "I'm sure not a day goes by, they don't raise a toast to Rick Parsons for giving you his recommendation!"

"Ah, probably. He knew what he was getting me into, bless 'im." They share a brief, bittersweet smile in remembrance of their beloved mentor.

Clearing his throat, Greg changes the subject: "Come 'round here often, do you?" She hadn't been one of those present at Sherlock's Moriarty meeting, he's certain, but it makes sense that she'd have been invited.

"This'll be my fourth time," she says, "and this one was my boss's call; he's been after me to put this case in front of Holmes for weeks. But honestly, it's been great to clear up some of these tough ones. I wish you'd thought of sharing sooner."

"Oh, it's never been up to me! This was all him."

"Yeah? He getting tired of you, then!"

"Hah! I hope not. I'd like to think ten years has earned me a little credit..."

They're startled into silence when Sherlock pokes his head into the hallway, exasperated. "Will you two please keep it down?"

"Sorry," they chorus, as the door shuts in their faces.

"Client," says Stella in a stage whisper, rolling her eyes expressively: what can you do?

He nods, looking down at his feet to suppress a laugh.

For the next two or three minutes, they carry on catching up through stifled whispers and hand gestures. Greg learns that Stella's wife Bree is in good health, and that Bree's recently taken up running in triathlons (that series of mimed gestures nearly sets him laughing aloud again); Stella seems startled to realise Greg is divorced, and expresses her sympathy. Greg's startled, too, honestly. Has it been that long since he's talked to her?

"I'm fine," he mouths, "it was for the best." Maybe he'll make an effort to reconnect, later, invite Stella out for lunch and tell her the whole story of how things had ended with Nadia. At any rate, now isn't a good time to explain that he's moved on to dating someone seriously. His pantomime skills aren't good enough to do Molly justice.

Finally the door opens once more, and they step hastily away from each other to let Sherlock's private client pass. The woman is a slim blonde in a shapeless dress, with thick-rimmed glasses that clash with the delicacy of her finely pointed chin; she wears an expression of worried unhappiness, and she stumbles a little as he reaches the middle landing. She hasn't got the answer she was expecting, thinks Greg, turning to watch her go with some sympathy.

Meanwhile Stella has seized the opportunity to slip inside, but that doesn't last more than a few seconds.
"The Borgia Pearl? Boring!" Sherlock hustles her directly back in the direction of the stairs; she digs her heels in, in protest.

"But—but—"

Not least because she's being aimed straight at him—the landing is smaller than it looks—Greg takes up her cause before Sherlock can slam the door. "Aw, come on, Sherlock, can't you just give it a look? You've helped enough of the others!"

Stella meets his eyes and mouths thank you. But even as he ticks his head over in a tiny, lopsided shrug, he isn't sure his interference has done any good, until Sherlock gives what can only be described as a cluck of annoyance and steps aside to let her back in.

"Much appreciated, Mr Holmes!" Smiling wide, she beckons Greg to follow her in.

Sherlock rolls his eyes with a put-upon sigh as he accepts the file from her, leafing through it at speed. Having reached the end, he turns away to pace a little circle, turning pages more slowly in the opposite direction; then, just when Greg expects another curt dismissal, he stops dead and whirls around.

"This name," he says, stabbing a finger at the paper. "I know this name. Cole Bidwell!"

Stella's face lights up in excited hope. "He has it?"

"No!"

"Oh. Who does, then?"

"Not the foggiest," Sherlock replies, waving the matter of the missing pearl away from his face like a tiresome gnat. "But! Cole! Bidwell!"

Again, Greg takes pity on the poor, befuddled woman. "What about him?" he prompts, in the half-gentle tone that most frequently elicits offhand explanation.

"It doesn't fit. It doesn't fit, why's he on this list?" The sofa groans when Sherlock bounds up to stand on it; he traces an inscrutable pattern over his scrap-covered wall with his free hand.

"Evidence at the Pearl's last known whereabouts suggests a black market deal gone wrong," Stella tells him, glancing at Greg for reassurance. "Personal belongings found at the scene were traced to Bidwell through DNA evidence. Of course he's a person of interest."

"Belongings?"

"Shoes."

A hiss of air escapes the man. "Sssshoes..." He scrabbles through the file, locating the photograph in question and tugging it out.

Stella is clearly at a loss, and even more so when he thrusts the rest of the case file back in her direction without looking. She and Greg wait, as Sherlock tacks the photo atop the centre of his mess and leans in to stare it down; Greg can't see much detail from where he stands, but it looks like a pair of trainers…

A pair of worn trainers, white and orange. Set neatly beside each other, in an otherwise empty patch of floor.
The sight brings another scene to mind, immediately, and a sudden rush of memories that turns his stomach and seems to electrify the air around him. His skin prickles with awareness of Sherlock, pulse leaping in synergic anticipation of the two stretching steps that bring his charge down over the coffee table to confront Stella with an imperious demand.

"I need those shoes, Inspector Hopkins. Get on the line with your man in Naples and have someone courier them here. Immediately, if not sooner!"

Stella still isn't getting it. "You need to see the shoes, in order to track down the Pearl?"

"Forget about the pearl! This isn't about the pearl!"

She rocks back on her heels, stunned; the shout echoes into thick, expectant silence.

A sizzle of adrenalin has seized Greg's throat; his words come out hushed and ragged. "This is it? Sherlock? Is this the start of it?"

The wide-eyed look Sherlock gives him, almost glassy in its intensity, says it all.

"Hopkins," Greg says, turning to his confused colleague with an effort to steady his voice, "you need to trust me on this. That evidence is part of something a hell of a lot more important than your stolen pearl."

"Is it? I'm sorry, Lestrade, but I'm just not following—"

"Lives are at stake, here; the Louvre can wait." Greg's speaking faster than he'd like, and it probably doesn't sound very professional, but his thoughts are speeding ahead down a frightening path. "And—Christ!—you just told me, you said your boss specifically wanted this file in Sherlock's hands. Weeks ago..."

Sherlock meets his glance knowingly, following through on the thought in his own rapid-fire before Greg can begin to express it. "Reynolds: he's clean, as far as I know. Probably received a tip specially planted by one of Moriarty's agents. I'll have Mycroft check him out."

"Well, we might not have much time to waste tracing it back. Better to focus on getting that clue in front of you, fast."

"Wait," Stella breaks in, finally beginning to catch up, "this actually has to do with Moriarty? The Moriarty?"

Greg nods grimly. "Will you help us?"

Sherlock's moved to stand so close beside him their shoulders brush; they face her, and the game, as one.

-----
Out With a Bang

Chapter Summary

Eyes fixed on the threatening pinpoint of light, he reaches for his radio.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to @bisexualspace for her kind assistance with scouting locations for this chapter!

5. Out With a Bang

Hurry up and wait.

Greg's sister likes to use that phrase frequently, in reference to New York traffic and any number of other stressful indignities. It's Corrie's voice sighing in his head, whenever he's powerless to move things along; right now, it's like a constant loop. Hurry up, Corrie whispers; hurry up, she grumbles; answers and action lie maddeningly out of reach as he laments with her, hurry, hurry up—and bloody wait.

The deadline hanging over their heads is frighteningly indistinct. They've already lost weeks, but there's no way to be sure how much time they have left. True to her word, though, Hopkins has made the requested arrangements with her Italian counterparts. A special courier delivers the evidence to her at the Yard two days later, and she immediately signs it over into Greg's care.

When he arrives at Baker Street with the shoes, Sherlock meets him at the door downstairs, impatient to snatch the package from his hands and get started; Greg follows him up at a more restrained pace, picking various voices out of the commotion as Sherlock loudly clears a path to his kitchen work table. It sounds as if there's a full house for the occasion.

Mrs Hudson is first to look over and greet him. She's seated on the near end of the sofa, holding a cup and saucer. "Oh, good morning, it's nice to see you again! I've brought up a nice currant cake for us all; I'd offer you a piece, but I've been instructed not to get up..."

Mary emerges from the kitchen and crosses in front of him with a small plate in each hand; the cake does look quite tempting. "Oh, just enjoy it, Martha," she chides, handing one plate to the landlady and the other to John, who's seated at the little dining table with a laptop. "You do too much for these boys; you deserve to have a rest now and then! Hello, Inspector. Shall I get you a slice, too, while I'm at it? And some tea?"

"Sure, that'd be great, if it's not too much trouble. Thank you." She nods and turns away,
smoothing her hands distractedly over the substantial curve of her belly, and he pulls out the chair opposite John. "Quite the Sunday gathering, today," he comments under his breath as he sits.

John glances up from the computer. "Hmm? Oh, yes. Mary thought she might be able to help out." There must be a quizzical expression on Greg's face, because he smiles tightly and says, "She's been around for lots of cases, these last few weeks."

"Oh! Really?"

"Well, sure," says Mary brightly, returning with a plate and steaming cup for Greg. "Can't let them have all the fun without me!"

"She has her uses," Sherlock murmurs without looking up from his intense study of the evidence. His expression is unreadable, distorted by a large magnifying lens and the glare of a bright task lamp. "Her areas of expertise are quite specialised..."

Something flickers across John's face, a tiny flash of feeling quickly hidden; Greg is the only one close enough to catch it. It makes him curious: what relevant experience could a nurse contribute to Sherlock's work, that a doctor and former soldier couldn't? Maybe nursing is a second career?

Before he can ask her, though, Sherlock straightens and pushes his lens abruptly away. "Intriguing," he says, dragging a hand thoughtfully through his hair.

"What do you have, so far?" asks John, going over to stand at his side. Greg quickly pops a pinched-off morsel of cake into his mouth and gets up, too.

"Interpol was right; these trainers really did belong to Cole Bidwell," Sherlock tells them. "The DNA they matched to their database came from skin cells; Bidwell suffers from psoriasis, and the depth to which these scratchings are worked into the lining fabric around the ankles indicates he wore them regularly for over six months. However, the wear pattern and the state of the aglets show they weren't his favourite pair, despite their expensive price tag—probably not even his third favourite. And perhaps most tellingly, he didn't wear them to the scene of Hopkins' black market tussle. They show no trace of mud, while photographs show the doormat there was fairly well caked with it."

"So he carried them in with him, and left them there? That's weird," Greg says.

Mary has come to stand at the other side of the table, and now she speaks up. "Unless, maybe, he didn't walk in under his own power. He could've been carried. Or dragged..."

"I see where you're going, Mary," Sherlock says, "but don't get your hopes up. He's still alive."

Mrs Hudson chooses that moment to pop her head around the open doorway and contribute, "Besides, dearie, dragging a man makes a terrible mess of his shoes. Even more, if he's trying to resist; the dirt gets in the scuffs something awful!"

Greg gapes a bit—both these women suddenly seem far more inured to violence than he'd expected—but Sherlock only nods, lifting a shoe and turning it under the light. "Quite right, Hudders. Well said. Going, now?"

"Yes, I need to go down and get changed; Mrs Turner and I are driving up to Bedford, to see her grandson perform in a play. She's expecting me at noon."

"Yes, yes. Boring."
"He means, 'have a lovely time,' Mrs Hudson," John corrects, stepping over to give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Mary and Greg murmur their goodbyes as she disappears down the stairs, and then Greg asks a new question. "So who is this Bidwell bloke, anyway? You already knew about him..."

"He was associated with Moriarty's network; I ran across his name while I was away, and actually tracked him down at one point, though he didn't see me. From what I observed, it was clear he wasn't a continuing threat—instead of using Moriarty's suicide as an opportunity for a power grab, he'd taken his earnings and retired quietly to the Bahamas. He'd only been an occasional contractor, anyway; he wasn't important."

"Until now, apparently. Seems like an awful lot of effort to get you to think about Carl Powers again," John says. "Right down to using someone with a chronic skin condition. Assuming Moriarty issued all these instructions ahead of time—"

"Which of course he did," Sherlock finishes. "One last contract, with a substantial down payment and the promise of more on completion. A fun job with a solid payoff, one worth coming out of retirement for... The Black Pearl of the Borgias was first stolen, what, October of 2010? Moriarty pulled strings to ensure it would change hands indefinitely; Interpol would willingly follow the trail of that hot potato for years. He simultaneously made it notorious to the world, and utterly uninteresting to me—a perfect setup."

Greg crosses his arms, frustrated. "But a setup for what? This guy's job was to travel to Italy, drop off his fourth best pair of trainers and leave? What does that even tell us?"

"More than you'd expect, Lestrade." Sherlock returns the shoe to the table and looks up at him, his eyes glinting with fierce excitement. "Much more! This single clue is a challenge, a message that will give me one chance, just one, to stop what Moriarty has planned. And the choice of messenger was vital—because Cole Bidwell has always been a specialist; he would never have been involved of his own accord with anything so trite as robbery or black market gems."

"Then what was his specialty?" asks Mary.

"He dealt exclusively with explosives."

The bell above the coffeehouse door gives a bright and cheery jingle, for perhaps the twentieth time since Greg sat down and began rolling his steaming mug nervously between his palms; when he looks up from his fidgeting, this time, he sees the face he's hoping for.

"Over here," he calls, raising a hand to draw her attention over the line of morning customers.

"Good morning, Greg!" Molly drapes her coat over the chair opposite him, then loosens her bright scarf so that it frames her wind-flushed face like a cameo portrait as she sits. "Sorry if I've kept you waiting! You've never asked me to meet you on the way to my early shift, before."

He nods, conscious of the strained smile he's plastered on. "I know. Thanks for making the time for me. I knew I'd be busy, tonight, but I didn't want to wait to talk to you."
"Oh! Well, I don't mind. I can't stay too long, of course. But, I'd like to—"

She's interrupted by a voice over her shoulder. "Your usual, miss," says Jesse, slipping around her chair to slide a to-go cup onto the table between them. "Would you like a pastry, this morning?"

"Thank you, Jesse! Mm, I've already had some breakfast, but maybe Greg will share a cinnamon bun with me?"

Greg readily agrees, and waits until they've been served to speak again. As he picks apart one tacky, sugary layer of the pastry with two fingers, he clears his throat and says, "I need to tell you something, Molly. Back at New Year's, when I was taken to visit Sherlock in that detention centre..."

She tilts her head, tentative. "You seemed very worried, when I saw you that evening. I remember hoping I could get you to tell me why, but then you opened a second bottle of wine, and then..."

The memory of what they'd got up to then pinks her cheeks, and Greg feels much the same. "Yes, well," he stammers, nervously sucking icing from his fingertip, and her brown eyes follow the motion avidly until he jerks his hand away from his lips. "I needed very much, that night, not to be thinking about what I'd just done."

"Why? What did you do?"

"I...told Sherlock. About—about me."

Her mouth forms a perfect, soundless O, and he rushes to fill the shocked silence.

"I thought he was being sent away! And he told me it was meant to be a one-way mission—he wasn't expected to survive long enough to ever make it back—"

"Wait," she breaks in, "you never told me that!"

"I never told you a lot of things," he says, grimacing. "I'm sorry. It was all just too much for me to process. And I thought—he'd be leaving, and I'd maybe spend a few days making peace with what I'd done, and once I had my head on straight, of course I'd tell you. I would have told you, but."

"But then, Moriarty," finishes Molly. Her expression has turned strangely sad; a bit of her cinnamon bun drops, unnoticed, to her plate.

"Yes."

And still, Moriarty: it's not over yet. Sherlock's been tying himself in knots for a little over a week, now, working on the problem of the Bidwell trainers. He insists he's getting close to making all the details fit, but he hasn't called another group brainstorming session; as the days have passed he's withdrawn into the puzzle, shutting everyone and everything else out. Greg's inability to be of assistance during this uncertain time is at least partly why his unfocused anxiety has swung back towards his personal life, like a snake attacking its own tail.

For perhaps a minute they regard each other silently. Around them, the morning coffee crowd bustles in and out, oblivious to the intensity of the hushed conversation that's reached a standstill at their little table.

Molly is the first to speak again. "So...he knows?"

"He does."
"And he's known for two months, now?"

"Pretty much. I mean, it took a few meetings to really explain things, and we still haven't covered it all. But I think—I think we're beginning to really understand each other, now." He remembers the coffee in his hand and savours a swig, smiling a little to think of how their dynamic has shifted.

"Two months!" Her tremulous, brittle tone jars him abruptly from his recollection. "And you didn't say a word to me about it. The nights I wanted to plan dinner, but you said you were too busy? Those were nights you met with him, I suppose?"

"Well, yes. But it wasn't all for that reason—you know we've had this Moriarty problem to deal with..."

"Yes, I know. I know." She rests two fingers at her tight-pressed lips and looks firmly down at the table: a clear signal to wait, which he does, uneasily. At last she gives a tiny sigh and says, "Greg...I'm not her, okay? I'm not keeping score, holding grudges. I don't expect you to be perfect..."

A choked, wet gasp of a chuckle escapes him involuntarily at the very idea. His eyes prickle.

"It's scary, I know, all of this. It's scary for me, too. There's so much at stake, for you—you try so hard not to let anything slide, but there's always something hurting for it. Always. And I hate feeling like you see me as—as your last chance!"

"Molly—"

"I'm not," she cuts him off, holding up a shaking hand. "Maybe we can make it work, and maybe we can't—but—but, if you treat every mistake like a catastrophe? Like you deserve to be punished? I can't do that, Greg."

"I'm sorry," he says automatically, and that's about all he can manage for a few seconds; his head is spinning. He'd expected her to be angry that he'd withheld information...but, not for the first time, the actual content of her complaint has caught him entirely off-guard. "I want to make this work. I do."

She nods, and looks down at him with tender eyes, unsmiling, as she stands up. "You're so used to keeping secrets, it's a reflex you don't even notice. You need to think about that, all right? I have to get going."

"Molly, wait." She pauses, coat dangling off one arm; he licks his lips and blurts out, "Are we—um. Can I still take you out to dinner, Friday?" Have I ruined everything, he can't help asking with his eyes, despite what she's just told him; will we be okay?

"Of course," she answers at once. "I look forward to hearing more about all these new developments of yours. Just text me on Friday, when you know what time." Then she picks up her coffee and heads briskly for the door.

On the opposite side of the shop, Cleo's swoop-curled pink hair is just barely peeking out behind the bulk of the espresso machine, but she pops into view as soon as she knows she's been caught watching. Her wide-eyed look says, everything all right?

Greg isn't sure what he would answer to that, even if he could.

He pulls a ten pound note from his wallet and holds it up, catching her eye meaningfully, before laying it on the table and getting up to leave. He knows he can trust her and Jesse to settle his tab.
and split the excess; right now, he can't handle fielding any well-meaning questions about what they've seen.

It may not be the catastrophe he'd feared, true...but he's not sure that Molly's unexpectedly gentle disappointment in him doesn't cut deeper, after all.

The following Monday morning, Sherlock rings him during the division briefing. Given the man's overwhelming preference for texting, Greg has a clear excuse for ducking out, and he's glad to do so—stewing over the still-delicate situation with Molly had already claimed the lion's share of his focus, anyway.

"I've figured it out," exclaims Sherlock, when Greg escapes to the quiet corridor and picks up. "Clever, oh, he was clever! He laid it all out, right down to the names of the shoe design and the auction company that sold it!"

"Yeah? And that stuff told you what he was gonna do?"

"I'll explain later, Lestrade. For now, it's time to take action."

"Finally." Abandoning the briefing room entirely, Greg turns and makes for his office. "What do you need?"

"Bomb squads."

"That I can do—wait, squads? Plural?"

"Yes, at least two, ideally three; the anniversary of Carl Powers' murder isn't until tomorrow, so we should have some time, but I think you'll agree we should waste as little of it as possible," Sherlock says, his words nearly tripping over each other in his distracted excitement. "It'll be best to search out all of the bombs simultaneously."

"I'll make the call," Greg promises. Suddenly it's a relief to know Molly is away visiting her parents.

"Good. I'll text you with the addresses; presuming we get three teams, you, John and I can each head one up and run the search fairly efficiently. It may take some time; they could have been planted months ago, and they're surely well hidden. You weren't planning to be busy with anything else today, were you?"

"Just pulled a triple out in Ilford; two pensioners and their home health aide. Looks cut-and-dried to me."

"Oh, Sally can handle that on her own. Take your other sergeant and two cars; the Watsons need to be collected from a doctor's appointment at St Pancras."

Some while later, when it's time to rendezvous with John, he and Mary are just making their ponderous way out of the hospital. Greg puts down his window and waves to attract their notice, and as they approach he hears John urging his wife on.
"Look, we've got to get you to safety! Hurry up, Greg's brought two cars for us—"

Mary bats John's hand away crossly. "I am bloody nine months pregnant, I can't hurry anywhere! I can barely get myself around, for God's sake!"

"Sorry, I know. Here, you've already got most of your things in this bag, right? You'll be safe with Mrs Hudson," he continues to babble anxiously, as he offers his arm to help ease her into the passenger seat, "she can help you with whatever else you need. I know you'd rather be home, but I'm sorry, Mary; I can't leave you alone, at a time like this, and we haven't the resources for anything else." Whatever absolution he expects from Mary, he doesn't end up waiting around to listen for it; his phone is already ringing as he shuts the car door.

John hurries to hop into Evan's car, which immediately speeds off towards the first of the three threatened addresses; Greg tries not to fidget as Mary huffs in frustration and wrestles with her seatbelt.

"Well," he says, when it appears she's settled enough to let him get on with driving, "at least you got finished with your checkup before all of this, huh. What's the verdict? Everything on track, I hope?"

"Well, she's healthy, Inspector. Training to be a clog dancer, apparently."

He chuckles. "Healthy is good. How much longer is it, now?"

"Any day now; I swear, she's doing her best to make sure I suffer properly while we wait! They haven't set me on bed rest, but it was a near enough thing. You're all absolutely sure that Baker Street is safe?"

Nodding, he reassures her, "Mycroft had his people over it top to bottom, two weeks ago. Bomb sniffing dogs, the whole works; all the buildings in a two hundred metre radius, in fact. Plus he's got guards back on the property, and either end of the street. You've no need to worry, Mrs Watson. You'll be snug as a bug; Sherlock's figured it all out."

"Has he, though?" Mary sounds dubious. It's understandable, he supposes; in her gravid state she's likely got a heightened sense of self preservation. And she hasn't really witnessed any of the desperately fraught cases, in which Sherlock's sweeping brilliance saved lives in the nick of time—had she been around during Moriarty's first dangerous game, for instance, maybe she'd have the sort of unwavering faith in Sherlock that Greg does.

Or maybe not. Greg's burdened with somewhat of a surplus.

Having delivered Mrs Watson to Baker Street, and made sure the ladies are settled in to their satisfaction, Greg proceeds according to Sherlock's instructions to a senior centre in Clerkenwell. He's in charge of the small bomb squad's search, at least nominally, although he isn't quite sure what to answer when the activities coordinator anxiously questions their presence. We have reason to believe isn't really satisfactory, but it has to suffice; thankfully, at this time of day there aren't too many members to clear out.

It's an older building, probably last renovated sometime in the eighties. There are two open halls
for large events, with a series of classrooms and club rooms on the floor above; the warren of utility and storage rooms downstairs is spotted with dim areas at the edges of elderly fluorescent fixtures' flickering reach, and dark ones where the bulbs have given out. They split up into two pairs, under the presumption that Bidwell will have laid multiple charges—without sure knowledge of how many people would be in range of a single, larger blast, he'd probably look to spread destruction over a wider area.

Sure enough, it isn't long before the radios crackle on their belts. One device has been located, in a bookcase up on the first floor, and the others are preparing to isolate it for disposal.

"Go," Greg tells his search partner, waving her on. "You should get up there and help them out; I'll just keep looking in the meantime. Be careful." He doesn't at all mind being left to pick his way through basement storerooms alone, methodically playing his torchlight along every surface and crevice. It's calming, really; it lets the nagging voice of automatic fear in his head relax, a bit.

He most especially doesn't mind the solitude when the air around him suddenly disappears.

The last ripple before this was Christmas—since learning the truth, Sherlock's been surprisingly conscientious about safety. Greg ducks down behind a pile of boxes marked CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS 1998, switching off his torch in the same movement, and he feels almost more relieved than concerned.

*It still works*, he thinks, dizzily, as his view of the darkened corner becomes an oily-edged splash of white. *I haven't ruined it...*

Never one to keep the simplest mission for himself, despite what some might presume, Sherlock's leg of the search has taken him to Westfield Stratford City, with a bomb team over twice the size of the other two and a complement of officers for crowd control. The massive shopping development, still gleaming and new after almost four years, is a hive of constant activity so large it has its own post code. Still, it seems that the possibilities have been narrowed down fairly quickly. In his first sweeping glance Greg recognises the two-storey open space, bracketed by chromed escalators under the cinema's friendly orange logo, and graced with abstract white struts that branch out organically to touch the honeycombed ceiling. He'd handled a memorable case right here, in late 2012: a murder committed amidst the crowd at the seasonal ice skating rink. Now the same area is cleared of kiosks to make room for a special event stage, paused in the midst of its setup.

A movable scaffold stands next to the glass railing at one side of the upper floor, providing access to the rectangular framework of sophisticated lighting rigging that hangs permanently over the central space, and it's apparent that Sherlock has spent the last few minutes carefully crawling his way along it. Greg takes one look at him, crouching frogwise atop the frame's rear corner, and sends himself in a startled shot towards the nearest consciousness he can sense—which turns out to be a young police constable standing guard to prevent shoppers from coming through.

*Leave it,* Greg tells him, slipping smoothly into his mind. It's a short jog across to the scaffold, and the constable doesn't even try fighting the wordless imperative to climb up and out. The white-painted truss is far sturdier than it looks from a distance, failing to produce even a little wobble when the man gets hands and knees on its bars. That's good, because in order to catch up to Sherlock, Greg has to get him moving fast.

*Thank God you're not afraid of heights...*!

Oblivious to the constable's approach behind him, Sherlock tentatively straightens up to stand, lifting his arms slowly overhead. Up, up, he stretches towards the tree-like structure of the support strut above, his face fixed in grim concentration—a black box, smaller than a deck of cards, is
nestled in the vee between two tubular branches. One ankle trembles as he rises onto his toes, straining long fingers to dislodge the device, and in the next heartbeat the smooth sole of his shoe slips. But Greg's ready; his man throws himself down flat on his chest, hooks one arm around the nearest vertical bar, and throws the other out with a warning cry of "Here!"

The look of stunned recognition that replaces the alarm on Sherlock's face, as he's caught by the wrist to dangle until he can regain his grip, is one that Greg's pretty sure he'll remember forever.

Oxygen rushes back into his starved lungs, and the image of the mall fades away, bringing his awareness back to where he's crouched in the space between the boxes and the wall, in darkness—

—but, no; not quite. There's a glow, faint but persistent, where there should be nothing but black. When he shifts his weight to the left, he sees that the box in front of his face is on its side, leaving the flaps to face his hiding place—and visible through the gap between them is a glowing red LED. If what this box contains is really Christmas decorations from over sixteen years ago, then something in there has truly phenomenal battery life...

He sucks in another gulping breath, rising gingerly to stand. Eyes fixed on the threatening pinpoint of light, he reaches for his radio.

-----
"You aren't going to like it," he warns, his voice low, and refuses to say any more until they're safely inside.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Kestrel337 for a little timely advice on this chapter! :)
emails urging your participation for weeks."

The room's attention turns back to Greg; he tosses his head in an embarrassed shrug and sips at his tea.

"You may have also inferred that the senior citizens' club you searched is a frequent haunt of Mrs Hudson's," Sherlock continues. "Tuesdays, in particular, are well-attended for bridge and bingo. Statistically, it's also the most common weekday for scheduling medical appointments: before joining me to finish searching Westfield, John cleared explosives from the Marylebone surgery at which he took employment after we met. To this day, it's still managed by Sarah Houston, née Sawyer, who's long since proven forgiving of Dr Watson's various shortcomings."

John directs a narrow look at Sherlock, flushing a little, and says, "Now that my shortcomings include causing her clinic to be targeted by a mad bomber, she may feel a little less forgiving."

Greg suspects the surprise reunion visit with John's former employer hadn't been entirely comfortable.

"After my death, it was logical to predict you'd remain employed there," Sherlock says, unperturbed. "Dr Houston is and always has been a creature of mercy and pity, prone to taking in strays..."

"But I didn't go back to that clinic," protests John. "I moved out to the suburbs long before I took locum work again."

"Yes, but he didn't know that, did he, given that he was dead? For a time, at least, you lived up to his expectations perfectly! You did stay here at first, as I understand it. He was crazed and clever, John, not psychic."

"He chose the locations," Greg muses aloud, "not the targets. There was a chance we might be there...but he didn't care whether we actually were?"

"Precisely! They were merely the most public locations associated with each of you!" Their combined participation seems to have re-energised Sherlock; no longer standing stiffly before the fireplace to recite his findings, he swoops through his kitchen in a few long strides and circles back with a chocolate biscuit in hand. "The only thing I can't quite fathom," he says as he drops into his armchair with an audible thump, "is how Moriarty managed to anticipate or arrange the manufacture of that shoe design; the rap artist Keynwa North's Sniper Mark III limited edition trainer wasn't produced or marketed until the autumn of 2012, and of course his suicide took place in July of the previous year..." He pops the whole biscuit into his mouth and chews thoughtfully.

The rest of them exchange silent glances around him, but Mrs Hudson's not upstairs to scold him for spoiling his supper, and none of them are about to mention it.

After Sherlock swallows, flashing a wry, closed smile John's way, he flippantly answers himself. "Well. He had connections everywhere, surely that could include someone in North's creative inner circle! No matter, now."

"So, explain why, again?" asks Mary, cradling her belly protectively between her palms. "John told me a little of what you explained to him last spring—Moriarty's final threat to your friends, I mean—so I guess I understand this bit about the targets. But why the crazy video message, and bombs in public? And why now?"

Ignoring the way both Greg and John tense in their seats, Sherlock readily answers, "It was all an extension of that day I was forced to jump. Once he pulled the trigger, Moriarty had no real way to
know if he would succeed in making me kill myself. He believed that I might, but in the end he
didn't only want me to die. He wanted to burn and corrupt the very ashes of my memory, once I'd
gone. Whether or not the snipers took their shots, that day—whether anyone but Mycroft, Molly
and my parents would be left alive to mourn me—setting up a later attack with such a public link to
me would ensure any legacy I salvaged would be buried under national tragedy."

"So he didn't specifically plan to kill John, and Mrs Hudson, and Inspector Lestrade," Mary
presses, "because he didn't care whether or not they would have already died in your place?"

"Not at all! In his eyes, he won no matter what I did. If I lived, my friends were to die; if I died,
they were to be shattered and believe me a fraud! And in either case, these bombings over three
years later were to be purely symbolic, a full-circle final move in his game. On the anniversary of
the very murder that began it all, three cruel explosions to echo the day that ended it: one for each
of his three snipers."

She looks away out the window, frowning; Greg wonders why she should still seem so troubled,
now that the danger has passed. But Sherlock is unfazed—he smiles triumphantly around the
room, happy to display his brilliant reasoning to his favourite audience.

Sherlock calls out of the blue, late the next Wednesday night. Very late. The ringer is set loud,
murder-on-call loud, nearly buzzing itself right off the bedside table before Greg can slap a startled
hand over it.

"Wazzat?" he slurs, dragging himself out of the unfortunate depth of sleep from which it's near-
impossible to feign alertness. He paws a hand over his face: drool and pillow marks. The digital
clock on the table is a muzzy blur.

Sherlock's voice is hushed, and vibrating with tension. "It's happening."

"Sorry, what?" He rolls himself upright and tries to clear his head.

"Mary. The—the baby. It's happening, now."

So that's what's got him too agitated to text. Or to wait for a reasonable hour. Greg smiles faintly
with his eyes closed, leaning back against the headboard. "Yeah? Right now?"

"Well. I mean, it's possible. I'm not—John is in there. With her. We only arrived here twenty
minutes ago. I thought there was meant to be waiting? People talk about the waiting. Hours of it, or
so I've gathered. But—they've already taken her away."

"Could be soon, then, or it could be some time yet," Greg says on a leftover yawn. "But you helped
get 'em to the hospital safely. That's good."

"She was screaming, Lestrade." This, more than anything, seems to have left Sherlock shaken.

"Yeah." They lapse into silence. Greg doesn't want to overdo the platitudes—there's plenty that
could go wrong, however unlikely. Considering his own history, perhaps he isn't the ideal
candidate to reassure Sherlock on this specific occasion. He's out of his depth, but it does feel good
to be trusted.
After a moment he asks, "You want me to come wait with you?"

The PA system calls out unintelligibly in the background for some wayward doctor's attention, while Sherlock considers the offer. "No," he decides at last. "I think I—no."

"All right," Greg says agreeably. It doesn't matter what Sherlock's reasons are, whether he's conscious of appearances or trying to be considerate, or whether he's merely weighed the factors and concluded the likelihood of a short wait. Greg would go, if he were wanted; of course he would. But tonight is about John's family, and John's most trusted friend. It's not his place to intrude.

"I should let you get back to sleep." Sherlock sounds uncertain.

"Are you kidding me? I'd never be able to drop off again, now," Greg lies, and scoots down to settle himself more comfortably under the covers. "So why don't you tell me about how you solved that torso case of Dimmock's, last month? I've been meaning to ask you for the story..."

They get through three case recaps, this way, before John emerges. Sherlock ends the phone call almost immediately, flustered at being caught in a moment of relative vulnerability, but not before Greg hears the news:

"They're all right. She—my baby girl—Sherlock, she's perfect."

A little over a week later, Greg receives an email inviting him to a welcome party at the Watsons' flat. It's at five, and he's meant to work until four thirty, so after a bit of texting back and forth he and Molly agree to arrive separately; that's for the best, as it turns out, because he still manages to arrive a bit late.

Mary greets him at the door, accepting his congratulations, his offered bouquet and an awkward kiss on the cheek with eyes that flicker from his face to the street behind him and a grin bright enough to seem manic.

"Sleeping much?" he asks, sympathetically, as he steps inside.

She laughs once, short and sharp like a cracked whip. "Oh, yeah! Loads," she says, reaching up to engage a second deadbolt on the upper third of the door.

When he walks in, his eyes are drawn immediately to Molly; she's sitting in the armchair by the bay window, cooing soft nonsense down at the baby in her arms. Back-lit by the late afternoon sunlight, her loose hair frames her downturned face in a fall of glowing auburn, making her pose strikingly reminiscent of a Renaissance Madonna with child. She looks up at him and smiles, and it's nothing short of angelic—so sweet and content it makes his heart skip a beat.

Giving in to a wholly irrational moment of panic, he pretends not to notice the open spot on the end of the sofa nearest her, and sits on John's opposite side instead. "Here's the new papa," he says, grinning, and shakes the man's hand with friendly gusto. "How does it feel, John?"

"Unreal," John replies, glancing back at Molly and his daughter. "Fantastic. Terrifying. All-consuming. Brilliant. Incomprehensible. Sorry—what was the question?"
Mary sweeps in around the coffee table and plops into the seat Greg hadn't taken. "If it was 'what was the state of her last nappy,' you were pretty close," she quips. "Brilliant, though?"

"Wait, wait; I can do better..." John screws his eyes upwards in comical thought, and lifts a finger to announce, in the triumphant lisp of a movie character: "In-con-ceivable!" They all laugh obligingly; then, John turns again to Greg. "Hey, I haven't offered you anything, Greg; I'm sorry. There's a spread in the kitchen—that's where everyone else is right now, unless Sherlock's off exploring the closets or something. Have you ever met Mike Stamford, from Barts?"

"Don't think I've had the pleasure. Right, I'll just go in and introduce myself—oh, don't get up, John, you clearly need your rest—can I bring anyone back something?"

The little party only lasts about two hours in total, and only four of the invited guests are strangers to Greg, but his social anxiety is flaring unexpectedly and erratically. His heart thumps in secretive unease at every sight of Sherlock (phone in hand, now, wilfully ignoring Dr Stamford's friendly chatter); his nerves prickle in Mary's proximity (smiling and laughing, but Greg can't shake the unbidden image of a wild animal, tense and exposed on the savanna); he gets the sense that he's missing some vital communication in Molly's increasingly pointed looks, and the very notion of being handed an armful of squirming, gurgling infant is so far beyond his comfort zone as to be terrifying.

Nevertheless, he holds it together well enough that nobody asks him outright what the matter is. He doesn't ask any of them, either, so he figures they're even. But this two hour party is honestly feeling more like ten.

Mrs Hudson is taking her turn holding the littlest Watson; Ted and Stella Gunderson are with her on the sofa, gushing over tiny fingers and tiny yawns and other diminutive things. John and Sherlock have just returned from the kitchen, and Greg wouldn't mind going over to join them...but he's trapped by Molly's side, smiling and nodding politely at Mary and her neighbour, Kate, with only his half-empty champagne flute to obscure his vaguely alarmed expression as the ladies' conversation veers well into the territory of overshare.

"Oh, well, I've decided not to breastfeed. Societal pressure be damned, it's just not a great fit for me and my schedule. Besides," Mary tells them airily, "I was orphaned as an infant, and had nothing but formula from early on! And there's nothing wrong with me, now is there?"

Greg's already turning to find his escape, as she's saying this—he wants no part in discussing the topic—which is why he happens to see John's eyes go wide, a few paces out of his wife's sightline. Judging by the way he holds his glass and the wheezing cough he immediately stifles to silence, he's merely taken a drink that's gone down the wrong way.

It's almost certainly a coincidence.
"...two of each, for a nice balance; so we'd like for you to be her godfather, as well."

The words sharpen into abrupt focus as Greg realises he's the one being addressed; he'd zoned out, somehow. He takes startled inventory: clear path to the door; Molly and Mrs Hudson in the way of exit to the kitchen; Mary and baby out of the room for a nappy change; John standing before him, waiting patiently for a response—Greg coughs, and shakes something loose.

"What? Me? Um, I don't— I mean, are you sure?"

John cocks his head to one side, with a merrily disbelieving grin. "Why shouldn't we be? You're a fine man, and from the stories you've told me I know you're a doting uncle..."

"It's easy to 'dote', they're overseas," he mutters, an embarrassed flush creeping up his neck. "Look, I can't—"

"Two each is superfluous. You shouldn't have bothered with asking me," Sherlock snaps from behind them. He's perched on one end of the sofa, brow furrowed and arms tightly crossed, his coat already on as if he resents that Stamford, Kate and the Gundersons have all gotten to leave.

"Two each is what Mary and I agreed on," John tells him calmly, barely looking over his shoulder. "I'm not changing my mind, Sherlock."

"Well, it's ridiculous. Lestrade is the only one of us fit for the duty! You said it yourself, John, he's the best man to care for your child; I wholeheartedly agree."

"Sherlock!" Greg isn't sure whether his protest comes out sounding more scolding, or astonished. John turns back, wearing a faint, wry smile. "If only to keep him in line," he says. "Please, Greg?"

_Godfather_, he thinks, and his stomach flips. Mary has come back to the sitting room; all eyes are on him. "It's an honour, John," he manages weakly. "Of course I can't say no."

The baby's spent much of the gathering in an admirable state of wide-eyed calm, but by the time it's pushing past seven o'clock, she decides she's had quite enough of company for one day. As her wails become more persistent, the remaining guests' goodbyes are made in increasing haste. Sherlock is first out the door, unsurprisingly; Greg throws Molly a sorry-we'll-talk-later look (to which she nods, rolling her eyes a bit) and hurries after him, slipping into the cab that Sherlock's already summoned somehow.

Sherlock eyes him speculatively before giving the driver the address of Greg's flat; Greg would have been just as happy to ride to Baker Street, but he isn't about to object to the concession. A minute's silent travel is all it takes for Sherlock's patience to reach its end.

"Are you actually planning on saying anything to me, Lestrade? It's obvious you're not looking to talk about... that, at least not to begin with, so there's no point waiting."

Greg hasn't quite marshalled his thoughts yet; the vague disquiet that had propelled him with such conviction into this cab is still mostly just that. But at Sherlock's irritable prompt he gives up trying to find the right words and bluntly asks, "What's going on with Mary?"
"Ah," says Sherlock, his impatience instantly dimmed to something almost like reluctance. "Yes, I thought you might have noticed."

"I noticed," he confirms, frowning. "What did I notice?"

A shrug. "Markedly less than I noticed, I'm sure...but," Sherlock opens a conciliatory palm to forestall Greg's grumble, "among other things, she's begun intercepting all their mail, so far unbeknownst to John. And as I assume you saw, she's become intensely vigilant about locking and checking doors and windows."

"That can't be good," says Greg. His mind is already throwing up a handful of worrisome scenarios, memories of cases involving affairs and stalkers and worse.

"Well, yes. There are a few unpleasant possibilities, of course. But, up until this evening I've dismissed my observations as a new mother's paranoia, for the most part. It's not as if Mary's background hasn't predisposed her somewhat towards caution. Anyway..."

"Hold on," Greg says, pointing a finger at Sherlock before he can trail safely off into another topic. "Her background, you say."

Sherlock hums and answers evasively, "Mm? What about it?"

"That's what you and John have been hiding from me, isn't it? I've been trying to put my finger on it, for months now." He can feel the past nine weeks' subtle clues suddenly beginning to fit together, but the picture they paint is still frustratingly obscured.

"To be fair," mutters Sherlock after a moment, "we weren't specifically trying to deceive only you."

"Well, that's as may be, but now I'm asking."

Stubborn silence.

He prods again. "Come on, Sherlock, you know I've been honest with you; surely, the safest way to move forward is with us both on the same page? It only makes my job harder, when I don't know what's going on! Hell, both my jobs!"

Finally, just after the cab has come to a stop on Greg's street, Sherlock heaves a long, tired sigh. "You aren't going to like it," he warns, his voice low, and refuses to say any more until they're safely inside.

-----
"Well. Since we're both being honest tonight, I'll just ask, I suppose: why haven't you told anyone?"

7. The Secret Keepers

"She's a—!"

"Yep." The p snaps, succinct, familiar and infuriating.

"And she—!"

"Unfortunately."

"Christ. Fuck. Fuck," Greg repeats for emphasis, narrating his pacing route between his sofa and the television. "Goddamn bloody, sodding, fuck—" It's a steam valve, whistling pointlessly, doing nothing to slow the heart that's trying its best to hammer straight out of him—nothing to stop his fists clenching and opening, again and again as if they could be any use—if only they had something to punch, a neck to throttle—

"Calm down, Lestrade, you look halfway to an aneurysm," says Sherlock, his tone deceptively mild. He's keeping his distance, perhaps wisely, standing back almost into the doorway to the hall.

"How could you keep this from me? Jesus, Sherlock!"

"You must understand the position I was in. Handled badly, the effect would be devastating, and with John's child already on the way we simply couldn't run the risk."

"The baby—God—" Greg's mind stutters and jams its gears, trying once again to reconcile the image of the proud new mother with that of the faceless, black-clad assassin. "She was pregnant. Already pregnant," he forces out, wheezing, "when she shot you dead—"

"If you recall, I did survive," Sherlock starts to point out, but Greg thunders back across the room and stops him short with fists bunched into his blue silk shirtfront.

"You have no idea what it was like for me," he roars. "You were hanging by a thread, Sherlock, and it was tied around my fucking heart!"

Sherlock's face is sheet-pale and shocked. Up this close, Greg can see the individual threads of silver-green-grey that make up his irises, the golden grace note struck into the right like a seared pinprick; he can see the minute flinch when a stray droplet of impassioned spittle hits; he wrestles himself back a half-step, releases his grip with effort and pulls in a slow breath.
"I swear," he continues, more quietly but no less intense, "I swear I felt every second of you flatlining. And if I hadn't been close by, that night, pouring everything I had into the connection..."

"I didn't know." It comes out in a near-whisper, an unspoken apology in the pained twist of Sherlock's lips. "But even if I'd understood, then, you must know I couldn't have told you. I already knew what you would do."

"I would've arrested her."

"You would've tried," Sherlock corrects him gently, and begins to urge him towards the sofa with cautious, open gestures. "Worst case scenario, one or more people would have been killed. Perhaps John. Perhaps you, or Donovan, or another officer. Best case scenario, she'd have gone on the run before we could get a handle on her."

"And John would never have known his daughter either way," Greg reluctantly finishes, sinking into the seat on wobbly knees.

"You see," says Sherlock. The averted possibility stands almost tangible between them, as they share a moment of regretful silence.

"So you, and John, you just...trust her, now?"

"It's more complicated than that. I wouldn't call it trust, exactly; more like a working détente..."

Greg shakes his head hard, pressing clenched fists straight down into the cushions at his sides. "You died. You were dying. I can't forgive that, Sherlock—I don't think I ever can! How am I supposed to act normal around her, now? Knowing she's a wolf in our midst?"

"I did say you wouldn't like it," says Sherlock, with just a hint of reproof. "But as far as how to act... Remember she's got her own reasons for wanting to stay. Remember that she's forced to trust John and me, too, so long as their daughter is part of the equation. And remember that you've made a promise just as I have, today, to protect that little girl—"

"Oh, God—"

"John's baby girl. Remember, Lestrade."

The gravity, the earnest entreaty in Sherlock's request is unmistakable. All at once, like clouds parting, Greg sees those protests of his at the party as the mere cover they'd surely been, an aloof show of disapproval to mask his true feelings. And his vehemence that Greg was best suited to the title of godfather—to ensure I'd say yes, when he knew it scared me.

Of course Sherlock will take the duty of guardianship seriously. How could he not?

"Find a way to bring me in on this," Greg says after a moment, and if he has to struggle around the sudden lump in his throat, his charge is kind enough not to point it out. "If something's really going on, we've got to get on top of it, and I want to be in the loop. I want to talk to John."

Sherlock makes good on his promise within just three days; Greg gets a text naming a run-down
little coffee shop in Shacklewell, and the oddly specific time of 3:52 PM. He has to do a bit of creative delegation to work his current case around getting out there, and ends up actually jogging from an inconvenient parking spot two streets over, scowling at his watch at every crossing. Two minutes late to arrive, he expects a mocking remark when he reaches the table in the back, but Sherlock is too engrossed in his phone to even look up and greet him.

The gum-chewing barista boredly calls out an order for "Galahad" before returning to her fashion magazine. Greg shrugs and obediently retrieves three thick-handled cups, each webbed with hairline cracks in the ceramic glazing: two teas, one coffee.

A few seconds after he sits the door opens again, and John slips in, breathing heavily. He crosses the space in quick strides, and winces at the tile's squeal when he pulls out one of the rickety wooden chairs.

"Right," he huffs, letting his messenger bag drop to the floor, "I left the surgery twenty minutes early and rode as fast as I could, so I should have a bit of time."

Sherlock nods and places his phone on the table. "Not too much, of course. You can't hurry back, and walk into your flat looking like you've just finished biking the sprint down the Champs-Élysées. Anyway, I've been texting with her; she's at home, and I'm at Barts waiting on a mass spectrometry result."

John rolls his eyes wearily. "This is all very Bond, isn't it? Remind me how tedious it all really is, next time I suggest we watch You Only Live Twice."

"You know I will, anyway," murmurs Sherlock, sharing a faint smile with him while Greg boggles silently in his seat.

"Um." Greg clears his throat. "Well. I was going to ask how you're handling things... But you don't seem half as broken up about it as I was expecting, he stops himself from finishing.

"I've had since last September to wrap my head around my wife being a lying, manipulative former assassin who shot my best friend to keep her secret," John says, each word like a quiet pop of machine gun fire despite his easy-looking smirk. "At a certain point, I just had to roll with it, you know?"

Mentally revising his opinion of the doctor's emotional state back downwards a bit, Greg gives him an uncertain nod. "I'm glad to get on the same page as you two, now, at least. Maybe I could use a few months to wrap my head around it."

"We may not have that long," Sherlock warns. "Her continued behaviour suggests an escalating threat. John?"

"The mail, yeah. I couldn't find anything, at first, but then I remembered her spare jewellery case folds together—the bottom inside flips up." John fiddles with his phone a moment, then passes it over.

"Two postcards." Sherlock narrates his observations as he flips among the series of photographs. "Both short messages addressed to Mary Watson, with international postmarks dated three weeks apart. 'Congratulations on your new happy family,' sent from Beirut; then, 'Missing you. Looking forward to visiting,' from Lisbon."

"Nice, innocuous messages to send through the post," comments Greg, leaning closer to peer over Sherlock's shoulder. He doesn't see anything especially remarkable about the handwriting or
phrasing. Regardless, his gut instinct agrees the greetings are threats. "...Are those supposed to be wings, around that initial signature?"

"It does appear so. A winged 'G', the added shapes cartoonish and casually dashed off; probably a habitual personalisation. Handwriting indicates a male, middle-aged, right handed. Plenty of masculine names to choose from, starting with G." The brief and secretive flash of good humour in the glance Sherlock spares for Greg loosens a little of the building tension. "He could be a pilot, or even a birdwatcher, but judging by the religious iconography featured in the cards' artwork, an angelic reference is more likely..."

John shows no sign that he's caught their private joke. "Yeah, you know, I thought that art was weird," he says, moving around to Sherlock's other side as Sherlock flips back to the photos showing the card fronts. "I wish I could've taken them out of her hiding place, to show you; see that shadowed bit of the background there? It was raised, like embossing ink, in a square character. The photo didn't capture it well, sorry. But the card isn't stamped. I think they're hand painted?"

Sherlock nods. "They're certainly some kind of custom work. It looks to me as if they originated in China—note the distinct cast to this Jesus' features—my initial thought is Hong Kong, but of course I'll need to study them further." His thumbs dance on the phone screen for a few seconds, then he hands it back to its owner; on the table, his own mobile chimes its receipt of the images.

They return to their seats, sliding apart from Sherlock's either side; John picks up his tea, sips and stares into it with a deep, unhappy sigh. "I have to say, I was honestly hoping I wouldn't find anything. I wanted you to be wrong. If something's really going on, she should know she could talk to me..."

"She doesn't want to burden you with it."

Sherlock's soothing tone startles Greg as much as the genuine worry he senses from John. It must show on his face, because John chuckles bleakly at seeing it.

"Yeah, okay, I can tell what you're thinking, Greg. After all the lies, after Sherlock...I shouldn't be upset like this about her past hurting her, should I? She may be the mother of my child, but I don't know who she really is. I don't even know her real name!"

Wincing, Greg flicks his eyes towards Sherlock—but there's no support to be had there. The man has dropped his gaze to the table, still and solemn as a scolded child.

"Well," John continues, "it's true. For all intents and purposes, I don't love Mary." He turns away to face the front of the near-deserted shop, his brow creasing in clearly visible guilt. "The real problem is that I don't...not love her."

Greg's attempt at an appropriate response falters and dies before the first useless word can form on his lips: what can he say, really? Nothing makes sense, anymore. Better to hum in vague, wordless sympathy, filling his mouth with hot coffee.

It's Sherlock that breaks their meditative silence. "It's time for you to go back to her, John," he says, and as John frowns and begins gathering his things to go, he adds cryptically, "I know you hid it away so that neither of us would be tempted to read it. But it seems an unavoidable necessity, now."

John's lips press thin. He adjusts his bag's wide, buckled strap across his chest. "I can get it. But it'll probably take at least a week."
"Safest to have it sent to Lestrade's attention, at the Yard..."

John ducks his head in an abrupt, almost angry nod, and before Greg can ask *send me what?* he's already on his way out the door.

Left to his own devices, Greg isn't the type to regularly cook himself elaborate meals. An omelet or a quick and dirty fried rice, full of whatever meat and vegetables he happens to have on hand, is generally enough to satisfy him whenever he gets guilty about his reliance on takeaways. But despite that persistent bachelor's laziness, he does know his way around a kitchen. Half his enjoyment in being married to a catering chef had been in helping her in the kitchen at home—and in occasionally treating her to meals of his own creation, when she'd been too fed up from a day's work to even look at a paring knife.

Mama and Baba had taught him a few things, too, over the years, reinforcing his familiarity with the traditional favourites that might otherwise have been Nadia's sole territory. His execution of the family goulash recipe may not be flawless like hers, or magical like Baba's always seemed to be...but it's one of the most impressive dishes he knows by heart, and one of the most personally comforting, too.

"Not much longer," he calls over his shoulder, licking a taste of the peppery gravy from his finger.

Molly's arms snake around his waist a moment later; she's padded up behind him on silent stocking feet, her heeled shoes having long since been abandoned. "It smells fantastic." The way her voice is muffled, with her face pressed into the groove of his spine, he's not entirely sure she means the goulash.

Setting his wooden spoon aside, Greg turns within the embrace to place a kiss on her forehead, and follows it with another on her lips. "I wanted to do something special for you tonight," he tells her, smiling. "It's been a busy week for us both, and I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too. We've hardly had a chance to talk, since the party!" She leans in for one more kiss, then pulls away coyly and goes to get out the wine glasses, while he returns his attention to the food.

"Yeah, uh, about that. Were you upset with me? I know I had sort of a tough time, there, and I got the feeling you might've been disappointed..."

"Oh. Well. It was nothing, really, just—nothing."

"Hm. Doesn't exactly sound like nothing," he says, following her to the table with a bowl of steaming egg noodles. "Need help opening that?"

"No, I've—got it." The wine cork punctuates her words with a throaty pop.

"Great." One more trip to the kitchen and back, and they're settling in together to fill their plates. He lets the unanswered question simmer beneath his tongue, but after they've eaten a few bites, and her gratifying initial reaction to tasting his cooking is out of the way, he lets it out again. "Really, though. The party?"
She looks over at him with wide eyes, chewing her mouthful fast, then slow, then fast again, as she visibly debates with herself over what to say.

"You said it yourself," she finally answers, "you were having a hard time. And, um, I may not really understand what goes on in your head—I mean, Sherlock was right there, and I think the chances he was going to kill himself trying to work that corkscrew were fairly slim..."

He huffs a tiny laugh through his nose, briefly fogging the inside of his glass.

"But I saw that something was upsetting you, Greg. It—it bothers me, that I don't know you well enough to understand what that was." Swooping up another big bite, she quickly fills her mouth as if to replace the words that have slipped out.

There's a long, uncomfortable pause; at last he lets out a long sigh. "It was the baby." His eyes drop under the shame of admitting it, and he ineffectually dabbles his fork in the edge of his noodles. "I know, it's stupid. I should've got over it a long time ago, but—being around kids, it—gets to me. Babies, especially. I can't help it; they're so defenceless, and everything around them is so dangerous..."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Greg, but didn't you just agree to be a godparent?"

"I only agreed because Sherlock insisted; he didn't want to do it without me."

"Oh, that's sweet."

"Please do not tell him that," he chuckles.

The meal continues in a lighter mood; they talk about work for a little while, and then discuss which upcoming films they're most interested in seeing together. They get almost all the way through dinner without the subject of the Watsons' party coming up again; it seems Molly's satisfied with the answer Greg has given her. Unfortunately, Greg slowly realises that he isn't. When she starts to tell him about her upcoming plans to spend a few afternoons with Mary, helping her manage the baby along with some reorganisation projects while John is working, he finds he can't in good conscience let it stand.

"Molly, there's something else. I mean, the thing about me and kids is true, and I appreciate that you understand where I'm coming from with it, but that isn't the only thing going on."

"Really? What's wrong?"

"I wish I could tell you."

Her eyebrows rise, but he puts up a hand to stall her. "I know you've signed on to keep my secrets, and I swear I am taking that seriously now. But this isn't my secret; it's John's. And if I tell you, it'll change the way you see some things, and how you act—he'll know you know, and he'll know I've told. So I'm just...telling you that there's this thing I can't tell you, because I don't want it to be like before. When you find out, eventually, I don't want you thinking I've been just doing that thing I do, again, keeping mum by default. Am I making sense, at all?"

"Okay," Molly says, cautiously, "yes... Yes, I think I understand. But I hope you'll let me know if anything changes, and warn me if I stumble into, I don't know, saying the wrong thing to John, or...?"

"Of course I will."
"Good. Um. All right." She curls her lips in over her teeth, hesitating with her gaze locked searchingly onto his, then stands to hurriedly clear away their plates; he follows with the half-empty pan of goulash, and as he steps into the kitchen behind her she says without looking his way, "You said, um. That I signed on for your secrets."

"Yeah, I did," he confirms, a tendril of unease curling through his gut. "I mean, you've been saying how we were a team—I wasn't really acting like it the past few months, but I hope you still feel the same way?"

Her vigorous nod is an instant breath of relief. "I know keeping them all private is important to you," she continues. "Even the ones that aren't so dangerous. So I wasn't about to push your limits by saying anything, when I could already tell you were on edge. And, well, we did arrive separately, so I'm sure that helped..."

"What're you talking about, Molls?"

"But by the end of the party, I was sure—none of the others actually know that we're together."

"...Oh." The discomfort is back, with a vengeance.

"I'd have expected Sherlock to know by now, at least. Maybe he does, but he doesn't actually seem to have an opinion," she says. Quickly shaking off the tiny grimace brought on by the mention of her former crush, she squares her shoulders and steps up close. "Well. Since we're both being honest tonight, I'll just ask, I suppose: why haven't you told anyone?"

-----
Special Delivery

Chapter Summary

"Let's just focus on one improbable, dangerous puzzle at a time, Lestrade," he suggests, smiling.

8. Special Delivery

After a hectic night-shift-turned-morning-shift spent processing the numerous witnesses to a nightclub stabbing, Greg returns to the office to find that the mailroom's left a delivery for him.

The small parcel is carefully wrapped in plain brown butcher paper and twine, with quaintly old-fashioned attention to detail. It's addressed to DI Lestrade's attention in neat hand-lettered capitals, from a J. Sholto in Wessington, Derbyshire; the uncommon surname strikes a chord at once, but it still takes him a moment to link it with the memory of the scarred, stoic soldier who'd been stabbed on John's wedding day.

Nice to see he's still alive and well, thinks Greg, remembering the sight of Sholto being wheeled into the ambulance, pale and sweating from the shock of his injury. And apparently, despite having been so cruelly targeted for daring to venture from his estate, the Major is still on good enough terms with John to have willingly safeguarded this box. Whatever it is.

Putting aside his longing for coffee, Greg shuts his office door and gets out his phone. "John, hey. You free to talk?"

"For a minute or two. Mary's run to the chemist's."

"Good; I just got a box delivered to me," he reports. "Anything special you want done with it?"

The baby's wails echo plaintively in the background, on the other end of the line. John sounds tense and harried. "I don't know when I'll be free. I'll try to set something up, soon—I'm coming, Daddy's coming!—just keep it safe, yeah?"

"I can do that, sure. But what is it? Sherlock seemed to think it could be time sensitive..."

John doesn't immediately answer. The cries get louder, and then there's a few seconds of awkward rustling over muttered noises of comfort as he apparently reaches his daughter and hoists her up against his shoulder; finally he says, somewhat spitefully, "Maybe I should just let you and Sherlock read it without me. I'm certainly not looking forward to doing it!"

Whatever information is inside this mysterious parcel, it must have the potential to shed some light on the situation. But it also sounds like it's personally painful for John to contemplate. "Only if you insist. I just want to help, John."

"I know. Sorry. Look, I do mean it; it could be important, we can't risk acting too late just because
I can't get a night off. And I'm not sure I want anyone in the room when I see... Be careful, though, will you? This can't be seen by anyone."

"My flat is secure. Just let me know when you can drop by," Greg says. "I'll talk to Sherlock."

The work day drags long, one task after another presenting itself for Greg's attention—and getting it, even though he's been on since eleven the previous night and he knows better than to spread himself too thin. He doesn't waste time analyzing his urge to work the extra hours, but in the slack moments between phone calls and video analyses he's aware of a heavy, sick tension in the pit of his stomach.

The package sits ominously in his desk drawer, waiting to be carried home.

Later, in the dead of night, Sherlock sends an inquiring text—and is knocking on Greg's door mere minutes after the response. Greg had woken from his extended post-double nap less than an hour before, to blearily scrounge up something to eat. He's off the next couple days, so while he's aware that three o'clock is an uncommon time to receive visitors, he isn't too bothered about being kept up in the wee hours; Sherlock, on the other hand, doesn't exactly seem conscious of the time. At least, not beyond Lestrade is awake, so it's fine, apparently.

"That's what you wear to sleep?"

Greg glances down at himself, reflexively confirming that yes, he had in fact put something on when he'd thrown himself at his bed late that afternoon. This time he's grabbed an old band T-shirt, almost too faded to read the logo. "Something wrong with it?"

Sherlock waves a scornful hand at his flannel pyjama bottoms as he steps into the flat. "Not if you're colour blind. Those lurid shades are an insult to the very concept of plaid."

"These were a gift from my sister. They're comfortable. And anyway, I don't think I'll be taking loungewear advice from the man who wore a bed-sheet into Buckingham Palace, thanks."

"Suit yourself. Where's the parcel?"

"Hang on, I stuck it in a cabinet..." Ostensibly, that had been to keep it safe from nonexistent prying eyes. But the truth is that Greg hadn't been able to sleep until he'd come back to the kitchen and stowed the box well out of sight. He retrieves it now, and passes it to Sherlock nonchalantly, as if hiding packages behind the salad plates is perfectly normal.

With a quizzical glance but no comment, Sherlock takes the parcel to the table and unwraps it to reveal a book-sized metal case, secured by a four digit combination lock.

"You know the code?" Greg asks. John hadn't mentioned a code. Dealing with the baby had distracted him and cut their conversation short.

"No," says Sherlock, "but John set it last October, at a time of great emotional upheaval for him. He locked this up and sent it away to spare us both the temptation; clearly he wouldn't have chosen a number that his wife would think to recognise as significant, and he'd at least have made an effort to prevent me guessing if I were to retrieve it behind his back. So he'd have picked something that I
wouldn't have the wherewithal to know—but, given what was weighing most heavily on his mind at the time..." He stares intently down at the box for a few seconds, then looks up at Greg. "How long was my coma?"

"Twenty-eight hours," Greg answers readily, and when Sherlock's expectant expression doesn't change, he grimaces and clarifies: "Twenty-eight hours, seventeen minutes." It's embarrassing that he knows the exact time without even having to think about it. He hadn't even been in the room, when Sherlock had awoken...

In a few quick spins, the dials are set to read 2 8 1 7; the latch flips up with a decisive click. Sherlock hums in satisfaction and opens the case to reveal a silver USB drive, nestled on a lining of egg-crate foam like a deadly weapon.

"She won't like it, when she finds out John kept this," he says, plucking it up and flipping it to reveal the four initials printed across it in marking pen. "She thinks she saw him destroy it, last Christmas, when he reconciled with her."

"Oh?"

"A duplicate, of course. We'd argued over what to do with it; I believed John wouldn't be able to lie convincingly to her if he knew any of the specifics. And he was certain that if I read it without him, the urge to ask me what I'd seen would prove unbearable. So he made a show of burning the facsimile in my parents' fireplace, as a sign of good faith. Overly theatrical, I thought, but she seemed impressed."

Grabbing one of the dining chairs, Greg beckons Sherlock to follow him into the room where he keeps his computer; they sit and settle in to wait as it boots up. "If whatever's on that is so incriminating to her, why'd she give it to John in the first place?"

"It was all she could offer as a bargaining chip. Once I'd exposed her false identity, her only recourse was to appeal to John's heart; either he would sympathise with her plea, or he would read the contents of the drive and reject her, giving her the excuse to make a clean break."

Greg frowns. He's still struggling with two conflicting images; the Mary he's been acquainted with has always seemed agreeably benign, despite the occasional prickly moments that had drawn his notice. But this other woman, this unnamed assassin, this faceless, threatening figure in black who shoots without hesitation—who is she? He already has the sense that a clean break for her would have involved a bloody mess for everyone else.

"I presume you're checking your system regularly for surveillance," Sherlock mutters, hesitating with the A.G.R.A. drive poised in front of its slot, "given that you researched ripples from here during my absence?"

"You presume correctly. Go on, pop it in; let's get this over with."

The drive contains an exhaustive history, file upon file of scanned documents and grainy surveillance photos and mission reports from numerous sources. The data is separated among only four folders, and within each the jumble of coded filenames and document formats provides no clear order; they jump in, choosing a few files at random from the first, only to find they refer to a
man called Alex.

"Interesting," is all Sherlock says, and then he backs out and chooses another folder.

Once they find the correct one, a bit of hunting and pecking leads them slowly through a disjointed and highly disturbing life story. Orphaned as an infant—that part of her current persona appears to be true. But Rosamund Mary Bergstrom clashed horribly with her foster parents. When Mr and Mrs June perished in a house fire, fourteen-year-old Rosamund was suspected of having started the blaze; evidence proved inconclusive despite coroner's reports indicating perimortem blunt-force trauma, and she was released to a temporary home. Less than a year later she was in trouble again, having assaulted a much older boyfriend (who had, in her defence, likely deserved it) and left him for dead. Shortly thereafter, she was plucked from corrective custody by a CIA black-ops recruiter, presumably attracted by the combination of her high test scores and the creative brutality of her handiwork.

From there, Greg and Sherlock must piece her story together from notes on completed missions and neutralised targets.

In eight years under the Americans' orders she was almost too successful, judging by the included news articles repeatedly providing publicly palatable explanations for various civilian casualties. Perhaps those unnecessary kills were part of the reason they then traded her to Israel's Mossad, who could take greater advantage of her quick-and-dirty style. Later, as the geopolitical climate shifted, Rosamund struck out on her own, forming a loose association with three other disenfranchised agents to take on lucrative contract killings around the world.

Based on what Greg and Sherlock can see, this mercenary partnership is presumably the sole reason for the flash drive's existence; why else would Mary choose to keep such a damning record of her own exploits?

"The three other folders," Greg murmurs, his throat dry, and Sherlock nods.

"Some kind of insurance against any of them selling out on the others, I expect. I'll have to study all of their files, too, later."

The record stops about six and a half years before the present day. No note or document has been included to explain the abrupt halt.

Sherlock sighs and rolls his chair back from the desk with a loud, grating squeak of springs. "Well, I'd already determined that Mary Morstan had no record of existence before about September of 2009, and even then didn't appear to actively be living under the alias until the late summer of 2011. So that leaves one year wholly unaccounted for, and two more that are questionable."

"Wonder what else she got up to, once she didn't have to keep up her digital scrapbook?" Greg rubs wearily at his eyes, groaning at his back's protest as he stands up from the hard seat for the first time in over three hours.

"Mm, yes. More importantly, on what terms did she end her partnership with this trio of mercenaries?"

"Fuck if I know, but you'll probably have the opportunity to ask her soon. Come on; I'll fix us some breakfast."
John arrives just before seven, sharply dressed for a day he's supposedly working at the surgery. He steps through the door with a hunted air, looking around like it's his first time in the flat; it may as well be. He hadn't been in a state to focus on anything beyond Sherlock's arrest, the last time. (He doesn't actually seem all that much more aware of his surroundings this time; tellingly, Greg's embarrassing pyjamas earn no further jibes.)

Greg offers him food, to be polite: he's only just cleared away their empty plates, and it wouldn't be a hardship to put a few more eggs on to fry. But John declines, allowing Sherlock to lead him directly back into the little office room, where the correct folder is already open and waiting on the screen. They've made notes on a scratch pad, so that John can view the files in chronological order more easily than they had.

Just as Greg passes in the hall, on the way from his bedroom with an armful of fresh clothing, Sherlock asks, "Would you like me to stay?"

"No," answers John immediately, and it sounds harsh to Greg's ears. He hurries into the bathroom and shuts the door, quickly turning on the shower taps so that he won't overhear any more.

With the benefit of the notes, it takes only about two hours for John to finish reading. One minute the living room is suffused in a dense, thoughtful quiet—the sort Greg's well used to waiting out—and then, without warning, John storms in and sets himself to pacing back and forth in the open space, one hand clamped across his mouth and the other wrapped tight around his stomach.

"This is. Bad," he chokes out between his fingers. "I mean. Fuck. She'd told us she was an intelligence agent; she said she'd killed people—and that was bad enough, it took months before I could even consider acting like—but all of this! My God..."

Sherlock has made himself small at the far corner of Greg's sofa. His feet are pulled up on the cushion, knees to his chest and hands linked around his shins, but he speaks slowly and evenly, as if he isn't one step away from the foetal form of his thinking pose. "We need to focus on the problem at hand."

"Fourteen years old, and she was already a killer!"

"Her last team," Sherlock continues firmly. "The threatening cards. That's what's important right now, John; focus."

When John fails to respond, instead coming to a halt and breathing loudly through his nose as he presses the heels of both hands to his eyes, Greg clears his throat and fills the crackling silence. "So this 'G' on the postcards, you think it's definitely the 'G' from AGRA?"

"Either he is, or he wants Mary to believe he is," says Sherlock.

"Don't call her that," John cuts him off, wheeling around angrily. "She doesn't get to be Mary! Not now!"

"You're wrong. She has to be Mary." Unfolding himself in one smooth movement, Sherlock stands
to face John's trembling anger, his words grave and insistent. "Her fate depends on her being Mary: her ties to you and your daughter are the only thing keeping her in check. Were you not important to her, she'd have taken rash and dangerous action weeks ago!"

John's face twists and crumples; he sinks down to the sofa. Muffled behind the cover of his palms, he moans, "She told me I wouldn't love her, when I'd finished..."

"Well, I'm not asking you to love her; I'm asking you to help her."

"Assuming we can!" John opens his hands to bracket the sides of his face, but his gaze remains fixed on the floor. "How do we even begin to confront her with this? You do recall what happened the last time you offered to help her!"

"I can handle it," Sherlock assures him, glancing over his shoulder to where Greg watches grimly. "I'll take precautions. I'll ease her into it on my own, so she won't feel we're ganging up on her. I'll return the thumb drive to her—that'll give her a measure of security in an uncertain situation. I'll even wear a stab vest, if you insist."

Greg meets his second glance with a tiny, sharp nod. Whatever you need to do, I'll back you up. But he'll put in his own vote in favour of protective gear, nonetheless.

"What you should do is put a tracking device in the damn drive," says John, looking up in sudden determination. "She'll bolt, Sherlock; I'm sure of it. Fuck, and you can't do it 'til next week, there's the christening this Sunday—would you believe, she'd almost worked me 'round to agreeing to naming our baby Rosamund Mary!" It provokes gasps and subvocal murmurs of affront from Greg and Sherlock alike, and John gives them a dark chuckle in response. "Oh, don't you worry. I'm not settling on anything that easily."

Over the next few days John drops out of contact, presumably focusing his energies on acting as normal as possible around his wife and child. In the meantime, Sherlock descends into his own preparations, making a sort of de facto base camp of Greg's flat. There's a reluctant visit to Mycroft's office (complete with a minor tantrum afterwards, to Greg's quiet amusement), more hours spent hunched over the computer to pore over the other files on the drive, and a few strange, cryptic phone conversations with someone named Wiggins. It seems he's taken John's words to heart: if no action is to be taken before the christening, then he intends to be ready immediately after.

"You're really going to do this thing right away?"

"Better than than to wait for the next postcard to panic her," Sherlock replies, sprawling bonelessly across Greg's sofa with the laptop he'd brought over balanced atop his chest. The screen is showing a street map now, but the last time Greg had walked past, he could've sworn he'd seen a selection of brightly coloured high chairs on the screen. Has Sherlock really been shopping online for nursery equipment? Whose account has he been charging?

"I suppose it's nice to see you've made yourself comfortable here, at least," Greg gripes mildly; he finds the newspaper he was looking for and tugs it free of the lounging man's ankle.

There's a motion that might be a shrug, but with the sofa pillow wedged against Sherlock's shoulder
it merely wobbles the laptop back and forth. "Mary doesn't know this place. If she starts getting suspicious of her husband, her first impulse will be to observe my behaviour for confirmation. And, considering that John's general state at this point is that of a rumbling powder keg..."

"Your behaviour needs to be where she can't see it," Greg finishes for him with a sigh. "Okay, I get it. I can't say I'm loving the thought of you having the run of my flat while I'm at work, but I only have a couple shifts left between now and the weekend...so I guess it's fine. I think I've got a spare key I could loan you, somewhere?"

It's a magnanimous gesture, if given grudgingly, but the only reaction he gets from Sherlock is a tiny, pleased hum. It doesn't even seem to be directed at him; a new tab has popped open on the laptop screen as he's been speaking.

For some reason, it's this moment that throws the whole situation into sharp, ridiculous relief for Greg: the looming menace of the unknown ahead; the delicate balance among players seen and unseen; the smug, unhesitating way that Sherlock has relaxed into Greg's territory, when mere weeks ago they'd still circled each other like wary animals, caught up in the revelation of their secrets. "All this time here," he says, soft and incredulous, reeling with the strangeness of it all, "all this opportunity, and you haven't mentioned us once. Haven't asked me anything. Why?"

Sherlock pauses in his awkwardly angled typing, and goes still. After a moment he tips his chin upwards, meeting Greg's eyes upside-down over the arm of the sofa.

"Let's just focus on one improbable, dangerous puzzle at a time, Lestrade," he suggests, smiling.

-----
"Bloody fucking hell," declares John, quite loudly, as his daughter continues to wail.

9. Count To Ten

Greg's spent nearly forty years practising his poker face, and he likes to think he doesn't do a bad job with it, most of the time. After all, he's experienced over a decade of meetings with Mycroft Holmes and made it through them all unscathed; there should be a medal for that, honestly.

But since the chain of events last autumn had abruptly upended his life, and somehow ended his loneliness in the process...well, there's at least one person who no longer takes his stoic act at face value, and she's paying closer attention just now than he'd like.

He's trying for calm, staring out the cab window and measuring long, slow breaths, counting them out in the rhythm of passing lampposts and telegraph poles as he waits for the sight of the steeple to mark their destination. Eight, nine, ten, and out...

The numbers falter as Molly reaches over and takes his hand.

"You'll just stand there with us, and repeat a few words when you're asked," she says, soothingly. "That's all. Nobody will even ask you to hold her."

A high-pitched hum of surprise escapes him, but at least he manages to hold back the strained, frantic laugh he feels bubbling up. It's not as if he can tell her I'm not scared of the baby this time, I'm scared of her mum; that secret's still not out of the bag. Instead he turns, clearing his throat, and changes the subject.

"You look fantastic in red," he tells her. "I can't wait to see everyone stare, when I walk in holding hands with the loveliest woman around."

She flushes and looks down at the bold flowers on her dress. "Thank you; to be honest, I wasn't sure if this was maybe a little too, um, lively for the occasion..."

"Are you kidding me? We're not going to a funeral! Don't worry; it looks great on you." He turns their joined hands and strokes his thumb back and forth, turning his full attention to a new method of self-distraction. "And I bet it'll look even better off you, later..."

"Greg. Hush, now, we're almost there."
The vicar is an easily distracted man by the name of Lowery, with a tendency to hum continually under his breath whenever not speaking or being addressed. He has a kindly smile and a firm handshake, but he seems vaguely unconcerned with much beyond liturgical matters, to the point of actually wandering off mid-sentence. It's apparent that the arrangements for the day have instead been handled by the church assistant, a small woman who bustles in a few minutes after their group has begun to assemble in the antechamber.

"Good afternoon, everyone," she greets them crisply, shoving the heavy, girlish fringe of her mostly grey hair aside in a habitual and entirely useless motion. Her cheeks are ruddy, high and rounded under cool blue eyes. "I'm Dorothea Smythe-Hardison. Just call me Dot. Mr and Mrs Watson, it's lovely to see you both again; now, if the godparents are ready we can quickly go over the stage directions before we begin? Yes?"

Dot looks over at the Gundersons, and though Stella and Ted look startled and flattered at the presumption it's Molly who answers, stepping forward with her arm linked through Mrs Hudson's. "Yes, we're all four here, it's—wait, Greg, where's Sherlock got to?"

"What—? He was right behind me a minute ago!"

He's lingering in a dim corner near the doors, tapping away intently at his phone. When Greg strides over and hooks his elbow to fetch him, muttering a quiet warning, he hisses back, "It's important."

"Well, so's this! Come on, best foot forward, yeah?"

Dot fixes an almost inordinate amount of attention on Sherlock as she instructs them; her gaze lingers curiously on him at the end of every sentence, as if she's specifically intent on studying him. It draws Greg's notice: Sherlock does tend to pull people's focus, but generally only when he's either trying to control the action or putting on some kind of act. Wary of a possible disruption, Greg watches carefully for Sherlock's reaction to the scrutiny—but there isn't one, really. In fact, Sherlock hardly seems to notice the woman at all; he nods at all the right places, and wears a moderately respectful expression, but his mind is apparently elsewhere.

His hands are elsewhere, too. Greg has to reach around behind Mrs Hudson's back and smack at his fingers, to get him to pocket the phone as the christening finally gets underway.

Though Father Lowery may be a flighty conversationalist, he executes the ceremony flawlessly, intoning the prayers and blessings in a calming, sonorous voice that triggers not-unpleasant memories from Greg's early childhood. By the time they're all standing in their places around the baptismal font, Greg is immersed in the mood of the occasion; his irrational anxiety over the infant is nearly forgotten. That's only a portion of what he has to be anxious about, of course; he doesn't let his mind wander far. Every time Mrs Watson shifts on her feet, he checks his own balance, ready to spring into unlikely action.

"Now, what name have you given your daughter?" prompts Father Lowery.

There's a beat of tension, a glance between the two parents so quick and subtle as to be missed by anyone not specifically angled to watch for it; Mary breaks it first, glancing down in acquiescence.

John looks up at the vicar and answers smoothly, "Caroline. Caroline Rose."

The quiet victory makes Greg smile. It's a beautiful name.
It's still on the early side of Monday morning, in that almost sacred-seeming hour following the weekly briefing, when the entirety of the office floor lingers in a hush over their coffees and slowly spins up their wheels for the work ahead. At this point in the day, nobody is inclined to pay much attention to anyone else's business; a closed door draws no comment, and a quiet meeting goes unnoticed.

As usual, however, Sally steps in with only the most perfunctory of knocks, and is speaking her mind before she's even fully through the door.

"Sir, I've got the information you were looking for on—oh. Hello," she says, stopping short at the sight of Sherlock slouched in a visitors' chair with his feet insouciantly propped on the front edge of the desk. "Haven't seen you darkening this door in a while, Holmes. Thought you and the boss had a falling-out?"

"Er, he needed my help with something," Greg offers as explanation, and Sherlock actually snorts on a swallowed laugh.

"Oh, yeah?" Sally looks back and forth between them, visibly suspicious, before returning her focus to Sherlock. "Is it help figuring out how to tell the rest of the Yard to shove off, now that you're bored with taking their cases? I keep telling Corran and Iverson that I can't help them get in touch with you, I'm not handling your schedule. 'Course, they don't believe me; I work for Lestrade, and he works for Holmes—"

"Hey, now," Greg protests; Sherlock drops his feet to the floor and turns to frown at her.

"—and as far as they're concerned that's the way of it," she goes on, crossing her arms and leaning into the doorway with an air of oddly gentle mockery. "Could you at least answer a few of their emails? They're driving me spare!"

"My apologies, Donovan," says Sherlock awkwardly, sounding almost mystified at his own words. "It's been a busy few weeks, what with the birth of John's daughter Caroline, and since the Moriarty plot's been sorted, I suppose I let things slide..."

"I get it. Well, let 'em down easy, huh? And give my regards to the Watsons."

"Certainly."

"Right; I guess I'll leave you to it. Just come find me when you want that report." Nodding Greg's way, she slips out and pulls the door closed behind her.

For a moment, they sit speechless. Greg finds his voice first: "Let things slide?"

Sherlock shrugs. "It's true. Not just the Yarders; there's a private client I've been putting off, too. I met with her once, just before Hopkins set me on the right track, and I haven't had time for her since."

"Huh. Think you'll be finding the time, now that..." Greg gestures vaguely to indicate their current situation.
"We'll have to wait and see."

"Yeah, guess so. Anyway, here; I got the vest." He pulls it from beneath his desk and hands it across, noting the flicker of distaste in the man's expression. "You'll really wear it? You're not just saying you will, to stop John going with you?"

"I'll wear it. I don't have to like it." Sherlock stands and moves around towards Greg's side of the desk, laying the protective gear across the chair until he's ready to hide it in his coat to leave. Pulling out his phone, he adds, "And before you ask, no; I don't want you hanging around nearby, or sending officers for backup. If I play my cards right, I won't be in any danger, and your planned evening with Molly should be entirely undisturbed."

Greg nods. They both know he doesn't need to be close by, in the event he is required. And as far as his girlfriend... "She knows," he says, bringing Sherlock's typing thumbs to a pause. "About what I do, I mean. She caught me out, the night you pulled that Leinster Gardens trick. Just, uh, thought you should be aware."

Sherlock's lips press tight for a heartbeat. "I owe you an apology, then, for forcing you to share your secret."

"Let's not get into all that, okay? It's fine. Better than fine, since I can be honest with her; at this point, practically the only thing she doesn't know about is Mary."

"Mm, yes. About that. Here we go..."

He leans in a little, angling his phone for Greg's benefit as he sends the text he's composed, and immediately taps out a second one to follow it.

I know about Gabriel. I've got information that'll help.

SH

Meet me at Kew Gardens - you know the spot. 11 PM. John doesn't need to know.

SH

They wait in silence, expectant; Greg tries to imagine what must be going through Mary's—through Rosamund's mind. Shock? Anger? Relief at the prospect of assistance? Her response, when it comes at last, gives no clue to the emotion behind it.

I'll be there.

Greg checks his watch, shifting to turn his back against the chill of a wayward breeze. The sun is getting lower in the sky, and taking the flush of mid-April warmth with it; he'd expected his wait to end five minutes ago. Of course, the real countdown ticking away at the back of his mind still has nearly four hours to run.

Over the last few months, it hasn't always been easy to make his schedule mesh with Molly's,
despite the tangential relationship between their duties. But he takes special pleasure in the evenings when he can meet her on her way out of work, and escort her directly from Barts to a nice dinner out, if she's up for it—or home (his or hers) for a glass of wine, a foot massage and a sympathetic ear, if she's not.

When she first comes out the door of the hospital after a long shift, she may look tired, or sore, or stressed—but all that weight always seems to lift away from her, somehow, as soon as she sees him. Watching her eyes widen and sparkle, and that bright smile coming out like clouds parting for the sun, is a pleasure he's certain he could never tire of.

Tonight she strides straight up and throws her arms around him, nuzzling lovingly into his neck without the slightest hint of concern for any nearby colleagues. Strong soap, and flowers, and the sweet snap of her citrusy perfume combine to light up his senses— God, she's like a drug, he thinks, dazedly reminding himself that he mustn't follow the directive of his hedonistic instinct while they're in public.

She must know her effect on him, because when she pulls back to walk beside him, her fingers trail teasingly down the length of his arm before winding into his grasp.

"So...Mary called me," she says, swinging their clasped hands idly between them. "She's got plans with a friend, tonight, and thinks she'll be later than they'd originally thought; she asked if I'd mind helping John out for a few hours..."

Now he understands her blatant show of affection: she's trying to let him down easy. "Oh. Well, that's all right. We can do dinner out another night this week."

"Of course we can." She hesitates, regret for their lost romantic evening clear in her eyes. "Or— you could come along, if you want. I mean, I can do all the helping, as far as taking care of Callie, but John likes your company."

He smiles at the transparent excuse, and shifts to walk closer beside her, with their arms slung low around each other's backs. "Hmm, and you'd like my company, too, is that right?"

Molly's chuckle is low and promising. "You know I would. And anyway, now that you're a godfather, it'll do you good to get used to seeing the baby."

Greg's certain that if he waits, she'll continue reaching for more and more reasons to back up her request; it's amusing, in a way, to watch her try and convince him. But she doesn't know that his mind would've been stuck on John tonight, anyway—helping babysit is exactly the excuse he needs to keep himself close to the action.

"Sounds great," he says, grinning to see the easy win surprise her. "Why don't we call John and see if he'd like us to pick up food, on the way?"

John welcomes them into the flat gladly, and not just because they've brought a heavy bag of Lebanese takeaway to share. He seems a little overwhelmed at the prospect of handling things entirely on his own; of the not quite four weeks since the baby's arrival, he's worked for two, leaving Mary the greater part of their shared duties.
Molly is quick to reassure him that he'll get the hang of fatherhood in no time, and that Mary's first night off won't be the end of the world. Then she slips away to the nursery, eager to say hello to her goddaughter, and when John turns to Greg the hollow dread is clear in his eyes.

They take the food to the kitchen, and John speaks quietly under the cover of clacking plates and tableware. "He told me not to worry about tonight. But she'll take off. I just know it, Greg. If not tonight, soon."

"And when or if she does, you won't be alone. It's why you wanted four of us, isn't it? We'll all have your back, John."

"Thanks. I have the feeling that I'll be leaning on you all quite a lot; I still don't know what I'm doing, with a baby!"

Greg's about to make some automatic comment about his own inability, but he stops himself. When it comes down to it, he has years of study under his belt—not only in the areas of infant CPR and first aid, but an extensive familiarity with the prevention of potential dangers. Sure, he lacks in hands-on experience, but Molly remains serenely confident that he has what it takes...

As if hearing the direction of Greg's thoughts, John comments next, "But Molly certainly knows her stuff. Did you see, she even insisted on taking Callie and changing her for us, at the church yesterday?"

"Yeah. As a teenager, she helped care for a handful of much younger cousins. She loved it. If she hadn't gone for pathology, she probably would've chosen paediatrics."

"Mm. I can see it." They settle in at the table, pulling out containers of hummus and falafel to divvy up. "You know, I have to say, you two seem great together. Really in sync with each other; I'm impressed. How long did you say you've been a couple?"

"Not long. Only about four months or so," Greg answers distractedly, reaching to pull Molly's chair out for her; she's coming down the hall with the baby cradled against her shoulder.

"Callie wants to keep us company for dinner," she announces, and seats herself with a grateful nod his way when he begins loading up her plate for her. "What've we missed?"

"I was just telling John about how long you and I have been friends," he says.

"Oh! Ages, seems like! I don't think you even met Sherlock until years later, did you?"

The emphasis she puts on met is so slight as to be basically imperceptible, but he knows it's there all the same. I love you, he tells her with his eyes. "You're right. More than three, I think."

"Wow. Well, congratulations on finally figuring it out," John says to them both, with a wide smile that takes any possible sting from the words. "They do say it's better, not to rush into things. Not that I paid all that much attention to that, I guess! For me and Mary, it was only about thirteen months, beginning to end—to the wedding, I mean."

Greg doesn't miss the tiny grimace that comes with John's correction; it makes him think back to that day, himself, and maybe that memory is what awakens the mischievous urge to meddle just a little. "Oh...well," he tosses out between bites of his meal, "love at first sight is definitely a thing, too. Someone could, I dunno, move in with a person the day after they meet them, and be totally devoted, just that fast. I mean, I'm sure it's different for everyone."

John stops chewing. Then he starts again, and swallows. "I'm sure it is," he agrees, and with that
the topic of love is dropped.

"...Greg?"

His name is spoken softly, barely louder than the tense dialogue being exchanged on the television. At hearing it, Greg looks around to see John standing almost out of sight, down the hallway, beckoning from the shadows. He checks that Molly is undisturbed, still engrossed in the film, before getting up to follow.

John draws him past the half-open door to the nursery, and into the bedroom he's never seen before. "It's getting late," John says, still hushed. "Your phone hasn't gone off at all?"

"No, nothing yet," Greg answers. He pulls the door carefully to rest just shy of closed; Callie's already woken once for a nighttime feeding, and the hope is that she'll stay down this time for at least another hour. "Nothing on yours?"

"Not from either of them. I should've heard from Sherlock by now, at least; it's been well over an hour since the meeting..."

"Maybe they're just busy, still. Occupied with the details, assuming she's decided to let him get involved. I'm sure he's okay."

"But what if he isn't?"

"He's okay," Greg assures him. He knows it's true, after all, even if he can't prove it. "We'll hear from one of them soon enough."

"Yeah, well, I have a feeling it won't be her," mutters John. "I was just in the closet looking for the portable changing pad, and we'd stored all the luggage at the back, after the honeymoon—it's a five piece set. Only three are left."

The implication is clear. Greg's heart sinks in sympathy. "I'm sorry, John." Struck silent by the loss and guilt radiating from the man's defeated posture, he sends his gaze tactfully away to the printed wallpaper: as his eyes travel across the blue jumble of birds, a thought occurs to him. "Did she leave the postcards behind?"

The question rouses John from his dark moment. "Oh—I hadn't thought to check. I think that jewellery case is still in the bathroom..." He steps into the en suite, bending to rummage in a cabinet, and Greg watches from the doorway.

The deep red case he retrieves is like a piece of stiff silk origami, boxy on the bottom and tied with a drawstring on top. In a few quick motions, John lifts out two small zippered bags and a few loose brooches, then reaches in and feels under the edge of the reinforced base.

"Still here," he confirms, pulling out the cards and passing them over.

John's hasty photos hadn't done the artist justice; layers of paint and gold embossing make angels' wings shimmer on the topmost card, slick under Greg's thumb.
Just then, there's a commotion from the front of the flat, and Molly's voice rises sharply. "Sherlock? Oh my God, what's happened?"

Greg thunders out of the bedroom immediately, with John right behind him; the door smacks the wall behind them, sharp as a gunshot. In the front room, the sight of Sherlock stops them short.

His overcoat is covered in dirt and cobwebs on one side, and he looks a bit disoriented, but otherwise unharmed. "Sorry," he says, his voice thick. "She slipped me a knockout drug. Took the stick and ran; I'm sorry, John. I'd have told you sooner, but apparently I stepped on my phone as I fell..."

The baby's begun to cry fretfully, down the hall; meanwhile, John is spitting a quiet string of curses under his breath, pushing past Greg to get close to Sherlock, brushing part of the mess off his shoulder while grasping at his other hand for his pulse.

Molly crouches to pick the dropped phone up from the carpet. Its screen is crushed. "She who? What's going on?"

Shaking his head, still fuzzy, Sherlock continues to speak over her timid questions. "Should've worked. I said everything right. Something must've—she, she was already panicked. The mail, was there mail today?"

Greg's still clutching the painted postcards tightly in his hands; looking down, he abruptly realises there are three in the stack, not two. Voiceless, he pulls the card from the bottom, holding it out for the others to crowd close and see: the postmark a local handstamp from the Grosvenor Avenue post office—barely three streets away; the message written large in bold felt-tip pen.

_Run little Rose, I'll close my eyes and count to ten..._

"Bloody fucking hell," declares John, quite loudly, as his daughter continues to wail.

-----
Caretakers

Chapter Summary

There's no response from Sherlock for the rest of the day, but that's not much cause for concern.

10. Caretakers

They get Sherlock's dirty coat off him, and John helps him walk over to the sofa on shaky knees while Greg goes to the fridge and pours him a glass of juice. Molly hurries away to try settling the baby—by now she's gathered that this isn't the most opportune time to ask the three of them to stop and explain what's happening from the beginning.

Greg, at least, has given her a few significant and sympathetic looks in the midst of the agitated scene. This is what I was keeping from you. Sorry, I'll explain it to you later. She's a sharp listener; he knows she'll pick up a lot from context.

"So what's the plan?" he asks, when Sherlock has downed half the glass and begun to look alert again. "Can we intercept her before she leaves the country? Put out an all-points watch?"

"No. Gabriel is too close, at this point; were we to corral her, we'd merely make an easier target of her. The AGRA team's record speaks for itself: targets in protective or punitive custody are hardly safer. Her best chance of survival is to follow the contingency plan she's already made for herself."

"But you have a tracker on her," John puts in. He accepts the juice glass Sherlock pushes at him, depositing it on the coffee table. "You did do that much, right?"

Sherlock dips his head in a slow nod. "In order to conserve battery life, it sends a half-second signal only once every four hours. A constant trace, while more precise, would run far greater risk of detection, and the periodic data points should be enough to infer the likely path between."

From his perch on the armchair nearby, Greg glances up over the others' shoulders. Molly is hovering just inside the kitchen, peering at them around the corner of the built-in bookshelves there while she quietly rocks and soothes the blanket-wrapped infant at her shoulder. Her eyes meet his, wide and concerned, as he asks the next question on his mind. "How will we know if Gabriel catches up with her, though? I mean, sorry to have to say it, John, but just 'cause the stick is moving doesn't mean she's the one carrying it..."

John grunts expressively, his lips buried against the knuckles of his clasped hands.

"We won't, of course," answers Sherlock; "not from the tracking alone. But I'll cross-reference it with all available data: CCTV footage, airline passenger lists, police reports. Mycroft's agreed to facilitate my daily access to the resources I'll need."

"Lot of work. He expects you to do it all yourself?"
He shrugs. "There are more pressing matters for the British Government right now. One retired assassin, running from the vengeance of a teammate presumed killed in a slaughter of a failed mission—it's hardly national security, is it? He's willing to help us, but at this stage he can't provide personnel."

"She knew," John bites out. "She saw this coming; she knew she'd end up on the run. Never once said anything—Christ, never even attempted talking to me about it—knowing all the while she'd leave me with my hands tied! Knowing she might never see her daughter again!"

Molly lets out a soft gasp, and steps backwards out of sight; the mysterious she has a name, now. Greg shifts unhappily in his seat, wishing he were anywhere else, while Sherlock hunches into curved shoulders and avoids the angry despair of John's gaze.

The wretched moment draws itself taut around them, until it seems to Greg that the very air is saturated and vibrating with silent misery.

At last, John smudges forefinger and thumb across his eyes, and sighs. "So," he asks, quiet and hoarse, "what now?"

"Now...we wait," says Sherlock.

"...Sure, I can do that..." Greg paces along the hall as he speaks on the phone, eyes raised to double-check his work on the cornice moulding; the section he replaced when he was here last month is pleasingly indistinguishable from the original. Around the corner, in the kitchen of his childhood home, a murmuring conversation continues without him. "I work Monday, but I can duck out long enough to go over there with you. It doesn't take long, does it?"

"Not long at all," John answers; "it only took about twenty minutes the other day, with Mrs Hudson. It's just a brief interview where they go over policies, record your information for the file and then have us both sign off on it. Photograph, copy of your ID, all that—you know, safety stuff."

"Got it; wouldn't want an impostor trying to pick her up, would we? Just let me know what time and I'll meet you at the daycare." He makes a quick goodbye, shoving the mobile back into his jeans pocket as he returns to the kitchen.

Molly is occupied with stirring chocolate pieces into a large bowl of biscuit dough, and doesn't look up, but Mum lifts an eyebrow. "Did I hear you say 'daycare', just now?"

"Oh, it's for a friend—his wife left him a few weeks ago, and he's trying to get infant daycare arranged for his daughter Caroline. He has to do some important business travelling, soon," he explains.

"Greg and I are both godparents," Molly chimes in over her shoulder.

"Oh..."

Greg takes a step closer, worried at the unexpected change in his mother's expression. "Mum? Your face is, uh, doing a thing..."
"Oh, I'm just overflowing, don't mind me, Greg," Mum burbles, flapping her hands a bit. "First you bring this brilliant, darling woman home with you, and now you tell me you're taking care of a baby together!"

"No-no, it's not like that; I'm just gonna be helping shuttle her to and from daycare once or twice a week," he says.

Molly laughs and abandons the mixing to come over and sling an arm around his waist. "Don't listen to him, Margaret; he helped me with her for the whole afternoon, last Tuesday! We haven't worked him up to nappies yet, but he's a dab hand at burping."

The flush that rises to Greg's face with the compliment only makes Mum smile more widely. "When can I meet her?"

"Mum! I don't think there's such a thing as a...god-grandmother!"

"A grand-godmother, even better," giggles Molly. "Next time you visit London, I'll try to make sure we cross paths with John and Callie at least once. You'll adore her, she's already got such a personality..."

"How wonderful!"

Greg rolls his eyes in affectionate vexation. "Next time'll be the wedding trip, remember. I know you expect me to play tour guide for everyone before we all jaunt off on holiday, but I don't know that I want to bring my entire family 'round to gawp at my two-month-old goddaughter!"

Molly exchanges a look with Mum. "I'll see what I can do," she assures her, with a wink.

"Fantastic; I'll count on you, Molly," Mum says. "Now, then. Let's get these biscuits started, and you can tell me all about her, while we let Greg get back to his work."

"Yeah, okay, break time's over for the handyman, I get it! I can tell when I'm not wanted," he jokes, and gives them each a kiss before heading back upstairs.

With her head angled down towards her work, the slender woman behind the reception window at the Bright Beginnings daycare centre is nearly obscured by her untamed mass of frizzy, mouse-brown curls. It isn't until John reaches the counter, with Greg a respectful pace behind, that she lifts her narrow, freckled face to look up and smile. "Mr Watson! No—Dr Watson, sorry—what can I do for you, today?" The name badge pinned to her brightly patterned cardigan reads Miss Jessica Gracewell, Care Manager.

"Yes, hello again. If you don't mind, I'd like to have you update Caroline's file with an approved guardian."

"Another one?" Miss Gracewell peers at Greg over John's shoulder through the thick lenses of her tortoiseshell glasses, absenty stroking at her finely pointed chin. "Or has something happened to your Mrs Hudson? I do hope not."

"No, she's fine."
"Oh, good; she's such a sweet lady." She gets up and walks around to unlock the access door, waving the two of them past her to a small office at the end of the corridor. "Though I must say I was a bit alarmed when she started telling me all about her sports car..."

John intercepts Greg's inquiring glance with a shrug as they all take their seats. "I'm just covering all the bases. DI Lestrade, here, is one of Callie's godfathers."

"One of?"

"Well, yes. There are two. I'll be bringing in her other two godparents, as well, later this week."

"So many!" She favours them with a dazed, bland sort of smile, flipping through a file drawer to look for Callie's records. "I've forgotten: have you had her mother come in, yet?"

John stiffens beside him. "Her mother, ah, isn't in the picture," he says.

"Oh no, are you a widower? My apologies, I hadn't realised! And with Caroline so young; my, my. Um, here we are; Mr Lestrade, if I could just start by having you complete this form..."

Greg nods, and produces the pen from his pocket before she can offer him one with the clipboard. "Ah, yes; paperwork. Feels like I never even left the office today," he mutters to John; it elicits a tension-breaking chuckle, just as he'd hoped.

"I do hope I haven't upset you, Dr Watson," says Miss Gracewell after a moment. "I certainly don't mean to imply that adding four guardians to your child's records is improper. It's simply...unusual? Most single parents tend to rely on only one or two people to help them pick up the slack, if they find they need a bit of help."

Greg glances up from the form, but John's expression is a pleasant mask. The lack of response doesn't put her off the subject; she seems to take it as encouragement to go on chattering.

"I think it comes down to trust, don't you? When you think about it," she says. "How many people in your life can truly be trusted never to let you down? Never to keep important things from you, or leave you unexpectedly, or lie to you?"

Greg's pen is a fat capsule of heavy brass engraved with his initials, and it's hot in his white-knuckled grip. If he'd accepted the cheap ballpoint from the woman's desk, he thinks there's a fair chance it might have snapped in half by now. "Well, you know what they say: it takes a village," he comments, looking over at John again. "Don't listen; by those criteria, you'd only be left with Mrs Hudson. And maybe not even her."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course! It's just so rare, these days," gushes Miss Gracewell. Her glance grazes Greg like a skipped stone over water; she's clearly startled that he's chosen to chime in. "With the world the way it's going, you know. Modern parents have to work harder than ever, to make sure they control who and what influences their children."

"Mm. I suppose so," says John, with a quelling frown.

She takes the hint, at last, and subsides into awkward quiet for the minute it takes Greg to complete the last information and sign his name. Then she regains her script, popping up from her seat in obvious relief: "Great, yes, this all looks to be in order. And may I just say, again, how much we look forward to having little Callie with us! Mr Lestrade, if you and Dr Watson will follow me, I'll give you the tour of our nursery rooms."
"Finland," Sherlock had said, "by way of a small fishing boat. She's probably changed names again, today." These had been his only words, on his return from whatever secret analysts' cave he's been visiting each day. In the hour since then, he's hardly looked up from his laptop, seemingly indifferent to Greg's presence.

As the Baker Street flat soaks in the thick afternoon silence, one round of baby bottles sits soaking in the kitchen sink; a second set is laid out in pieces along the worktop. It had been Mrs Hudson's suggestion that he stay to prepare a few portions of the baby's formula, pre-mixed to keep ready on hand in Sherlock's fridge. She'd expressed a reluctance to have Sherlock do it himself—she'd thought all the mixing and measuring would somehow tempt him to experiment with the proportions. Greg suspects Molly's hand in the request, though; she's determined to get him gradually more involved in Callie's care, especially now that she knows how much John will rely on their help.

He doesn't mind. This is exactly the sort of thing he can handle best: small, sharply defined tasks, involving minimal contact. Molly had chosen to play up his skill level in conversation with his mother, and that had been kind of her. But unless by dab hand she'd merely meant that he'd managed to hold the infant for a sum total of ten minutes before his anxiety had ratcheted up to intolerable levels—well, at any rate, he knows he has a lot of work ahead of him.

He's still busy with his tasks, when a brisk knock intrudes on their peace; Sherlock gets up to open the sitting room door without complaint or delay, and that's surprising enough in itself that Greg peers around from the kitchen to see the apparently expected visitor.

It's a petite woman, wearing high heels and a smartly tailored skirt suit. Dramatic makeup accentuates the almond shape of her dark eyes; the effect, with the ends of her bob-cut black hair grazing her high and rounded cheeks, is that of a very determined alabaster doll.

Sherlock ushers her to sit. "Ms Huang, I presume?"

"Call me Wanda, please," she says; "it's a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr Holmes. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed! My readers will be thrilled to know more about the hidden story behind the Moriarty Panic, at last."

By this time Greg has returned to the sink; at hearing mention of Moriarty, his grip slips and the bottle he's scrubbing splashes into the water.

"Oh! And is that John Watson? I do hope he'll be joining us!"

"Dr Watson is otherwise engaged," Sherlock dryly informs her. "I'm afraid you'll have to make do with me alone."

Chagrined, Greg wipes off his hands and pops his head around the sliding door panel. "Sorry, Sherlock; I was just gonna finish this up and go..."

Wanda turns around fully to see him, and her face lights up in recognition. "You're DI Lestrade, aren't you? The Scotland Yard powerhouse behind Mr Holmes's savvy skills! You must have an exciting insider's perspective on the terror plot he thwarted, following that frightening media takeover."

"Oh, well, not really; I mean, it was all Sherlock's—"
"Nonsense," Sherlock breaks in. "You certainly had a hand in the action! I might not have cracked it in time, without your help. Please, Lestrade, have a seat; this is nearly as much your interview as it is mine." His face is performatively friendly and inviting; his eyes, however, say help.

So of course, against his better judgment, Greg stays to help.

It doesn't go too badly, at first. Sherlock does most of the talking; he quickly lays out the sequence of events and gives an abbreviated account of his reasoning, while the woman puts in noises of astonishment and approval at intervals. When Greg does speak, it's mostly to clarify things in publicly acceptable terms.

He's surprised that Sherlock has agreed to meet with a reporter at all, but it seems likely that Wanda had simply worn him down through sheer persistence. Her intense personality becomes obvious when the interview shifts abruptly from its safe, relaxed exposition phase into a prodding search for a meatier story.

"Is it true that these acts of heroism on your part have been purposefully kept secret?" she asks, at one point; later she suggests, "It must be grating to realise that no one around you can rise to the level of a true contemporary."

Sherlock brushes these away with quiet demurrals, but she's not put off.

"My sources at Scotland Yard tell me you enlisted the Met's help in searching for clues to the plot, and solved a number of their other cases in the process. They also say this was well out of character, for you," she says, crossing her legs and leaning in like a hound on the scent. "Do you find that the resentment of officers hoping for your assistance and never receiving it outweighs the resentment of those who find their own hard work invalidated by your superior intellect? Or—and do forgive me, Inspector, but I really must ask—the inevitable resentment of someone who's spent years trapped in your shadow, utterly relying upon you?"

"Bloody reporters," Greg complains, after he shutting the door behind her at last.

But Sherlock has descended into his thinking pose, and doesn't reply.

Perhaps Greg's limited window on his charge's younger years has resulted in a somewhat distorted understanding of his mind, but the way he's come to understand it, Sherlock's curiosity comes in waves. A pressing, all-consuming interest in geology fizzles away to nil from one day to the next; every free surface in a room may be covered in entomological specimens within the space of a week, only to see them discarded all at once when the study abruptly loses its attraction. So, while being at the receiving end of that same eager preoccupation had been admittedly disorienting, Greg hadn't been too surprised when Moriarty and then the Watsons had taken precedence over the investigation into his gift. He'd understood Sherlock's reluctance to split his focus, when other matters became more urgent—and anyway, by that point it seemed that most of the truly important questions had been addressed.

So now that John has been left in the lurch, and everyone is scrambling to help compensate, when Greg returns from work to find Sherlock waiting outside his flat he presumes it's something to do with Mary. An update on the tracking data from the thumb drive, he expects, or maybe a
verification on a disposable alias she's used.

But apparently, these four weeks of relative inaction—forced by the necessity of waiting until Caroline's reached the minimum age to begin daycare—have made room for a fresh wave of curiosity. Sherlock's back, tonight, for another chat about the ripples.

"I've spent the day trying to decide on the most scientific way to quantify your abilities," he begins, before they even have their coats off. "Obviously the technical limitations preclude an active trial, but I think we might compensate with a system of scaled responses."

"Oh, no." Greg shuts and locks the door with a grimace, following him into the living room in time to watch him fall into his now-accustomed place on the sofa's left hand side. "Come on, Sherlock, can't we skip the science for a little while longer?"

"But it's irresistible! Surely you don't expect me to sit on my hands, when you've given me such brilliant unknowns to explore?"

Licking at his lips in agitation, Greg protests, "I really don't think we should be examining it too closely..."

"Whyever not? This phenomenon—"

"It's a calling, right? Look, name it what you want—I know I've never found words that stuck—but the ripples are the deliberate will of a higher power, they must be. Something beyond us, and it's meant to be beyond us."

Sherlock's mouth twists into a tightly quizzical scowl. He looks as if he's about to launch into an atheistic diatribe that would put Dawkins to shame.

"Please. Sherlock. I promise we can revisit this topic at some point, but not tonight? It's still only been a few months!" I haven't even had the guts yet to tell Uncle Ted I've blown the family secret. Let's avoid calling divine retribution down on ourselves just yet, Greg pleads with his eyes.

"Fine," Sherlock sighs at last. "Without your cooperation, there's nothing to study at all; I concede your natural advantage. Where do you suggest we place our focus tonight, then, Lestrade?"

"Well, uh." Caught off guard, Greg reaches for the first thing that comes to mind. "I guess, maybe...the time you were away? I mean, it's been this big secret, ever since you've been back—and when that reporter tried digging into it the other day, you looked ready to bolt. You've kept all of that stuff close to your chest, as far as what you had to do, and I get that. But—"

Sherlock shakes his head, frowning at the floor. "No. Hearing what I've done won't make John any happier with me."

"That wasn't what I was going to say. I was just going to point out that it's obviously still been troubling you."

"Why shouldn't it? Are you suggesting I laugh off the events of those two years? 'Forgive yourself,' you say; is it supposed to be as easy as that?"

"No, you git! I'm saying—you have me to talk to, now. If you want. I'm not demanding anything, but it might make you feel better."

They sit in silence for a while, the offer a quiescent presence between them. Finally Sherlock gets up and goes to the other room, returning a minute later with two glasses and a bottle; he uncaps the
scotch and pours them each a generous two fingers.

"If I'm to talk," he says, decisively handing Greg his share, "I'd rather you drink."

"Mm. This is becoming quite a habit, isn't it."

"Call it tradition, it'll taste better. Noroc," Sherlock declares; Greg looks up in warmed surprise to hear the Romanian toast, and lets him clink their glasses.

Only after Greg has a few good sips in him does Sherlock speak again. "Honestly, I couldn't begin to know what to talk about first. It would hardly do to rehash things you already know, would it?"

"Well, obviously you know a hell of a lot more than I do," Greg reasons. "You have to start somewhere."

"Yes...but if I'm approaching familiar ground in the middle of a tale, I'd rather know it. I could presume your presence in every instance I recall being endangered, but that's awfully imprecise, isn't it? Call me curious; I still don't have a handle on the scope of your sight..."

Greg rolls his neck on his shoulders, the tension there already loosening under the liquor. "Test me, then. Go on." This brand of curiosity seems a little bit safer than the more scientific sort, at least. He doesn't mind the chance to prove himself.

Sherlock's brows twitch. "Your memory—"

"Is better than you'd probably expect, when it comes to this. Though I'll admit it wasn't always easy to figure out where I was seeing you."

"Visually distinctive cities, then. To be fair."

"Kind of you," agrees Greg, lifting his glass in a wry salute. "Come on. I'm ready."

"All right...Mumbai?"

"Two gunmen after you. A lorry turned down the lane and kicked up a cloud of dust at the perfect moment. One guess who was really driving."

Sherlock gives a short nod, granting the first point. "Paris?"

"How you thought you were going to wrestle that hulk of a man out the window on your own, I'll never know," Greg fires back, punctuating his statement with a quick slug of his drink. "You're damn lucky I could make him put his foot down wrong!"

Sniffing and waving a dismissive hand, Sherlock rolls his eyes upwards in thought before asking, "Montevideo?"

Greg blinks and frowns. "Which time?"

"What do you mean, 'which time'? Montevideo. Uruguay."

"I mean exactly what I said. Which time? There were two."

"Really?" Sherlock shifts forward in his seat, drumming long fingers expectantly across his knees.

"The first time, you were coming out of a casino, and walking up the street towards the plaza." Greg can still picture it in vivid detail, the bronze horseman and the odd bulbous cupolas of the
building to the east—he'd agonised over figuring out that city for days, before the second ripple had conveniently taken place at the opposite edge of the same plaza. "There was a man following—I guess you didn't see him, or hear him get hit by the skateboarder?"

"No," admits Sherlock, with his own frown. "Was it the same man I confronted, later?"

Greg shrugs. "Could've been. Or related, maybe. Dunno. Three days in between; I was trying to remember the landmarks, not the goon."

"It must've been hard, figuring out where I was each time. You certainly didn't get the training in specialised memory skills that I did, as a child."

"Yeah, I s'pose it was a pretty tough two years," he says, thinking of the leather journal he still hasn't brought out of its hiding place. Much of what he scribbled in there is just too raw to share. "But I managed."

"Hm. Here." Sherlock reaches across to refill Greg's glass. "What about Venice?"

"Hah, that one was pure inattention on your part, I'm sorry to say! How long had it been since you'd slept?"

They continue in this vein for a while, but eventually the game devolves into an unstructured exchange of stories, going back well before those two years of travelling. The image of Sherlock hiding in the darkened hold of the cargo ship reminds Greg of a youthful game of hide-and-go-seek gone wrong...and that leads back to the memory of Mummy's birthday party, the year that little Sherlock decided to run away from home...

"It made sense at the time," Sherlock insists, scowling at Greg's abrupt giggle.

"Ah, my. Cheryl never forgave me for that." Greg sighs and tips his head back, wistful; he feels the slosh of a fresh pour hitting the emptied glass in his hand, and frowns vaguely for a second before the memory distracts him again. "She thought I ran out on our second date, but it wasn't my fault; they wouldn't let me back into the cinema! She told all her friends I was a worthless, lying loser. After that, none of the girls wanted a thing to do with me."

"That sounds like it was a blow."

"Psh. I was already the class weirdo. Spending all my free time in the library, reading up on religion an' mythology? Always sneaking about, or disappearing in the middle of conversations? Not to mention I was sprouting new patches of grey hair right and left! If not for that play we were in together, she'd never have given me a second look anyway." He wets his dry throat with another warm, tingling sip, eyes closed as it goes down. How many times has Sherlock filled his glass? No matter. "Even my family was fucking convinced I was bound for the clergy! That was a bloody hard notion to shake, lemme tell you..."

Greg wakes the next morning with a pounding head and the taste of hell itself in his mouth. He doesn't remember getting into bed, or changing into these pyjama bottoms; his mother's knitted throw lies crumpled beside him, an incongruous sight away from the sofa where it belongs. A large glass of water waits for him on the bedside table, next to his plugged-in mobile. He feels a pang at
the signs of deliberate minding, though it's quickly eclipsed by nausea; shamed guilt follows him inevitably into the loo.

For all that he's relied perhaps too heavily upon the comfort of drink to numb him through the worst times in his life, he's almost never stupid enough to overdo it like this—especially not with company present. He's always known that letting his mouth run freely is an unacceptable risk. Sherlock may be one of the three people on the planet with whom that risk is lessened—and the fact that there's anyone like that at all remains a novelty—but Greg doesn't like having blank spaces in his memory.

How long had Sherlock let him talk, before taking pity on his drunken ineptitude?

At least he hasn't stuck around to witness the indignity of the hangover; the flat is empty. There's no taunting message on Greg's phone, either, which is something of a surprise.

"What the hell was I thinking," he mutters, "getting that pissed?"

Thanks for tucking me in, he types carefully, one eye closing against the thumping that jars his skull.

There's no response from Sherlock for the rest of the day, but that's not much cause for concern.

-----
Roman Holiday

Chapter Summary

He's laughing before she's even finished saying it, his discontent melted away under the sunshine of her smile.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

11. Roman Holiday

Greg wakes up to a kiss on the forehead, and a shaft of sunlight tinted pink between familiar floral curtains.

"G'morning, bright eyes," he murmurs. "Time is it?"

"Only about six. Sorry to wake you."

"Don't mind." He leans up into the sweet, closed-mouth kiss Molly offers before she moves away from the bed. "D'you need me to get moving?"

"No, it's fine. The spare key is still under the silverware tray; you can sleep in as long as you want. I know you aren't working early today."

He props himself up on one elbow to watch her getting ready. "No, but I'll be swinging over at about eight to take Callie from Mrs H's to the daycare. It's test-run week."

"How could I possibly forget?" says Molly. "Poor John, he's got to have been beside himself worrying, without her home at night for the first time..."

"Well, he only texted me three times yesterday to remind me; that was better than I'd expected! I'm hoping he at least grabbed the chance to get a good night's sleep." Considering the information that's been streaming in from Sherlock's surveillance efforts, and the fast-approaching plans they're finalising, Greg imagines John may have needed a bit of alcoholic or pharmaceutical assistance to do so.

Yawning and scratching lazily at his chest, he gazes at Molly's seated figure from behind. Her hair is wound up into a loose, puffy bun atop her head; as she rummages through the shallow jewellery drawers of her little vanity table, he remembers the feeling of running his fingers through it, and smiles.

She pauses in the act of fastening a chain around her slender throat, and her reflection looks up at him. "I hope you managed to get some real rest, last night, too?"

"Hm?" Even as he questions her, the foggy memory of a string of disjointed nightmares rises to
sour his sleepy contentment. "Oh. A few bad dreams, that's all. Did I bother you much?"

She shakes her head, turning to face him. "What about?"

"Dunno. Nothing, really. Or everything." There had been a woman, he knows that, and fearful or angry shouting in the invisible distance. But without features or form, it's impossible to assign meaning to the dreams—all that's left now is a sense of betrayal and loss, followed by fearful desperation. Nothing terribly abnormal, for him. He pushes the lingering memory firmly away, and flops over onto his back with a huff of breath as if to expel any cloying trace of negativity. "Doesn't much matter, does it? It's just stress."

"And we know how to handle stress, don't we?" she teases, breaking into a knowing smile as she stands.

"We do, at that! C'mere, love, and let me handle just a little more..."

She giggles against his mouth. Neither of them wastes time or breath on words, for a minute or two. Still, his mind on the clock, he manages to keep himself firmly reined in for her schedule's sake; the tiny sigh that catches in the back of her throat when he begins to pull away ignites a spark of primitive satisfaction deep within him.

He hums, relishing the scrape of her short nails over his bare shoulders. "Just think," he says, "at the end of this week, you and I will be waking up together in Rome."

"It'll be nice to have a little break from things, won't it? And I can't wait to finally meet your sister," says Molly.

"Heh. Yeah."

"You're nervous. I can tell," she chides him. "Surely you don't think it'll go badly? Your mother seemed to like me well enough."

"Maybe I'm just worried they all might like you more than they like me, Molls!"

Her eyes roll as she stands up, but she plays along. "Don't be ridiculous; of course they will," she chirps, grinning at the laugh it earns. "All right, I'm going to fix myself some toast; I've got about twenty minutes left to spare. Go back to sleep, if you want to. But..."

"What's that, love?" he asks, shifting to let the bedsheets slip a bit farther down into his lap; she's paused at the bedroom door, looking back, and it's almost impossible not to preen under her appreciative gaze.

"If you feel like handling any more stress before I go, I recommend you get up and brush your teeth."

---

Ever since he first heard the news that Mike had proposed to his girlfriend, Greg had presumed there'd eventually be a big event to worry about attending overseas. Everything his sister told him about Jenny Perrini—her aspirations to eventually leverage a law degree into politics, the spread of her large extended family across New England and Pennsylvania, her parents' comfortable wealth
—led him to picture a grand, traditional wedding with hundreds of guests. Something fancy, and crowded, and anxiety inducing.

But then he'd met Jenny himself, and realised that all those facts didn't paint an accurate picture on their own. Sweet, down-to-earth, adventurous and funny—she's a great match for his kind-hearted and unshakably confident nephew, and the two of them together make a dynamic team. Their decision to treat their immediate families to the intimate luxury of a destination wedding, before honeymooning on an eleven-day Mediterranean cruise, fits them as a couple much better than a ballroom packed with cousins and classmates.

The main event will be the weekend in Rome, but almost everyone has extended their travel around it. Mum has played host to the New York contingent, including the bride, for most of this week. Jenny's older sister Beth has opted to fly over later, joining the group for their two days in London. Meanwhile, their parents have spent the week travelling across Italy, fulfilling what Jenny says is a long-time wish. Greg's had to miss out on most of the family's time in Bristol, but Mike and Jenny have asked him to take charge of everything in London, from hotel and meal reservations, to entertainment, to making sure they all make the plane to Rome on time. It's ideal for him, really: a way to make an important contribution while on his home turf, enough moving parts to keep his worst anxieties at bay, and a little time to relax after the festivities.

Best of all, in Greg's opinion, is the fact that this wedding plan allows him to bring Molly along. Asking her to join him for a week or longer in the States, with all the stress and expense that entails, feels like a level of commitment a bit beyond what they've built in just five months. Perhaps that's just the voice of his fatalistic doubt, fearful of trusting that things between them are as fantastic as they seem. Still, many of his most memorable clashes with Nadia had sparked off during transatlantic family visits. It's far less daunting to contemplate a romantic weekend getaway.

The timing of all this could be better, of course. John hasn't complained about having to postpone going after his wife, and Sherlock has given no clear opinion on the matter, preoccupied as he is with tracking the woman's seemingly random movements from place to place. But Greg is all that's holding them back, now that little Callie's care is sorted out. He can't help but feel a little guilty.

Guilty or not, it's happening; he's resolved to make the most of it.

"Here, Mum, let me take that bag for you. How was the trip? Do we need a cart, you think?" Greg gives his mother a quick kiss on the cheek and starts scanning around for the nearest luggage cart, while the train empties onto a busy platform; soon Pat and Corrie join them, gratefully depositing their suitcases and waving for the others to catch up. Jenny has a phone held up to one ear, and a finger pressed to the other in an attempt to hear over the noise of Paddington Station; she waves at Greg as she gets close, letting the bag slip from her arm onto the growing collection without missing a beat in her conversation—apparently Beth's stuck in a traffic tie-up coming from the airport. After a moment, Mike wrestles a rolling case and an unwieldy dress bag off the train, grinning. Behind him, his sister attempts to help, eventually giving up with a shrug to focus on hoisting her own bulging bag higher on her shoulder.

"Hey, now, there's my girl," Greg calls out jovially, when she gets into hearing range.

"Uncle Greg!"
Gaby's nineteen now, a grown young woman in her own right, but she hails him with almost the same giddy enthusiasm she'd had at ten. She practically throws herself at hugging him, laughing in delight when he lifts her and spins them once around.

It's a relief to be greeted this way; he's dreaded seeing that *joie de vivre* replaced with the sort of cautious reservation that had infected his own youth. Could it be, despite all the signs at Christmas, that he's wrong about her?

The idea is a comforting doubt to cling onto, and he chews it over in the back of his mind as he ushers everyone into cabs bound for the hotel. But he's seen Uncle Ted's diagrams, and they make sense. Second child of the first child: it's what he and Ted are, it's what Ted's lost aunt and uncle were—no telling, yet, whether the circus-bound runaway or the missing soldier was the guardian of that generation. Gaby fits the pattern, there.

In the months since opening up to Sherlock, Greg has kept a tight rein on the inheritance angle, skirting the subject with non-answers whenever it's come up. By this time Sherlock surely has an idea what's being hidden from him; it's a miracle he hasn't pressed the issue yet. He regards his protector as enough of a science experiment, as it is. Greg's reluctant to offer up two more potential subjects.

*Or maybe, only one?* A quick check over his shoulder confirms that his niece is still with the group, though she's lingering some distance away from the others as they congregate in the hotel lobby. It looks like she's texting someone...that's an entirely plausible reason for her to be three steps away from the large potted trees flanking the corridor to the stairwell. And with kids her age, wanting some extra space is normal, right?

Greg ducks his head to hide a smirk. For the time being, he'll just have to live with not knowing.

"We have a block of five rooms reserved, under the names Lestrade and Stonehouse," he tells the clerk, and Pat steps up beside him with his credit card at the ready.

Molly joins Greg's family for an early dinner, and they have a good amount of time afterwards to soak in London's atmosphere before they go in for the comedy show that had been Mike and Jenny's choice of entertainment for the night. The sun is fading, but still out; Greg has the lead on their strolling tour, fielding questions about the city from Jenny and her sister while his own British-born relations hang back and reminisce. He feels ridiculous, honestly—as if he should be wearing a Blue Badge and spouting fun facts off a script. For a moment, he's reminded of Sherlock's brief, high-speed stint as a tour guide, rattling off landmarks and careless historical critique from the driver's seat of a hijacked bus; it had been truly vexing, then, but now the memory brings a wry smile.

"Oh! Sherlock," Molly exclaims as she steps up from behind him, derailing his thoughts quite effectively. "Over here, hello!"

He should have known Molly would go ahead and arrange something like this, just as she'd promised. Approaching from the other side of the street, Sherlock looks as fashionably composed as ever, right down to the glistening burnished leather of the fat satchel slung over his shoulder. John follows in his wake with the baby strapped in a carrier across his chest, and he waves when
they get closer as if it's a causal chance encounter. Greg doesn't believe that for a second.

"Okay then! Everyone, uh, these are friends of mine and Molly's. Dr John Watson, and Sherlock Holmes," he says, turning to face the group and starting off the obligatory round of introductions with those nearest him. "Sherlock, John; this is my nephew Mike, his fiancée Jenny, and her sister Beth..."

"Fantastic, hello," John begins, but Sherlock moves straight past them with no more than a polite nod.

"Mrs Lestrade, I presume." Sherlock takes up Mum's hand and clasps it warmly, while Greg looks on in shock. "It's an honour to meet you."

As she makes a gracious reply and introduces Corrie, Greg can't help muttering to John out of the side of his mouth, "What's he up to?"

"Got me," John murmurs back; "I'd hoped for polite, but..." They exchange a glance. This is a bit beyond polite.

"Aww, who's this little nugget?" "Oh my gosh..." The girls' attention is immediately drawn to Callie; she is, after all, a fantastically lovable infant, with her downy blonde hair and serious, watchful blue eyes. Greg may be a bit biased, of course. When John points out that Greg is her godfather, they melt down further into a swooping high-pitched chorus of adoration, and he's startled at the rush of pride he feels.

It's been only a few weeks, and his deeply ingrained fears remain a frustrating obstacle; how can it be, then, that he already cares for this little girl so much?

Stunned, he turns to look for Molly—just in time to overhear the words, "Your son is an invaluable colleague of mine, and a credit to his profession as a whole."

"Pinch me, love; I must be dreaming," he says, reaching out to her.

She squeezes his hand tight and laughs.

Their newly expanded group walks on together, after the initial introductions are out of the way, but they don't go too far; just before Sherlock and John came along, Gaby had ducked into a shop to find a gift for a friend. The pretty little park at Leicester Square is only one street farther on, and there's enough space there to stand and chat without blocking pedestrian traffic. Everyone's feeling cheerful and sociable, buoyed on the excitement of the week. Even after Gaby catches up and is introduced, there's no hurry to move on. The conversation partners shift, and shift again; Callie comes out of the carrier harness, to be better admired by all.

"Here, Gaby love, you can have a turn holding her," Corrie offers at one point.

Gaby steps obediently closer, but Greg reads hesitation in her movements. "You don't have to," he immediately assures her. "Don't give her a hard time, Cor."

"Fine, but you're missing out! Just look at these cheeks," coos Corrie, nuzzling at the baby's face until she earns a giggle.

Questions and observations from Jenny and Gaby capture most of Greg's attention for a few minutes. When he turns around to check on the others, John is still chatting amiably with Mike and Pat, while Molly holds the baby up to get acquainted with her would-be grand-godmother. But Sherlock stands a few paces away from the rest of the group, his head bent low in conversation
with Corrie.

Something about the sight sends a muted thrill of panic through Greg. He makes a quick excuse and weaves his way around the knot of people.

"...And then he was just so moody and shy, as a teenager," she's saying when he gets close enough to hear. "I don't think any of us were really surprised when he ended up burying himself in such a gruesome career. Murder, and the like."

"What's this?" asks Greg, and their heads pop up and around like startled schoolchildren attempting to look innocent. "Corrie, are you spreading tales about me?"

"No! No, I was only telling your friend here about what a sweet, funny little boy you were!"
Corrie's cheeks still carry a flush from the wine at dinner, and there's a merry sparkle in her eyes.

"Great. That's just the reputation I need around the Yard—sweet and funny."

"No worries, Lestrade; your reputation is safe. Nobody would believe me, anyway." Sherlock turns away from him abruptly. "Well, John, we'd best be going; these people have tickets to a show in thirty minutes, and isn't Caroline past her bedtime, by now?"

She is, of course. It's a wonder they've stayed so long in the first place; they make their goodbyes, and Greg watches thoughtfully as they walk on. What could have prompted Sherlock to behave so atypically?

And why does Greg have the nagging sense that he was only there to test a hypothesis or two?

The hotel room Greg and Molly share isn't overly large—even a well-to-do young couple is wise to watch their budget—but it has the rare bonus of a sun-kissed private veranda, with lush greenery climbing high dividers of wrought iron, and a pair of lounges perfect for sunbathing. Though the sights of Rome have been fascinating and lovely, Greg's spent many a spare moment over the course of the weekend wishing for the chance to get back here to his room and enjoy it.

Now, the main event is done. Saturday's ceremony was intimate and beautiful, set beneath the breathtaking gilded arches and friezes of a small Catholic basilica. From there they proceeded to a restaurant with an enclosed garden courtyard, for a hearty meal and plenty of wine, and then carried the celebration on to join the jubilant nightlife of a nearby piazza. Molly and Greg were hardly the last to say goodnight and head for the hotel, but they stuck it out longer than Mum and the newlyweds' parents. This morning everyone gathered, bright and early, to see the couple off in the cab that would take them to the port at Civitavecchia for their honeymoon cruise; Mike and Jenny remained enviably energetic as they said goodbye, in the sleepless way that only the under-thirty set can manage.

All in all, the trip is a resounding success, and focusing on the wedding has been a refreshing change for Greg. For almost four days, most of his worries have been confined to minor, logistical details: keeping his mother comfortable, matching the right tie to his good suit, fetching drinks and hailing cabs. But with the end of the holiday looming ahead, dark reality is pressing in at the edges of his perception. He's almost able to keep it at bay, basking here under the gloriously cloudless sky.
The sound of the sliding door pulls his eyes briefly open; Molly emerges from their room, carrying two cups, and hands one cappuccino down to him before settling into the lounger beside him with the other. As the first blessed waft of caffeinated aroma hits his nose, he lets out a fairly undignified groan of pleasure.

"Run away with me," he sighs, bringing the cup closer and inhaling again.

Molly's voice is rich with amusement. "I presume you're asking me, not the coffee. But either way, you're not serious?"

"No. But. Yes." Looking over, he tries to commit her to memory just like this: glowing and content in her green linen sundress, crossing her legs to expose a creamy length of slender thigh. "How much time do we have left?"

"About two hours to checkout."

"Two hours," he repeats mournfully. "Not nearly enough. Maybe I could ask if the room's available another night."

"That would be lovely," she agrees, "but we're expected back at work tomorrow. And besides, John and Sherlock..."

"Fucking Sherlock." His vehemence surprises him—and her, too, judging by the way her brows shoot up. He shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut in frustration. "I just, god—I just wish I could get away from it! Just not be me, for a while. No ripples, no assassins, no secret plans. I could just—run away with you, explore this city, soak up the sun and be free, for once in my life! You know?"

"...I know."

There's a long silence. Greg sips at his drink and sullenly waits for Molly to fill it with a platitude.

"So," she says at last, "if you're Audrey Hepburn, I suppose that makes me Gregory Peck? Only, I don't think I'm strong enough to carry you away from the park bench..."

He's laughing before she's even finished saying it, his discontent melted away under the sunshine of her smile.

-----

Chapter End Notes

The reference, in case you don't know it, is to the 1953 movie *Roman Holiday*, starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn; she runs away from her royal responsibilities, and he finds her and carries her to safety from the park bench where she's sleeping. :)
It's almost twenty minutes before Greg gets over the shock of it all enough to move.

12. On the Line

"Oh, hush. You'll be all right."

Greg isn't so sure of that. "Can't we ask Mrs Hudson—"

"No," Molly says chidingly, "she's had her three nights already this week, she deserves her rest! Tonight's my night, that's all there is to it. But there just isn't anyone else available to pick up Dad's medication. I'll do that and come back on the next bus, quick as you like; it'll be fine."

"You know, I could always make the run to the chemist's for you."

"And have you meet my parents for the first time bringing in the cream for Dad's foot fungus? And then making sure he applies it properly? No, Greg."

"Ah, well, I'm sure I'll be meeting them eventually, anyway." Now his protest is halfhearted at best; he knows he's lost the debate. He's mostly trying to keep a straight face, while Molly's expression wavers towards a smile.

"You'll meet them soon enough, I promise! But not for this." The mental image of Greg tending to her father's grotty feet tips her over into mirth, at last; an unsuccessfully stifled giggle escapes in a tiny snort as she thrusts the handle of Callie's carrier at him.

"You've got a folding cot and a changing pad stashed in your spare room; I know Sherlock ordered you a set along with everyone else. I'll put the nappy bag over here, and a fresh bottle in the fridge. She had her last one an hour ago, so you shouldn't have to worry about feeding her for a little while at least. I promise,"—she pauses in her fast circuit around his flat, and rises onto her toes to plant a kiss on his cheek—"I won't be gone long."

"Yeah, all right. Go on, then."

Within a few minutes after Molly leaves, Greg's dragged out all of the baby paraphernalia he's had stashed away. By this time Callie is grizzling her discontent.

"Hey, now, I'm sorry. I wasn't prepared for you to visit," he tells her, returning to the carrier and pulling her up into his arms. "I had to get all your things out! I'm not ignoring you, pet."

She lets out a long, complex gurgle as if in direct answer.

"Yeah, I know; all this shuffling around's rough, huh? You were probably just getting used to
Auntie Molly's, and now you're stuck with me."

Her reply to this is brief, and involves spit. He chuckles. "No, I'm not Molly, that's for sure. I'm a whole lot bigger, and uglier, aren't I?"

She crunches up her face, and squirms with surprising strength as if she's trying to launch herself right out of his arms, despite her obvious inability to do so much as hold her own head up for more than a minute at a time; Greg's heart lurches in his chest.

"No," he gasps, convulsively tightening his grip, and then he realises with further distress that he's probably squeezing too hard. You'll hurt her! "Can't; no, no I can't," he mutters, stepping up to the empty cot and hastily laying the baby down. She's squalling, now, waving her tiny fists in protest, but he backs away—in a few quick steps his backside bumps the table in the next room, and he turns away to make a desperate run for the kitchen.

Perhaps it's only a minute that he stands there, chest heaving and knees trembling, forehead pressed to the cool metal of the fridge door—perhaps it's less than that, not long at all—but with the baby's cries rising sharply in the other room, and the acid pulse of shame burning behind his eyes, it feels like an eternity, unforgivable.

"Christ," he says to nobody, voice cracking. "I'm such a fucking cowardly arsehole..." What would Molly say, if she were here to witness his failure?

She wouldn't permit him to wallow in it. She'd sympathise, then briskly set him back on his feet to try again.

She'd believe I could do better.

Gathering himself, he makes his way back to the living room.

The remote for his rarely-used stereo system is in reach on the side table nearest the hall. A few quick button presses, and the currently loaded CD begins to play—*The Cars: Greatest Hits*, to his relief. It's one of the more generally wholesome choices in his eclectic collection, considering that the music he chooses for the purpose of solitary catharsis ranges from raunchy, despair-ridden blues to the grinding growl of early industrial rock. The snappy, distinct beat of *Just What I Needed* gives him something grounding to focus on, so that Callie's continued crying no longer crowds his senses into irrational panic; after another minute of breathing in the doorway, he realises that the sobs are dying down.

"You like the music?" It seems she does. When he tentatively steps closer, she appears to be trying to look around at the room beyond her little green-and-yellow cot, kicking her legs nearly in rhythm with the tune.

He shoves away his misgivings and picks her up once more, settling her in position to look out over his shoulder.

"Forgive me," he murmurs as he begins to sway them around the room. "I didn't mean to frighten you. The world's a big and scary place, isn't it? And I know you've been missing your Daddy all week, too. Well, don't you worry; he and Sherlock will be back. Soon as they can, I promise you."

He doesn't mention her mother. Mary's been gone, now, over half of Caroline Watson's short life. And it seems to Greg that the longer she's away, the slimmer the chances are of Mummy rejoining a happy fairytale family.

It's a sobering thought; he falls silent, gently stroking his little dance partner's wispy golden curls as
they finish out the song.

By the time a week has passed, everyone has settled fairly well into the routine—the alternating nights, the daycare on weekdays, the feedings and bath-times and changings. John has checked in with Molly or Mrs Hudson at least once each day, eager to hear news from the proud godmothers; Sherlock's communication with Greg is far more terse and sporadic, texted updates on their movements and nothing more.

Rather than making a beeline to Mary's signal, John and Sherlock have decided to follow in her footsteps. Evidence of what she's done to accomplish her anonymous passage, be it through old supply dead-drops or rekindled professional contacts, could prove vital knowledge if they mean to find her safely. But whatever it is that they've turned up in her wake, so far, they haven't yet chosen to share it with their friends back home.

Greg was involved in the plans, before they'd left—or in the room while they were made, at least—yet in all their discussion of probabilities and precautions, he hadn't really got a sense of what the final outcome was meant to be. Finding Mary is a must, and confronting her a given, but all of Sherlock's obsessive forethought seems to end in a vague intention to protect her from the present threat. Meanwhile, John continues to fluctuate between apparent genuine, caring worry for the mother of his child, and grim rage at her misdeeds and deceptions.

So will they eventually return to London with her in tow, and try to reunite the Watson family—presuming that there's a loving relationship to be salvaged there at all? Or will she be brought to justice for past crimes, the attempted murder of Sherlock Holmes being one of them? Mycroft's gotten involved, too, behind the scenes; could the reluctance to discuss the endgame be a sign that one or more intelligence agencies will be coming into play?

As for Greg himself, well, he still can't see how he can possibly forgive the woman who nearly ripped his life apart. He'd warned Sherlock as much. He does sympathise with her plight, to an extent, and he understands that her place in John's life going forward is for only John to decide...but if it were his call, she'd never be coming back.

Probably for the best, then, that the outcome won't be up to him.

Greg's been home from work for about an hour, and he still hasn't wound down enough to fix himself supper; something about the case he closed today is sticking with him. The elderly victim had lived with her eventual killer for over two years, believing him to be her nephew—and whenever he'd needed more funds from her accounts, he'd posed separately as her doctor and her solicitor, a cunning scheme of disguises that had fooled neighbours and friends alike until Greg and his team had tracked down the real nephew and dug deeper. The killer is in custody, now, and his carelessness has left the Crown with plenty of evidence to pursue the murder charge. Still, Greg doesn't usually feel this restless unease after a case in which he knows he's done everything right.
Maybe this is just stress from the rest of his life, bleeding over into his work...or maybe there's something he's missed. He'll certainly talk the case through with Frank and Ollie, when they meet up for lunch tomorrow, and see if they can shake something loose.

It's a worrying surprise when his phone rings, interrupting his aimless staring into the fridge. He's been so conditioned to expect texts, over the past ten days, that it's impossible to keep the concern from his voice as he abandons the search for appetising food. "Sherlock? Everything all right?"

"For the moment, yes. John's in a bodega across the street, phoning Molly; I presume she's not with you?"

"Not tonight, no. A bodega, you say? Whereabouts?"

"Miami. Well away from the pretty, touristy bits, of course. This particular neighbourhood played host to a fascinating murder spree in the early eighties, but they don't sell postcards of that."

"Pity," Greg says, with a sympathetic grin. "Mm, bet it's warm there, though."

"Disgustingly sunny, yes," confirms Sherlock. "Were you here, you could happily broil yourself insensible. But I haven't phoned to give you a weather report."

"Of course not. So what's up?"

"We've caught up with her. Her signal's spent two days in a pattern of local movement at night, and eight-hour stretches of daytime inactivity at this address. As soon as John returns, we'll be paying a surprise social call." There's a short pause, then Sherlock says, "So I'm going to keep this line open, but you'll be in my pocket presently."

Greg's brows shoot upwards. "Really? Are you sure it's me you want listening in on that? Wouldn't it be better if—"

"Shut up, Lestrade; if I wanted any more pesky meddling from my brother than what I've already got, I'm pretty sure I'd say so!"

"But he knows what's going on, right?"

Sherlock sighs into the phone. "Yes, of course. He has our GPS signal, and there's a passive confirmation app running on John's phone. If neither one of us manages to check in on the half-hour, he'll scramble a strike team."

"Fine, good," Greg says, mollified. "So, this phone call—"

"You wanted to be in the loop, didn't you? You've always hated not knowing the truth, and not having warning. You were...angry, that I hadn't explained what really happened, when I was shot. Well, this way you'll know what's going on, and if anything happens you'll see—hear it, in context. And you can always call Mycroft yourself, if you absolutely must."

For a few seconds, Greg is struck speechless. "Sherlock. I...thank you."

"Right, then; here comes John. Pocket you go—"

There's a little rustling and scraping on the sensitive microphone, and then after a moment John's voice comes into range, speaking in a murmur: "...as good as we'll get. You ready?"

"Yes. You?"
"As I can be," John replies. "Right, let's get this over with."

For thirty seconds or so the sounds of quick motion are loud in Greg's ear. He imagines stairs, perhaps three flights' worth given the pauses in the sound where landings might be. He's so intent on staying quiet and visualising what he's hearing that he doesn't immediately notice how shallow he's made his breathing to compensate—but midway up the fourth flight of stairs, he attempts to inhale fully and is thwarted. That, he notices.

Fuck—here we go! He places the phone far from him on the table, realising with the last of his coherent control that it would do Sherlock no favours to have the faint sounds of agonised gasping coming from his pocket.

The cement-block staircase is narrow and dingy, its pipe-like railings spotty with rust. Yellowed plastic over wall-mounted light fixtures tints John and Sherlock with a sickly pall. They're disguised, of course—just enough to prevent recognition at a glance, on the street. Up close, the touristy windbreakers, T-shirts and blue jeans they're both wearing are incongruous, and the ball caps obscuring their night-and-day hair are somehow even worse. Greg registers the overall strangeness of the sight in the slow-motion stutter between two heartbeats, as both men lift their feet for the next step and the off-sync echo of their hurried footfalls pauses, caught in the ripple's stretching grip.

Swinging quickly ahead of them, he reaches the landing at the top of the stairs and continues to the corridor beyond, where a single cracked-open door leads through a narrow foyer to a darkened suite of small rooms. Draped blankets turn the windows into reddish and purplish blurs of sun-glow; the furnishings are sparse and makeshift, but more small, incidental belongings clutter the space than someone on the run would ever acquire.

The usual resident's belongings apparently include kitchen equipment; dark-haired and clad in lightweight yoga clothes, Mary stands poised around the corner with a long chef's knife in her right hand and a gun held in her left, ready to chop at neck height and then pivot around shooting.

Greg backtracks immediately and slips in to make his push; John's hand whips out to snatch at Sherlock's shirt collar, dragging him to a crouch against the wall of the dim foyer. Then John lunges and slides in on his knees—a slick move that surprises Greg with its sudden fluidity, coming from somewhere in the depths of the former soldier's experience—and with that, his gun is trained on the woman from well below where she expects her attacker.

As soon as he's got his breath back enough to be silent, Greg snatches the phone back up to his ear, eager to minimise the interruption.

"—you, John! You shouldn't have come," Mary is saying.

John matches her angry tone, breathing hard. "And you shouldn't assume that every approaching sound is an enemy to kill!"

"Oh, come on; I wouldn't have killed you, John." Her accent has changed; there's a nasal quality to the vowels, now, and the consonants are harsher. She no longer sounds British, but she doesn't quite sound American to Greg's ears, either.
"No, it would have been Sherlock's throat you cut; possibly my gunshot wound wouldn't have been fatal. Well, I've had quite enough of you killing people, and him in particular!"

"Let's just be calm, everyone," Sherlock's deep voice breaks in between them. "We wouldn't want to attract attention, would we?"

"Fine," John growls. There's a silence, and then a bit of rustling.

"How could you possibly have found me?" asks Mary, sullen. "I was careful. Every move I made was perfectly random! There's no way!"

Sherlock clears his throat and says, "Well, once I combined what I knew of you with all of the available possibilities at each specific juncture, the percentages—"

"Ooh, you arse. I've told you, Sherlock, I know when you're fibbing!"

"Fine; it may not have been entirely a mathematical exercise, per se, but considering the likely—"

This time John interrupts his obvious extemporisation, though it sounds more kindly done to Greg's ears. "It wasn't all that hard, actually. I put a tracking device in that memory stick you've carried with you this whole time. But even without that, you left a nice trail of bodies for us to find, didn't you?"

"I—"

"Innocent people, Mary. A stewardess dumped in the loo at Newark International. A Swedish university student stripped of her motorcycle leathers. A cab driver in Cairo. The unemployed squatter who'd been living in this very flat. Shall I go on?"

"I'd rather you not."

Greg claps a hand over his mouth to stop himself cursing aloud.

"And all of this, what? To spare me, hmm? I think that's what that letter you left in my coat pocket said. You wanted to spare me, and Callie. To keep us from dragging you down..."

There's venom in John's voice, a quiet, restrained rage that Greg is shamed to recognise. He'd used that tone with Nadia, more than once; every word had fairly burned on the way out of his mouth. For a moment, he's back there—his stomach churns with acid, remembering how he'd turned his own guilt back onto her with vicious precision.

"You could have stayed. You could have talked to me! That's what couples are supposed to do."

"You wanted me to talk to you, John? You threw what I'd given you into the fire! What was I supposed to take from that, except that you didn't care to hear about my past?"

"That was before your past came back to kill you, Mary. Or should I say, Rosamund? If all of those...things...are true, that we read?"

The room goes quiet, until Sherlock says, "Go ahead. Tell John what you told me, about your last mission with AGRA."

"We were hired to extract the British ambassador from a government building in Tbilisi. She and a number of her staff were being held hostage during a Georgian military coup; we were to get them out. It should've been simple. But it all went horribly wrong; our intel was bad, the floor layout we
had was missing something. They got the drop on us—as if they knew we were coming—I was the only one to get out alive. I was lucky."

"Oh, but that's not all," purrs Sherlock, "is it, Mary?"

"What? No, no; it's like I said before! I got out and ran as far as I could; I thought they'd all died—everything in Tbilisi went horribly wrong—"

"There it is again. 'A gigantic hound,' you say." The slow and softly meditative tone of Sherlock's voice sends a shiver down Greg's spine; when John puts a question into the heavy pause, he sounds as wary as Greg feels.

"...Sherlock?"

"You told me about Tbilisi, just before you went on the run. And you could be excused inconsistencies in the retelling, of course; you'd undergone two shocks that day, you had reason to fear for your life—but that phrase stood out to me, even then. 'Horribly wrong'. It's a bit of a stilted understatement, isn't it?"

"It's true," Mary says, quietly.

"It's a story," Sherlock chides her. "It's a story you've rehearsed, and learnt by heart, even though you've never had to tell it except to us. A story...you received, in exchange for your service."

John speaks up again. "What are you saying? Sherlock?"

"Eight false identities, in the last five weeks. Professional ones with plenty of detail, not easy to break, but Mary Morstan was impeccable; not even Mycroft's background check caught you out, when you worked your way into John's life, and my brother knew all about AGRA. No, this was a cut above. Only the best will do, when you've reached out and made a deal with the world's only consulting criminal, isn't that right?"

There's a silence. Greg imagines at least one stricken expression to match his own.

"You didn't tell me this." John's voice, sharp with warning.

"I didn't know. Not 'til now." Sherlock's pocket rustles with movement. "You were tired of being beholden to the 'trust' of your group's potential for betrayal. 'Dear Jim, please will you fix it for me to retire from contract killing.' What was his price, Mary?"

Her answer comes slowly. "I...worked for him, for eighteen months. Followed orders. Did whatever odd jobs he came up with. Sometimes killing someone, yes; more often, just weird random stuff...delivering messages. Spray painting walls. Baking cookies, once. Shadowing the detective he was so terribly obsessed with."

"Aiming sniper rifles?"

"A few times, sure," she answers Sherlock, defensive. "Jim gave me my identity as final payment, just before what we agreed would be my last job. That's how I knew—usually, it'd be after. He planned to die."

John voices what Greg is thinking: "You were there, when Sherlock jumped. A fourth sniper."

"Someone had to follow you, John, you kept moving! Seb was up in the stairwell of the Market View building, where he could see the rooftop and the turnaround; I covered the opposite angle."
There's a pause. "Yes—of course I saw you fake it," she tells Sherlock, and John makes a strangled noise.

It seems to shake Sherlock's composure, as well; he doesn't sound so smooth when he asks, "And you kept it to yourself?"

"The rest of them didn't know," she says. "I had my payment, they expected me to disappear; what would telling anyone have done, but get John killed then and there? I didn't give a shit about Seb and the others! I liked John. I wanted to wait, and see what would happen."

"What would happen," John parrots in a disbelieving tone, sounding on the verge of cruel laughter. "You know what's going to happen, now? Hmm? We're to bring you back to England, and then your fate's in the government's hands! They'll use you, or they'll punish you, or they'll do both at once; I don't know. But before this week, before this trip, honestly, I thought I might try talking to Mycroft after all. Thought I'd ask for leniency. For Callie's sake."

"I was only trying to survive," protests Mary. "If you were in my place—"

"Shut up." The black humour drops from John's voice, replaced by a fearful intensity. "After Sherlock. After he—after. You. You watched me lose my—you watched me grieve, and you waited..."

The pocket rustles as Sherlock quickly interjects, "Oh, it's getting quite stuffy in here, don't you think?"

"You waited," John continues, giving no sign he's heard, "until I was at my very lowest point, until I had nothing left. And then you swooped right in—"

"I fell in love with you!"

"—knowing I'd be so desperate and empty, that you could claim the damaged goods—"

Sherlock tries to interrupt again, quiet and anxious: "Let's all just step out and take a breath, there's a nice breeze outside..."

"It fucking broke me! Permanently! Did you understand that, Mary? And you lied, and lied, and let me believe I'd lost the only person I'd ever—"

Sherlock scrabbles desperately for the phone in his pocket as something is thrown or kicked to land with a terrible crash.

"Fuck you, Mary! You can go—to—HELL!" John roars, and the line goes dead.

It's almost twenty minutes before Greg gets over the shock of it all enough to move.

-----
Someone Else's Story

Chapter Summary

He certainly isn't going to suggest sitting in Speedy's, to interview Sherlock's client right under his nose.

13. Someone Else's Story

After standing witness, as it were, to the confrontation in Miami, Greg expects another call from Sherlock within hours. Considering the way that call had ended, with emotions running high and a not-inconsequential threat of violence...he stays awake late into the night with his phone close at hand, waiting for either news or a ripple, finally losing patience and firing off his own requests for reassurance.

But Sherlock pulls back hard on the reins, returning only the briefest of replies to Greg's various inquiring texts the next day. Beyond confirming that everyone is okay, and that Mary has consented to return to London in their escort, he won't discuss what happened in the squatter's flat after the phone connection was cut.

It doesn't make Greg happy, but he decides to stop pressing for more. John's outburst touched on uncomfortable topics, verging close to what sounded like a confession—the tragic circumstances of which must have been an arrow to Sherlock's heart, despite content that might have validated his buried hopes, in another time. This, of course, is pure supposition on Greg's part: though he's been all but certain there was a thwarted attraction between those two, over the years, he can't truly know just how strongly either of them feels. All he knows is that when he listened in on the three of them, the searing finality in John's words had left Greg reeling with empathetic pain.

No, he won't ask Sherlock to revisit that.

Right now the man is overseas, far from familiar territory, working on making discreet travel arrangements while stuck in close quarters with the two people who, respectively, have shot him figuratively and (almost) literally through the heart. It would be cruel even to remind him that Greg had heard the latest shot hit home.

On Saturday, the second day after the Miami call, a terse text message gives Greg a flight number and a Heathrow arrival time for the next morning. A quick lookup confirms that the flight originates from a connection in Charlotte, which strikes him as notable; there are plenty of nonstop flights out of Miami International.
"Well, they probably don't want to fly out of Miami," Molly suggests pragmatically, when he returns to his living room to relay the information. "They're still worried about that man looking for Mary, aren't they? There are so many people, in a big airport like that; it would be easy to overlook someone in the crowd."

"That's a good point," Greg says. He takes the freshly emptied baby bottle from her outstretched hand, and carries it to the kitchen to rinse it out.

By the time he comes back from doing that, Molly's shifted Callie up to her shoulder for a burp, saying in a sweet sing-song, "Did you hear that, dearest? Daddy and Mummy and Sherlock are coming home tomorrow! Isn't that lovely?"

"Mummy won't be home for very long," Greg amends quietly. "They'll probably give her a little time with Callie first, though. Not even Mycroft would be that heartless."

"Oh. Yes. I can't believe I nearly forgot—isn't that awful of me?" She sighs. "It still seems too strange to be real, I suppose. I mean, she and I were friends; even though we weren't too close I always thought she was sweet, but then there were all those terrible things you said she did..."

Sitting down next to her, he rests a hand along the curve of her spine. Callie's blue eyes meet his behind Molly's back; she blinks at him, startled, as a hiccup of wind escapes her.

"It's hard to believe, I know," he says, his gaze fixed sadly on the baby. "I wish I could tell you that she's not the assassin from those files, anymore—that she chose to work for Moriarty only so she could leave that life behind and reform herself. But I've seen proof she hasn't changed, with my own eyes. Twice, now. Callie deserves so much better than to lose a parent, but trust me, Molly; that woman's still a cold, hard killer."

She nods, leaning back into the warmth of his palm. "I believe you, love. I do. It's just such a horrid situation! And poor John, he must be torn up over it."

He hums his vague agreement. John's voice is echoing in his memories, brittle with cruel resolve while detailing Mary's probable fate at the Government's hands. But Greg's had to sit behind the ex-soldier's eyes often enough that he knows a storm of emotion rages continually beneath that tightly controlled surface. From that perspective, it seems rather as if John is torn up about everything. All the time.

As if sensing the unhappy direction of his thoughts, Molly turns to fix him with an inquiring look. "So you do think Mycroft will allow Callie some time with her mum? From what you told me last night, it sounds like John expects her to be taken straight away..."

"I've no idea how it'll play out; I only know what I overheard, and John didn't sound sure of what would happen. I might've guessed the Americans would want to get something out of her turning up. Mossad might have a bone to pick, even, given they were her last official employers. Turning her over to Mycroft is probably the kindest thing we can do," he murmurs, after a considering pause.

Mycroft, calculating bastard that he is, would likely term it productive, rather than kind. He'll almost certainly have argued that letting her rot in prison would waste skills and knowledge that could benefit national interests. It's only logical that he may want to make use of her, allowing her a merciful atonement through further intelligence work, at home or abroad.

Greg doesn't love the idea of Mary out there, somewhere, handling sensitive matters at the British government's behest. Be it sedentary work performed under heavy guard, or an out-and-out suicide
mission, there's no doubt in his mind that she's more than slippery enough to turn circumstances to her eventual advantage. She spent nearly two years in Moriarty's direct employ, after all; given what Greg knows from Sherlock, all those allowed within the madman's inner circle shared a common core of viciousness and duplicity.

Still...Mycroft Holmes had been prepared to send his own brother to an unsurvivable exile for ridding the world of just one man, and a truly vile and dangerous one at that. It's safe to assume his version of mercy will likely be a hard pill to swallow.

Greg dutifully takes out an unmarked fleet car, next morning, and drives to the airport.

He finds a suitable parking spot, and glances at his watch: the flight coming from Fort Myers by way of Charlotte is due to land in just over twenty minutes, and at his last check it was running on time. But just as he opens the car door, the chime of his text alert stops him short.

Disregard flight details.
Return rescheduled. MRH

Expect to be updated
when new arrangements
are in place. MRH

I've heard nothing about
this from Sherlock. Has
something happened?

An unexpected delay.
Nothing to concern
yourself with. MRH

"Well, ta very much for letting me know before I got all the way to bloody Heathrow," Greg mutters, typing out a far more polite reply as he restarts the car.

He grumbles to himself and to the traffic for a little while longer, but it isn't so bad, really. Though she hadn't actually said so, Molly had clearly been disappointed that she was set to work today while Mrs Hudson watched the baby. Whatever this delay is—and judging by Mycroft's tone, or more accurately the lack thereof, it's probably something useless and bureaucratic—it means she'll have another chance to be there for the touching father-daughter reunion she expects. And in the meantime Greg can go on in to work, thus saving the personal hours that would've thrown his and Molly's schedules out of sync again.

When he thinks about it that way, the morning's inconvenience practically seems a stroke of luck.
Two days later, Greg's at the airport again. The new flight is arriving in the late afternoon; he's prodded Mycroft for advance confirmation, and it seems that the second time will, in fact, be the charm.

At last John and Sherlock emerge from the International Arrivals terminal, separated by a few other travellers. They're wearing their own clothing again—a marked improvement over the incognito attire with which they'd stuffed their suitcases—but they both look exhausted, faces grim and pinched as they make their way past the newsagents and service kiosks. It looks like John's trying to minimise a slight limp, briefly pressing his hand to his upper thigh as if to soothe the travel-stiff muscles.

*Must have been a rough flight,* thinks Greg, standing as they get closer to passing the bench where he's been waiting.

Can't say I'm surprised. I always feel like shit coming back from New York.

He falls into step alongside them, greeting their drained silence with bright, cheering chatter. "Glad to have you back! I have to say, it'll be a real relief to get back into a normal routine. But we held the fort for you pretty well, though, I think." He's not getting any real response, but if Sherlock's not snapping at him to shut up, he figures it's implicit approval to continue. "Honestly, Mrs H will probably insist on having Callie at least once a week from here on out! She adores having someone to look after. Heaven knows why; surely she gets to do enough fussing with Sherlock as a tenant, eh?"

He expects this to draw some reaction from John, a smirk or a chuckle; the man just continues walking determinedly, frowning down at his feet. Sherlock doesn't defend himself with a witticism, either. He merely pulls his hard-sided suitcase around to roll along at his side and slightly in front of him, placing its sleek bulk between himself and the others as he silently lags a step behind them.

Something's wrong.

"So, uh." Greg moistens his lips, trying for a casual tone. "I notice it's just the two of you...where's Mary? On a different flight? They haven't taken her straight on into custody, already, have they?"

Nothing, still. No frustrated tirade about Mycroft's inept lackeys or about last minute demands from the CIA. They just keep on walking.

*What the hell is going on? "John?"

"She's dead."

Greg does a double take, stumbling at the sliding-door transition from carpeting to concrete as he twists sideways to see his friends' faces. *What? How?"

Sherlock's eyes narrow at the reaction, but he says nothing; John speaks again, flat and bitter. "Does it matter? She's dead."

"Oh, Christ. I-I'm so sorry, John! That's—God, that's rough. How did it happen? Did you—uh, was that Gabriel bloke following you?" asks Greg, dividing his gaze between two equally stony expressions.

"I don't want to talk about it," says John. "I want to see my daughter. Who has my daughter?"

"Molly's got her. They're waiting for us here in the car park, it's not far; I hired an SUV to fit us all—"
John stops in his tracks, scowling but not looking around when Sherlock fails to keep the suitcase from bumping him from behind. "No. I'm getting a cab and taking her home. Right now."

Greg flicks his eyes over to Sherlock, apprehensive; Sherlock returns an inscrutable stare.

"Uh. Well, that's fine. Sure; of course, John! Come on, then," Greg stammers gamely, beckoning them back into motion as he leads the way to the second level.

When they reach the SUV, its windows are down; Molly is sitting in the second row beside the car seat carrier. She looks up and breaks into a smile, lifting and turning the baby on her lap to face the opening door. "Look, Callie! Daddy's home! Welcome home, Daddy!"

John takes his daughter into his arms, softening his expression into something that's closer to a smile. "Hey, little one, come here. Yeah, there you are," he murmurs, then looks up. "Molly, if you could get her things together, I'll be taking her on my own from here."

"Oh! Okay..."

While she goes about gathering loose items into the bag by her feet, and John settles Callie into the carrier, Greg and Sherlock move behind the vehicle to open the rear hatch and stow the luggage.


"Either you really don't know, in which case I don't see that it's your business, or you're lying to me to cover your own shortcomings, in which case I refuse to discuss it with you," Sherlock replies, stiffly.

"My shortcomings? What the fuck do you mean—oh."

"Yes, oh," hisses Sherlock, turning at last and lowering his voice even further. "Your mandate is fairly capricious, isn't it, when it comes to bystanders? Does it even matter to you when someone else gets hurt?"

"Yes! It matters, you know it matters. Whatever it was, I'm sorry I couldn't help; you know I have no control over that—"

"No. Clearly not."

The bitterness in the statement strikes Greg silent. He wants to reach out for the man's shoulder, pull him around and insist on explanations—but this isn't a good time for that. Sherlock's mention of mandate might already be enough to arouse suspicion, if John has paid any attention to their conversation through the open doors. Safer to step back and let Sherlock finish loading the cases on his own, strolling slowly around to the driver's side for time to re-order his thoughts.

What could have happened, to leave these two in such a state? They hardly seem able to look at each other, let alone speak about it. John's blaming Sherlock, it appears, while Sherlock is clearly angry that the ripples didn't bring Greg into play. If Sherlock was close enough to witness the action, but was never actually in danger himself...what possibilities does that imply?

The elusive "Gabriel" may well have caught up to his target, despite Sherlock's caution. Sherlock might even have planned for the encounter, expecting to turn the tables on Mary's vengeful ex-teammate, only to be outmatched or caught off-guard when the time came. Or perhaps Mary chose to take her own life, desperate to escape the bleak future she'd earned for herself through her crimes.
But there's always the chance that John may have been the one to pull the trigger. Or wield the knife, or throw the punch; whatever.

My God, what if he actually killed his own wife? Could've been accidental if so, sure, but what if he had to?

What if he wanted to?

The open door beside him claps shut; he shakes a fast montage of violent spy-movie still frames from his head, chagrined. John strides off towards the taxi lanes outside the terminal, loaded down with the baby carrier and the fat changing bag.

"Whatever it is you imagine happened, Lestrade, you're almost certainly wrong in every conceivable detail," Sherlock announces, his crisp voice betraying an edge of unkind satisfaction at the way Greg startles to find him suddenly at his back.

"Enlighten me, then."

"Mm, no. I don't think so."

"What? Come on, Sherlock!"

"Your morbid curiosity is no concern of mine. If I choose not to verbalise the particulars of an unspeakably terrible incident, that is my prerogative, and I'll thank you not to press me further! Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get going."

"Not that I look forward to forty minutes of insipid, well-meaning sympathy and poorly veiled interrogation from the two of you. John had the right idea, there, I daresay."

Greg huffs in irritation, yanking open the driver's door and climbing in opposite Sherlock. "Well, excuse me for thinking you both might like to be met with a friendly face or two, after a fortnight away!"

"Yes, we're all friends, here, aren't we?" Sherlock makes the words sound caustic, closing his own door with a slam and ignoring the way Molly's eyes go wide behind him. "Friends who tiptoed around for weeks, while an assassin got eyes on us and learned how to follow our lead; friends who plotted against a desperate woman who was already backed into a corner!"

There doesn't seem to be anyone near enough to hear the way assassin and desperate echo through the still-open windows, their sibilants ringing among the concrete columns of the car park. Greg winces and hurries to start the engine, anyway. "She was an assassin, too," he points out, aware that Molly still doesn't realise why they're arguing. "What else could we have done?"

"We could have succeeded in bringing her to safety," says Sherlock. "I could have done better. I made a vow!"

Abruptly pulling out of the parking space with angry efficiency, Greg counters, "You made that vow before she tried to fucking kill you!"

The only reply to that is a half-vocalised sniff beside him, but Greg hears the contempt in it plain as day. Of course that's all you care about, Sherlock may as well be saying. And if he really thinks that Greg shouldn't consider him a priority, after everything—fucking hell.

After a minute, Molly clears her throat nervously. "Welcome home, Sherlock!"

"I appreciate your effort at good cheer, Molly, but do let me save you some time, hmm? Yes,
something's gone wrong; yes, John is upset and unlikely to speak with me for a while; no, I will not be saying any more about it; and no, I don't want to have a nice chat with you and Lestrade about anything else, either. Has that just about covered everything?"

"Um. I—I guess so..."

"Good. Wake me when we get to Baker Street."

She and Greg exchange quite a few speaking looks via the rearview mirror, but they let the drive pass in tense silence. Around about Brentford, Sherlock begins to snore.

Hey, I'm in the area with some time to spare. Thought I might stop by, Greg taps out on his mobile as he strolls along Baker Street. It's a nice day, pleasantly breezy and sunnier than most in the past week; it's made even better by the fact that his case had wrapped up unexpectedly quickly, that morning. Despite the case's probable ranking as a four or lower on the inscrutable Holmesian scale, the various parties involved had made for an interesting experience: a unique set of motives and a healthy amount of gore, adding up to a story that Greg thinks might amuse Sherlock, if only briefly. So, while the details are fresh in his mind, and he's got the freedom of a long lunch break, it seems the perfect time to check in.

No. I don't want company.
SH

But he's already nearly there; the doorstep is almost within sight...

Are you sure?

Go AWAY. No visitors today.
SH

Greg sighs. He may as well continue his walk past 221, now that he's this close; there's always a chance Sherlock will change his mind, isn't there? He hasn't seen or heard from the man at all in the week since he acted as his airport shuttle. High time that he start edging his way back inside Sherlock's self-imposed bubble of solitude, certainly.

He's still about ten metres away when the black-painted door opens inward—see, insists the timid optimist in his head, persistence pays off after all—and the blonde woman exiting the building firmly catches his attention, if only for her utter failure to be Sherlock.

A visitor of Mrs Hudson's, perhaps?

The woman wears a sharp, preoccupied frown as she turns and walks in Greg's direction; her distracting familiarity draws him to study her as they get closer, their paths set to cross about five doors away from 221. Trying to stare without staring distracts him further, enough that the sole of his shoe catches a crack in the pavement at exactly the wrong moment. It's far from the subtle introduction he might have hoped for, to nearly trip face first into the woman's bosom—but the automatic round of flustered apologies it sets off does give him the subsequent opening to ask: "Um, not to pry, but—have you just come down from 221B?"
"Yes," she says, her voice flat with surprise; she pushes her thick-rimmed glasses up on her nose with one finger, blinking up at him. Then it's almost as if something in her shifts, some indefinable change in the space of a breath; she seems somehow softer and smaller when she stammers, "I was—I had an appointment. With Mr Holmes. Why do you ask?"

"I was on my way there, myself, to see him. But he just texted me not to bother coming," he explains, sheepish. "So I was wondering..."

"He practically threw me out," she tells him. "He only gave me ten minutes, hardly even looking at me once the whole time, and after I'd been waiting two months to meet with him again! So I wouldn't think your chances are looking that good."

"Well. Damn."

She adjusts her glasses again. "I've seen you before, haven't I? Oh, I have; you were waiting in the hall with a woman, the first time I consulted Mr Holmes, weren't you? Are you a client, too, or—?"

"No, I'm a police detective," he says, relieved to have concrete confirmation that he actually has seen her before. "Greg Lestrade. Detective Inspector."

"Angela Hosmer." She accepts his offered handshake primly. "Maybe I should have just taken this to the police, after all. Chances are they'd have bungled it, but at least they wouldn't have strung me along for four months!"

He winces, recalling the chain of successive distractions that must have interfered: the bombs, the baby, Mary... "You know, I've worked with Sherlock for quite some time now. Maybe I could be of some assistance? Or at least push him along for you, a bit?"

"Oh. Well, I—you'd do that?"

"Sure I would! Look, why don't we go sit down and have a coffee, and you can tell me a little bit about your case?" He tilts his head encouragingly in the direction she was already walking—there's a Pret, not too far down the road. He certainly isn't going to suggest sitting in Speedy's, to interview Sherlock's client right under his nose.
He'll have to dig in and search for the connections, but his first and most pressing need is clear: *Find Sherlock.*

**14. Standoff**

The mid-morning sun, so promising just half an hour before, is all but gone; Greg peers out the window, disheartened by the ominous speed with which heavy clouds are rolling in to blot the daylight out. It would have been nice to start his day off with a pleasant jog, but that's clearly not going to be happening today. And it doesn't look like a visit to Baker Street will be happening, either; the phone in his hand hasn't returned any response to the lengthy series of texts he's sent. He sighs and flops back down on his sofa, sending off another, and one more a couple minutes after that.

Still pissed off at me?

Look, I get it.

He'd fully expected a backlash, when Sherlock found out he had spoken with Miss Hosmer; it's not as if he'd planned to keep his involvement to himself. Any case that had kept even a small portion of Sherlock's interest, over such a long period, would surely be one Greg couldn't make much headway with on his own. He'd merely begun digging into the matter of Angela's thirty-years-missing mother in the hopes that he could spur Sherlock along on it a little—and the prospect of having a pretext to start a conversation had been attractive, too.

But Sherlock's upset over the case, when Greg had finally gotten in to try talking about it the other day, had been *nothing* compared to his continued upset over John and Mary.

Watching as misfortune befell his companions, in Florida, had surely been a hard lesson for Sherlock. The first time it had been so firmly impressed upon Greg that Fate was anything but *fair*, he'd reacted quite badly—the knowledge that he'd missed his chance to prevent Sherlock's drug abuse had put him in a miserable funk for months on end.

Up until now, Sherlock's enjoyed the novelty of it all: an inexplicable saviour, vast new horizons of knowledge to shoot for, and the simple certainty that he can do no wrong. A fantastic safety net has unfurled beneath him, and for the first time in his life, he *knows it's there*.

But now he's seen firsthand that having a guardian on his side can't solve all his problems. Greg may be able to turn Death's gaze from Sherlock...but when it comes to Sherlock's friends, or their loved ones? That power means nothing.

It's not Greg's fault, whatever happened to Mary. It's not Greg's fault that the loss has somehow
soured things between John and Sherlock. All things considered, though, Greg doesn't mind
shouldering the blame for a little while, if that's what makes Sherlock feel better.

Still, the man could at least reply to a text message once in a while...

I hate worrying about you
all the time. You don't have
to chat with me, just give
me SOME kind of response?

I'm FINE.
SH

When I need you, you'll
know it.
SH

"Well, what if I need you?" he says aloud to his empty flat. It sounds petulant and pathetic even to
him, but he types and sends it anyway.

You solved your own cases
while I was gone, didn't you?
You know my methods.
SH

Try applying them, for
once, and leave me alone.
SH

"Fine, have it your way," he mutters, tossing the phone onto the coffee table and tipping his head
back to stare at the ceiling.

*He'll come around. Eventually. I just have to stand back and give him space, let him work through
it.*

He's weathered Sherlock's black moods before. He can do it again.

"I heard Holmes was back in town."

Greg looks up from his work, blinking in surprise to see DI Hopkins in the doorway. "Hi, Stella.
Yeah, he was overseas for a bit, but he's been back a few weeks now. Why?"

She steps in and closes the office door behind her; sitting down, she fidgets and pats the folders she
carries into a perfectly aligned stack on her lap. "Um, well, I emailed him. There's this case
involving the deaths of a few high-profile diplomatic officials in South Sudan and the UAE, and
the whole thing's gotten gummed up with weird rumours of some crazy assassin's ring working out
of Hong Kong. One of the leads traced back to London, so they dumped it in our lap, but we
couldn't get anywhere with it. I thought maybe he could take a look at what Interpol was feeding
me?"
"Sounds like it'd be up Sherlock's alley," Greg agrees. "And?"

"And he replied with—well. I'm not sure what to make of it, honestly. You've known the guy a long time, right? Is he usually so, so..."

"Overbearing? Impatient? Stubborn? Tactless? Help me out here, Stella, I could toss out adjectives all day."

"Here," she says with a tight, apologetic smile, tapping at her phone, "I'll just show you, shall I?"

The computer on his desk lets out a cheerful ping; rolling his eyes agreeably, Greg opens the email.

It's high time you muddle-headed imbeciles at Scotland Yard break yourselves of what has all too quickly become an unhealthy habit. You've all used me this year to reach your case closure quotas, relying upon my far superior intelligence to spare you the pathetic indignity of having to put in an honest day's work, all the while continuing to make childish jokes at my expense in an effort to save face among your colleagues. I have no interest in the stultifying, simplistic cases that leave you stumped purely for lack of diligence; I gave you my assistance in January for one reason and one reason only - Moriarty - and that free pass is long since expired.

Believe me when I say that I find your collective laziness and general ignorance as distasteful as you all find my social indifference and my freakish attention to detail. I suspect that once you're over the crushing disappointment of your collapse back into mediocrity, you'll all appreciate my absence.

Pass this message around as you like: as of today, I am no longer available for consultations.

Sherlock Holmes

Venomous. That's the word Stella's looking for.

"Fuck. Did he send this to everyone?"

"Not unless he used blind copies. Probably I was just the first unlucky Yarder to email him, after he'd got fed up and decided to pen his manifesto, right? I figured he didn't send it to you..."

"No. But that's probably just because he told me to leave him alone two weeks ago, and I actually listened," he answers, grimacing.

"Look, I want you to know, Greg—I haven't forwarded that email to anybody else, and I don't plan to. I'm just gonna put the word around that nobody here should try contacting him for a while, okay?"

"That's a smart move. I don't relish the idea of having to do that much damage control!" They share a weak smile; it's laden with nostalgia for the old days, when she'd worked side by side with him and Frank under DI Parsons' watchful eye. They'd made a good team.

"Oh," says Stella after a moment, visibly shaking her own thoughts back to the present, "speaking of Hong Kong. I finally got my hands on the records you wanted, for Faith Hosmer. But it's not
much, I'm afraid." She slides a slim folder out of the stack in her lap and passes it over. "Her husband Jacob was found dead in the Wan Chai district three days after his business partner's body washed up off Kowloon Bay, and Faith's whereabouts after that aren't on record. A lot of Triad activity in the eighties went on under the radar; the official default position is to insist it never happened. If she really was forced to work in one of the underground brothels, as her daughter believes—I don't know how you'd go about tracking that down."

Greg nods. "It was a long shot, I know. But thanks for this. I owe you one, okay?"

"That you do! Just promise to put in a good word for me, if your consultant ever cools down?"

"Will do," he agrees, leaning across his desk to shake Stella's hand as she gets up to leave.

Does Sherlock really believe the things he spouted in that email? After everything he's done for the city and for Scotland Yard, in the past six months, his reputation has skyrocketed. Hell, even Sally's practically gone sweet on him. But he's lashing out now as if he's reliving the days before his jump, when Superintendent Atchison had the warrant out for his arrest. When Phil Anderson was his most vocal detractor, not his most devoted fan.

*I need to go and see John on my next day off, decides Greg. He could talk some sense into him.*

John looks worse for wear, when he opens the door to Greg's knock. He's unshaven, wearing wrinkled clothing that looks thrown on in a hurry. There's a desperate brightness to his eyes, as if every ounce of his focus belongs to the baby girl in his arms, while the mechanics of his own life are merely an afterthought.

But despite her father's questionable state, Callie looks happy, healthy and well-groomed. It lifts Greg's spirits instantly, to see her; he's missed her over the last few weeks, far more than he expected. And she looks so different, already, sitting up in John's arms all on her own, and looking straight at him with focused curiosity.

"Hey there, sweetheart," he greets her, breaking into a wide smile; to John, he says, "I just came by to see how you've been. Thought maybe you'd like a little breather, you know?"

"Tell Uncle Greg we're doing just fine, you and me, aren't we, Rosie? That's right, we are."

"Rosie?"

"For her middle name. Just something I'm trying out," replies John. "She's still Callie, most of the time."

The defensive edge in his tone is clear. Greg doesn't press. Instead he pulls the stuffed lion he's bought from its bag and presents it as an offering. "Here, darling, I brought you a prezzie. From me and your Auntie Molly; she misses you, too! Oh, look, I think she likes it..."

"I was just about to feed her." Maybe that's initially meant to be a dismissal, but Greg is clearly entranced with the baby; John gives in and keeps talking. "We're just starting on a bit of solid foods, this week."
"Really! That's fantastic. How's she getting on with it?"

"It's a learning curve! But not too bad, so far. Um, if you don't mind watching me make a mess of her lunch, I suppose you could stay a little while."

"Wouldn't miss it," Greg chuckles, stepping in as John moves aside.

The flat is cleaner than Greg might have expected, aside from the rumpled bedding left on the sofa and a basket of laundry sitting in the hall. He follows John into the kitchen, and happily accepts the task of holding Callie as two tiny servings are prepared: mushy peas, and pureed banana.

Once they're all settled down and the baby's begun feeding, he clears his throat and asks, "Have you spoken to Sherlock, lately?"

John's tiny silicone spoon freezes in mid-swoop. "No, actually. Been a bit busy."

"Ah, yeah, I get it." He sits back, watching as unobtrusively as possible for a few sloppy bites. But he can't stay silent for long. He keeps thinking of last week; malicious comments once in a while aren't uncommon, for Sherlock, but the sheer levels of sustained spite in every word of that email... "I'm worried about him."

"Mm." The tone says I'm not.

"It's like, I dunno...like he's got all these ideas in his head that don't fit what he should already know. And he's trying to believe them anyway, never mind they don't make sense."

John barely looks away from his daughter, but his expression is sceptical, bordering on annoyance. Sighing, Greg leans back with arms crossed; he isn't making his point very well. Problem is, he's not sure there's really a point to be made. It's just this nagging, prickling sense that something's off—he licks his lips and keeps trying to pin down the elusive thought. "It sounds stupid, but I'd almost say it was like he was being brainwashed or something! I mean, there's no reason he should've believed anything that barmy reporter was trying to say..."

John hums distractedly, pulling a wide-eyed face as he encourages Callie to accept another bite. "Reporter?"

"Yeah, he gave a private interview at 221B; it was, oh, about two months ago? An in-depth exclusive on the Moriarty bombing plot. I was there taking care of some stuff for Mrs H, and they asked me to sit in. Started off fine, but she ended up pressing him on what he'd been doing, those two years away, and then she basically told him everyone at the Met resents him for being superior —"

"Don't they, though?"

"Not like that! Not nearly as much as you'd think. And he must know that; fuck's sake, John, the number of DI's he helped, this year? He could walk into the Yard, right this minute, and I'll bet he couldn't find an office in the building without someone in it who'd be happy to shake his hand!"

"I don't remember seeing an article about the bombing plot," John says, frowning. He may not feel up to dealing with Sherlock at the moment, but it's clear he still considers himself the custodian of the man's public image. Writing about the consulting detective's doings is his territory, and he's always been touchy about the frequent liberties taken by journalists.

"Huh." Greg thinks back. "Come to think of it, I never saw it either. 'Course I wasn't really looking
"for it."

"What publication was it?"

"Ah...got me. I don't actually recall her mentioning. Her name was Wanda something, I remember that much."

"Hmph." John's attention is back on the baby; Greg's losing him, he can feel it. Time to get to the point.

"I really think you should go and see him," he says.

John breathes out, long and slow, and puts down the spoon. He speaks quietly without looking away from Callie. "My therapist doesn't think that'd be a good idea, for me, right now."

"Your therapist," Greg repeats dubiously, wincing as soon as the words leave his mouth: some things are private and mustn't be questioned. But John answers him anyway, his voice gone distracted and vague.

"She's new, of course. Couldn't go back to Ella, not after—well, for one thing, I moved all the way out here. But Agatha's not bad."

"Mm-hmm."

"I've been having trouble sleeping. Since Mary," John continues. Callie reaches out clumsily, and he takes up a damp cloth to wipe her face with unhurried, almost dreamlike strokes. "She's helped me understand some things about myself. Why I bottle up my feelings, and seek out danger. Why I choose relationships with manipulative, untrustworthy people, and allow myself to be hurt. What I can do to be fully present for my daughter, and protect her from harmful influence..."

Greg's jaw is slack. Seriously, has the whole world gone mad? Whoever this Agatha is, she's apparently doing a fair job of turning her patient into a paranoid shut-in! John doesn't need to cut himself off; he won't find safety in isolation.

John needs Sherlock. And Sherlock needs him.

Greg spends twenty more minutes trying, gently but insistently, to convince John of that fact, until John's patience wears thin and he sends him home.

The very next afternoon, Greg misses a call.

He always sets his mobile on vibrate while he's in the interrogation rooms; it's basic habit. He's trained himself to ignore it when it buzzes in his pocket, continuing to speak or listen without giving a visible flinch. Distractions aren't helpful, when setting up a line of questioning. If it's genuinely important, he trusts that someone outside the room will also get the message, and knock to get his attention.

This time, when he's finished with his suspect, he expects to see Molly in his call log. Frank and Drew are trying to set up a double date, and Molly has promised to get back to him regarding her
work schedule. He's surprised to see John's name instead, and almost more surprised to see a voicemail waiting—over the years, Sherlock's subtly influenced them all into a strong preference for texting, and even Molly now resorts to summing up her needs in writing, if her call goes unanswered.

John's voice in the message is clipped, and breathy around wind and traffic noise in the background; it sounds as if he's speaking into the phone while moving at a brisk marching pace.

"You wanted me to come and see him," John says. "You said I needed to, and I didn't believe you. I told myself I knew he wouldn't be waiting around for me to show up. He wouldn't be hoping I'd come crawling back, to tell him he was right after all. But you insisted. So I came. And guess what, Greg? He hasn't even been at the sodding flat in over a week! Mrs H hasn't seen or heard from him at all! So I don't know what you thought you were going on about, telling me he was sitting at home, wasting away for lack of his sidekick."

He pauses, catching his breath, and by now the noise behind him has become the crowded echo of a Tube station. "Fact is, Greg," he says next, low and viciously fast as if the flood of words has caught him by surprise, "he saw it all coming. He knew we were being followed. And when we could have taken the easy way out, he made a big fuss about driving across the state to a different airport. There's only one fucking road out there, did you know that? One road, miles and miles through the bloody swamp, and one fucking truck stop right in the middle of it; he knew what would happen! So if you were wondering why he wouldn't tell you about it, well. There you are. And now I'm done," he declares, sniffing roughly. "I'm fucking done."

As the end of John's angry message flips over to the familiar spoken menu of voicemail options, a hot-cold wave of eerie certainty washes over Greg from toe to head. Something really has been going wrong, for quite some time now, some ticking itch at the very edge of his perception, and he doesn't yet know what or why, or even how he knows—five minutes from now the sensation might pass, like a strong blast of deja vu that leaves only confusion in its wake. But for now, there's no space in him for doubt.

Something sinister is working behind the scenes to tear Sherlock and John apart. And Greg must be the only one close enough to the sidelines of the impending disaster to have even the chance to see it for what it is.

He'll have to dig in and search for the connections, but his first and most pressing need is clear: Find Sherlock.
"May I come in?" asks Sherlock, meekly, still not looking up.

It's all connected. It must be.

First, find Sherlock...

"Sir?" Evan's voice jars Greg from the strange trance. "Everything all right?"

Greg realises, belatedly, that he's still standing in the centre of the corridor outside the interrogation room. The phone remains clutched tightly in his hand, fallen slightly away from his ear; the computerised voice continues to repeat its tinny prompts, flatly unperturbed.

"I," he says, then swallows and tries again. "Sorry. It was—a personal call. Important. I've gotta go. Tell Sally she can take the lead 'til at least tomorrow."

Before Evan can even get out a response, Greg has spurred himself into motion, dialling his phone on the way. First stop is his office—Sherlock doesn't answer—he grabs his suit jacket and a blank notepad, and locks up. Sherlock fails to pick up a second call as Greg hurries down to the vehicle pool. There he sits in a parked fleet car, keys in the ignition, and jots a fast and thorough list of all the boltholes he can think of: the ones dating back to 2005, the ones Mycroft's surveillance had uncovered last year, the fanciful ones that were probably just rumours all along. Once he's finished racking his brain, he starts at the top and methodically begins working through eliminations.

If Sherlock's been in one place, all this time, it's got to be one of the ones with ready access to power: he'd sent that nasty email to Hopkins in the middle of his week away, most likely from his laptop, and both that and his phone would have had to be charged at least once in that time. He would have needed WiFi, too, which rules out the hideouts without connectivity onsite, or at least convenient access to a coffee shop or something. (Even if Mrs Hudson's stories about Big Ben are true, Greg feels he can strike it off the list for the bother it would be going up and down.) Considering the way Sherlock had lashed out, it seems unlikely he'd have chosen to stay in any space he had to share with others, so the British Library is low on the list despite the perks of its strong WiFi and extensive collection of distractions.

By the time Greg's done a few more rounds in this fashion, pausing periodically to try Sherlock's phone again, the list has narrowed to only a handful. Satisfied, he starts the car and heads for Baker Street; the first place to begin any search for Sherlock is always right where he's meant to be.
It would have been a perfect relief to find Sherlock holed up in 221C to avoid visitors, but no such luck. Mrs Hudson lets Greg go up on his own and snoop around Sherlock's flat, turning over loose papers and squinting at indentations in scratch pads. He calls Molly, glossing quickly over the reasons for his search, and notes her suggestions on the marked-up list in his pocket; he scuffs thoughtfully over marks in the sitting room carpet; he ventures into Sherlock's bedroom, puzzling over the wardrobe's contents as if he could somehow divine whether anything has been packed and taken.

Finally, he drops into the black armchair with a distant frown, his earlier sense of blind urgency faltering as the memory of the strange epiphany fades. Sherlock's done this sort of thing before; he's sought isolation to let a black mood run its course, or to immerse himself in a complex experiment requiring tightly controlled environmental variables. What's to say this isn't a similar situation?

Mrs Hudson announces herself with a quiet *yoo-hoo* from the doorway, pulling him from his increasingly muddled thoughts. He gratefully accepts the mug of tea she's brought him from downstairs—it's dark and richly plum-scented, an almost scandalous change from the expected usual; he looks up and raises his eyebrows.

She's settled herself to half-sit on the upholstered arm of the other chair, tugging absently at the hem of her moss-coloured cardigan as she sips at her own mug. "I lived in Florida for over forty years, you know," she says. "Most of the tea there is rubbish, of course. But I got attached to this one, I'm afraid, and I still find myself craving it now and again. I thought you might not mind..."

"No, it's fine." It reminds him of his sister, actually; during his month-long visit, Corrie had sometimes brewed whatever she had on hand when she'd run low on imported Whittard's, calling him *snob* with twinkling eyes and a thick imitation of her husband's New Jersey accent. This one is better than most of the fruity abominations he'd tried then.

They drink in companionable silence; Greg's eyes scan along the mantelpiece. From this seated angle, all he sees in the mirror is the manic, frozen smile of the scrawled face opposite.

"Putting it off won't make it any easier for you," observes Mrs Hudson, regarding him with compassion despite her gently scolding tone. "Whatever it is that's gotten into him, *someone* has to set him straight. He won't hear it, from me. Nor from John; *tsk*, that poor man, left all alone to grieve his dear wife's passing, and with Caroline still so young, bless her! He's got every right to be angry at the world, but I do wish those boys weren't quite so set on being furious with each *other*."

What is it, exactly, that she thinks happened to Mary? Did John or Sherlock ever bother explaining why she ran, or who she'd turned out to be? Greg could tell her the truth right now, but he just doesn't have the stomach for it.

"You think he'll listen to me, then?"

"I think he'd be a fool not to," she says, nodding decisively; she takes his half-full mug from him as he gets up. "You're a good man, Greg. Now go and find him."
Searching is a slow process, despite the many locations Greg's preemptively scratched off the list. The top remaining contenders are spread wide across the city, inconveniently far from one another, and he gives each one a thorough going-over before moving on to the next.

With the evening coming on fast behind a low, dull canopy of clouds, he walks slowly, scanning the shadows for signs of life. As he goes, his thoughts move in ponderous circles.

Just hours ago, he'd known—something. Or thought he had. The ephemeral sense of wrongness seems to have centred on this feud between Sherlock and John, but now that Greg is walking the dingy second-storey promenade of Dagmar Court's aging council block, trying to look casual in his shirtsleeves as he searches for one disused maintenance corridor in particular, he can't lay his finger on why he might have thought that so very odd.

Right from the start, when the two of them were in accord they were a perfect team, so clearly attuned to each other that they were like a little bubble of a world unto themselves. Those times have long since become rare. With all that's happened between them—Moriarty, Sherlock's two years gone and his abrupt, poorly explained return, John's wedding and the baby—it feels like John's been pulling away for some time now.

Yes, Greg is unsettled by the apparent illogic in John's reaction to the unexpected death of a woman he had no reason to love any longer. But grief and guilt are fickle things, unpredictable at the best of times. He'd been reminded of that just last week, in fact; when he met with Miss Hosmer again to pass on the details from Hong Kong, she confided that she'd sought Sherlock's assistance against the advice of her ex. One passing mention that her partner had been perpetually unfaithful, and Greg's mood had suffered mightily for the rest of the day—apparently, those hurtful memories aren't as well-buried as he believed. So, no; reality may not have much bearing on how John feels, right now...but he still has the right to feel it.

What right does Greg have, to meddle?

The sun is down, now, and there are only two likely boltholes left on Greg's list. If this deconsecrated church doesn't pan out, there's only the library to search before he'll be reduced to slogging the disused paths through the back end of Hampstead Cemetery. Alone in the dark, and practically guaranteed to turn his ankle and scuff up his nicer pair of oxfords. Again.

Maybe I got this system of mine all wrong, he thinks sourly. The exterior door is half off its hinges, and he has to heave it up and over the jamb with a grunt. I should've at least gotten the damned graveyard out of the way while it was daylight...

The main floor of the church looks deserted, as he'd expected. His pocket torch finds old trash and bottles strewn about, and a few scrawls of graffiti across the walls and columns. It looks like the space has at some point come into use as an impromptu indoor skate park; perhaps in winter it provides overnight shelter for transients, but at the end of a warm day like this one it's unpleasently stuffy. Though Greg knows from experience that the power is kept on to the building, only one intact light bulb remains over the nave, and it isn't lit.

The stairwell leading to the cellar is narrow and pitch-dark, an easy deterrent to any casual interloper. Greg is briefly wistful for the night-vision provided by the ripples, as he picks his way
down the uneven stairs. But at the very bottom, the corridor turns a corner, revealing light farther on; he hurries towards it, eager to be done here.

When he picks out Sherlock's distinctive silhouette seated up ahead, dark curls a contrast to the back of his pale grey shirt under the glow of a bare dangling bulb, he lets out a gusting sigh of relief.

"There you are," he exclaims, shouldering his way past a stack of pallets; Sherlock doesn't turn around as Greg crosses the long space towards him, merely hunching his shoulders further over whatever it is he's doing. "Care to explain why you're not answering your calls this time? I thought we were past all this shit, criss-crossing the city to check out all your old hidey holes. You could've at least left me a clue or something, saved me wasting two hours on the—Sherlock?"

"Go away," Sherlock says, his voice little more than a dry rasp. He crosses his arms tightly, clamping his right hand over the crook of his left elbow, but the defensive flinch does nothing to hide the rolled-up sleeve, nor the array of paraphernalia lying on the upended crate before his knees.

"What. The fuck. Is this?"

"What does it look like?" The curls at Sherlock's nape shine slick with sweat under the light, as he hangs his head low to avoid Greg's eyes. "Go on," he sneers, "think hard; maybe you can manage to figure it out."

The anger at catching Sherlock in the act is magnified, in person, far beyond that of hovering helpless over the scene. It kindles a furious flame in Greg's belly; without conscious volition his hand shoots forward and drags the man around on the makeshift seat to face him.

"I thought you were done with this shit!"

"Whatever gave you that impression? Didn't you preside over my near OD at New Year's? The others have all been quite clear and vocal about my status as an addict; haven't they been keeping you in the loop?"

"Near overdose? I didn't—what?—John said you were clean! You never—"

"John never said I was clean," scoffs Sherlock. "And here I thought you were simply avoiding the topic, out of discomfort. Well, I guess that proves Mycroft wrong, doesn't it! I had it well in hand. Just as I do now. I'm in no danger. So, go away." He wrenches out of Greg's grasp and pushes to his feet, putting the space of a few lurching steps between them.

"Have you not listened to a bloody word I've said, these past months? Do you think that just because you've survived your own stupidity thus far, you can go ahead and keep on risking everything? I'm not a goddamn failsafe!"

"Clearly not! You've already made your point, Lestrade. You were an unwilling conscript in all this, yes, I know, why don't we go over it all again, how awful my very existence made yours?"

"Fuck. Just what unhappy memories had he let slip out, anyway, under the influence of drink that night? He should've known better... "Forget all that, Sherlock! Point is, I'm a person who cares about your well-being—"

"Technically," Sherlock cuts him off viciously, "your measure of success hinges solely on my survival, not my well-being. Don't you dare pretend you've played hero beyond that. As long as little Sherlock's heart keeps beating, no matter if it's broken, hmm?"
Shock drains the hot flush from Greg's cheeks, so fast that he feels a kick of light-headedness and staggers back a step. "That's—that's not true!"

"Then where were you before," shouts Sherlock, his face twisting in ugly rage. "When I could have been changed! When it wasn't too late!"

"I don't know! Probably sitting alone somewhere waiting for my lungs to quit working!" The first night he'd seen Sherlock with a needle in his arm, it had already been too late. Why hadn't he been there? He's asked himself the same a hundred times, but hearing it from Sherlock's lips is like a lash across his back. And it's clear that Sherlock isn't finished getting his licks in.

"Go on then, why don't you just go back home to hide and wait," Sherlock spits, "and leave me in peace! If Fate doesn't care that I'm high, you've no need to trouble yourself over it!"

With that the fire returns in force, blazing a painful path along Greg's veins—it burns behind his blurring eyes, and down his shaking limbs, and out through the loud crack of splintered wood as he kicks the empty crate to smash against the nearest wall, sending the syringe flying with the rest of it. "Fine," he roars over the invisible flames, "have it your fucking way, I admit it! I do wish I'd never been tapped for this! I could've had a nice life, a nice fucking normal fucking life with a wife who stayed faithful and a child who survived to be born, but you had to come along and ruin all that before I ever had a chance, didn't you!"

He wouldn't have believed that Sherlock's countenance could become any harder or more distant than it already was, but now he sees it happening, and the sight is a cold fist punching through his still-burning heart. Somewhere, a door is slamming shut on what little understanding they've built.

He can't let that happen.

"W-wait," he stammers out, "please, I didn't mean that—"

"But it's all true! Admit it!"

"No! Sherlock, wait, listen to me—"

Sherlock pushes past him, grabbing his coat and a duffel bag from atop a nearby pile of boxes. Greg tries to catch at his sleeve, but he's too fast.

"It's not like you think," he pleads, running to follow, and cursing when he trips on something in the dark corridor. "$\text{Sherlock!}$"

The smack of Sherlock's footfalls echoes from the stairwell, and the heavy bang of the upstairs door follows seconds after.

Greg stands paralysed outside the old church. The hand he's braced on the weathered stone beside him is trembling, a shocked, involuntary shivering that threatens to take over his whole body and leave him curled up on the ground behind the shrubbery, but somehow he remains standing. A thin, warm rain has begun pissing down in the dark, plastering his hair to his forehead.

Fuck. Fuck, what do I do? How do I fix this?
He remembers—so long ago, now—the day he'd had Sherlock dragged into rehab. January, it was; bitter cold and glare-bright. He remembers how he'd watched from a hidden stairwell window, heart pounding in his throat as the skinny kid in torn jeans struggled against the bulk of two dark-suited security men, shouting half-coherent strings of insult and expletive until his voice cracked behind the clouds of his breath—spitting in his older brother's face, and earning only a cold, disapproving sneer for his efforts. He remembers watching them bundle Sherlock away into that black car, the echoes from the street below replaced all at once by brittle, metallic quiet. He'd been rooted to the spot, staring down at the place the car had idled, the place Sherlock had stood at the moment DI Lestrade had changed abruptly from an interesting acquaintance to a traitor.

He'd felt righteous. Powerful. He'd known right from wrong, and he'd drawn a line to prove it.

And just then, in that hollowed out moment, he'd understood what he had lost: the right to meet Sherlock as an equal. Whatever happened from then on, however close he might allow himself to be drawn into Sherlock's irresistible orbit, he could never shake this. He would forever be the man who'd sent him away, the self-declared parental figure, the man who regarded adherence to the rules above the most cursory attempt to understand.

Back then, before even the infancy of their consulting arrangement, Greg had hardly expected a second chance—though the guilt had been tremendous, he'd seen it as a fair trade for Sherlock's safety, and the safety of his secret. And when Sherlock had fallen to his knees, practically begging for the chance to prove his worth? Even as that protective certainty had filled Greg with light, even as he'd given silent, awed thanks for the opportunity undeserved, he'd felt the mantle of the arbiter settling and locking in over his shoulders.

One step wrong, and I can have you taken away. One false move, and I can have your life crammed into a box, shut in until you've proven you can behave.

He would have done it, too. If Sherlock hadn't been shot, last year, he'd have made the call all over again, standing by silent and stone-faced as nine years of trust crumbled.

But now that there's even more at stake?

What else can I do?

It breaks his heart just thinking of it, but maybe he needs to.

Please, call me.

It's the seventh or eighth text Greg's sent, each one a variation on the same message. He's returned his car to the Yard, and found a taxi to take him home; the phone in his hand remains silent, no matter how intently he stares down at its screen.

As he pays the cabbie, he's already dialling, but of course Sherlock is no more inclined to answer his call now than he had been earlier. Stepping inside, locking the door behind him, Greg steels himself to leave a long voicemail.

"You told me, once, that you couldn't ever tell if I was lying," he says, omitting the preamble of a greeting. "Well, if you can see your way to believing anything from me, believe this: what I said to
you tonight was totally inexcusable. And, yes, I'll admit it held a bit of truth. You concluded that I've been unhappy about my situation, over the years; I won't deny it."

He heaves a deep sigh and presses a hand over his eyes as he continues speaking.

"But you're missing half the story, Sherlock. More than half. Truth is, I've been proud to watch you live and grow. Knowing you were out there...it gave me hope, when I needed it most. I celebrated each and every one of your milestones as if they were all my own. When I knew you were hurting, I'd have torn out my heart to be able to comfort you—and it was hell, believing I had to stay away for your safety and mine! You—" His voice cracks, and he has to swallow tightness from his throat before continuing.

"You seem to think I only care about you like a God-given duty, and only value you for your help with my work. But you need to know, Sherlock, you're the most important person in my life. As frustrating as you are, as painful and difficult as things have sometimes been, I wouldn't give it up. I wouldn't change a moment.

"So please understand that seeing you fall back to this hurts me, deeply. And it makes me angry—because I should have been able to help you, before. Damn it, I should have been given the chance! Whatever it is that's brought you to where you're at, right now...forget Fate, Sherlock. Maybe it doesn't care, but I do. Tell me how I can help you. Please, just—"

A long beep cuts him off, and a recording prompts him to deliver the message, which he does with shaking fingers; then, he sends just one more text.

I left you a voicemail.
Listen to it. Please.

That done, he forces himself to let go of the phone and sit down in the next room. Sitting lasts only a few minutes, though, before he's up on his feet again and pacing.

It's well past ten, already, and he'd never stopped for dinner; the very idea of eating a meal makes his stomach seem to flip over, and for once not even the idea of a stiff drink holds any appeal. But he can hear Molly's chiding as if she's right there in the kitchen beside him, and so he dutifully expends a little of his nervous energy on a tall glass of water and a couple pieces of toast. He stands by the worktop in the dark and eats methodically, chewing and swallowing bite after bite, even though eating feels about as pleasant as sucking on newsprint. Then he returns to his restless tour of the flat, never straying far from his phone.

The next few hours pass in a jumble of unhappy recollection. There's so much he might have done differently over the years, to impress upon Sherlock from the very beginning that he was appreciated. That he was loved, as maudlin as that sounds. And instead, Greg had loosened his tongue with liquor and lingered on the bitter memories, the lost opportunities and broken promises and lonely nights. How could he possibly have thought that Sherlock would hear those confessions and not interpret them as regrets?

Stupid, stupid!

He's so engrossed in the process of refining and embellishing upon his self-recrimination that he's genuinely startled when a noise filters into his perception. The knocking is insistent, but quiet—not resolved to try, yet unwilling to disturb. But Greg isn't sleeping.

He yanks open the door, gasping in relief: "Sherlock. Thank God."
There's a beat of uncomfortable silence before Sherlock replies. "It wasn't because of you," he says, directing the words towards Greg's feet.

"Wasn't it?"

"No. I—I never stopped." The words fall off into a near-whisper. "Not completely."

The confession freezes Greg in the doorway, mouth agape.

"May I come in?" asks Sherlock, meekly, still not looking up.
"I doubt it," Sherlock answers her bluntly, and he says nothing more to either of them for a long while.

16. Darkest Before Dawn

Time seems to hang motionless, while Greg stares blankly at the man on his doorstep—as much a stranger, it seems, as the wild-eyed, hissing creature who'd run from the church.

"Right; come on," he says at last, stepping aside. When he reaches out for the light switch, Sherlock makes a discontented sound; Greg accepts the silent request and leaves the flat as it is, lit only by the soft glow of the automatic nightlight in the hall. His own eyes have long since adjusted, anyway.

The clock on the microwave reads 1:47 as he pours two glasses of water; returning, he finds that Sherlock has taken a seat at the dining table, rather than sprawl out in his accustomed place on the sofa in the next room. Though his spine is rigidly straight, his dark head is bowed forward, and his hands are clasped tightly together on the table edge.

Greg's seen that body language many times before, in interrogation rooms...but never from Sherlock.

He eases himself into the opposite chair, placing the second glass within Sherlock's reach. Careful to keep his voice gentle, he asks, "Still high?"

Sherlock nods once, hesitant. "A little."

"All right, then. Anything you'd like me to get you?"

"No."

"Okay," says Greg.

He sips at his water, and after a minute Sherlock lifts his own with a shaking hand and downs a large, quiet gulp.

Greg waits. A dim, distant part of him is surprised at his own compassionate patience, but he finds that a pervasive calm has filled him, wrapping his sharp-edged emotions in thick cotton wool.

"I knew what would happen, if I broke my promise, and I did it anyway," Sherlock eventually says. "You should have nothing more to do with me."

"The deal was no cases, as I recall. Never said I'd cut you out of my life. As if I even could."
"Well, then, you should've stopped giving me work in 2006."

"Huh. That long, really."

Sherlock looks up warily at the mildness in Greg's reply. The yellowish glow from the hall catches briefly on one of his pale eyes.

"How often?" asks Greg.

"It varied. Sometimes once every few months. Sometimes once every few weeks. I was already practised at evading my brother's surveillance; it was hardly a challenge to avoid you."

"I'm sure it wasn't."

"I didn't—I don't do it just to be contrary," Sherlock says next, sounding slightly desperate. He's reading Greg's stillness in the dark as a warning sign of terrible anger about to explode, it seems, and with a start Greg realises he knows why: John's deepest rage is like that, silent right up until it turns deadly.

"I know," he says earnestly, and leans forward a little, so that more of his expression shows in the meagre light. "It's okay, Sherlock. What's done is done, all right? You had reasons every time, I'm sure."

Sherlock's head bows low again, abruptly.

Greg lets the pause stretch out until he hears a deep and even breath, marking a return to composure. Then he quietly asks, "You kept it up like that, all this time?"

"Not so much, after John moved in. I had to get it under control, or I knew he wouldn't stay..."

"It's a drugs bust. "I am clean; I don't even smoke!" The memory squeezes Greg's heart. "Oh, Sherlock."

"Shut up," snaps Sherlock. "He left anyway; I'm well aware. You needn't rub it in."

Greg sighs and drops the subject. He'd still like to understand what happened there, what Sherlock had miscalculated to cause John to blame him so vehemently for Mary's death. But as unnatural as the rift between the two of them seems, there are more important things to be learned, here in this dark confessional hour.

"One question," he says, when Sherlock's silence feels calm again.

"Mm."

"When they pulled you off that plane. John said you had a list of drugs with you, a long one. But he never did tell me anything, afterwards, about your blood test..."

"You want to know what I took, and how I got my hands on it."

"Well—yeah." He remembers Sherlock's scoffing denials, that afternoon—and it had seemed ridiculous, that Sherlock could have accessed so many illicit substances while under guard.

Sherlock sighs and slides lower in the seat, rubbing his fingers in circles at his temples. "My coat," he admits at last, in the low, resigned tone of a man who's already lost everything worth dissembling for. "There were two flat pouches hidden in the lining behind the belt, sealed in padded waterproof vinyl."
"Really? But you told us—"

"What better way to keep my hiding place safe, than to point straight at it and laugh? It was an old stash, though. I'd sewn it in there just a few months after John moved in, at the time I cleared everything else out of the flat."

"You were just walking around with it, all the time, for five years?"

"Three," Sherlock corrects him darkly, "but yes. Knowing it was there was a comfort. The whole point of it was to not use it—it would've been too inconvenient even to consider, on the rare occasions I did use over that period—but having it there freed a part of my mind that would have continually concerned itself with planning how I would get it, if the need arose. I don't expect that makes much sense to you."

It makes enough sense to be getting on with. "And the stash itself was...?"

"Cocaine. Ideally I'd inject, but insufflation was of course my only option in the airplane lavatory."

"Of course. And the list?"

Sherlock breathes out with an almost imperceptible chuckle. "Coincidence. I'd begun drafting an experiment, before the task of planning John's wedding fell to me—I wanted to look for a new way to test for multiple compounds simultaneously and effectively. The list was meant for Wiggins: samples I'd need his expertise to acquire for testing. I never did get around to asking him."

Greg frowns. He's never met this Wiggins in person, the junkie friend Molly had so distastefully recalled, but his memory calls up a shadowed image of ratlike features and a squeal of pain under John's angry hands. How long had it taken, for that dealer to decide to take advantage of Sherlock's heartbreak and gain himself an active customer?

I would have made the call, that day, he thinks again. If I'd done it right away, maybe he wouldn't have gone and gotten himself shot that night...

"What should we do now?" he asks Sherlock, shaking his head a little to dislodge the unpleasant memories.

"We?"

"You heard me. Look, I've said my piece. You know why it upsets me, and I think you also know this can't go on. You won't lose my support, whatever happens, but I really think it might be time to consider professional help..."

"I've tried before. I have."

"And now you can try it again."

"Easy for you to say!"

Nodding, Greg concedes the point. "Yeah, okay. So maybe let's talk about what made it hard. I know last time, you cut out of the programme quite a bit early—you might recall nearly being hit by a lorry that night," he adds, when Sherlock snaps his head up in surprise.

"Oh. Well, that place was horrid. It would have done me no good to stay."

"All right; what about a different place, then? One chosen by you, not your brother."
"What's the point? They're all the same, aren't they! It's all touchy-feely psychobabble, bolstered by enforced confinement, mindless group activity and a careless over-reliance on prescription medications. They think if they can order addicts to hold hands and sing Kumbaya together long enough, they've done their duty. It's a pseudoscientific sham!"

"I can believe it. And it makes sense that you didn't stick it out; you're a unique case. If they couldn't give individually tailored attention to their run-of-the-mill patients, they sure as hell couldn't handle you."

Sherlock shifts and straightens, cocking his head to one side, but he gives no sign of whether he's interpreted that as a compliment or a gentle insult. Honestly, Greg isn't sure which it was, either.

"Okay," he continues, scratching his head, "so, let's see. Any place you've already been is out, and any place that employs substantially similar methods is out, too. Fine; there are plenty of treatment centres to choose from. We'll just have to find one that's going to be interesting enough to suit you."

Even after another large gulp of his water, Sherlock's voice is low and rough when he says, "You make it sound so fucking easy. I'm—I'm an addict, Lestrade. You can't just assemble my sobriety like a bookcase."

"That's too bad, 'cause I'm pretty sure I have a nice set of Allen keys around here, somewhere."

Sherlock gasps a startled chuckle, quickly stifled, and a sly grin begins to pull Greg's mouth wide.

"And anyway, who knows? Maybe we'll get really lucky, and find you a rehab facility where someone's been murdering the patients," he suggests flippantly, and Sherlock explodes in a genuine laugh, shadows crinkling up around his eyes in the half-light.

Everything will be all right, eventually. Somehow.

When day breaks Sherlock goes off to Baker Street, then comes back carrying a bag. He stays at Greg's flat in the days following, unobtrusive but apologetically present—whether it acts more as a temporary barrier against temptation for Sherlock or as a balm to Greg's heightened worry is immaterial. It's an unspoken agreement between them, part of the casual understanding that they needn't repeat themselves aloud; all of the brutally honest confessions and assurances of that first night still seem to linger in the air around them like a bubble, insulating them from the outside world. Still, nearly eight months on from their first secretive meeting, it's no longer difficult for them to coexist. Only the subdued mood and the spare bedding tucked beside the sofa differentiate this from when Sherlock hid here to avoid Mary's watchful eye.

Over the next few days, initial research into local rehab centres turns up discouragingly few promising results; Sherlock demonstrates a startling ability to deduce a place's dirty secrets merely given the splash page of their website. It's entirely possible that misplaced comma isn't irrefutable evidence of a poorly handled laundry service, and this oddly captioned photo has nothing to do with the probability that the management is skimming funds. But Greg has seen the trick Sherlock can do with restaurants' door handles, and besides, the man has every right to express his discomfort. Greg's entirely willing to allow him a little leeway to be picky, as long as he continues to cooperate.
About a week after the night of the church, Molly comes over to offer moral support as they hunker down for another research session. She'd been quite distressed to hear the truth about Sherlock, when Greg had called her to explain things. For a few awkward moments after she arrives, it seems his worries about having her here were justified—Molly's dark eyes first flash with disappointed anger and then well up in compassionate pity, while Sherlock's face cycles rapidly through contortions of shame, indignation, and sorrow—but then she takes a step back, shooting a brief glance towards Greg.

"I'm glad you're here," she tells Sherlock, smiling warmly, and the atmosphere relaxes as if by magic.

The laptop Molly has brought from home is a welcome convenience for the evening's work, because it means they can all stay in the room together; for the first time, Greg finds himself seriously thinking about buying one of his own. He's never regretted owning only a desktop computer, of course, and the high-powered, extra-secure one he purchased during Sherlock's travels has served him admirably, well worth the dent in his then-limited funds...and yet. There's something to be said for having his gorgeous girlfriend snuggled up beside him while he sifts through boring review articles and references.

Sherlock, meanwhile, is sprawled out sideways on the armchair across the room, intent on the screen of his own laptop. He shows no outward reaction to their choice of position. Greg glances over guiltily, the first few times he catches himself murmuring an affectionate comment, but only once does Sherlock look up, meeting his eyes with a subtly sardonic expression.

Meanwhile, Molly appears surprisingly emboldened by the stoic presence of Greg's houseguest. Stealthy touches become sly caresses, then casually brazen ones; she's partially draped across Greg's back, gazing contentedly over his shoulder at the bland, clinical website for a small centre near Bexleyheath, by the time the doorbell rings.

"Oh, that'll be the pizza!" She plants a quick kiss on his cheek before scrambling up. "Don't move, I'll get it."

"Okay—use my cash, yeah? My wallet's on the table."

"Got it," she chirps.

She comes back a few minutes later with the box and a stack of paper napkins, but she's studying something small in her other hand. "Have you already ruled this one out?"

"Hmm?"

"Anderbrooke Retreat, in Stanmore. You had their card in your wallet—it fell out when I was getting the money..."

"Let me see?" He takes the business card from her, frowning, and turns it over to see the scrawl of writing on the other side. "Oh, yeah. Angela used this to give me her number, a while back. I'd forgotten."

"Angela?" She raises a coy eyebrow. "Should I be worried?"

"I certainly hope not," Sherlock pipes up from the other side of the room. "She's a client, and a hopeless case at that."

"Really?" asks Greg, turning in his seat to see him better. "You don't think we can help her?"
Sherlock rolls his eyes at the we. "I don't think there's much I can do for her, no! Whatever happened to Faith Hosmer, it was thirty years ago. Various Triad factions during that era likely held more than a few European women against their will, as payment for the debts of their husbands, and they're not exactly notorious for keeping accurate records of their misdeeds; unless Angela is able to recall her early childhood in much more detail than she's given me so far, I'm unlikely ever to find any hard evidence. And I think you'll agree that now isn't exactly a good time for me to jaunt off to Hong Kong and search for a needle in an organised crime haystack!"

"Mm, no. You're right about that," Greg agrees, with a pang of sympathy for the poor woman. Stifling a sigh, he reaches for the open box and gestures invitingly with a slice, "Pizza?"

Sherlock shakes his head and returns his attention to his laptop.

There's a few minutes of silence, while Greg and Molly focus on trying to eat and cuddle at the same time.

"I haven't actually ruled it out, no," Sherlock says, and they both look up.

"What, pizza?" asks Greg, and Molly snickers quietly into his arm.

"Anderbrooke. It's currently on my short list."

"Really! It looked a bit new-agey to me. Yoga, and spa treatments, and acupuncture..."

"They're unconventional, that much is true. And relatively unknown, which is a plus in terms of press coverage—the centre disguises itself quite effectively as an exclusive spa."

"I thought it looked relaxing," Molly puts in. "The photo on the card, anyway."

Greg grunts, mouth full, and leans forward over her stretched legs on his lap to pull the computer closer with his free hand.

"They do appear to focus heavily on relaxation and coping techniques, along with individually paced self-exploration therapy," continues Sherlock. "But it's their lenient policy on accompanied release that really caught my eye."

"Mm-mmph?" Tapping at the keyboard one-handed isn't getting Greg anywhere; Molly helpfully takes the last bit of crust from his other hand and swipes at his fingers with a napkin. He gives her a grateful nod and swallows quickly. "Accompanied release, you say? And that means what, exactly?"

Sherlock's self-satisfied smile makes the shape of a lowercase V. "That means, Lestrade, that if a serial killer terrorises London during my three months there, you'll be able to fetch me out for a day without derailing my recovery. Likewise, when the tedium of therapy becomes unbearable, I can request a day of relative freedom with you, or,"—he nods deferentially towards Molly—"another responsible person, rather than being forced to break myself out and forfeit my enrolment."

"Forced to, really," Greg half-laughs. At least now he understands what must have happened, the night of Mycroft and the lorry, when there should have been more than two months left in Sherlock's programme.

Why Mycroft had let the escape stand, however, is another matter. Couldn't he be bothered? Or was it just easier to acquiesce, to declare the rehabilitation a closed chapter and back off to his customary, comfortable distance once more—his nuisance brother presumed safe under basic
surveillance?

Well, there are good reasons they haven't brought the current situation to Mycroft's attention. Funding, security, media spin, all the favours a man in his unique position could grant...his involvement would come at a humiliating price, and it's not what Sherlock needs. Greg knew it without asking, that night; he recognised the shivering-hot ember of desperation in Sherlock's gaze.

Sherlock needs to be the one in control, this time. He needs to make his own decisions.

The splash page for Anderbrooke loads at last—swooping title text over a panoramic photograph of flowering gardens, flanked by silhouettes with glowing chakra points that pulse in and out soothingly—and whatever Molly has been saying hasn't registered over the sudden churn of Greg's thoughts, but it ends in the words, "...to John?"

"I doubt it," Sherlock answers her bluntly, and he says nothing more to either of them for a long while.

-----
Visiting Hours

Chapter Summary

"Go on, open it," he says, trying to sound relaxed; "Molly'll want to know what you think of her gift."

17. Visiting Hours

6 August, 2015

Dear Uncle,

It's been some time since my last letter, I know; sorry for my slow reply. I hope you and your friend have both been well.

As for me, I remain in good health (an uncommonly strong immune system's a continual blessing, isn't it?). However, there've been a few major developments since last autumn, which I've sadly neglected to mention in my few letters over that time. Apologies, again. It just didn't seem right to tell you before I knew how things would play out - it's an awful lot to put in writing, and I know I'm not as good at this double-talk as you are, anyway.

I do think, on the whole, the changes in my life have been for the better, but I always appreciate your advice. So I'm planning on coming up to tell you about them, finally. This letter should arrive at least a few days before I do; you should expect me on Saturday the 15th, probably after lunchtime.

I look forward to seeing you again.

Greg

Ted opens the door as if he's expecting a travelling dentist.

"Greg," he says gravely, glancing up and down the street suspiciously before allowing him inside.

"Uncle. It's good to see you."

The warm greeting earns a noncommittal grunt, but Ted briefly grips Greg's shoulder as he passes. It's a downright affectionate gesture, by his standards.

"I hope you aren't expecting me to feed you lunch," he grumbles on the way to his kitchen. "I just
had the last of my ham and cheese, so you'd have to settle for rye toast."

"Oh, no worries, I ate in Leicester with Aunt Flora."

"Did you, now?"

Grace and Emerson had been there, too, and their daughter Rosalie with her scrappy little seven-year-old Benji; it'd been a regular family party, spanning four generations. Greg knew he'd brought it on himself, scheduling a visit in advance rather than dropping by unannounced, but it hadn't been too unpleasant after all. Rather than go into any of that, he simply answers, "If I'd mentioned I was visiting you after, I bet she might've sent something up for you."

"Hm, her cooking's too rich for me," says Ted, clearing his dishes into the sink and filling the kettle. He seems quietly pleased to hear that Greg hasn't damaged his reputation as the family hermit.

Greg sits down at the little table there, just as he did four years ago, and watches with patient amusement as his uncle potters about. But when the tea is ready, Ted waves him up and directs him into the sitting room. It looks much as Greg remembers: the same heavy brocaded curtains drawn brown-and-gold against the afternoon sun, the same rolltop desk and antique globe. The old sofa creaks under their weight as they sit down.

"So how's old Flora getting along, then?" asks Ted, making a good show of being grudging about the small talk. "And her unruly horde of descendants? Go on, I know you're dying to tell me all the juicy bits."

Greg smiles and complies; they spend a few minutes on family news, before he decides to get down to the reason for his visit.

"I wanted to talk to you about Sherlock," he begins, unnecessarily. "I know you've taken a rather dim view of my getting close to him..."

"Well, of course I have. Surely you understand why I worry; you're going against the natural order of things. Being directly involved with the life you're guarding is incredibly dangerous!"

"That's the bit I don't quite believe, see. I met my charge," he asserts, "and the world didn't end. You already knew that."

"Sure, I knew that. Working in the same city, in the same specialised field he was angling to be involved with; it was bound to happen. Doesn't mean it was the best thing for you," Ted sniffs. "I stand by my statement. The risk you put yourself in—"

"But now I've told him," Greg breaks in, before the lecture can get rolling.

Ted's eyes pop wide. "You what?"

"And my girlfriend."

"What sort of muddle-headed, feckless fool—!"

"And they believe me, Ted. And they support me! And believe it or not, the world hasn't ended."

"This will lead to nothing good," Ted warns. "Nothing good. Mark my words, Greg!" His face has taken on a deep flush, and the teacup is unsteady in his shaking hand; Greg grins and puts his hands up, placating.
"All right, all right; calm down. I'll explain, of course! I just couldn't resist the opportunity to wind you up..."

"Hmph. Cheeky boy. Go on then."

"It wasn't—casual, like I made it sound. I didn't just go prancing up and tell them, okay? With Molly, I had no choice."

The smile drops away, as Greg remembers the unhappy circumstances of that night. "I was alone with her, at the hospital where she works; there was a bad ripple, and I couldn't get away—she saw the whole thing. It was either try and explain myself afterwards and hope for the best, or she'd have had me in an MRI machine within the hour! We weren't a couple yet, at that time; I certainly didn't expect she'd believe me, but there was nothing else I could say."

"If the girl was in love with you already, I'd say that probably didn't hurt your odds," Ted comments dryly, and Greg huffs out a soft laugh, tipping his head back to drain the last of his tea."

"Yeah, maybe so. Anyway, what's done is done. And I couldn't be happier, really; being with her, being honest about myself, it's fantastic."

"Well, bully for you, I suppose. Was it her idea, then, your telling Sherlock?"

Shaking his head, Greg answers, "No, not at all. I didn't plan for that, either! If it hadn't been for Sherlock murdering that blackmailer—"

"What?"

"—and then getting sentenced to a suicide mission in Eastern Europe for it, less than four months after he'd been shot in the chest by his best friend's assassin wife—"

"What!"

"—yeah. It's a long and complicated story. Believe me, I never planned to tell him! But when it came down to it..." Greg shrugs, helplessly. "I just couldn't let him be sent away, knowing he was meant to die, without having at least the knowledge that he wouldn't be alone—that I'd be there fighting to get him home alive! And yeah, there wasn't time to explain, and I knew he wouldn't really understand; it didn't matter. I had to say something."

Ted gapes at him for a long moment; then, blinking, he reaches down to place his forgotten teacup on the low side table. "So that's what you've been up to, this year? Watching over this suicide mission?"

"No, he got out of that. Well, Moriarty got him out of that. Posthumously," Greg adds, with a wry shadow of a chuckle. "Actually, I signed him into rehab for drug addiction about a week ago, now. That's why I came up here to see you; I was feeling a bit at loose ends, with him away."

"I can imagine," says Ted, looking a bit stunned. "My God, Greg...your life makes the politics of warring Columbian cartels seem like bloody child's play, doesn't it!"

"Oh, is that what these maps are about?" The wall opposite them is dominated by a large, detailed rendering of South America's northern region, partially tacked over with a more localised map; various coloured markers and flags are affixed here and there on both. "Looks complicated. Could you explain a bit of it to me?"

They spend a few minutes talking about Ted's charge, Anni, and the ever-changing state of affairs in the country she's made her home. Despite the disadvantage of distance, Ted does his best to track and anticipate the factors most likely to affect the rural area for which Anni serves as doctor.
—and teacher, and stubborn advocate for justice, and beloved surrogate grandmother to dozens, besides. Speaking of her lights Ted's gruff features from within, lifting his perpetual frown into a faint, hovering smile he doesn't even seem to realise he wears. Pride and love are evident in every word he speaks of her: Greg can't help his satisfaction.

After the subject of Colombia is exhausted, there's a comfortable lull in the conversation. They sit together in the sepia-toned quiet, watching dust settle through a stray shaft of afternoon sunlight. Eventually Greg leans back, stretching his arm out across the bumpy brass-studded edge of the sofa frame; oh-so-casually, he says, "You know...I saw a funny thing on the news the other day. Two people who'd been pen friends for forty-two years, and they finally went and met each other in person..."

Scoffing loudly, Ted cuts him off. "I'm not a bloody human interest puff piece! What business is it of yours, how I conduct my life?"

"None at all, of course. I don't mean to offend. It was just a thought."

"And someday, when your niece comes to you to say she's figured out your secret? How will you feel when the tables are turned?"

"I'll tell her anything she wants to know," answers Greg, smiling as he feels the pure truth of it warming him from within. "I'll open my home to her, just as you've done for me, and I'll give her whatever support she needs; I'll show her she never needs to feel alone again. And I'll try my very best to teach her caution, and to pass on the valuable lessons you've taught me."

Ted looks at him for a long moment, his expression shifting and unreadable. Finally he nods, and one corner of his mouth twitches upwards. "I suppose that'll do nicely."

Sherlock's stint at Anderbrooke Retreat has lasted two weeks now, and amazingly, there's no sign of an imminent escape plan.

Visiting privileges begin for patients at Anderbrooke only after the adjustment period of the initial two weeks. The centre's policy forbids mobile phones, but the lack of connection doesn't seem to have bothered Sherlock as much as Greg might have expected; in the brief twice-weekly phone calls he's made from the common room, he's expressed more irritation at the therapeutic masseuse's habitual gum-chewing than the isolation or even the group discussion hours.

Greg worries that there's more he isn't saying, of course—given the prospect of being overheard, it's quite possible he's sanitising his reports. So on the very first Saturday afternoon he's permitted to come, Greg shows up promptly at the start of the afternoon's open hours. He's brought a care package along with him; Mrs Hudson has baked an almond cake with raspberry filling that she says is one of Sherlock's favourites, and Molly has thoughtfully enclosed a brand-new set of luxuriously soft pillowcases, with a thread count higher than Greg had actually known existed. She's even taken the time to launder them with the same brand of washing powder used at 221B, to give Sherlock a touch of home. Greg hadn't actually thought to find a contribution of his own, and if he had it certainly wouldn't have been nearly so gracious, but he figures the visit itself must count for something.
The male nurse seated at the front desk checks his name and ID carefully against the information on his screen, and Greg expects to be issued a pass of some kind and directed on his way; instead, the man stands and comes out to usher Greg over towards a nearby seating nook, a cozy little waiting area out of the way of the rest of the lobby's quiet traffic.

"The details concerning any patient's treatment are of course privileged information. But you were registered as Mr. Holmes' designated guardian," he explains—Greg's muscles instinctively tense at the word. He schools his face to stillness as the nurse continues, "So I can inform you that there's been a minor setback in his care, Mr Lestrade."

"Oh, no." Instantly, four or five terrible scenarios crowd into Greg's brain and vie for his attention. "What's happened?"

"He's okay," the young man is quick to reassure him. "But during his therapy session, this morning, he experienced a bit of a nervous breakdown. Dr Kavanaogh believes it probably had something to do with a past trauma, and has entered a tentative diagnosis of PTSD into his file."

"God! But you're sure he's okay?"

"Yes, sir. He should be sleeping now; we did have to administer a mild sedative, unfortunately, after he began punching a wall in the corridor. If you'd rather not stay, I can make sure this parcel is delivered to his room for you..."

"No, it's fine. I'd rather see him anyway. If—If you wouldn't mind?"

"As I said, you're a privileged visitor. Of course you're welcome to spend time with him. Right this way, sir."

The private room assigned to Sherlock is more like a suite; the spacious, cunningly joined living and sleeping areas and attractively appointed bathroom wouldn't be far out of place in a luxury hotel. It certainly lives up to the name Retreat. Greg's been in here once before, during the brief introductory tour of the facilities on the day they'd come to check Sherlock in. Somehow, though, the spectacular view from this room had escaped his notice. The lush gardens pictured so prominently on Anderbrooke's website are spread invitingly below the wide bay window, which comes complete with a deep, cushioned ledge seat for reading or meditation.

Greg doesn't linger at the window for long, though. He pulls up a slim upholstered chair and settles himself by the head of the bed, studying the man sleeping there. The hollows beneath Sherlock's eyes are faintly bruised with fatigue, and he wears bandages wrapped around the knuckles of both hands. But there are no wires, no tubes; there's no haze of suffocating smoke hanging in the air. There's a sense of peace, here in this warmly sunlit room, unlike anything Greg's ever experienced while watching Sherlock sleep.

Being seated at his bedside, safe within the quiet oasis of Anderbrooke, feels right. Greg's heart feels full to bursting with affection—it's as if something's come full circle, and finally found a resting place. He watches Sherlock's steady, even breathing, letting the feeling swell and build into a sort of bittersweet joy; when the room's rapt silence threatens to overcome his composure, it seems his only choice is to break it.
"So," he murmurs, "I've been thinking, um. Well, I s'pose it's silly to talk at you while you're asleep, but anyway. Yeah. The day I came looking for you...I had the strangest sort of feeling come over me, all at once. Like...like nothing that's happened since January has been a coincidence? Like something's been working its way into the cracks between us all, pushing our buttons. Like someone was watching, over all our shoulders."

The back of his neck prickles, for a moment, at the very thought. He casts his eyes around the room once more, searching reflexively for the telltale signs of a camera lens, or for a face peering in at the window—which is a fairly ridiculous fear, given that this room is up on the first floor. He softly clears his throat, dismissing the irrational idea.

"But, you know, all of that—it seems pretty stupid, now," he continues. His nails pick lightly at a snagged thread in the sheet, where his hand rests on the edge of the bed. "I probably just...couldn't handle the idea that things could've gotten that bad, on their own. With you and John both so screwed up, and everyone shutting everyone else out, all those hurt feelings. And God, that was before I even knew what you were doing to yourself." Something in the air has shifted; Greg's pulse picks up at the sense that Sherlock is beginning to wake, but he licks his lips and stubbornly forces himself to continue speaking as if he isn't being heard. "So I just—I guess I wanted to say, I'm sorry if I didn't do something I might have, to stop it going that way. I'm sorry I didn't see you were hurting sooner. This is what's important now, yeah? Getting you well."

He falls silent, sniffing away the brief and thankfully nebulous threat of tears, and turns his gaze away from Sherlock's serene features; the cotton-ball perfection of the drifting clouds beyond the window keeps his attention, until the velvety baritone of Sherlock's voice startles him.

"Lestrade."

"You're awake," Greg blurts out, and yanks his wayward hand back into his lap.

"Well spotted."

"Sorry. It was rude of me to stay while you were sleeping, wasn't it? I probably should've gone..."

"You needed reassurance; I suppose it's understandable. Obviously the desk nurse told you about this morning."

Greg nods, resisting the urge to offer help as Sherlock pushes himself somewhat awkwardly up into a sitting position—the long months spent visiting Sherlock in hospital have apparently left some lasting impulses. "They didn't give me any details, but they said you had a breakdown. Said you were triggered by some traumatic memory during your session, or at least that's what your doctor put down."

"Dr Kavanaogh. Yes."

Though his speech is still fuzzy with the lingering effects of the sedative, something in his tone gives Greg pause. "Is he—right, in his assessment, do you think? PTSD?"

"She," Sherlock corrects him. "It's...well, it's possible, I suppose. It's not as if I've actually told her about Serbia."

He hasn't told Greg about it, either. That entire region of the world seems to have been purposefully omitted from all Sherlock's chosen to recount of his travels—Greg still shivers at the memory of seeing Sherlock fall to his knees in the snow, hopelessly surrounded by mercenary soldiers, but he's never found the right opportunity to ask what had happened after that ripple.
Hearing the weight given to the word, now, he's perversely glad he hasn't.

"So you, uh." He casts about for something to say, to pull them back from the edge of that particular abyss. "You've been getting along with her well enough, then? The doctor?"

Sherlock shrugs and brings his hands together thoughtfully at his chin, only to put them back down on the coverlet, annoyed, when he remembers the bulky bandages. "I find her interesting," he says. "There's something about her. She's far smarter than she lets on, I think."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes, but I fail to see the logic in that. Given her position and responsibilities, she should want to appear as intelligent as possible!"

"Hm. Well, you'd want to, sure. But it's probably a strategy to appear approachable to patients," Greg suggests. "Make 'em feel comfortable around her, y'know? She just hasn't dropped the act, yet, with you."

Sherlock sniffs dubiously at the idea; his expression turns almost sullen as he looks down at his hands. "Even her name is interesting," he mutters, picking at the left-hand bandages with the bitten fingernails of his right. "Kavanaugh," he repeats, and spells it out for good measure. "The surname has many spelling variations, but that particular one is quite uncommon. And yet, I'd run across the exact same spelling in the course of case research, just last month."

"Huh. That's a fun coincidence," says Greg, as he gets up to pour himself a cup of chilled water from the convenient dispenser built into the little wet bar; turning back towards the bed he freezes, fixed in place by the odd, piercing look Sherlock is giving him.

"Intuitions are not to be ignored, Lestrade. They represent data processed too fast for the conscious mind to comprehend."

"Uh." Sherlock isn't only referring to his doctor's name, now, Greg feels sure. "You heard me? All of that stuff I said?"

"You were sitting six inches from the bed, and tapping your fingers next to my pillow," Sherlock points out, rolling his eyes. "Of course I heard you."

"Look, you probably shouldn't take me seriously, on that. It was the day after I'd visited John, and I was just upset about how he was acting; it makes sense I'd try to find something bigger to blame —"

"Stop trying to rationalise it," snaps Sherlock. Throwing back the covers, he hurries across the room in his loose pyjamas to hunt through a stack of magazines and books near the sofa, digging out a pencil. "If you had a sudden hunch that the murder victim you were looking at was connected to one you'd seen a month prior, you'd follow up on it, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yeah." Greg's caught a break in more than a few cases that way, over the years; those flashes of inspiration had all been based on some kind of visible evidence, though, not just a vague dissatisfaction with the course of events. "But you don't really think—?"

"No, no, of course not, don't be silly. I'm simply—reminding you—of what you already know."

The speed at which Sherlock bounds up to him is distinctly at odds with the casual nonchalance in his words, and the sudden physical contact between them is an even more shocking anomaly. Alarmed and baffled, Greg looks down at the scrap of glossy magazine paper that's been firmly
pressed into his hand, and reads the messy scrawl there.

*MM didn't recognise Gabriel.*

*He said Moriarty hired him - Feb.*

*Pymts traced thru Asia. My file.*

*Look after John.*

Sherlock clasps Greg's forearm tightly for a second, still drilling into him with that intense green-silver stare, before stepping back. Plastering an unnervingly serene smile across his face, he says lightly, "All right, then, Gordon?"

Greg swallows with some difficulty, mouth suddenly dry. *He thinks we could be bugged. I may already have said too much.* "Yeah, all right," he manages, folding the note over and shoving it quickly into his pocket.

The cup of water is in Sherlock's hand, now—Greg didn't even notice him taking it. He steps around Sherlock to retrieve the parcel he's left waiting on the table, then trades Sherlock the box for the cup and takes two fast gulps to settle his nerves.

"Go on, open it," he says, trying to sound relaxed; "Molly'll want to know what you think of her gift."

-----
"I'm sorry, I must have misheard you, love." Molly emerges from her kitchen with two cups of tea, carefully stepping around a stray catnip mouse as she crosses to the sofa. "You didn't just say that Jim is alive?"

"Well, we didn't think so, no," Greg answers. Reaching out to accept his tea means taking a break from petting Toby; Toby grizzles a distinct complaint and kneads his lap until he starts up again. "I mean, the barmy bastard shot himself in the head, right? Can't be easy to fake that sort of thing. Especially not when you're in the middle of a handshake with the man you'd have to fool!"

"No, it does seem unlikely," she agrees as she settles into the opposite seat. "If only he'd made it down to me that day, we'd know for sure. I certainly wouldn't have minded doing his post-mortem."

The unusual hardness in her voice draws his eyes to her, but her raised mug obscures her expression. It's been years, now, and Greg had almost forgotten—Molly has her own reason to hold a special grudge against that man; he'd used her, toyed with her heart and then tossed her aside. He'd been invited into this very flat—had sat on this very sofa—had played the part of the attentive lover to gleeful perfection; he'd probably even copped a feel while he was at it, while they sat curled up here watching telly, cupping her perfect sweet breasts in his disgusting murderer's hands—

Toby yowls and thrashes under Greg's clenching fingers, digging claws into the meat of his thigh before leaping away and bolting for the back room.

"Oh! All right, darling?"

"Yeah," Greg answers through closed teeth, hissing a little as he sets down the dripping mug and wipes his scalded hand off on his trousers. "I'm fine, thanks. Anyway. So I do still think he's dead."
He fucking better be, his inner voice adds viciously, before he can push the last bit of his possessive rage down deep.

"But if he supposedly paid someone—wait, sorry, what exactly did Sherlock say today?"

He pulls the torn magazine page from his pocket and smooths it out on the armrest before placing it on the open cushion between them. It appears to be part of a perfume advertisement; Sherlock's warning is scribbled hastily across the cheek of a fair-skinned model and the pale, moon-shaped curve of the bottle she suggestively cradles near her lips.

Molly studies the note for a moment, frowning. "And MM is—?"

"Mary. Has to be. Her maiden name was Morstan, remember—well, that's what she told us it was, anyway. And Gabriel was the name of the contract killer who was after her."

"Huh. 'MM didn't recognise Gabriel.' But that makes no sense; didn't you tell me he was supposed to have been her old teammate?"

"Exactly. If he was an impostor, he knew enough about the guy to scare her into running. She wouldn't have taken the threat seriously if she didn't have reason to believe it was him." Judging his hand safe to use again, Greg retrieves his tea and takes a sip, then continues to think aloud. "But who knew the real Gabriel's writing style, and special personal signature? The four of them kept all that stuff private on those memory sticks. And Mary believed they'd all died in Tbilisi, except her."

"Someone who found one of the other three sticks? On a dead body?"

"Or...someone who had access to the information, as payment," he says. His pulse picks up a little: he's getting closer to something, he can feel it. "Mary made a deal with Moriarty, to get out of the business; he arranged the disaster in Tbilisi...he'd have had to get information about AGRA, to plan that setup, right? 'He said Moriarty hired him.' That's gotta be it."

"February," Molly points out, shaking her head. "Moriarty hired him in February. February when? 2011?"

"Well...maybe? He died that July, it'd have to have been."

"No, Greg. That can't be right! What did she say about that day, when you were on the phone listening in? You told me she said she'd decided—"

"—not to tell anyone Sherlock was still alive, because she liked John too much," he finishes, deflating. "Shit, you're right. She took her new identity and followed after John, only because she knew she wouldn't get in trouble for it, since Moriarty was dead."

Molly nods unhappily. "And if he was dead, he couldn't possibly have predicted she'd do that. To hire a fake Gabriel, years ahead of time, somehow knowing not only that she'd follow John, but that she'd get into a relationship with him, and actually marry him, and have a child with him? And to have this killer wait for all of that to happen, instead of just hunting her down to begin with?"

"Which begs the question, again," sighs Greg, "is he still alive?"

They sit and contemplate the question in uneasy silence, for a minute.

Greg tries again to assemble the meagre clues he's gathered, to picture the scene of that fateful day in Florida. An isolated highway leading through the swamp, an unavoidable risk taken to reach a
smaller, safer airport...a confrontation beginning in confusion, as the target failed to recognise an
approaching stranger as her intended killer...and while John attempted to administer first aid to the
mother of his child, too far from the nearest emergency response, perhaps Sherlock had focused his
attention on the wounded man? Perhaps he'd forced him to confess his employer, out of earshot
while Mary lay dying—thus appearing sufficiently uncaring to rouse John's anger. And afterwards,
as shock set in, had Sherlock even tried to explain what he'd learnt from the assassin? Or had he
kept it to himself and merely accepted John's blame for the whole mess, confused by an answer
that made no kind of sense—afraid that pinning yet another senseless loss on Moriarty would be a
step too far, for his friend?

"I don't think Sherlock is telling me he's alive," Greg says, slowly, testing the feel of the words on
his tongue. "I think...Jim must be dead. But it didn't have to be Jim who hired Gabriel, did it?" A
memory strikes him, edges and details fuzzy with age: leaving the morgue with Sherlock, and
riding with him to Baker Street... "In the beginning. Before John got kidnapped and taken to that
pool, before the bomb that exploded in Glasgow...Sherlock was telling me. He said Moriarty was a
mystery figure. Unseen, yeah? Criminals all over the world whispered the name, but nobody knew
his face."

Molly looks distinctly uncomfortable; she's pulled both feet up onto the cushion in front of her, and
wrapped her arms protectively around her knees. But her voice is bravely calm, when she says what
they're both thinking: "There's a new Moriarty out there."

Greg hardly even notices, at first: he's deep in thought, contemplating the evening's plans as he
makes the walk to Barts from the Tube—not from the closest station, but the longer walk that will
take him past a good florist's shop. It isn't a special occasion or anything, just an innocuous
Tuesday in late August. Baba always maintained that the best sort of gifts were the ones given for
no reason, though, and Greg hasn't been able to get Molly off his mind all day—her eyes, her
smile, and the incredible way she'd helped him work through things, last Saturday night. So, while
he tries to decide between classic roses and something more cheerful and bright, he pays the
passing traffic no mind, and only gradually realises that one piece of that traffic isn't actually
passing.

The black car has pulled up alongside him, perfectly matching his walking pace. He's hardly
surprised to see it, but he's more than a little irked that it's taken this long to come. All in all,
counting at least a week spent off-grid and more than two as Greg's houseguest before getting
things finally sorted at Anderbrooke, it's been well over a month since Sherlock's been where his
brother's expected him to be. What makes today the day, for this? Why should the situation
suddenly be important now, when it apparently wasn't actionable yesterday, or last week?

Fuck it, he decides, fanning that spark of mutinous resentment into a glowing ember of antagonistic
mischief. He keeps walking.

The car continues to pace him for at least two or three minutes, by Greg's internal reckoning,
before the backseat passenger finally gives up and puts down the window. Greg barely gives him a
glance before facing front again with a purposefully sunny smile, still not breaking stride. "Ah, Mr
Holmes! Pleasure to see you. Nice weather for a stroll, isn't it?"

"For goodness' sake," huffs Mycroft. "Must we do it this way?"
"Hmm? Sorry?"

He heaves a put-upon sigh. "Surely you know why I've come to speak with you."

"Surprised it took you this long to notice," retorts Greg. "Sherlock had said something about the surveillance detail lightening up lately, but I didn't put much stock in it. I suppose I stand corrected."

"Oh, I noticed. I merely felt it might be a tad embarrassing for you," Mycroft says, with an oiliness that says two can play at this game, "to have your hopes dashed quite so soon."

"So considerate of you, Mr Holmes, to think of my feelings! But I expect we'll have to wait and see."

"I take it this was all your doing, then?"

"By 'my doing', do you mean filling out a couple forms and attending a three hour orientation session? Yeah, I did that. Took care of the transportation, too. 'Course, that wasn't any hardship."

He may love the man like family, but two and a half weeks was a very long time to have him underfoot at home.

The car is still crawling at pace, tyres steadily crunching and popping over kerbside debris as Greg strides along, unbothered. It must look silly to the people on the street, to see two men arguing while one's head and shoulders protrude from a vehicle's side window. Mycroft doesn't even seem to notice he's pushed himself up so far; his expression is purely haughty and superior as he says, "I hope you realise it's a fruitless venture."

Greg snaps his eyes forward and resists the urge to snigger at the sight of Mycroft's thinning hair being mussed in the crosswind. "No, actually, I don't think it is."

"You'll be disappointed, then. I estimate he'll stay another week, two at most," Mycroft asserts. "Five has previously been the record, but then he's rather less inclined towards self-restraint, these days."

That's it. The playful edge is gone from Greg's anger; his fists clench at his sides as he stops dead and turns to face the car, which lurches in turn to a halt. "And what's it to you?" he asks testily. "He hasn't used your money for it! He hasn't inconvenienced you!"

"He's had me barred from visiting," says Mycroft, just as forcefully.

Greg blinks. He hadn't actually been privy to those details; he'd only signed off on what he'd been asked to, while Sherlock hashed out his own paperwork. "Well. He has that right! It's his decision."

"This is my brother we're talking about, Lestrade! I'm the one who deals with him when he lands himself in these situations, time and time again; the duty falls to me!"

"Christ! Do you honestly not see the difference, between this and the last time you shuffled him off to be dealt with?" There's a distant note of alarm sounding, somewhere under Greg's upset, that warns him against taking this verbal attack too far—but just now, he doesn't give a toss about the nine kinds of hell a furious Mycroft Holmes could make his life. "And don't you go getting all shirty about your duty; far as I could tell, after that blood test you had done back in January you washed your hands of him entirely!"

"January's incident involved extenuating circumstances," says Mycroft, seeming to shrink as he pulls himself back into the vehicle. "And even after it was determined that he would remain in
London, I could hardly justify consigning him to treatment for a single lapse of judgment, not while there was some unknown plot of Moriarty's apparently coming to fruition!

The reminder is sobering, and twofold: Sherlock's cocaine binge on the plane had almost surely been a way to lessen the pain of leaving for good. And the timing of Moriarty's elaborate posthumous game had been easy to overlook, in the heat of the moment, but it really had been a little too perfect—was it ever Jim's plan, after all? Or was it this new guy, pretending to be Jim? The idea flashes in the back of Greg's mind like a distant firework, and he puts a pin in it—he'll have to think on it, later.

When Greg speaks again, after a short pause, his tone is marginally more gentle. "If, I dunno, there's some kind of family emergency or something—you can contact the centre and tell them; they'll probably work something out for you. But if you're only looking to visit so you can rub his failings in his face—yeah, I don't blame him for scratching you off his list." Mycroft draws breath to protest, but Greg cuts him off with a raised hand and continues, "He chose this for himself. That's what's going to make a difference, this time. I didn't pressure him to go through with it, whatever you might think. All I did was offer him my perspective, and my support."

"And have I not supported him? Dragging him from the depths of his vice and self-neglect, enrolling him in exclusive treatment, cleaning up his messes? Lobbying for his pardon?"

Greg inclines his head, acknowledging the importance of Mycroft's efforts in regards to the murder charge. He steps a little closer to the car and lowers his voice. "He has a problem. He's been trying all these years to manage it on his own, and at times he's maybe thought that's worked well enough, but now he's come to realise he needs help, and that's good. With all you've done for him over the years, you've disapproved of him for having that problem; you've belittled him for it. You've doled out punishments for it as you've seen fit. And sure, yes, I know you do care about your brother, Mycroft; I know. I know you love him."

Mycroft's face has frozen into an interesting expression of exquisite discomfort—as if he's suddenly confirmed the existence of that deeply unconditional love, while having simultaneously found that it's manifested as a fat, juicy slug squelching down the back of his neck.

"You love your brother," Greg gently repeats once more, partially because he's experienced that truth from the inside, and partially because he wants to fix that incredible grimace in his memory for all time. "But, honestly? You've got a pretty fucked up way of showing it."

On Friday, Greg replies to Frank's recurring "let's do lunch" email with the news that he's free and clear, and miraculously, Ollie answers the same. It seems like it's been ages since three caseloads across two divisions have aligned well enough to allow them to meet up during a workday. One might suspect rather more than coincidence at play, on the part of the DCIs wrangling the distribution of those work assignments, given the rowdiness and undisciplined profanity the trio generally gets up to when they lunch together. But even though Greg may be the most circumspect of their little clique, by nature, he's hardly suspicious enough to believe a ridiculous idea like that.

The waitstaff at the cafe they've chosen might be starting to form their own suspicions, at this point. It's probably making for a memorable scene—three middle-aged men, all wearing suits without ties, falling about their booth in the sort of raucous mirth generally reserved for late-night
drunkards, though none of them has so much as ordered a light lager with his afternoon meal.

A particularly inventive comment about DI Strahan's grooming routine has just sent them all into fresh convulsions of helpless, teary-eyed cackling, when Greg's phone starts ringing.

"Oi, this is my girlfriend! Put a sock in it, boys!"

But he's still grinning and shaking with poorly suppressed laughter as he picks up the phone to hear Molly announce triumphantly, "He's answered me, love!"

"Finally," Greg exclaims in satisfaction, while his friends continue to snicker and make moon-eyed faces in friendly mockery of his eagerness to take her call. "Did he say why he's been ignoring us?"

"Not exactly; I didn't press. Though he did mention they'd just come back from Cambridge."

"His sister's out that way, I think. Shouldn't have stopped him answering his phone, though," he says, stabbing a bite of his green salad somewhat viciously. With Sherlock's vague warning burning at the back of his mind, it had taken a real effort not to let his fears run rampant when John had proven unreachable this week. It's lucky that he's resurfaced now; it saves Greg having to find some acceptable pretext to enter his home for a welfare check, tomorrow. "So? Can we meet?"

"He sounded iffy about seeing us, at first," Molly says. "But after I told him how much you and I have been missing Callie, he finally softened up. I agreed we'd meet them at Finsbury Park at four thirty—I hope that's okay?"

"Today? Huh, yeah, I can manage that. I'll get back to the office in a half hour or so, and after I sort the team out for the rest of the day, I can take a car. Pick you up at yours, about four?"

"Sounds like someone's got a hot date," croons Frank, and Ollie grins around a bite of his burger, waggling his eyebrows.

"Shut up, both you goons; we're gonna visit our goddaughter! Oh—wait, Molls," Greg breaks urgently into her amused goodbye, "I almost forgot—d'you think you could swing by mine on your way home? Mum knitted something for Callie. I left it by where I drop my mail, I'm pretty sure."

"Oh! Sure, I can do that."

"Thanks, love, you're a peach! See you in a while."

This time it's Ollie who speaks up, as Greg rings off. "Well! You two are sounding positively domestic, Greg. And she's got a key to your place, huh?"

"It makes it easier, with our schedules being so complicated," he answers simply, and stuffs the bite he'd speared into his mouth.

Patting overdramatically at his heart, Frank sighs, "Oh, Oliver dear! Our baby boy is growing up!"

"I'm older than you, you swishy berk," Greg tries to growl convincingly in response, but he's already laughing right along with his friends.
Finsbury is a relatively large slice of parkland just north of Emirates Stadium, featuring a boating lake with a picturesque wooded island at its centre. There's plenty of parking near the athletic track area, but of course John doesn't have a car; when Greg and Molly walk down the gently sloping path towards the lake, it's a few minutes before they see him coming from the other direction, pushing his daughter in her stroller.

John returns their friendly wave with a somewhat stiff one of his own, adjusting his trajectory to meet them. When he gets close enough to be heard, he shades his eyes and looks off towards the island, greeting them with, "We don't always come here. It's not the closest to home. But she seems to like looking at the water." It sounds inexplicably defensive, somehow.

"That's nice. It really is lovely here, isn't it? I'd never been," Molly says, her voice rich with a comforting warmth that reminds Greg not to take offence at their friend's behaviour.

"Yeah, it's a bit out of our neck of the woods, up here," Greg agrees, squatting to get on a level with the baby. "Not that we mind, of course. Hello, Callie, my love! How's my best girl, this fine afternoon?"

Callie meets his eyes and burbles up at him, waving the slightly damp-looking stuffed animal clutched in her pudgy little hand.

"Oh look, and you've brought along your lion! D'you like him, then? I hoped you would," Greg tells her, then glances up to her father. "May I?" At John's nod, he reaches out and frees her from the stroller seat. He hoists her up to a cozy perch against his chest, giving her the option to look out over his shoulder at the pond or to study his face up close—and, yes, he does give their surroundings another thorough once-over as he straightens up, but he's careful to be subtle about it.

No threats make themselves apparent, though, and so he lets himself relax while Molly takes the lead as planned. Greg's small talk tends to centre on work or sport—rousing, manly sorts of subjects—and he knows it's probably fairly obvious when he's working towards a serious point, at least to anyone who's watched him on the job. John's witnessed interrogations, and he's watched Greg deliver bad news, too; Molly's light, friendly chatter was clearly the right choice, to gently set John at ease and perhaps get him to open up a little.

While she and John talk, Greg focuses his attention on Callie. He kisses the lion's fluffy head when she swings it straight-armed at his chin, smacking his lips with a wide-eyed, exaggerated pucker, and she breaks into a delighted smile— and that's it, he thinks, there goes my heart! He's practically giddy with happiness, for the next few minutes, speaking quietly to her about the lake and the geese and what she might name her lion, transfixed by the delicacy of the golden curls that lift and settle in the light breeze coming in off the water.

Finally he notices Molly moving closer to him, with a smile playing over her lips that leads him to suspect the most recent topic of conversation has been his own besotted behaviour. Maybe he should've been paying more attention to what they've been saying, and less to the miraculous stormy blue of his goddaughter's eyes. Maybe he could find it in himself to care, if he really tried.

Right, he tells himself firmly, dropping one more light kiss on Callie's head before handing her off into Molly's equally eager arms, time to get down to business.

"Thanks for coming out to meet us," he says as he steps over to stand with John. "We've really been missing that little darling of yours."

"That's what Molly was saying, too. I'm sorry I've been keeping her to myself lately," replies John. The guarded edge is almost gone, now, thanks to Molly's fine work. "I guess I just figured, after I
forced you guys into watching her for so long, while I was away—"

"Don't even say it, John. That was no hardship, understand? Anytime you want more help, you've only got to say the word. That's what us godparents are for."

John studies the ground, embarrassed. After a moment he clears his throat roughly. "Well, I. Ah. Suppose I should consider making a visit to Baker Street soon; Mrs Hudson will probably have a few strong words for me, too."

"Probably, yeah. And I know for a fact that Sherlock's been worried, about you and Callie both."

"You sure about that? Last time I thought he was genuinely worried about something, it turned out to be indigestion."

Frowning at the flippant, dismissive tone, Greg draws a deep breath. "I'm sure. We had a nice long talk, when I visited him at the centre last weekend."

John's expression fades from sharp to apprehensive.

"He's away in rehab, John. Making a good, solid go of it, this time; therapy and everything."

"What—" The words seem to catch in John's throat; he blinks, and works his jaw around a disbelieving parody of a smile. "You're joking."

"Afraid not."

"But...that thing on the plane, that was months ago! Unless—no. He didn't."

"Now, before you go getting too upset—"

"He went back to shooting up? After everything? And you don't think I should be upset!"

"We think," Molly interrupts before Greg can answer, stepping up between them with the baby cradled against her shoulder, "that you need to calm down and take a step back, first. I was angry, too, John, you know that. And Greg had to help Mycroft put him in treatment, just a few months after they first met; of course he was furious! But, John—does it really just bother us all because he broke his promises to us?"

"It bothers me," John fires back, "because he's poisoning himself!"

"Exactly," she says, satisfied, and rocks back on her heels to send a prompting glance towards Greg. He lays a hand on her shoulder gratefully, taking his cue to speak before John can get over his moment of shock.

"In almost eleven years, I've never seen him serious about getting help. Until now," he says. "He was worse off than we ever knew; he hid it from us all, and not out of a desire to put one over on us. Not because he wanted to hurt us. But he knows he has, and he's ready to change."

John is silent for a long moment, staring out over the water, his face apparently at war with itself. Finally, he sniffs and says, "You really believe that."

"Yeah, I do, John. And I'm absolutely certain that he's going through with treatment for you, and for Callie, as much as he is for himself."

They both turn to watch Callie for a moment; Molly's retreated towards the lake with her, crouching a little to point out a duck that's strutting close to the green metal fencing in hopes of a
"You should visit him." Greg doesn't glance back at John as he says it.

"Should I?"

"I would, if I were you. It'd do you both good, to talk things over."

John goes quiet again, but this silence feels far closer to a decision than the last, and that will have to be enough. Greg senses he's said all he can on the topic of Sherlock, at least for now; his mind has already moved on to the next important issue. How can he work the conversation around to the idea that Moriarty is an active threat, without sounding unhinged for a lack of proof? And how can he do it in such a way as to keep John from losing his already delicate composure?

And, come to think of it, should he even be saying anything at this point?

Think about it, Greg reminds himself; the note said "Look after John." Not "Warn John."

Sherlock had obviously begun to suspect something already, but he hadn't said a word until Greg practically stumbled into it. It's clear he feels his best strategy is to keep his cards close to his chest, especially if they're being watched. If Greg drops Moriarty's name, now, might John's reaction give them away?

No, better not say anything just yet. I've got more work to do, first, he decides, frowning.

"All right," John sighs, breaking into Greg's thoughts, "give me the details, then. I'll consider it."

"Good. I'll text you what you need to know. Just try and give him a chance; that's all I'm asking."

"We'll see. Look, I'm going to have to get going—it's a half hour to walk home, and I need to stop for milk on my way. I've been trying to get Callie accustomed to a predictable schedule; my therapist says it's important to provide a routine..."

"Sure, of course! We wouldn't want to interfere with your setup." Greg beckons Molly over, and John helps her get Callie settled in the stroller; meanwhile, Greg takes out his phone and quickly composes a text message with the Anderbrooke details, chewing his lip as he types. Is this really the way Sherlock would want him to handle things? Or is he letting his own ingrained fearfulness convince him to take an easy way out?

Whatever the case, he can't let John go without saying something. "You be careful; take good care of yourself and that little angel, now. And remember, we're open to babysit, anytime, okay?"

"I don't—uh, yeah. Yeah, actually, I'll keep that in mind! Thanks. And Greg, do thank your mum for that little jumper, it's lovely; I'll send you a picture when I try it on her, all right?"

"She'll be thrilled with that, ta. Bye-bye now, Callie! Be good for your Daddy!"

Molly's hand reaching for his, as they walk back to the car, is some small comfort: they've done what they could.

-----
Step in Time

Chapter Summary

I'll visit him tomorrow, and he'd better be prepared to listen to what I have to say."

19. Step in Time

Sherlock’s private room seems somewhat less serene, when Greg arrives for his second visit. Perhaps it's down to the fact that he's waited until Sunday, this time; he knows from the bare-bones phone calls that Sunday mornings afford everyone the opportunity to access fresh stores of print media. The stack of magazines and books that had previously been confined to the sofa table has spread and multiplied, now scattered over much of the living area, with numerous handwritten pages visible here and there in the mess. Sherlock sits cross-legged and solemn in the single cleared spot on the sofa, the index fingers of his clasped hands resting at the bow of his lips.

"You shouldn't have made him come," he intones, opening his eyes slowly.

"I didn't make him come," Greg protests immediately, then relents and adds, "I strongly suggested he should, that's all. So he visited yesterday, huh?"

Sherlock merely twitches one eyebrow, but that's more than enough to convey obviously. Greg grins, unrepentant. "And are you saying you didn't want to see him?"

"...No," answers Sherlock, hardly moving his lips. His eyes fall shut once more.

"Well, then."

There's a silence, and then with a great, noisy inhale, Sherlock springs up from his meditative pose. "Come on, Lestrade," he says, sweeping past; he shoves his feet into a pair of slip-on plimsolls in two quick, dancelike moves, and snatches up a bathrobe that lies crumpled across the foot of the bed. When he pivots in place to twirl it on over his shoulders, Greg blinks—for a disorienting second, he fancies he can see the suit and the Belstaff, as if the man's accustomed fashion is an invisible shield, even here. Then the moment passes as Greg gets a full front view of the ensemble: a soft T-shirt and grey trackies topped by the sagging maroon terry cloth of the robe.

"What's so funny?" Sherlock mutters, crouching to separate a couple pages of paper from the chaos and shove them in a pocket.

Greg does his best to stop the relentless uptick of his lips, and bites his tongue on a pithy quote from the Hitchhiker's Guide television programme that aired back when he was in training at Hendon. "Oh, nothing," he says. "We're going out?"

"A turn around the garden, I think. I could use some fresh air."

"Everything going all right, then?" Greg asks, as they make their way downstairs. "You look like
you've been sleeping rough."

"Sleeping? No."

The desk nurse had said something about antidepressants, a new prescription given in the wake of the PTSD diagnosis. Greg makes a mental note to ask about potential side effects—insomnia may well be on the list. Of course, a case would usually explain the expanding mess, the refusal to sleep, and the sense of barely controlled mania. Is this a case, really, or just the knowledge of a possible threat?

"I'm actually a little bit surprised John came to see you so soon. I'd expected him to stew over it for at least a few days."

"He went to Cambridge last week," Sherlock replies, as if this explains everything. When Greg fails to signal understanding, he sighs and continues, "His sister Harry. He hadn't visited with her since shortly after I jumped."

"Yeah, so?"

"Learning she was to become an aunt apparently set her on the path to sobriety. Sure, she's stopped drinking before, and John doesn't really trust her to make it stick any better this time, but for Caroline's sake, he felt obligated to give her another chance. And that worked out in my favour, of course."

"Mercy would've been fresh in his mind," agrees Greg; he lowers his voice as they turn the last corner into the lobby. "Look, I didn't know if you meant for me to tell him about—"

Sherlock cuts him off with a quiet hiss and an elbow to the side: one of the staff is approaching them. The young man's muscled physique accentuates the faint peculiarity of the centre's dark red uniform; on most it's just a set of asymmetrical sash-tied scrubs, but he looks like an extra in a martial arts film.

"All right, Mr Holmes? We missed you at morning meditation today."

"Perfectly well, Nate, thank you. I thought I'd take Lestrade out to see the grounds."

"Lovely day for it," Nate says, nodding encouragingly. "They're saying it'll be a cold snap, next week, you know."

"Are they? Well, that's a pity." Sherlock's speaking through a rigid smile, now. "I suppose summer can't last forever."

"Right you are, Mr Holmes, right you are..."

It looks like Nate's drawing breath to say something more, but Sherlock heads him off at the pass, tilting his head with a conspiratorial expression. "Oh, but don't let me and my guest waste any more of your time! You'd best hurry if you're looking to catch Irina on her break."

Nate's eyes widen; he smooths a hand self-consciously over his blond hair and hurries off, freeing Sherlock to lead Greg out through the rear courtyard. They follow the leftmost path at a fairly brisk pace until it winds well away from the building, then Sherlock slows as they approach the large fountain that serves as a centrepiece for the southern half of the gardens.

"I'd like to get a gift for Caroline," Sherlock says, as if they'd never been interrupted. He's got his long fingers wound together in front of him, twisting them back and forth and worrying the base of
one thumbnail with the other, but his voice is steady and casual.

"Yeah?"

"Ruth, in Group Three—hooked on painkillers after a knee replacement—told me about the rather ingenious stuffed animal she bought for her granddaughter. It's called the Bedtime Elephant; I want you to purchase one. Use my account, and bring it to me next time you visit."

Greg chuckles. "Thought you said it's for Callie?"

"It is. The ingenious part is the electronics built into the toy. It's meant to allow an adult to record customised bedtime stories for the child to play back."

"Oh. Well, yeah, that does sound pretty interesting. Sure, I'll go pick it up." It's nice to see Sherlock taking an interest in their goddaughter. He may well end up recording a lecture on metallurgy or chemical reactions, of course, but it's the thought that counts.

Sherlock sweeps a bit of debris from the lip of the fountain and sits down, with a gesture to indicate the free space beside him. The loud hiss of the water at their backs separates them from the main building. Greg looks around and nods, satisfied that it's safe to speak freely.

"You mentioned there was a file, showing the payments you tracked from the assassin. I'm sorry, Sherlock, but I didn't find anything like that."

"You searched my flat for it?"

"Well, yeah; Mrs Hudson let me in..."

Sherlock's tone is only mildly scornful. "I left all my current work at your flat. I thought you knew!"

"Oh, for—" Greg cuts off his curse and drags in a long, steadying breath instead. "Of course you did. Fine. So I'm meant to be looking for clues on a new person calling themselves Moriarty, right?"

"If you like," says Sherlock, staring off towards the row of skinny cypress trees disguising the far fence line, still wringing and scrubbing his fingers together. "Your chances of actually digging up any useful information are slim—my own progress had stalled well before I shut myself up in here—but you're equally unlikely to stumble blindly into anything too dangerous."

"Hmph. Thanks for the vote of confidence, I guess."

"I hardly need to tell you the importance of caution," Sherlock points out. "Your discretion in dealing with John tells me you've lost none of your ingrained prudence."

Sherlock's compliments always sound like subtle insults, to Greg; this one is no exception. "So, did you—?"

"Not in great detail. Enough of a warning to keep him on guard, but not enough to set him panicking and send up red flags. Continue to keep an eye on him, if you would. But...I do think he'll be coming back here to speak with me. Now and then."

"The two of you finally buried the hatchet, then. Thank goodness," says Greg, feeling a weight lift from him.
Sherlock is silent for a moment. Then he heaves a long sigh. "John has every right not to forgive me. I've hurt him too many times. I've failed him, at every turn."

"Hey, he's not perfect, either," Greg chides him cheerfully. "He's got trust issues, and anger issues, and he married an assassin, just for starters!"

"That's not exactly fair to hold against him," Sherlock murmurs just over the noise of the fountain, but his lip does curve slightly upwards, and his hands relax.

Teasing aside, Greg senses he should at least attempt to offer a little perspective. "Look, you're right, Sherlock; an awful lot's happened that's come between the two of you. But circumstances have been out of your control, ever since that mad bastard Jim first showed up to fuck with you. Don't just lay all the blame on yourself and assume that's the end of it."

"You'd rather I blame Moriarty for my dishonesty, insensitivity, and over fifteen years of drug abuse?"

He doesn't dignify that protest with any more than a dismissive shake of his head. "And furthermore. When I visited him last month and said you needed him, he came looking for you, the very next day; when Molly and I told him you were in here, he came. The very next day. I can't pretend to know what's been going on in his head, but from where I'm standing, you haven't lost his heart. Not yet."

Sherlock snaps his head around to face Greg; his brows rise, then lower ominously. At last he says, "I've never said I was after his heart, Lestrade."

The faint tremor in his voice, and the way he blinks and clenches his hand on a fistful of his robe, is practically confirmation in flashing neon lights that Greg's been right all along—at least about one half of that star-crossed pair. "Don't worry, Sherlock. I'm great at keeping secrets," he says, standing and brushing off his trousers with a wide smile. "C'mon. Let's walk back."

Sherlock's files have been sitting in a bag under Greg's coffee table for well over a month, just waiting for Greg to figure out they were there. He feels like kicking himself when he finally pulls them out, imagining Sherlock's smirking comments at how obvious their hiding place had been. Within a few minutes, though, he's immersed in their contents, and his upset over the week's delay is relegated to the back of the queue.

The file on Mary's killer is disappointingly thin. Sherlock's shorthand scrawl recounts a surprising failure on the part of Mycroft's people to link the man's face or fingerprints with a real name. The ID he'd carried had traced only as far back as the Cairo airport; they'd tracked down a name before that, and before that and that, as if opening an endless series of nested dolls, but the centre had never been found. During the weeks of Mary's globe-hopping flight, each alias had cashed one or two payments received via wire transfer, inconsistent amounts on a seemingly haphazard schedule, and following the money had proven nearly as futile as following the names. Greg spends over two hours attempting to make sense of the tangled nest of accounts and shell corporations, drawing elaborate diagrams; the commonalities are few and far between.

"Payments traced through Asia," he mutters to his empty living room, remembering Sherlock's
warning note. His own efforts haven't come up with anything much more specific. Each trail appears to finally dead-end somewhere in the East: two in Thailand, one each in Myanmar and Singapore, two in Japan, three in mainland China, and a whopping five in Hong Kong.

Funny, that particular place seems to have been coming up a lot, just lately.

Greg pushes a layer of papers farther from him on the now-crowded sofa cushions, making room to lay another open folder by his hip; as he glances over the messy notes on its front page, he scrolls through the contacts on his phone.

"Stella, hey! It's Greg. Working today?"

"You mean tonight, don't you? It's already half seven! But yeah, you caught me, Greg—I was just popping in to finish something up. Gotta run soon, though; dinner with the in-laws."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I promise not to keep you. I just wanted to ask about that case you tried to send Sherlock's way last month. Something about Hong Kong, wasn't it?"

"The invisible assassin's ring? It's going nowhere, at the moment. Why, is he looking to play nice now?"

"I can't get it all in front of him yet; he won't be available for at least a few more weeks. But yeah, I think he might be coming around. Thought I might dangle a few relevant details next time I see him, and see if I can get him to bite. What do you think?"

"I can send you some stuff, sure," says Stella, sounding cheered at the prospect of assistance. "Email okay, to start, or would you rather see the hard copies?"

"If you have the time tonight, email's perfect for now. I just wanna get a sense of it. If it looks like I can get Sherlock interested, I can get back to you for more."

She agrees, and promises to shoot something his way before she leaves her office; he wishes her a pleasant evening and sends his greetings to her wife, then rings off and settles back to read Sherlock's notes on the Hosmer cold case.

As far as Greg knows, in the angry, isolated period between Sherlock's defeated return from Florida and his final drug binge, he hadn't made himself available to take any new private cases. He had, however, met with Angela Hosmer. And as this file is the only other one Sherlock left here in this flat, it's safe to assume that Sherlock's cryptic reference to recent case research was meant to point Greg's attention to her mother, Faith.

Greg does find the surname Kavanaogh, eventually, buried in the list of Faith's known connections; her husband Jacob had been the lesser partner in an import/export venture run by Terrence Edmunds, whose wife Mona had been previously widowed by Michael Kavanaogh in Belfast. A few days after Terrence met his unfortunate end in Kowloon Bay, Jacob had himself been killed, and his wife and daughter taken prisoner.

Jacob Hosmer killed Edmunds for skimming funds & setting the company up to fail, Sherlock has scrawled in the margin. *TE had agreed to handle under-the-table Triad shipments, attempting to make up the losses he'd created.*

"And if Jacob didn't know the details of the dirty jobs," Greg muses aloud, "Terry's murder would've bolloked up the next delivery, for sure. So of course the baddies came for payback. Killed Jacob, took his family...but they missed their chance to kill Terry. What about *his* family?"
Mr and Mrs Edmunds had come to Hong Kong the previous year with the two children from Mona's first marriage. Twin seven-year-old daughters, Maeve and Saoirse Edmunds, had been officially recorded as new residents of the city-state. But their records are nothing more than placeholders; there are no photographs or useful details, and the truth about their fate is lost.

Angela had told Greg that she'd been raised among the back rooms and basements of a series of brothels, from the age of four until her eventual rescue by the missionaries; she'd specifically mentioned that her own mother hadn't been the only non-Asian woman kept there. But what about the other girls? They would've been less than four years older than Angela, still young enough to have required similar treatment at first; they might've been her playmates, or even her minders after a time. Certainly the presence of other English-speaking children should have been memorable enough to mention, in any case.

What reason might Angela have had to leave Maeve and Saoirse out of her story? And furthermore, what was her connection to Anderbrooke? Had her offhand use of that particular business card when she'd met with Greg been a mere coincidence, just like the name of the doctor there matching the birth surname of the missing twins?

Well, I know what Sherlock would say about coincidence...

Frowning, Greg reaches for his phone again. The number he dials rings over to voicemail, with a robotic recitation of the number rather than a recorded greeting.

"Ah, yes, Miss Hosmer; this is DI Lestrade. I was wondering if I could ask you a little bit more about your case. I'm still digging into it with Sherlock, and we've come across a detail that doesn't quite make sense. Please call me back, when you get the chance? Thanks."

Greg's research session Sunday night had raised more questions than it answered, but when Monday rolls around, he has no choice but to set all that on the back burner. The arrival of September heralds the much-dreaded annual Administrative Oversight Week at Scotland Yard, when teams of accountants, auditors and high-ranking Human Resources personnel pack the building to the gills. Not only does everyone have to continue working their usual caseloads, they're obligated to attend extra meetings, participate in training sessions, and cooperate with the auditors' requests in order to straighten up the books for the upcoming financial quarter end. With all of that to deal with and a couple of ugly murder cases to boot, Greg doesn't have a lot of time to worry about the lack of a return call from Angela.

He does wonder a bit, though, about not getting his usual Monday call from Sherlock...but he tells himself that Sherlock has probably chosen to use up his phone time on John, now that they're finally reconciling. It's too exhausting to imagine any other explanation.

Greg's still at the office, working late to finish an expense disclosure form he'd left 'til the last minute, when the punctual ringing of Thursday's call from Anderbrooke eases his unvoiced fears.

"You need to come and sign me out tomorrow," demands Sherlock, without the preface of a greeting. "I'm claiming a personal outing."

Greg sighs and presses an ink-stained hand to his forehead. "Sorry, I won't be able to leave the
office, not tomorrow. Too much going on this week."

"But Kavanaogh will be taking the whole afternoon off!"

"So you'll get a day off from your therapy. Enjoy it. I don't know what else to tell you, Sherlock—it's not like I can change Oversight Week! My schedule's packed with compulsory sessions tomorrow, and I've already got a mark on my record for missing them last year."

Sherlock lets out an exasperated huff, apparently offended at the notion that a work requirement might occasionally outrank his own importance. "Last year?"

"Yeah, you see, my grandmother passed, and then you went and got yourself shot..."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh. Why are you so desperate for a day out all of a sudden, anyway? I thought you were doing okay, this time 'round."

"It's—tolerable," Sherlock admits, skittish. "I'd hardly call it ideal, but I have regular visitors and a puzzle to focus on. After Monday's session—well. I wanted you to see Dr Kavanaogh, and get a sense of her! I can't pin down what it is about her..."

"Why, what happened on Monday?"

"It's nothing. Never mind."

Greg hears the warning in his tone, and changes tack accordingly. "Couldn't I just, you know—walk in and ask to meet the woman? If I'm the 'privileged guardian', or whatever it is, surely I'm entitled to consult with your doctor?"

"You'd rather just walk right in, and tip her off that we're onto her? Hardly subtle, Lestrade. No, that's out of the question."

"Besides," Greg suggests dryly, "there's always the chance she hasn't actually done anything..."

"Don't be so boring. Oh, damn, someone's coming. Laters!"

Sherlock calls back again just after two o'clock the next afternoon, from an unknown number. "I do hope I've caught you between your compulsory sessions," he drawls. "Got a minute to chat?"

"Actually, my next one's not 'til three," Greg starts to answer, then cuts himself short. The only background noise audible on the calls from the centre is usually voices, or sometimes faint music. But those are most definitely the sounds of traffic in the background... "Where are you?"

"I told you, I registered for an outing. You're not the only person on my approved list, you know."

"Molly's working today, too. How'd you convince her to come get you?"

Sherlock is silent for a moment. His shifty, smug expression is practically deafening.
"Put John on the phone," says Greg. "I want to talk to him."

"He's not here," Sherlock replies, then quickly backtracks to correct himself: "I mean, he is here. With me. Just not...right where I'm standing, at the moment."

"Sherlock..."

"What? He wanted a coffee. Caroline still isn't sleeping through the night; what sort of friend would I be to deny him a coffee?"

"Fine. You've got John for the day, and he's off getting a coffee. That's great. Why're you calling me?"

"Why, Kavanaogh, of course!" Sherlock's walking briskly now, his excited voice jarring slightly with each step. "I don't have a photo for you. This phone I borrowed from Nate doesn't have a camera. Can you believe people still buy them like that?"

"Borrowed?"

"Oh, he's running meditation all afternoon; he'll have it back before he ever notices it's gone."


"She just met up with another woman. They're walking together, roughly twenty metres ahead of me. Kavanaogh's wearing a lilac blouse, the other a striped jumper under a blue jacket. I'll lose them in a moment, but for now they're clearly visible from my position. Are you alone?"

Greg glances around his office. "Yeah, why?"

"Take a better look at them and tell me what you think."

"What? You just told me you couldn't get a photo—!"

With that, as if on cue, Greg's words cut off and become wheezing gasps into the phone—suddenly he can see Sherlock, and the women up ahead of him, but it's not as if he has much time to look. There's an oncoming bus to deal with, first, and a bloody idiot detective standing directly in its path.

When the bus has been brought to a screeching halt, and Greg pulls in a deep breath again, Sherlock—presumably safe on the pavement once more—is humming thoughtfully at his ear. "Interesting. Very interesting."

"What the fuck! You—you bloody bastard!"

"Did you see them?"

"Fuck you!"

He hangs up, and doesn't answer when Sherlock calls back.
The three o'clock training session is fairly disastrous; it's quite difficult to focus on contrived communication exercises while one's fingers are itching for a neck to throttle. At least none of Greg's own team has to witness his poor performance; in order to keep the team's cases going despite the week's distractions, they've signed up for all their slots in rotation. Friday's later groups have mostly been filled by stragglers from all the departments—or as Frank would laughingly suggest, the poor sods who've spent all week juggling everyone else's work—so the only really familiar face happens to be one of Iverson's sergeants. Greg sends him a malevolent glare on their way out, in case he's thinking of gossiping.

When Greg comes back up to his home floor, it seems mostly deserted, which is another relief. He intends to lock himself in his office and lick his wounds for a while, before Sally and Evan return to give him the day's report. But before he gets there, he notices that DS Gupta has paused in mid-photocopy, peering curiously over the glass divider.

Turning, he sees what's got her attention. Two men are approaching from the lifts—and one of them hasn't been seen so casually, sloppily dressed within this building in at least seven years.

Greg takes one look at them, feels his face twist, and immediately storms off in the opposite direction. "No," he tosses over his shoulder. "Not now. Get the fuck out, Sherlock, I don't wanna see you for a while."

Sherlock catches up to him in a few long, loping strides. "But the suspects, Lestrade—"

Wheeling about, Greg shoves him away, hard, with an open palm at the centre of his chest. "No. I don't care what your excuse is! John, get this prick out of my sight and take him back where he came from!"

Startled, John hurry forward to catch Sherlock's elbow and hold him back, while Greg stomps past the gaping DS Gupta, throws open the door to the fire stairs and clatters down them.

The only place he can think to go is all the way down to the underground car park. He signs out for a car, but doesn't bother to start it; for twenty minutes, he silently seethes in its enclosed privacy. When he's feeling calmer, he texts Sally for her location and heads out.

About two hours later his phone rings, and the simmering anger pops right back to the surface again—but it's John's number, not Nate's or the centre's, and so he picks up even though he really doesn't want to.

"This better be John," he answers, sullenly.

"It is, Greg. He's back in his room at Anderbrooke, and I'm down the hall; it's just me."

"Good." Greg rubs fingers and thumb across his eyes and lets out a heavy breath. "Thanks for getting him out of my face. I'm sorry I blew my top in front of you—I really could've handled that better."

"No worries, I can relate." John hesitates before carefully saying, "The man basically ruined your marriage and you weren't this angry. What the hell did he do?"

"I can't tell you about it, John, I'm sorry. And he shouldn't be telling you, either."

"He hasn't—I mean, yeah, I asked, of course I did! But I couldn't get a word out of him. Now, he's not talking at all—he fucked off to his Mind Palace almost as soon as we got back here—but I'll tell you: he did look upset. Regretful, I'd venture."
"Hmph. I think I've only seen him regretful twice in my life."

"Well, I suppose I could be misinterpreting that, what with everything. Honestly, I've been worrying about him all day—he's not looking well, and he's changed the subject every time I've asked him about it! He can't be getting enough rest; I don't have any authority here to demand information, but I overheard one of the nurses say something about having had him sedated the other day. Do you know anything about that?"

"There was an incident, a little over a week ago," Greg answers reluctantly, a spike of worry briefly muting his anger. "From what I gathered, his therapy session dredged up some nasty stuff. Something traumatic he went through shortly before coming back to London, I think."

"Christ. And here I've—I've never asked, all this time. I told him flat out I never wanted to know," John mumbles, shaken. "So the night he waltzed back in and bollocksed up my proposal to Mary, you're telling me he was coming straight off some awful—and then I went and—fuck, it's no wonder he hasn't trusted me ever since..."

Trust—the word seems to echo in Greg's ears, and suddenly the rage is back in full force. If he'd trusted me enough to bloody listen to a word I said... "Oh, you're not alone on that," he spits. "I'm not sure there's a soul left on the planet he respects enough not to manipulate!"

"Ah. Well. Whatever it is that Sherlock did to you, it's obviously...personal." John sounds uncomfortable. "I won't pry, okay? But, when he comes back around—can I ask him to call you and talk it over?"

Greg is silent for a moment. If they're going to hash this out, the phone in the patients' common room is absolutely not the place to do it. "You can tell him I'll talk to him alone, in person. I'll visit him tomorrow, and he'd better be prepared to listen to what I have to say."

-----
"Well, yes...but it's mostly because Moriarty could be listening," he says, and settles in to explain.

20. All Hands on Deck

The suite at Anderbrooke is beginning to feel familiar to Greg, now that he's been here three weekends running. It's taken on the limp, unbalanced disarray of an overused and under-cleaned hotel room during an extended stay, but at least the explosion of papers and magazines has been brought under control; the dressers and tables play host to ragged stacks, but the nearest wastebasket is crammed full and the floor is almost fully cleared. Greg suspects John's presence yesterday had something to do with the improvement. In fact, there's a distinct possibility that John was the one doing the bulk of the cleaning—there probably wasn't much else for him to do, assuming he really stuck around and waited for Sherlock to finish his sulk, as he'd said he would.

However the tidying was accomplished, it's benefited Sherlock; he has a clear path again to pace without the risk of breaking an ankle, and as Greg opens the door and takes in the change to the room, that's exactly what he's doing. Hands clasped together behind his back, head down and expression stormy, he's pounding out a circular route between the sofa and the bed at high speed.

He's so intent on this frenetic exercise, and on the contents of his head, that he doesn't even notice his visitor's arrival until his third pass—at which point he startles and misses a step, and has to execute a graceless hop to avoid barking his shin on the coffee table. "Lestrade," he says, breathless in his surprise, "I thought—"

Greg raises a hand to interrupt, letting the bulky plastic bag he carries drop beside the door. "I won't be staying long today. You look like you could use a bath."

Sherlock's jaw snaps shut over whatever he'd been about to say. "A bath?"

"Yep. A nice, long, relaxing soak." He heads into the ensuite, bends over the tub and immediately turns the taps on full blast.

It takes a few seconds, but Sherlock soon recalibrates enough to follow him into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. As soon as he has, Greg rounds on him, letting loose the frustration he's been shoving down since the previous afternoon. He hisses under the sound of the tub filling, "You listen up, Sherlock; I'm not a bloody light switch you can turn on and off! I'm not your tool!"

"On the contrary, Lestrade, you've always had great utility to me..."

"Don't you fucking push me," warns Greg. "You know this thing is bigger than the both of us. I can't have you treating me like some sort of experiment, or manipulating me for your own
purposes!"

"I had a good reason!"

"There is no good reason for trying to get yourself hit by a goddamn bus!"

"But—"

"We don't know the rules! You can't play around with this, Sherlock!"

"Fine." Sherlock turns away, shoving his hands up through his wild curls, then spins back to lean in close. "Fine! By your rules, by all means, Lestrade. I haven't much choice in the matter, have I? Do you think this is easy for me?"

"What, the rehab?"

"That too! Any of it," whispers Sherlock angrily. "You've had my whole life to come to terms with this; I've had eight months! Eight months of—of searching for a reason. An explanation, an excuse, anything! So I'm alive, thanks to you; is that supposed to be enough?"

The water continues to rumble and splash beside them, making the green-tiled room feel small. They stand toe to toe with their eyes locked, Sherlock breathing heavily, Greg stunned into staring. He forgets to whisper. "It would be, for most people."

"I am not most people!" The protest rises to a near-shout on the last word; Sherlock sinks to seat himself on the tub's side wall, lowering his head into his hands and mumbling so quietly that Greg doesn't catch the beginning, and has to sink to his knees to hear: "...arsehole, insufferably rude, selfish, and irresponsible. I've hurt everyone I've ever cared about, without fail! I deserved what I got, in Serbia. Every bit of it!"

Greg leans closer, alarmed. "Hey. Hey, stop that! Stop it. Whatever happened there, you didn't deserve a bit of it. Are you hearing me? You got caught because I failed you; that was on me, and I'm sorry. And you were never there because you deserved to be! You were the only one brilliant enough to stop Jim's network; you knew our safety relied on you. The world owes you a debt, not a punishment!"

"But I couldn't stop Jim—couldn't outsmart him—even in death, he won; he forced me to ruin my own life and abandon my heart, and I still can't find a way back! And I'm not ready, I'm not ready, I've been so careless and stupid, I deleted too much and now I can't find it..."

Letting out a breath, Greg tentatively reaches out to touch Sherlock's anxiously bouncing knee. "Sherlock? Can't find what?"

"I can't see where it'll come from; I can't find the connection," Sherlock rasps, meeting Greg's concerned gaze with wide, pained eyes. "The new Moriarty took revenge on Mary as punishment for betraying the old one. But she could have lived, if my actions hadn't drawn Moriarty's attention, do you see? I thought I was snipping off the legs of a flailing, defunct network—I was stirring the new spider's nest!"

Greg nods, his mind whirring. Mary had used her freedom to get close to John, and at the same time the old Moriarty's contacts had begun going down, one by one. It makes sense that whoever took over the mantle might assume the two were linked.

"Mary was the warning shot across our bow," Sherlock continues, the heel of one hand pressed to his forehead. "She could have been dealt with anytime, quickly and quietly: a road accident, sniper
fire on a crowded street, a home invasion. Moriarty marched her down the plank as a message to me, and by the time I had any idea what was happening, my rigging had already been cut and the sails were catching fire!"

The pirate metaphor is a little odd, honestly, but Greg follows it easily enough. The younger Sherlock's nautical obsession had lasted years; it had seemed a great comfort whenever he was upset—and he's got plenty of reason to be upset now, thinks Greg. "Psychological warfare," he agrees. "We're dead in the water, and any time now, our ship'll be boarded."

Sherlock's head hangs in a defeated nod. He whispers, "This is all my fault, all of it. It's been right in front of me, and I've probably deleted the vital link from my memory without even realising! How can I protect John and Caroline, stuck in here like this? How can I protect you and Molly?"

"Hey," Greg says softly, squeezing his knee. "Don't you worry about me. I'll be fine. And I promise you, I'll do everything I can to watch out for the others. We're not sunk yet, okay?"

"...I'm sorry about the bus, Lestrade."

"Good, you should be. And...I'm sorry I didn't get a good look at your suspects. Truce?"

"Truce," sighs Sherlock, after a moment.

Greg reaches past him and twists off the taps; the room falls suddenly silent, but for the last few drops plinking into the full, steaming tub. He grabs the ledge, and then Sherlock's hand is at his other arm, steadying him as he heaves himself up off aching knees with a stifled grunt. Nodding his thanks, he turns to go. "Bath's ready. See you next time."

Stopped in to see Mrs H -
  she's well. Hasn't seen
  anything unusual. xx
  
  Glad to hear it. I did ask
  her last week to call me if
  she ever noticed anyone
  snooping around. x

"Everything all right, sir? You look a bit, er, intense..."

Greg looks up and hurriedly shoves the phone into his pocket. "Sorry, Evan. Yeah, it's fine, nothing for you to worry about. What've you got for me?"

"Sally's on her way back from the Bastion house. She told me she spoke to the neighbour who was out of town the day of the murder, and there's some new background information that might make a difference. I expect she'll get here just in time for lunch..."

He recognises the hopeful expression on his sergeant's face, and rolls his eyes affably. "Oh, yeah; if you managed to clear that security footage up enough to identify the suspect in the Warner case, I promised I'd spring for sushi, didn't I?"
"I narrowed it down to three people. Surely that's good enough for sushi?"

"In my experience, it's generally preferable to keep a limit of one identity per shadowy figure." The mock-stern tone crumbles into a chuckle as Evan's face falls. "But I suppose I can make an exception, just this once! Tell Sal to hurry, I'm already getting hungry."

"Thanks, boss!"

"And while we're waiting for her, I still need to get an updated personnel list for the brokerage," he calls after Evan, who nods vigorously and throws Greg a cheery salute on his way back out to his own desk.

It'll be nice to sit down for a special lunch with his team, and probably good for morale too; they have three open cases going full steam as of today, and he's been relying on delegation a little more than usual. Donovan and Pritchard are sharp and dedicated, and over the years they've taken everything Greg's thrown at them in stride—he relied on their solid work each time events threw him into the grip of depression, and he pushed them hard for perfection through his months of manic anxiety over the first Moriarty. They truly do deserve every bit of appreciation he can show them, especially now that he's trying to set himself up as Command Central in the wait for the second one to show his hand. Every minute of his workday is a battle against distraction, now.

Problem is, it's already beginning to feel as if his job is the distraction he's fighting...

Greg's computer pings with an email; he shakes himself out of his guilty thoughts, with the firm intention to put his focus back where it's paid to belong. But the incoming reply isn't exactly work related.

*Got your message,* writes Ollie...

> Sorry, out on an all-night obbo last night, or I would've called you right back. L says I slept like the chainsaw-wielding dead all this morning - gotta say, I don't feel like I did! There should be a rule against sticking us old fogeys on stakeout duty.

> Anyway, as for your request... Assuming the sting goes down as planned tomorrow morning, I'd be happy to help you out for a week or two. I'll talk to the local force in Stanmore about partnering with me and a few of my people on rotation out there. I think my turns will mostly be days, though, if you don't mind!

> You're owed more than a few favours from me, Greg. Never be ashamed of having to call one in. Give me a ring tomorrow night and we'll work out the details of what you need...and also, plans for you and Molly to come for dinner. Lauren's been asking.

Ollie

Well, that's one item on Greg's checklist as good as sorted. Obviously it's not going to be possible to keep any sort of police presence within Anderbrooke itself, but having someone he can trust on hand outside the gates—near enough to notice any obvious disturbance, or respond immediately to a distress call—will take a load off his mind.

He glances at his watch, then out at the activity beyond his office to make sure Evan isn't on his way back in just yet. *Might as well get one more thing out of the way now,* he tells himself. getting
out his phone once more, then, for sure, I'm back on the job 'til lunch...

John answers on the second ring. "Greg, hey. Did you and Sherlock get your disagreement sorted out?"

"Uh, pretty much. I think he understands where I'm coming from now, at least. Anyway, I just wanted to check in with you today. How's it going?"

"Fine, yeah. No problems here. Well. I say that, but actually, Callie's got herself a bit of rash, and she'd like all our neighbours to know she considers it a problem!"

"Poor little thing," Greg sympathises, pausing to appreciate the hiccuping wail in the background of the call. He tries his best to sound casual as he prods, "Just the neighbours you already know, though? Not disturbing any strangers, I hope?"

Distracted, John answers, "What? No, no; there's been nobody new around." Then he sniffs, as if he's just pulled up short in the middle of a task. "You're not concerned over noise complaints on the baby. Sherlock put you up to calling me, didn't he?"

"If he did, would you be surprised?"

"No," he sighs. "I'm fine, Greg. Really. I know Sherlock seems to think there's a bounty out on my head, or something; if he were here, he'd see there's nothing to worry about."

Greg frowns. "John...this isn't paranoia. We haven't wanted to say too much too soon, but there's a good reason Sherlock's concerned for all of us. And I'm worried about him, too."

"All of us? Huh. You really think there's something to this, do you?"

He hesitates before answering; the hard evidence is still very thin—in weaker moments, it's still tempting to dismiss the whole thing as baseless conjecture. But he can't get rid of that nagging feeling of something wrong that crawls along his spine—and he trusts Sherlock.

He can't bring himself to say the name Moriarty aloud. The idea that someone could be listening in is hard to shake; he chooses his words carefully. "You ever get to wondering...if things might've gone differently, had we been paying the right attention? If maybe you might've avoided, say, getting put in that bomb vest, or if I might've kept the Met from calling for Sherlock's arrest?"

"Or if I would've broken it off with Mary before the wedding." John's voice is heavy with what sounds like regret.

"Well, with that in mind, I'd appreciate it if you could just keep your eyes wide open, for a while. Watch your back; be careful around strangers; check in with me or Molly regularly, whenever possible. If we can communicate and keep each other alert, I think we'll all have the best chance of staying safe long enough to track down the threat—and I dunno about you, John, but I don't want to wind up at another funeral."

"God, no," blurts John, just as there's a knock at Greg's open office door.

Evan steps in, offering a sheaf of printouts as he apologetically mouths the words, Sally's waiting downstairs.

Nodding, Greg stands to take the papers. "John, I've got to let you go. Think about it, will you?"

"Yeah, um. I—I'll stay in touch. Okay?"
"That's all I'm asking. Thanks."

He grabs his coat, and they head for the lifts. Evan gives him an inquisitive look when his phone goes off again, barely half a minute after he's put it away, but Greg makes no attempt to explain his sudden popularity.

Made it to work. I'll call on my dinner break. xx

Great. Still off at 9, right? Expect me outside Barts when you get done. x

"You probably don't really have to escort me home from work every night," Molly tells Greg, three nights later. "I doubt I'm a terribly likely target."

"Molly. Do I need to remind you, again, how much you matter to me? I have the whole speech prepared, and everything. I was even thinking about getting it tattooed..."

"Really." She leans in closer to him as they walk, coyly bumping up against the arm she's already wrapped around. "...Tattooed where?"

"Mm, down my back, probably. Only place I'd have enough space, right? 'Course, even there, I'd probably have to cut it down to bullet points," he says musingly; he breaks into a grin when her cheeks flush red and she buries her face against the side of his shoulder.

Her weak protest is muffled against his coat: "Oh, you, stop."

"Short version: it makes me feel better to know you're safe, and if it makes me feel better, I'm all for it at this point! Too bad I can't make it to meet you every night. Hmm, maybe I can get Frank to come when I'm on late shifts..."

"Well, I suppose I'd feel safe enough with Frank. After all, if someone did try something, he could probably charm them into surrendering!"

"He'd blind them with his rakish smile," Greg agrees, chuckling as his restless eyes continue to scan their surroundings. "Here's our car. You know the drill."

"Yes, dear." She keeps hold of his hand and follows calmly behind him, allowing him to circle the vehicle, squat to check the undercarriage and each wheel well, and peer into the side windows before unlocking and holding her door for her.

"Sorry, love," he says as he gets in, "that must be getting tiresome."

"I'm just glad you aren't finding anything," she replies. "I really hope all this gets sorted out soon; I think we're both getting a bit paranoid! This afternoon I thought a suspicious man was watching me in the canteen. Turns out he was cardiology's new hire, and he was only marvelling at how much I looked like his sister. He showed me photos, and everything—No, Greg, don't go getting that look. You needn't run a check on him!"
"If you say so." As he drives, he makes a mental note to speak with HR at Barts. No sense taking chances.

Because he's borrowed one of his usual fleet cars from the Yard, his phone has automatically paired with the car's Bluetooth; when it rings, the call comes up on the dashboard screen. Greg recognises the number as the rehab centre's common room.

"Everything all right?" he asks, when the call connects.

"As well as can be expected. You've got me on speaker?"

"Yeah, I'm driving Molly home."

"Hello, Sherlock," Molly pipes up. "I hope you enjoyed the chocolates I sent along with Greg the other day, when he brought that elephant doll for you. I think it's lovely, you thinking of Callie like that! Have you recorded any stories yet?"

"Er. Well, not quite yet. I'm still thinking my options over. And I always have liked the fruit creams best; I'm impressed you remembered, Molly."

She seems pleased with Sherlock’s answer, so Greg shifts the topic. "So. Any luck with the detective work?"

"I've had Nate and Irina asking around," Sherlock reports. "Nobody seems to remember a patient or staff member named Angela. She might have been given an Anderbrooke business card in some other setting, like a support group meeting, but the fact that she still hasn't returned any of your calls does seem suspicious."

"Did you give them her description? Maybe she was using another name, if she was there."

Sherlock hums, noncommittal. "I told them she was...blonde-ish. Frail? Utterly, maddeningly boring, at any rate. Honestly, Lestrade, if it weren't for the drama of the case she brought, I couldn't have stood to listen to a word she said! I deleted her face months ago."

"Slender build, average height, thin face, sharp chin. Glasses with clunky red frames. Blonde, yeah, hair just below shoulder length, and brown eyes. No; more like hazel, actually." As he finishes the recitation Molly throws him an unreadable look, and he shrugs, snapping his eyes back to the road.

"Fine, I'll ask again. But don't expect much," says Sherlock.

"I just wish we knew more about the twins," Greg complains. "That business card might not mean anything, sure. But I can't figure out why Angela would leave those two other girls out of the story, when they were almost certainly part of her childhood!"

Molly contributes, "If they were identical, um, they'd definitely be memorable, even to someone pretty young. But maybe she didn't see them very often, and they didn't look alike? We don't have any photos."

Greg nods. "My cousins, on my father's side—Violet and Susan are twins. They don't look much alike at all, really."

"Yes, that is generally how fraternal twins work," Sherlock says dryly.

"Okay, so—what if this doctor of yours, with the same surname as the twin girls, actually was one of them? You said she met up with another woman, right? They could be plotting something,"
Greg suggests. "They could both be working for the new guy! They could've *sent* Angela looking for you in the first place, and she didn't mention them because she couldn't..."

"It's never twins, Lestrade, come on. This isn't the roster of poorly-conceived henchwomen in one of John's ridiculous spy films."

"But," Molly says, "what if—"

"It's never twins!"

Greg and Molly exchange a silent glance. But before either of them can acquiesce or argue the point further, a commotion becomes audible in the background of the call.

"Ugh," groans Sherlock, "I've told them they'll regret it, but apparently I have to participate in the evening's asinine group competition. Dear *God*, I loathe Charades! Saturday?"

"Saturday," Greg promises, trying very hard not to giggle before Sherlock rings off.

The events of the next day, unfortunately, put a kink in Greg's plans and promises.

"You've got a message from Inspector Dimmock," Sally reports, when he arrives for work. "He's asking to see you when you get in."

"Oh? Right, let me just settle in for a minute, and I'll go find him."

Greg hangs his coat, then takes a quick glance over his inbox and sees nothing requiring immediate action, except one see-me email from Dimmock, sent in the middle of the previous night shift. It provides no more explanation than Sally's message, but if Dimmock had been on the job at two o'clock in the morning and decided to wait around here for Greg to come in at nine, it must be something worth his attention.

*Yeah, I better go see what he needs, thinks Greg. I'll just grab a cup of coffee and take it with me.*

The hall leading to the kitchenette happens to be empty, for the moment, but about halfway down it he realises he's not alone. He's being paced by a smartly-dressed woman with long, wavy brown hair, who seems to have appeared from nowhere; she greets him calmly in his near-stumbling moment of surprise. "Good morning, Detective Inspector."

"Hello," he says, brows lifting. "Ah...Anthea, was it?"

"If you like."

"You've never come here before."

"No," she agrees. "Which is why nobody will guess where we're about to go."

He finds the glint in her eyes distinctly unsettling. There's humour there and in the slight curve of her plush lips, as always, but there's something hard and unyielding, too—a tension he's never before noticed in her demeanour.
"I'm meant to be working," he protests. "I'm on my way to a meeting! I can't just walk out with you."

"Oh, I think you'll find you can. That's not a meeting you want. Chop chop, now; wouldn't want to keep him waiting..." She glances over her shoulder, and cocks her head to indicate the fire door.

As Greg hesitates, making his own glance back towards his office, she clears her throat and lifts her arms to show that the coat folded over them is his.

"What's this about?" he asks, as he follows her down the stairs.

"We shouldn't talk here," she says. Her serene voice rings in the enclosed space, punctuated by the clicking of her high heels as she descends ahead of him with all the grace of a runway model.
"Better if you let him explain."

No matter how he prods, she refuses to answer any more questions for the duration of the chauffeured journey. Soon enough Greg finds himself led down into Mycroft's chrome-and-concrete underground office, abandoned at the open door with no more than a wry smile and nod from the retreating Anthea.

Last time they saw each other, the elder Holmes had been a raw nerve, somewhat diminished in his uncharacteristic volatility. Greg had ended that encounter with the upper hand, which was in itself a vanishingly rare occurrence; now he feels that power imbalance righting itself, reversing to place him firmly on the bottom, as implacable as the closing of the heavy steel door behind him.

"Take a seat, Inspector Lestrade," Mycroft requests curtly, without looking up. His head is bent low over the desk, immaculate dark hair gleaming a burnished auburn under the spotlight of a small swing-neck lamp; the magnifying glass through which he's peering looks like it could be a valuable antique. The object of his study is a photograph, its subject obscured to Greg's view.

Usually, Greg remains standing during meetings here, whether he's giving reports or receiving orders. Trying not to sound rattled, he returns the greeting as he sits. "Morning, Mr Holmes. Would you mind, terribly, explaining why your assistant has just hustled me out of my workplace in secret?"

There's an unsettling silence before Mycroft straightens; he lays the heavy lens aside, briefly pressing thumb and fingertip at the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

"You are already aware, of course, that a flagging system is in place; it covers law enforcement, emergency services, and credit reporting agencies, just to name a few. The entry of a flagged name within any of these systems prompts immediate eyes on the situation."

"Well, uh." Greg's brows shoot high; he feels thrown utterly off-balance by the man's patient tone. "Yeah? I mean, I guess you knew the minute I did a records search on you, way back when. And I think you were out of the country when they called 999 for Sherlock's cigarette experiment, but you had it handled right away..."

"Just so. If, for example, Martha Hudson were to get into a road accident with that ridiculous sportscar of hers, I would be notified the moment a first responder registered her identification."

"Okay. Nice to hear Mrs Hudson's made your list." Greg pauses, as a stone drops in his stomach. "Is John okay? I haven't had a text from him since last night. Has something happened?"

"Doctor Watson is safe, to my knowledge," Mycroft assures him, a thin smile flickering briefly across his features. "But, unless I am very much mistaken, you're presently being framed for
The dead woman in the photographs is sprawled on her side, arms at unnatural angles. Her long blonde hair lies in stringy snarls, matted with blood, across her face—well, what little is left of it.

"You can identify her, I presume?"

"I—" Greg swallows hard, flicking his eyes from point to point again in disbelieving inventory: *sharp chin, slight build, blonde hair, one open hazel eye*. Less than half a metre from her head, a snapped bit of glasses frame gleams cherry red against the pavement. "Her name is Angela Hosmer," he says, shock numbing his lips.

"The bins behind which she was found serve a block of flats two streets on from yours. The call history on the mobile phone she carried heavily featured your number."

"So I'm a person of interest, if not the top suspect. They'd put my name in the system in order to gain access to my schedule, see if I had an alibi to start with."

"Yes. And, of course, you were no longer on duty last night at the time of death. If, perhaps, Miss Hooper might corroborate your whereabouts at approximately eleven?"

"Sorry, I left her flat at nine thirty and drove home. I don't usually keep a car from the Yard overnight, but I was on this morning, so I just drove it back in today." At Mycroft's prompting look, he shakes his head. "Didn't make any stops, didn't go back out, nobody saw or heard from me the rest of the night."

"Unfortunate."

"I'll say. Given all that, it's a wonder you don't suspect me!"

One corner of Mycroft's mouth twitches upwards. "Inspector Lestrade, I've had nearly eleven years to assess your character. You're capable of many things, but vicious homicide really isn't one of them, is it?"

Greg smiles back, but it's weak and wobbly; *capable of many things* is a phrase almost too apt for comfort. He clears his throat and shoves the ever-present worry further down. "So, uh. What were your thoughts on the possible murder weapon?"

For three hours they stay at it, sifting through new information as it comes to Mycroft's desk. Periodically, Anthea slips in to provide refreshment, sometimes murmuring in Mycroft's ear or slipping him a folder—some of it is almost certainly government business, and Greg studiously avoids listening in, but he's never asked to step out. It's undeniably surreal to be sitting here, quietly working on a case with the wrong Holmes...and the farther morning stretches into afternoon, the
more keenly he's aware of his absence from Scotland Yard and the eerie silence of the phone in his pocket.

Finally he can no longer bear the suspense. "I still don't understand, Mr Holmes. What's the advantage in whisking me away to hide? Innocent 'til proven guilty, sure, but I also know what it looks like when a suspect goes on the run..."

"Detective Inspector Dimmock still hasn't formally entered you as a suspect. It seems you've made quite a positive impression on him, as a colleague; in fact, according to my agents' reports, he's resisted at least two suggestions from a sergeant that you be brought in for official questioning."

"Good old neurotic Martin. Never thought I'd be grateful for his weird hero worship."

"Quite," Mycroft says, quirking an eyebrow up, and Greg is struck once again by his almost congenial attitude. Where has their comfortable mild antagonism gone? "Of course, the delay is thanks in part to the work of the agents I have in place. They've provided a bit of influence where necessary, although Dimmock's initial reluctance did allow them time to gain access to the investigation to begin with."

"And just how easy is that?" Greg asks, glancing up from the worrisome written account of a witness who came forward to describe a shouted argument, and a grey-haired man seen hurrying away towards the main street. "Not all of the stuff you have here is computer entered, at this stage. Do your people just waltz in and look over officers' shoulders anytime they please? How often are you getting your hands on our cases?"

"It isn't as easy as you're thinking," Mycroft replies coolly. "But when it's called for, you can be sure that Intelligence is quite good at what it does. I'd have expected a bit less of a protest, honestly, considering your situation."

"Right, yeah. You're doing me a big favour, I know! I'm not exactly sure how preventing Dimmock from questioning me is gonna clear my name, but I'm grateful to get off the radar for now, anyway." Leaning back in his seat, Greg runs his hands through his hair and sighs; the magnitude of the situation has begun to sink in. "Well, fuck. I figured I'd become a target; I guess I should just be glad it was this, and not a car bomb..."

Now Mycroft leans forward over his clasped hands, obviously interested. "Ah! Then you already know who's behind it? If so, I assure you, it shouldn't be all that difficult to straighten out."

"I think I do," Greg admits. "But assuming I'm right, it won't be so simple. And I'm thinking that whatever your plan is to defuse this case, it might be a lot smarter to make it look like I'm going down on charges, to any observers."

Mycroft hums thoughtfully. "It could be done. Inspector Dimmock would need to be brought in and agree to it. But you do realise what that would mean? You'd likely not be held in custody, but you'd be unable to work. Your travel would be severely limited. You could no longer make your visits to my brother..."

"I'm pretty sure that's the whole point of me getting framed. They don't want me trying to keep him stable anymore." As Mycroft's brows lift in confused alarm, Greg studies him with fresh eyes; he sees a powerful, resourceful genius, who's sacrificed half a day's important work to help a lowly, victimised copper—despite hurt feelings and probable jealousy that Greg holds his brother's trust in a way he never could—and all at once, it seems ridiculous that they've kept him out of the loop so long.
"Let me write to Sherlock," he says, making up his mind. "Go to the centre in my place, tomorrow, and ask to speak with Nate—he can be trusted to deliver the letter while you wait, and then Sherlock should agree to see you. Just be careful what you say..."

"Yes, I know; I'm to refrain from criticism." Mycroft's posture and tone, though rigidly controlled, fail to entirely hide his eagerness.

Greg resists a smile. "Well, yes...but it's mostly because Moriarty could be listening," he says, and settles in to explain.

-----
"Mum, it's not so bad as you're thinking."

"Not bad? Bernice sent me the clipping this morning. You're to be tried for murdering a woman in cold blood! In what conceivable universe is that not so bad?"

"Well, you see, we had to let the papers have the story—"

"My boy, my only baby boy, going to gaol as a killer—"

"Listen to me! It never happened! Calm down, Mum! I've been framed, that's all it is. It'll be straightened out before you know it; I promise you, everything will be fine." Greg pushes the curtain edge aside and peers out at the unmarked car sitting on sentry duty. The idea they're hoping to sell is that the pair of uniformed officers within are there to ensure he stays at home and makes no move to flee. Greg knows they're really Mycroft's people, looking out for his safety, but he wishes he could order them off. The awareness of being under watch is like a persistent itch.

"And, oh, whatever will I tell your sister?"

"Nothing! Nothing," he insists, hastily turning his back to the window and his attention to the phone. "You don't need to worry Corrie with this! I'm telling you, I didn't do it; there won't be any charges filed. Just trust me, and be patient for a few days. Are you listening to me, Mum?"

She subsides, sniffling, and when she speaks again her querulous tone is enough to make Greg wince. "But why would someone do something like this to you, Greg?"

"I wish there was an easy answer to that. But I've got good people on my side, okay? Look, I should go; I promise I'll let you know as soon as anything changes. I love you."

Long after he ends the call, restless guilt churns in his gut. The risks inherent in the career he chose
have given his mother more than enough to worry about, without adding this complication. Ideally, he'd have liked to get through this without her ever finding out—and she never would have, had he not insisted on making it look like a successful frame job.

He hadn't enjoyed seeing his name in the news any more than Mum had. But it had been necessary, in order to make it look like he was really in trouble. Mycroft had assured him that the story would be tightly controlled; no front page headlines, no photographs of his face, and minimal television coverage. Last night's news programme had run about twenty seconds in total on Angela Hosmer's murder, naming the prime suspect only as a long-standing officer of the Metropolitan Police Service and promising more updates as information became available. It's unlikely the story will get any more airtime or newspaper coverage before the whole thing is cleared up properly.

And then, maybe Bernice the bloody Human Google Alert can send my Mum a news clipping about how I helped take down Moriarty, thinks Greg, heading towards the bedroom. He's been meaning to take the time to reorganise his closet; now that there's nowhere for him to be, he may as well stop putting it off.

On Wednesday Greg and Molly go shopping together. They take their time wandering through the store, gathering whatever ingredients catch their eyes and discussing possible combinations. Tonight's menu hasn't come together just yet, but whatever they end up choosing, it'll be something they can cook together—he's still basically stuck at home, so it's a good opportunity for them to share a nice evening in.

As they stand undecided before the pasta selection, Molly looks over her shoulder, glancing back at the security officer who's been pacing them, and then leans in closer to Greg. "I don't like it," she says, quietly.

"I know, love. Neither do I. Are the ones trailing you at least a little more subtle about it? Mine think they've got an excuse to be stupidly visible at all times..."

She shakes her head. "Mine are—fine. I suppose. But, I mean, you being followed? It's not good, is it?"

"Well, it's not doing wonders for my nerves. And I have to say, it's really putting a crimp in my romantic style," he quips, accepting her gentle elbow to his side with an unapologetic grin.

"What if you—you know?"

The sobering possibility has of course occurred to him. "I hide, if I can. If you're with me, you keep watch, and create a distraction if you need to. Not much else we can plan for. There won't be much warning, if it happens."

"...I know." Her eyes linger on his for a moment. Then she turns away and, with a purposefully comical air of momentous finality, chooses a package of linguine for their basket.

As they continue with their shopping, Greg finds his thoughts drifting away from the choices of spinach or rocket in the salad, and chicken or prawns for their pasta. As always, Molly seems to know just what to say to set his mind running, even if she doesn't realise she's done it.
Given that his everyday resting state ranges from fidgeting nerves to gut-churning anxiety, it's easy to lose perspective—a steady background of constant fear can tip over into a sort of numb apathy, after long enough, and in the past six days since Angela's murder, he'd already begun to feel that dull throb of why fight it dragging him down.

Wouldn't it be easy, he'd thought just this morning, to simply sit back and wait, now? Out of the way, shut up in my flat, while Mycroft takes the reins and cleans up the whole mess. Maybe I could make a cocoon of my bed, and simply not come out 'til it's all over...

But the fact that Molly's been worrying about the ripples, too, somehow makes the whole issue seem more real again; he thinks back to the beginning of it all, fixing the events in his mind.

Last Friday afternoon, Martin Dimmock had been brought from the Yard in secret to meet with him and Mycroft, up in the bland, stuffy bank-manager office that Greg had almost forgotten from his own early days in Mr Holmes' acquaintance. Consternation had quickly given way to intimidated awe, thanks to Mycroft's inability to resist dramatic shows of power, and by meeting's end he'd lost his last shred of doubt as to Greg's innocence. His cooperation had been contingent only on Greg's full willingness to play the suspect.

Within hours of the meeting, they'd had Greg's entire flat searched under Dimmock's apologetic supervision, swept for surveillance devices and pronounced safe. Afterwards, Greg had brought his own equipment out of its locked strongbox and swept the flat again, just in case Mycroft still felt the old compulsive urge to leave his own bugs and cameras everywhere. And ever since that night, Greg's remained under watch, unable to step outside without the accompaniment of one or more plainclothes agents.

Better safe than sorry, certainly...but he can't seem to help feeling a little bit sorry that he's safe.

The thought is a small, petulant storm cloud that hangs over his head throughout the rest of the shopping trip, and dissipates only a little once they get back home.

Just as they're unpacking the last of the food, Greg's phone rings. One look at the number of the incoming call has him pulling his posture up straight, immediately on tentative alert. "John?"

"Hey, Greg."

"Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah. All clear so far; don't worry, I'm being careful," John assures him, and he exhales, nodding in answer to Molly's silent question beside him, so that she can relax too.

"I'm glad to hear it. And Molly is, too; she's here with me right now."

"That's great. So, is this a good time? Can I ask you for a favour?"

"Anything, as long as I don't have to be at work to do it for you! I've, uh, run into a spot of trouble..."

"Mycroft mentioned that, when he called me in to explain why he was putting a security detail on me. Sounds like unpleasant business. Does everyone at Scotland Yard think you're on the hook?"

"We haven't had to take it that far, thankfully. Mycroft's team at the Yard hasn't found anything to suggest there's another mole on the force." The thought of another sniper like Markus Gwerder hiding in plain sight and working alongside his sergeants had chilled Greg's blood; he'd insisted that special attention be given to rooting out any such potential threat. Even now, the man he'd
known as DS Brieter appears like a spectre behind his eyes, symbolic of Sherlock's bitter vengeance, lying brain-dead and anonymous in some German hospital—he pushes the image from his thoughts, and continues speaking with only a slight pause. "So, we've just got Dimmock controlling press releases and keeping a lid on the whole case as much as he can. My reputation won't be gaining any new tarnish, at least for now."

"Well, that's good to hear."

"Yeah, here's hoping it's worth all the trouble. So! What is it you need?"

"My therapist was called out of the country last week," John explains. "It threw off her whole schedule, and now the only slot she has open this week is an evening appointment on Friday. I was hoping I could ask you for a little babysitting help. Molly too, of course, if she's free."

"Babysitting, Friday night," Greg repeats for Molly's benefit, chuckling when her face lights up. "Absolutely; we'd be happy to take Callie for you! How long can we keep her?"

"I thought, maybe—if you didn't mind—I could have you take her around four, and bring her home at a quarter to ten? My session with Agatha is from seven to nine thirty, but there are some big errands I've let slide since I've had the baby around..."

"Say no more. Four o'clock sounds perfect. We'll enjoy every minute of it."

"Thanks," sighs John, sounding intensely relieved, as if he'd expected them to deny him the help. "I know I could've just waited to schedule a different appointment, but with everything that's been going on—I really need to see her, and get some things off my chest, you know?"

It's disconcerting, almost, to hear John Watson speak so freely and easily about his personal needs. Greg's come to expect reticence from the man, over the years; stoicism, deflective humour, and flat denial have been his stock responses in nearly every emotionally sensitive situation.

This therapist of his must have had quite a tough job to do, in bringing him out of his shell.

By Thursday afternoon, Greg is utterly sick and tired of sitting like a bug under glass. But just as he's finally resolved to call Mycroft and complain, Mycroft calls him.

"What's happened?" Greg demands as he picks up, too thrown by the coincidental timing to imagine less than the worst.

"Nothing at all, unfortunately," replies Mycroft crisply, unfazed by the lack of greeting. "Two unidentified persons paid suspicious attention to your residence and the guard vehicle, early in the week, but since then there's been no conclusive sign of action on any front. Whatever more this so-called Moriarty is planning, it appears unlikely to involve you directly."

The sigh that escapes Greg is equal parts relief and frustration; waiting for the first Moriarty to show himself was much like this, weeks or months of unfocused tension left to build to its boiling point. "Seems like we've made a pretty good show out of me playing the victim, then. Look, I know it was my idea and all, but maybe we could pull back a bit on this whole stakeout thing? Even if I was under investigation, it's pretty unlikely I'd be under house arrest..."
"Actually, you've hit upon the very reason for my call." Mycroft clears his throat, and after a brief hesitation he asks, "You likely have seen news reports regarding Monday's terrorist attack in Brussels?"

"Yeah, I did. Nasty stuff, that. Didn't they say there was going to be some massive EU summit or something there?"

"There was, and thanks to the gaping breach in Belgium's security, that summit shall very soon take place in London, instead. Given the unforeseen and immediate need for a new, undisclosed venue, special travel arrangements, highly secure lodging and all associated amenities, the task of ensuring the absolute safety of Europe's most vital officials has fallen squarely upon my shoulders."

Greg blinks. It's unprecedented for Mycroft to so much as hint at any specifics of his responsibilities; he prefers to leave the scope of his power implied. But here he is, explaining what amounts to a top-secret diplomatic manoeuvre, in the tone of a tired, disappointed child. Well, a very uptight one, anyway.

"And so," Mycroft continues, "I must unfortunately reassign most of my trusted personnel. The guard details assigned to you, Dr Watson, Dr Hooper and Mrs Hudson will be completing only one more shift."

"Oh! Well, that's all right." Greg lets his illogical relief colour his tone, in the hopes an optimistic response will reassure the man. "I have to say, I really wasn't looking forward to dragging a bunch of agents along when we're babysitting at Molly's place tomorrow night!"

"Ah. I must confess...I rather expected a negative reaction to this change of plans."

"It's been nearly a week, now, and we've seen nothing but those two scouts? Moriarty's people don't care about me enough to kill me! I was obviously supposed to be discredited and kept out of the way, and we've made them think I have been, right? Don't worry about me, Mr Holmes. Oh, but just one thing—"

"Yes?"

"If we're gonna be pretty much left on our own, can you loan me a safe vehicle? Normally I could take out a fleet car if I needed something for an evening, but since I'm on suspension..."

"I understand. Yes, I'll have a team leave a car with you tomorrow, after they do a final check to ensure perimeter safety at each of your flats," Mycroft assures him; he really does sound stressed, and exhausted.

"Hey, ah, Mr Holmes—Mycroft," says Greg, impulsively, "I want to thank you. I know you've really bent over backwards, here, for me—for all of us."

"It was within my power to assist," Mycroft demurs. "Let us only hope that it will be within my power once more, when it must."

Greg's well aware that his own track record is poor, when it comes to managing his emotions in healthy ways, but John's angry, conflicted turmoil after the death of his wife had been especially
worrisome. In light of that, it should be encouraging to see him reaching out and asking for help.

But Greg can't seem to shake the nebulous feeling that something isn't right.

It's Callie's supper time, and she's eagerly smacking her hands on the tray of the highchair while Molly gets out the little jars John packed for her; Greg sits at the table with them, aimlessly browsing the headlines on Molly's laptop.

"Callie, Callie, Callie-Rose," Molly sing-songs, making the tiny spoon dance and swoop; "rosy right down to your toes..."

*Rosie,* Greg hears John's echo in his memory, with a jolt.

"Open up, and in it goes; yummy, nummy, Callie-Rose!"

*Run, little Rose. I'll close my eyes and count to ten...*

He remembers the strange way John had responded to them, when they'd arrived to collect the baby tonight; he'd sounded dreamy, distracted, almost as if he'd been in a trance. And it wasn't the first time Greg had seen him like that, either. He'd nearly forgotten, with everything else going on, but the questions he'd asked himself then are still there when he digs for them: what sort of therapist gives the advice to shun one's closest friends in a time of need? What therapist worth their salt would ever seriously tell a patient that his hardships and traumatic losses were his own fault, thanks to loved ones he'd chosen poorly?

The more Greg thinks on it, the more he wonders about this woman's training and background. Could she be malicious, or is she merely a cut-rate hack?

There's no reason not to try and find out. Surely there can't be all that many therapists close to Mildmay Ward, with the first name *Agatha.* Opening a new browser window, Greg looks for listings within a convenient distance of John's flat, then filters for the name—it takes only a few minutes to track down Dr Agatha Neuwalter's professional-looking website.

A photo of the woman comes up beside the text, when he clicks the link for her bio. Her pale brown hair is turning grey in streaks, and styled in fat shoulder-length curls; she faces the camera with an enigmatic smile, slim bifocals set low on her nose so that they rest across the curve of her high and rounded cheeks.

"Oh! See, Callie, now you have sweet potato in your *hair,*" Molly giggles. "Greg, look how darling!"

Greg glances away from the screen to see—but his eyes flicker back. There was something, in the moment he'd half looked away...

A black marker pen is lying on the table, near a pile of junk mail waiting to be sorted through. He grabs it, uncaps it, and then stops himself—the entire Yard had heard about it after Iverson ruined the computer monitor in his office, trying to prove a point with an impulsive action just like this, and *that* had been a supposedly harmless dry-erase pen. But there's a plastic sandwich bag within reach, too, that John had used to wrap up the little baby spoon. Snatching it up, Greg smooths it flat over the laptop screen and starts drawing eyeliner on until the woman's eyes seem almond-shaped, stroking heavy black lines over her hair to approximate a sleek bob. The effect is clumsy and crooked, but he keeps at it.

Molly notices, at last, turning her attention from the baby. "What in the world are you doing?"
"It's John's therapist," Greg mutters, pressing the tip of his tongue between his lips as he concentrates on smoothing out his marks. "I think...she was the reporter. The one who came to Baker Street. The one I told you about, who tried to get Sherlock to believe I resented him..."

"Really? Let me see."

He holds the baggie in place and carefully slides the laptop around to face her.

"She looks familiar," Molly says after a moment, frowning.

"Yeah, I know. I just said that."

"No, I don't mean—you know I never saw that reporter of yours." She reaches out to touch his hand, still spread over the top edge of the the screen, and gently pulls the crinkled plastic from beneath his fingertips. "But I've seen her before. I know I have..."

"Have you? Where?"

"I want to say she had grey hair, or maybe almost white...with a heavy fringe. And, um. Her cheeks. They were red, like they were chapped. Oh, oh, who am I thinking of?"

They stare together at Neuwalter's photo, and all at once they both blurt out the same answer: "The christening!"

Stomach dropping, Greg checks his watch. "It's almost seven, already. How long will it take to get Callie all cleaned up and ready to go, love? I feel like I need to crash that appointment."

According to the website, John's therapist sees patients in her private home, in order to provide a comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere. Greg's committed the address to memory and looked up the route, and as they get situated in the sleek black sedan—plush, full-featured, probably bulletproof, and complete with an installed baby seat thanks to Mycroft's incredible attention to detail—he wonders exactly how non-threatening the situation really is.

It's been over five full months since the christening; if this woman truly is an agent of Moriarty, shouldn't she have done something more concrete in all that time? Objectively, Greg can surmise that the lady at the church may have been tasked only with observation: assessing the wayward assassin and the former target she'd taken as her husband, determining whether the series of threatening postcards had sufficiently spooked her. And perhaps, in disguise as the pushy journalist, it had been enough to sow the seeds of doubt and discord, once it was clear that Sherlock would yield no information on his posthumous crusade. Sherlock's mind had certainly taken those hints and run with them, despite Greg's unplanned-for presence.

She didn't figure on me, Greg thinks, driving with his jaw tight and his hands clenched stubbornly on the wheel. If I hadn't managed to get through to him—and I probably wouldn't have, if he hadn't already understood what I am—he'd probably still be off his head in some fucking drug den, even now!

"This woman told John she was called out of the country last week," Molly muses aloud, apparently occupied with her own attempt to understand things. "I wonder what she was doing?"
He lets out a mirthless chuckle. "My best guess is nothing good. Hell, what do you wanna bet Mycroft ends up tracing that horrible Brussels attack back to Moriarty?"

"Ugh. I wish I could tell myself you were joking."

Callie's apparently picked up on the tense mood; she's begun to fuss, and Molly's periodic efforts to calm her from the front seat seem to be delaying the inevitable meltdown by only a little.

He's just about to suggest they try singing some nursery rhymes or something, when he feels a warning pain in his chest, and his breath stutters to a forced stop.

"Oh God," he wheezes, "Molls—" His hands jerk on the wheel, swerving around a large puddle on the left-hand verge and pulling abruptly over into the next clear area.

"It's okay," she tells him, unfastening her safely belt as he throws the car into park and activates the hazard lights. Backed by the baby's fast-rising wail, her determined voice fades quickly into the ripple's fog: "I'll be right here, just..."

Sherlock is in bed, and he doesn't look at all well. The sleepless bruises beneath his eyes are dark and hollowed, making his face appear gaunt; his hair is greasy-looking and neglected. In the two weeks since Greg's seen him, it appears that his state of mind has spiralled dramatically out of control.

"...physiological response," a woman is saying; a glossy, smooth curtain of reddish-brown hair hides her face as she looks down to pick through her handbag. "I had to increase your dosage twice before you began to show proper effects. But," she locates what she's searching for and looks up in triumph, a pair of latex gloves in hand; "you trust me, don't you, Sherlock?"

"I trust you," Sherlock repeats dully, as if by rote, then his face twists in realisation and self-disgust. "No. No. I don't," he insists, attempting to jerk his hands up towards his face—which calls Greg's shocked attention to the bandages on his forearms, and the padded leather cuffs securing his wrists to short leads at the sides of the bed frame.

Greg shouts an angry curse, inaudible, jarred by an animal shudder of protective fear. He spins to face the woman, who's making a show of slowly pulling on the gloves as she steps unhurriedly towards the foot of the bed. She wears no glasses, her posture is straight and confident, and makeup shapes her finely pointed chin to seem less obvious—but he's already prepared to see through the disguise, and he does so in an instant.

Angela Hosmer isn't dead, he thinks wildly, and then: She was never Angela to begin with, was she? Who did she have killed, to get me out of her way?

Hovering to watch her speak won't do any good, he knows. The quickest way out of the room is directly through the wide bay window, below which the gardens are shadowed and red-lit under a sunset on the brink of consumption by oncoming storm clouds; Greg flings his awareness through it and out in a wide arc to come down just outside the centre's gates. The car he's hoping to find is there, thank God. And one of the pair sitting inside it, patiently waiting on standby for some unspecified trouble signal, is Ollie Berkeley. Even better.

It's not every day one gets a view inside the mind of a close friend; it's not necessarily something Greg's ever wanted to do, but trust outweighs civility in this case. He makes a quick, silent apology and reaches for Ollie, pushing a mental picture of the route he needs.

Out of the car. Through the lobby. Up the stairs, two flights. Round the corner, room 273, fast as
you can!

Ollie chokes a little, spills his lukewarm tea, then lunges for the car door and bolts towards the building, not pausing when the female officer calls after him in confusion. Greg touches her too, impressing upon her the need to follow, before flying to catch up with his friend. As they reach the lobby, he sails directly into the mind of the staff member manning the desk, and a quick *push* buzzes open the locked entry door so that the two police officers can pelt straight through unhindered. But there's only so fast they can go; Greg puts the room number into Ollie's head again, for safety's sake, then shoots straight up through ceilings and floors to home in on Sherlock once more.

"—the bombing plot? That wasn't him at all, was it? It was *you*." Sherlock seems to be prodding the woman, stalling for time.

"Oh, it was *fun*," Dr Kavanaogh says, with a throaty chuckle. "Fun to play at being Jim: setting up the elaborate drama. Putting all the dominoes in line, just so, rings and rings of them; all set to fall, and cry, and burn. How he did love complication! But he always kept his best playthings for himself, you know."

"So after he was gone for good, you took your turn."

"Once around the garden," she chants, the eerie smile still flickering around her lips. "And you danced so well, you and your pet soldier."

"He's not my *pet*," says Sherlock, and her smile widens as his voice shakes on the word.

"No; no, he's not, is he? Not any longer. We've made sure of that." She checks her watch and nods, satisfied. "And now, I think, that's quite enough. You may have been the old Moriarty's favourite diversion, but the *new* Moriarty? Oh, we have much bigger, better things to do, and we can't risk you ruining tomorrow's coming-out party."

Sherlock's eyes widen and roll from side to side, searching the ceiling in a frenzy as she leans in over him and fits her gloved hands over his nose and mouth. But it's not just panic; before she can get a secure hold on him, he bucks hard, thrashes his head to one side and gasps, "Not just me! John! Save John! Now—!"

Then the door crashes open, practically struck right off its hinges by the impact of Ollie's burly shoulder, and with a shout of "*Step away from that man!*" ringing in his ears, Greg is pulled back to his body.

Molly's anxious expression transforms itself to relief, as Greg's eyes come into focus on her face and he sucks in a long-overdue breath. She's standing beside the open driver's door, hovering over him with two fingers held to the pulse point beneath his jaw, and Callie is cradled against her other shoulder.

"Is he okay?" she asks, lovingly cupping his cheek in her hand for a second before straightening to shift the baby a little. Her question is almost inaudible under Callie's bawling, full-throated and inconsolable. That probably explains why they're out of the car—but Greg doesn't much care about the reason, he's just glad for the stroke of luck. He needs to drive very fast, now, and he knows he mustn't do that with the girls riding along.

"He's okay, I'm okay," he rasps, stretching around to drag the nappy bag from the back seat and push it into her hand, then grabbing her handbag and thrusting that at her as well. "Sorry; I'll come back for you, but I have to get to John, *now!*"
Eyes wide, she juggles the bags onto her arm and steps back out of the way, nodding when he apologetically reaches for the door. "I—I'll wait," she says, already muffled through the window glass as he puts the car in gear. The last of the sunlight is gone, and the first fat raindrops are beginning to spatter on the windscreen; there's no time to waste on second thoughts, no time to feel sorry for leaving her behind in the gathering dark. There's only the memory of Sherlock's desperate plea, and the word we, like a tolling bell.

We.

Moriarty is both women. Kavanaugh. The twins.

He drives.

"All right; I'd like you to tell me about Sherlock, now. You haven't gone to see him again, have you?"

"No."

Greg crouches behind a stand of shrubbery at the back of Neuwalter's house, his ear pressed close to overhear. There's a chill in the air, and the rain has begun to come down more steadily. Even so, multiple windows in the home are cracked open, including this one; if he leans carefully forward, he can peer in on the cozy sitting room.

"Why not?" asks the woman. Her German accent is present, but not overbearing.

"Because he manipulated me. Because he." There's a thick pause. Greg risks another peek; The wall visible opposite the window boasts a large fireplace, and John has turned his head to stare into its crackling flames.

"It's okay. Go ahead."

"He convinced me to sign him out of his rehab, pretending he was desperate to see me—but he just wanted out to run around on some crazy case, and I waited around for hours after and even cleaned his sodding room, and he still wouldn't explain anything!"

"I see. And you still believed you wanted to be part of his reckless adventures, even after all the pain he's caused you?"

"No. Yes. I—" John makes a frustrated sound. "No."

She clicks her tongue reprovingly. "Now, John. We've spoken about this before..."

There's another long pause, and when John speaks again his voice is dull and pained. "If he thought honesty was important, he wouldn't have been shooting up while we lived together. If he cared about my feelings, he wouldn't have stayed dead for two years. The fact that he's in rehab doesn't mean he's changed."

"Very good. You've made such remarkable improvement, John, in such a short time."

She continues speaking, but Greg finds himself repelled from the window. It may not be proof that
she's Moriarty—although Sherlock had looked as if he'd reached the same conclusion before, it's by no means confirmed—but he's heard enough to know he doesn't trust her intentions.

*I've got to get in there,* he thinks, creeping around towards the other end of the house. He's thankful for the property's high garden wall; as far as he can see, there are no lights on at the neighbouring home, either, so it's unlikely anyone will catch him breaking and entering. Really, though, it's not as if there's anything to break—all he has to do is push the pane up farther, and climb in.

The darkened loo is clean and quiet, with no breakable clutter to announce his presence when he tumbles unceremoniously onto the floor. Righting himself and catching his breath, he wonders again at the state of the windows; it's freezing in here, and the tiles are wet with rain, as is the edge of the shaggy mat facing the toilet. How much fresh air does this person need?

He emerges cautiously into the hallway, creeping past the cold, dark kitchen and dining room towards the only apparent sources of light in the home. A small lamp burns in the entryway, illuminating a path directly to the arched doorway at the far side of the sitting room, behind where John sits; maybe it's a strategy to reduce distraction for patients, keeping their attention focused in that single warm space as if the rest of the home doesn't exist. Whatever the reason, it conveniently allows Greg to tip-toe right up to the opposite doorway, standing one step outside the reach of the lamp- and firelight, with an angled view to John's pensive posture and the straight back of the woman seated opposite him.

Just as he gets close enough to really hear, the supposed therapist leans forward and echoes Dr Kavanaogh—*her sister?*—in asking, "You trust me, don't you, John?"

"I trust you," comes the dreamy, rote reply; Greg shivers and takes an involuntary half-step backwards. The movement brushes his hip against an ornamental table against the wall, and he reaches to silently steady the wobble of a tall, slender vase of carved marble, heart pounding.

"Then let it out; let it all out, right here, where it's safe. Put words to all that anger you're feeling, all that bitterness. *I hate Sherlock Holmes.* Say it, now."

"...I can't."

"You can, and you *must,* John. Part of you has been held prisoner for over five years, subjugated by a man you already know to be emotionless and controlling. All of the good work we've done together, over the past three months, has been building to this: you need to separate yourself from his influence, from this addiction that poisons your life and endangers your daughter! And won't it feel better, not holding all that rage inside any longer? Go ahead, just try. *I hate Sherlock Holmes.*"

She waits, and Greg holds his breath; John remains mute, eyes distant and clouded.

"Well?"

"I...love him," John says, his face a confused picture of slow realisation, as if hearing the phrase escaping his own lips is bewildering to the extreme.

"Oh, no," she corrects him with obvious amusement, "*that* can't be right!"

"No, it is. That's—that's what it *is.* I—Jesus, all this time, all this *time* I've l-*oved* him..."

"You need to stop and face the facts. John, are you still listening to me?"

He looks lost in his head, overwhelmed by this brand new information, and doesn't respond.
"He hurt you, maliciously," the woman presses. "He led you to become a widower, so your attention would centre once more on him. He forced you to watch him die. He spent two years on a worldwide vigilante rampage!"

In the shadows, Greg's eyebrows lift. Her accent has noticeably begun to slip in her agitation, and she's just tipped her hand, although John doesn't seem to have noticed yet—how could she know the damage Sherlock had done to Moriarty's network, except as one of the people trying to reorganise that same network for her own purposes? Greg has it from Sherlock himself that John knows little to nothing of what filled those two lost years.

"I love Sherlock," John murmurs softly to himself again, testing the words. "I'm in love with Sherlock..."

She makes a harsh, disgusted noise, smacking palms on her thighs in frustration, and when she speaks next both the accent and her calm, measured tone are totally gone. "So stubborn! I wonder if the real Frau Neuwalter's patients were all as bloody stubborn as you are?"

Slowly, John begins to register her break in character, emerging from his daze. "What?"

"We still have nearly an hour left in the session; I really thought I could get you to come around," she sighs. "I thought, for once, I'd win one of Saoirse's mad wagers. I mean, it's fine either way, isn't it? Fire hides a multitude of sins..." She stands, turning to the little side table by her armchair, and Greg quickly retreats a step farther into the shadow; he hears the slide and wooden thunk of a small drawer. "But, ugh, I truly was hoping you'd do this part yourself."

"I don't understand," says John, who can't see what she's retrieving as she faces away from him—Greg does see. He reaches out for the stone vase behind him, closing his hand tightly around it.

"It's very simple." She makes a slow, dramatic turn, and John sucks in a startled breath and stands as she levels the gun at his face. "Your dear Sherlock is already a comatose vegetable, by now, thanks to my sister; only fitting, really, given what he did to our friend Markus. And you were supposed to shoot yourself, out of misery over your lonely, pathetic existence...but now I'm just going to have to do it for you."

"W-who are you?"

"Why, we're Moriarty, of course," she croons, and just as she cocks the gun Greg leaps out of the darkness behind her with an inarticulate yell, swinging the heavy vessel like a club. The next moment is a blur—John shouts in surprise, the vase connects, her arm abruptly drops, and the gun goes off as she crumples to the floor.

"And stay down," Greg pants, standing over her, letting his improvised weapon fall to the carpet with a dull thud. Distantly, he's aware that what he's just done in no way befits an officer of the law. Well, I'm on suspension right now anyway, he tells himself, almost giddy with the adrenalin rush.

"Greg? What're you doing here?"

Greg looks up from his study of the unconscious woman's eerily familiar face, turning to see that John is seated in the chair once more. "I came to warn you," he says, still breathing heavily. "Saw her photo on the website, and figured out she was in disguise—fuck, I'm glad I got here in time..."

"She—she said Sherlock was—"

"No, it's all right. DI Berkeley stopped the attack, he's just fine," Greg assures him, returning his
attention to the woman. He squats to check that she's still breathing, thinking wryly of the fact that he was only recently declared incapable of just this sort of violence. "And she's still alive, too," he reports grimly a moment later, pulling the phone from his pocket. "I'll get in touch with Mycroft, he can send people to us."

"Okay. Uh...hey, Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't freak out, okay? But, if you could call 999 as well, that'd be good..."

Greg's head whips around; stomach sinking, he registers the slightly unnatural posture his eyes had passed over a moment before. Biting his lip with a wince, John shifts his arm away from his left side, revealing a widening area where his red button-down is becoming much, much redder—and Greg feels the blood draining from his own face, to match John's rapidly greying pallor.

A litany of howling, fearful curses fills his head, but all that comes out of his mouth is, "Oh, shit."

------
Chapter Summary

They're lost in their own world, the three of them, and Greg's never been happier to be ignored.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

22. Aftermath

Greg isn't a doctor. He's seen more than a few gunshot wounds in his time, sure, but the overwhelming majority of them have been the defining features of corpses. So despite a hopeful voice at the back of his head that points at the location of the hole in John's side and insists it may not be as bad as it looks, he can't quite keep the upset from his voice as he gives the emergency dispatcher the house address.

"They're sending an ambulance," he reports tersely, ringing off and immediately switching over to stab out a possibly illegible message to Mycroft's number: 51 Highbury new Pk susp uncns jw shot snd hlp. "Mycroft'll have someone along soon, too." Quickly pocketing the mobile, he looks up at John, who's still holding himself stiffly in an awkward lean against one arm of the upholstered chair, and realises with utter mortification that his usually reliable memory has gone frighteningly blank on the topic of first aid. "Tell me what to do?"

"Help me lie on the floor. Legs raised. Pressure on the wound," John pants. He seems neither surprised nor upset with Greg's failure in the moment, merely lifting an arm to allow the assistance.

He seems admirably calm about the whole thing. Greg is fairly sure his own response to being shot wouldn't include the ability to crack a reassuring joke between pained gasps, as he was being laid out on the carpet. It's humbling to see John shift so smoothly into the role of the Army doctor and patiently direct Greg just as he would any inexperienced, anxious recruit.

His calm lasts long enough for Greg to get him positioned, to dash away and unlock the front door, and to grab a cotton throw from the hall settee on his way back—but as the seconds tick by, blood loss and oncoming shock begin to take their toll.

"You're sure he's safe? You're absolutely sure?"

"He is; safe as houses," says Greg, gingerly peeling John's ruined shirt away from his side and unable to stop an indrawn hiss of dismay at the sight beneath. "Couldn't be more sure if I'd been there myself. Berkeley has Angela well in hand. Or Saoirse, or Jessica or whatever the hell her name is," he adds, a touch bitterly. Seeing the woman here—Maeve, presumably—in person, and fitting his memories of her other disguises consciously over her features, has unlocked another remembered face that corresponds to the woman at Anderbrooke. Now is hardly a good time to
dwell on the probability that Moriarty has been in repeated, prolonged contact with John's daughter at the daycare; thankfully, John lets the unexpected name pass without clarification.

John's face is chalk-pale under a sheen of cold sweat, and the nearby fire paints his trembling, exposed stomach with golden light. Having satisfactorily arranged John's raised legs on a soft footstool, Greg drops to kneel at his side, incongruously over-aware of the strange intimacy in their position.

Then he leans in with the folded blanket to better staunch the bleeding, and John's brave composure finally breaks. His eyes slam shut, and he lets out a jagged cry; it trails off into a high, thin whine at the back of his throat that goes on for a long time, punctuated at intervals by harsh, sucking breaths. When his eyes open again at last, he blinks up at Greg with a distinctly confused expression that spills over into sudden, irrational panic. He rolls his head around to look wildly in every direction, only barely holding himself back from thrashing out of Greg's steadying hold, but it doesn't appear that he's actually seeing the room they're in.

"My unit," he rasps, his voice taking on a clipped, strained note of urgent command, "the rest of them are still back there, the nurses and James, you have to go back—I have to—God, I can't—where am I?"

"You're in London, John, it's okay," Greg assures him, and clamps down hard on his own private kernel of panic. "Take a breath, and remember. You came home years ago; you've got a daughter now, Caroline, six months old. Can you remember?"

Three wild-eyed seconds later, the fog of confusion seems to clear somewhat. "Callie..."

"That's right. Callie's with Molly right now; she's okay, too."

Tears brim over and leak helplessly towards his ears; a sympathetic glance away is all the privacy Greg can offer him. For a moment the only sounds are the huffs of their breathing over the crackling from the hearth, John's too-fast and shallow in counterpoint to Greg's ungentle, deeply drawn he's-still-alive pulls of air. In the distance, thunder rumbles, and the next gust of wind carries the faint screaming of sirens.

"I don't," whispers John, "I don't want to die. I don't want to die."

"You won't," Greg insists, pressing into the wound as hard as he dares. "You won't. I've got you, I won't let you—"

Storm-blue eyes fix on him with such intensity that Greg gasps and bites off his words. "Tell him," John pleads, "tell Sh-Sherlock that I—that I—"

Greg's heart lurches in his chest. "I will. I promise." The clamour of sirens is getting louder outside. Soon, soon. "You'll be all right, John. Help is on the way. Just stay with us, and you can tell him yourself, yeah?"

The front door bursts open as he's uttering the words; it's Sherlock, wild-eyed, the long sleeves of his grey T-shirt streaked with rain. "John!" He skids across the carpeting and crashes to his knees opposite Greg. "I'm here, here I am! The paramedics are coming, they're right behind me! John!"

"Sh'lock." It's hardly more than a slurred breath; John gazes up at his friend, his eyelids beginning to droop. "Hey. 'M sorry."

"Don't be stupid, there's no reason to apologise—John? John!"
His attempt to cajole John back to consciousness is interrupted by the bustling arrival of the paramedic team. They waste no time in ordering him and Greg both out of their way. Greg stumbles as he rises, finding his legs partially numb from minutes spent on the floor, but strong hands steady him from behind: Ollie has slipped into the room, the normally imposing presence of his impressive height and ginger-topped tree trunk build made almost innocuous by Sherlock's blaring agitation.

"I gotcha," he murmurs at Greg's ear, and draws him a step back from the commotion.

"Ollie." Greg's attention is divided—Sherlock is hovering anxiously over the action, interjecting with obscure and probably less than helpful information on John's medical history—but he has just enough composure left to act at least a little surprised. "What're you doing here? Did something happen?"

"There was an attempt on Sherlock's life. No harm done; I'll explain later," Ollie adds hurriedly, before Greg can inquire. "Afterwards he grabbed my phone, messed around with it for a minute, then gave me this address and shouted for me to drive like a bat outta hell."

"It's good that you did."

"He called the lady we arrested...Moriarty? Did he mean she works for him?"

"She is Moriarty, these days." Greg gestures at the other woman, still crumpled unconscious beside the armchair on the opposite side of the room. "And so is she. I checked her pulse, she's still breathing—but I recommend someone get some handcuffs on her, before she comes around."

Ollie doesn't have the chance to ask anything more; John has been loaded onto the gurney, and Sherlock's questions have significantly increased in pitch and urgency.

"What do you mean, I can't stay with him? No!"

"Sorry, only family members or spouses can ride along," replies one of the harried paramedics. The procession towards the door jams up, briefly, with the arrival of a stone-faced team of MI5 men; one gets in and edges around them all towards the sitting room, following Greg's directive gesture while muttering replies to an earpiece, and the rest are forced to stand aside as the gurney is rolled out over the doorstep.

Sherlock fights his way through the last of the incoming group, raising his voice in outrage. "But I am his family, here! His sister's in Cambridge, and bloody worthless besides—and—and, he rode in my ambulance, when I was shot; that in itself should be adequate proof of relation! Have either of you numbskulls even bothered to check his records?"

Catching up to him, Greg places a heavy hand on his shoulder; Sherlock continues to argue, but his level of vitriol thankfully drops below the threshold of personal insults to medical professionals. Though it must seem terribly unfair from Sherlock's perspective, Greg can easily imagine Mycroft's rationale—given his brother's perpetual state of personal risk, John had generally been the voice of reason and safety in the pair; meddling in Sherlock's records for his own good was a long-acustomed and unhesitating habit for Mycroft, but John's rigid sense of self-containment would surely bring violent backlash if he were to discover similar infringements made on his behalf.

Greg verbalises none of this. Sherlock is in no state to hear it.

"Will you be needing help with your boy?"
Looking over his shoulder, he gives his friend a tired, grateful smile. "It's okay, Ollie, I can take him from here. I owe you, big time, man." A stray gust of wind splatters cool raindrops across his face, all at once clearing his nostrils of the clinging scent of blood; suddenly he thinks he understands the open windows, and the darkness marking one end of the house as off-limits. "Ah—just one more thing. Check this place for a dead body, will you? I think the actual homeowner might still be in there somewhere."

"Can do, boss," says Ollie, smirking affectionately as he tosses off a mock-serious salute. "I'll keep you posted. Best of luck."

The ambulance's rear doors are swinging closed, now, latches clanking into place; its conscious occupants, sympathetic but unmoved by Sherlock's increasingly desperate pleas, are finished with their hurried preparations and ready to roll. Sherlock's involuntary whine of distress isn't exactly audible under the large engine's rumble, but Greg senses it all the same, a tangible twitch under his palm.

"Come on. We'll follow right behind," he says, tugging Sherlock around and guiding him quickly towards the borrowed car.

The first two minutes of the drive are silent. Greg focuses apprehensively on the road and the siren-blaring ambulance up ahead of him, conscious that falling behind would be a broken promise. Beside him, Sherlock sits mute; a glance as they pass under a streetlamp shows his neck corded with tension, his arm thrown up against the window like he's either preparing to throw himself from the moving vehicle, or trying to stop himself doing so.

That's worrying. Greg keeps facing front, but his eyes flit over again and again. Sherlock's lips are pressed tight, quivering with the apparent effort to hold words back. He's staring ahead at the vehicle they follow as if sheer force of will might grant him X-ray vision.

The atmosphere inside the car is taut, crackling and heavy, an oncoming thunderstorm to shame the steady rainfall already pelting the windscreen. *Any second now,* Greg thinks, searching the fragmented mess of his thoughts for something to say that might calm, or comfort, or somehow defuse—but it's useless. He doesn't seem to have the mental energy left just now to do much beyond driving, and even that's a challenge; this car isn't from the Yard, and he hasn't got the luxury of a siren light to let him break the rules.

Sure enough, the moment his luck with traffic signals runs out, Sherlock explodes.

"Why me? Why, Lestrade! Answer me that!"

"Sherlock."

"You should protect *him,* why can't you save *him,* what's the fucking use of you if you can't—"

"Sherlock, I'm sorry, I wish I could've—it doesn't work that way, you know it doesn't—"

"But I'm not worth your protection," he seethes. "I'm worth nothing, less than nothing, everything that is *good in me* comes from *him,* and now look what's happened!"
"Not worth protection, huh?" The light turns green, and Greg quickly pushes the car up to speed, speaking through clenched teeth. "I don't make that choice! Whatever force or design put me on this earth, it put you there too, and since I was tapped to be your guardian I've never once doubted you were worth it."

"You were a child, and your persistent bias is that of a child. Forgive me if I ignore your rose-tinted credulity in favour of empirical fact!"

The barb stings, as it's meant to, but Greg lets it go. He's got John's ambulance in sight again, and Sherlock has shifted his laser focus outward once more.

They arrive at the hospital only a few minutes behind John. Almost immediately, Sherlock picks a fight with the charge nurse, a loud and increasingly nasty continuation of the argument he'd attempted with the paramedics; it's quashed only by Greg's quickly offered warrant card and a pleading promise to keep him in line. This at last gains them the information a level-headed Sherlock might have gotten on his own.

Reaching the appropriate waiting area reduces Sherlock's overall volume, but it does little to calm him. He sets himself to pacing the nearly-empty room, quietly snarling at anything and anyone in his path, up to and including an elderly woman who thankfully is napping soundly enough to be undisturbed.

The custodian chased away from his duties wears such a telling expression, as he retreats, that Greg turns back to look at Sherlock with fresh eyes. Seeing him was a shock when the ripple began at Anderbrooke, and now it's shocking all over again: lank and tangled hair, red-rimmed eyes with deep bruised circles beneath, loose clothing rumpled and damp and stretched out of shape—he looks more like a drug addict, tonight, than he did when he first entered rehab five weeks ago. Nobody here or at Neuwalter's house has seemed all that eager to listen to him, and Greg can see why.

"They won't come out and tell me until after, I'm not family," Sherlock babbles, winding a fist into his hair, "they'll want Harry, but I don't have her number, and even if she's already been notified she'll be at least two hours getting here..."

"Okay, calm down. I'm sure your brother will know to contact her." Greg can't check to be sure, though. It seems he's misplaced his phone, somewhere along the way.

"But if he codes, if he goes critical before she arrives—I won't even know—"

"Calm down, Sherlock! There's nothing you can do right now but wait."

"I can't! You don't understand, Lestrade! I can't just sit here, not knowing—"

Greg grabs Sherlock's forearms to still his desperately fluttering hands. "No. I do understand, and you know I do," he says firmly, leaning close to command Sherlock's field of view. "I sat and waited for you, and so did John. And now you and I are gonna sit and wait for him, yeah? This is what happens now. Just breathe."

Sherlock drags in a deep breath, settling reluctantly, even as a faint wince of pain crinkles his eyes.
It's not quite enough to be classified as a flinch, but Greg blinks and looks down: his thumbs are pressing into Sherlock's arms.

"Fuck," he says, remembering the ripple again. He immediately shifts his hold to Sherlock's right elbow, and plucks at the stretchy cuff of his T-shirt to reveal one of the large gauze bandages. "What happened here?"

"It was nothing," Sherlock starts to insist, but one dark glance from Greg is enough to change his mind about lying. "I—scratched myself up. I may or may not have been hallucinating at the time."

"Lack of sleep," guesses Greg, earning a tense shrug.

"Or a side effect of whatever Kavanaogh was dosing me with to keep me suggestible and on edge. I had presumed it was a common antidepressant; perhaps not."

Greg's lips tighten. The urge to hustle him off to a bed (and a blood test) is strong, but he knows it'll have to wait. There's no way in hell Sherlock will be moved before this is all over with. 

God, I hope John makes it through this, he thinks, releasing him to his pacing. It'd probably shatter Sherlock, to lose him now. And who knows how we'd all deal with Callie—oh, FUCK, Callie and Molly—!

"I have to check on something," he tells his charge, with a calmness he absolutely doesn't feel. "Sit down and try to relax, okay, I promise I'll be right back."

Hurrying off to the nearest nurses' station, he attempts to charm the staff there into sending someone to watch over Sherlock. It seems they've already had a warning about the *strung-out madman* from the nurse he clashed with on their way in, and they're reluctant to get involved. After he desperately explains why he has to leave the hospital, though, one nurse tells him she saw a rather wet young woman arrive with a baby, a few minutes ago in the north entrance lobby.

He crosses the hospital at a fast march. If it isn't her, and odds are it isn't, he doesn't want to waste time he could be using to drive back to where he left her...and he shouldn't leave Sherlock alone for too long, either.

The lobby waiting room is far busier and louder than the surgical unit. Greg scans once over the crowd without success, but then someone shifts slightly and he gets a glimpse of the brown hair and striped knit scarf he's looking for. She's seated near the far wall, bent forward to coo over the baby, and though the coat draped over the next chair is dark with rain, she looks untroubled. With a tiny groan of relief, he rushes across the room and drops to a crouch before her.

"Oh! Greg!"

"Molly. God, I'm so sorry, love! I thought I'd get to come right back for you, but then with everything I just—"

"It's fine," Molly assures him. "No harm done! We waited for a little while, and then a car pulled up and Miss Anthea introduced herself. She's...um. Interesting?" She tilts her head, regarding him with a small, wry smile. "You needn't stay down there on your *knees*, Greg. Apology accepted."

He doesn't feel absolved, exactly, but he gets up and perches on the edge of the next seat, in front of her bag and coat. One hand reaches out automatically to stroke Callie's hair; Callie blinks up at him, and yawns.

"It was just like we thought," he says without looking up from the baby. "John's therapist was a
fake. I'll tell you all about what happened, but it's too crowded here, and I should really get back to Sherlock..."

"Here, you take her for a bit, and we can go. I'll grab the nappy bag and everything else," offers Molly. She stands once he has Callie in his arms, pausing to stretch. Greg waits until she's well and truly finished, not without a private flicker of appreciation for the lovely sight, then turns to lead the way back.

As they find pockets of quiet along the corridors, he does his best to summarise the events of the last—*hour and a half, Christ, how has it been only that long?*—but before Molly can ask him to really elaborate on anything, they turn a corner and are intercepted.

"Inspector Lestrade," Anthea greets him with a neutral nod, then looks to his girlfriend. "Dr Hooper, allow me to apologise for my abrupt exit earlier. Urgent business, I'm afraid."

"It's, um. Fine, of course," stammers Molly, hitching the bags up on her shoulder. "I mean. You didn't need to come back at all. Not for me, I don't mind."

Anthea gives her an enigmatic smile. "Actually, I've only popped in again to make a delivery. You'll probably be wanting this, Inspector..."

"Ah. Yes. Thank you." He accepts his lost phone from her outstretched hand and shoves it into his jeans pocket, embarrassed, while Callie wraps tiny fingers around his earlobe and headbutts his shoulder.

"We traced the signal to follow you here." There's a definite hint of amusement in Anthea's voice as she explains, "You dropped it in the car, in case you were wondering."

That's surely how she'd known where to find Molly, too. Knowing all of their phones are so easily accessible is a little unnerving, but he *had* texted Mycroft for help, after all. "And the sisters?"

"Inspector Berkeley informed our people of his close call at the Anderbrooke Retreat; we freed up a second team immediately to secure that facility and clear things up with the Stanmore force. Both women are now in our custody, and the one you injured is already conscious and talking."

"Right. Good," Greg mutters, wishing the pair a decidedly ungentle interrogation. It's reassuring to know he's not responsible for a murder tonight; still, holding Callie has got him feeling more than a little protective and vengeful on John's behalf.

It seems Molly's mind is on the Watson family, too; she pipes up beside him, asking, "Has someone already got in touch with John's sister?"

"Yes; we reached her shortly after she heard from the hospital," answers Anthea, dividing a professionally contrite look between them. "Unfortunately, Ms Watson is away on a business trip in Amsterdam, and will be unable to return before tomorrow afternoon." When neither of them come up with an immediate response to this disappointing news, she asks a question of her own: "Will you be requiring further assistance here with Mr Holmes?"

He shakes his head and tells her, "No, Molly and I can take care of Sherlock," and Anthea relaxes visibly.

"Mr Holmes will appreciate that." The name sounds quite different, when she refers to her boss. "An important event is scheduled for tomorrow, and there's still quite a lot to be done," she sighs with unexpected candor, eyes already drifting back to her phone as she starts to turn away.
Tomorrow's coming-out party, Greg recalls, and takes a hasty step after her. "Wait. About that event..."

For such a potentially critical revelation, it takes almost no time at all for Greg to pass on the scant information he has on Moriarty's potential plan to interfere with the summit—and much of that time, in fact, is used couching it in the excuse of Sherlock told me. Anthea doesn't appear to question the idea that her employer's brother might have had the presence of mind to recount his observations in the time immediately following John Watson being put in an ambulance, though Greg knows it's one of his more transparent lies. She merely listens and promises to inform Mycroft promptly, her thumbs already flying on the screen of her phone. Then, wishing John a speedy recovery, she makes a hurried exit.

By this time Greg is acutely aware of his prolonged absence from the surgical waiting room. When they get there, Molly turns the corner into the seating area ahead of him, and stops short.

"Um. I thought—isn't this where you left him?"

"Oh, damn. Where's he gone?"

"Your sick friend?" The old woman is awake now, paging through a magazine as Molly chooses a seat. "He took himself off to find the loo, a while ago. Looked awfully peaky, if you ask me. I told him, whatever you do, don't get the curry from that canteen downstairs! Here two weeks ago for my sister's hip replacement, Jeremy had the curry, and now?" She tips her head meaningfully towards the doors leading to the operating rooms. Apparently Jeremy is back there, somewhere. It seems unlikely the curry is to blame.

Greg sighs, gives the baby a kiss and hands her back to Molly. "He won't have gone far. I'll track him down." He wouldn't be surprised to find Sherlock fast asleep in a stall, honestly. Fear and adrenalin can do only so much to counteract abject exhaustion.

The restroom turns out to be empty, but a hunch draws Greg on to the next intersection beyond it, where he finds an offshoot corridor that holds one of those rare pockets of calm and quiet. Sherlock sits braced against the wall there with his knees drawn up tight.

It looks like he's made some effort to clean himself up; his hair has been wet down, slicked back and given a half-hearted tousle with paper towelling, but his overall appearance is still a far cry from the usual.

He glances up at the approach of Greg's footsteps, eyes red and pleading.

"No word yet," Greg promptly assures him. "Don't worry. Molly's waiting, she'll text me if anything happens."

A bare nod is Sherlock's only response, and he returns his bleak stare to his clasped hands. Greg watches him for a moment, indecisive, before quietly hunkering down to take a place on his left side. They sit like that for a while, solemn and mutually exhausted, their white-noise silence and the hospital's distant hum of activity stretching time itself into something blurry and unreal—when speech breaks the trance at last, Greg jerks and pulls a quick breath in through his nose, startled.
"I've put him at risk," Sherlock declares a second time, ignoring Greg's reaction. His voice is a low, rasping remnant of itself, broken in the wake of his earlier hysteries. "Just as I always have done. Everything I am puts him at risk. How—how is he to believe he will ever be safe around me? Caroline might have lost her father, tonight—nothing could justify that!"

Greg opens his mouth, intending to offer easy reassurance, but the words sit leaden on his tongue. This is no time for hollow platitudes.

"Is this what I'm for, then?" Sherlock asks bitterly after a moment, smearing the heel of a hand across one damp cheek. "Is the whim of destiny so callous? That I should cause such suffering to those I love, by my very existence? That I should remain set apart, always, as the price of being a so-called great man?"

"No," says Greg, and Sherlock flinches, apparently having forgotten that he wasn't muttering dramatically to an empty corridor; Greg reaches out to rest an open palm on Sherlock's arm, careful and gentle. "Because you're not a great man."

"No?"

"You're better than that, Sherlock. You're a good one."

Eventually they do get up from the floor, shuffling back to the waiting room in silent accord. They find Molly engaged in chatting with the woman, whom she introduces as Esther before breaking off mid-sentence at the sight of Sherlock.

"Oh," she says softly, and crosses directly to him with the baby still curled at her shoulder. Sherlock seems surprised to be suddenly wrapped in a hug, but after a moment his hand comes tentatively up to touch first her back, then the top of Callie's head. They break the embrace after a moment, and she guides him to a seat, whispering something that earns her a hesitant nod in answer.

Esther's wait alongside them lasts only a little while longer. A few others arrive and take seats over the course of the next few hours, anonymous men and women looking nervous or resigned or withdrawn in ways that would no doubt draw torrents of tactless deductions from an untroubled Sherlock. But none of them attempt to strike up conversation, or interact beyond a polite nod and smile when Callie squeals adorably for attention. They can see the protective way Greg and Molly flank their friend—the way they occasionally lean close in front of him to speak in low murmurs or to pass the baby between hands, while he either watches them with morose detachment or stares off into space—and they seem to understand.

Now and then someone comes through the doors they're watching, but every time it's for one of the other people there. Each successive disappointment strengthens the gnawing, unspoken worry. Surely he must be out of surgery, by now?

Then a male voice calls out cautiously from the corridor behind them. "Is there a...'Sherlock' here?"

Sherlock shoots to his feet, electrified. "That's me! I'm here! Is he all right?"

The orderly looks relieved, as if he hadn't quite believed someone would answer to the name. "Yes,
we've just moved him out of recovery and into a room on the third floor, north wing. I'm sorry nobody came out to speak with you sooner; we did contact his listed family, and she didn't mention anyone here waiting, only that she was out of the country and making travel arrangements for tomorrow. I can't provide private details, as I'm sure you understand, but Mr Watson is clear of the anaesthetic now, and he's asking specifically to see you. Would you like to follow me?"

The words have hardly left his mouth before Sherlock is at his side, vibrating with anxious eagerness. Feeling some measure of that tension himself, Greg lets them go, avidly tracking Sherlock with his eyes until they round a corner; then, he lets out a quiet sigh and slumps down in his seat. It's like a thrumming charge has gone from the room, leaving it emptied of its meaning. Various aches and pains rise into his awareness to fill the void: bruises and strained muscles from his house-breaking adventure, and a seriously sore back.

Should've thought twice before sitting on the floor with him so long, he scolds himself, but he knows he wouldn't do anything differently given the chance.

There's a rustle near him, and he opens his eyes; Molly is shifting the dozing baby from shoulder to shoulder, and starting to gather up her things. "We should go, too, so that Sherlock can find us when he's done visiting. There'll be another place to wait up there."

"Yeah, 'course. Here, let me get that..."

They set out together, Greg toting both their coats and the brightly coloured nappy bag like a dutiful pack mule, bleary and frazzled, while Molly leads the way in quiet poise. Watching her, he's struck by a surge of desperate affection—and a rush of guilt comes hard on its heels.

"Hey, Molly...I want to apologise," he says, after the lift doors bump closed with only the two of them inside. "I feel like I've been shortchanging you. And not just tonight, either. You deserve more from me, and I'm sorry."

"I've known from the start that I was sharing you," she points out. "I chose this—being with you—already knowing what you were dealing with. I didn't have to."

"I thank my lucky stars for that, every day, I really do. You're so important to me, Molls. I just—I know I let myself get too distracted, sometimes."

"Well, he's quite the distraction, isn't he?"

"No kidding," he says, chuckling ruefully as they exit the lift.

They continue on in silence for a minute, but when the bustling north wing nurses' station is in sight ahead of them, Molly pauses in the relative privacy of the corridor. Turning to look up at him, her expression fretful and contrite, she hesitantly confesses, "I think—no. I know, I'm still in love with him. Just a bit. I shouldn't be. But I am."

It's not quite a laugh, the sound that bubbles up wet through his chest. Her tear-glazed brown eyes swim and waver in his sight as he blinks away gathering tears of his own. "I think I must be, too, a little. Is that weird?"

"No. I think I'd be surprised if you believed you weren't," she says, and one corner of her mouth lifts in an unsteady smile.
Relocated, they settle in to the wait once more. It hasn't been long—a couple minutes at most—when a round-faced nurse approaches from the direction of the patient rooms. Greg is alone at that moment, attempting with limited success to find a way to sit that will ease his stiff lower back.

"Excuse me, sir, are you one of Doctor Watson's group?"

"I am." He abandons comfort and shoots up straight again.

"He's been told that his daughter is on the premises, and he'd like a few minutes with her..." She glances around at the otherwise empty waiting area.

"Sure, I can bring her to him as soon as my girlfriend comes back from the loo with her. Nappy change; you understand."

The nurse smiles, gives him John's room number, and moves on to another task.

When Molly returns with the baby, he stands to meet them. "There you are, Callie! All cleaned up, and feeling better? It's time to take you in to see your Daddy, now!" As he reaches out to gather her into his arms, he explains to Molly. "He's not ready for all of us together, I don't think. I'll probably leave her there with him and Sherlock, or maybe stay a few minutes and then bring her right back."

"Either way is fine. I think I'll ring Mrs Hudson and make sure she knows what's happening. Go on and take her."

It's well past Callie's bedtime, and she's dozed off for serious naps only a few times over the course of the evening, but tonight's long parade of unfamiliar surroundings seems mostly to have piqued her curiosity rather than her temper. Greg knows from experience that she can raise quite a ruckus when provoked—the decibel level she'd reached on the road, just hours ago, had probably been audible inside houses two streets over—so he's almost absurdly grateful for her continued tranquillity, as he carries her down the hall towards John's room.

"You've been such a good girl tonight, Callie love," he murmurs to her. "And it looks like you'll be staying with me and Auntie Molly for a few more days, what do you think of that? Hm? Oh, we'll have a grand time, won't we?"

The room number he's been given matches a door that stands just slightly open. There's muffled speaking audible from within as he approaches, and he's lifting a hand to knock and announce his arrival when Sherlock's voice cuts the other off, strident and unmistakable.

"It's my fault I ever needed one in the first place! My own pathetic, reprehensible weakness put me right where Moriarty wanted me, and provided the perfect smokescreen to keep me from learning the truth!"

John's voice is less clear, but Greg can still make it out. "Sherlock..."

"There were clues, John. There were clear signs that something wasn't right, that I was being drugged—but I accepted every one as an inevitable setback in my recovery. Because I'd never before stuck with any course of rehabilitation!" Despite the agitated emphasis Sherlock gives the words, he sounds more resigned than angry. "It's my fault for believing that things could be different. That I could somehow change an unforgivable flaw in my basic nature. I should never have been led to that place; I should never have needed it! And you were nearly killed, as the price for my folly!"
"There's more to it than that," John bursts out, and Greg catches his breath, leaning in closer despite himself. He hasn't heard John sounding this emotional since the confrontation in Miami. "You're missing half the story. She wasn't supposed to shoot me!"

Greg sees the scene in that firelit sitting room all over again, within John's pause for breath: the perverse cruelty lurking in the woman's soothing, hypnotic tone, and the struggle it had taken for John to pull himself finally free.

"She'd been working on me for over three months," John continues, "putting a twist on everything I saw. Convincing me I needed to be self-reliant, isolated from attachments, focused on my daughter to the exclusion of all else. She had me really starting to believe some pretty screwed-up things, by the end there, even though I know our friends were doing their damnedest to pull me back. And if tonight had gone the way she planned, she wouldn't have had to shoot me."

Whatever is said next drops below Greg's hearing, an exchange of near-whispers—but the content isn't hard to guess. He winces in anticipatory sympathy and cradles Callie close, waiting for the reaction.


"But in the end she couldn't get me there," says John, urgently. "She thought she was in the home stretch, and she fucked up! Listen to me, Sherlock."

There's another brief silence; Greg shifts on his feet, praying that no nurse comes along to find him spying at the door. When John speaks again, there's a tremor in his voice. "She failed because of you. Because at the moment when she had me on the edge, when it could've gone either way, I finally realised—"

Again, a hesitation. Greg shouts silently through the door. Say it, God, will one of you just say it!

"I realised, I—I love you—"

"And I love you," Sherlock replies at once.

"—and I understand that's probably something you'd rather not hear. I don't want you to feel like anything has to change between us. But it's important that I'm honest with—wait. Uh. What did you say?"

"I said, I love you." A stifled hint of wild, elated laughter leaks through to colour Sherlock's words as he continues, "Please bear in mind I haven't properly slept in the past fortnight, which seems to explain my uncharacteristic candour and frankly appalling sentimentality—but I am quite desperately in love with you, John Watson, and I have been for some time."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"That's...that's good. Good."

"Good," agrees Sherlock, dazedly.

Great, thinks Greg as they go quiet once more, grinning widely into Callie's hair. She's beginning to squirm; he can't risk standing out here in the corridor any longer. He gives it to a slow count of ten, one last consideration given to their privacy, then raps his knuckles cheerily at the door and pushes it open.
It's apparent that the two of them have hurriedly halted a massively successful first snog; the matching flush on their cheeks says it all. That, and the hands that remain firmly joined despite the fact that they're no longer alone. John looks sheepishly pleased to be caught out, while Sherlock meets Greg's eyes with a defiant expression that dares him to comment.

Greg only beams joyfully at them both and turns the baby around to face the room. "Callie, look who it is! Say hello to Daddy!"

Laughing, John beckons him closer, reaching out for his daughter—which means letting go of Sherlock's hand. Sherlock steps back, allowing them to get safely situated, and takes advantage of the distraction to address Greg in a low voice. "It took you long enough getting here, Lestrade."

"Yeah, well, I could say the same, couldn't I?"

Sherlock tries to give him an offended look, but given the way his ears instantly go pink, the effect is something more along the lines of a mild vexation. Greg claps him on the shoulder in wordless congratulation and steps aside.

"Yes! That's Sherlock," John says, in response to Callie's emphatic pre-lingual exclamations. "You've missed Sherlock a lot, lately, haven't you? I'll bet you've had a pretty exciting evening, too! Why don't you tell me and Sherlock all about it?" Encouraged, she continues to squeal and coo, patting happily at John's face.

"I hardly think I've spent enough time in total with Caroline to make a real impression, positive or negative," Sherlock points out. "I doubt she's missed me." But he goes willingly around to the other side of the bed, and takes the hand John is offering.

"Okay, so I'm projecting a little there. Or a lot." John dislodges her tiny fingers from his lower lip, and smiles fondly up at him. "And as far as time spent—we can work on that. If you want to."

"I look forward to it," murmurs Sherlock, reaching out a finger for Callie to grab and shake.

They're lost in their own world, the three of them, and Greg's never been happier to be ignored.

-----

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter will take me a few weeks to shake out, sorry! Expect it, as accustomed, on an unspecified Tuesday in the near future. ;)

-----
Chapter Summary

But for once in his life, Greg doesn't care a bit who might be watching.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

23. Onwards, Upwards

21 September, 2015
(Two days after)

Greg comes into the Yard the back way, on foot through the lower level car park, dressed for a day off and sipping leisurely at some special new thing Cleo's fixed him; it smells more like a classy dessert than a coffee, but he must admit the sweet almond flavour is just as subtle and soothing as she'd promised. Skillfully avoiding both the reception area and his own department, he slips into the observation booth for interrogation room seven, least frequently used due to its less-than-convenient placement and cramped layout. He hits the switches: bright fixtures flicker coldly to life in the mint-green tiled room beyond the one-way glass, while a dimmer glow lights the small space around him.

He knows he's in for a bit of a wait—even after eleven days off, he can't shake the compulsion to be early—so he isn't expecting to hear someone entering the room behind him before he's even pulled out a chair.

"Hey, boss. Ooh, denim's a good look on you."

He whirs around in surprise, only just saving his coffee. "Shit! Sally. You weren't meant to know I was coming in today! I'm not working."

She rolls her eyes—obviously—and gives him a smug smile. "What can I say? I know who to grill around here. If Berkeley knows something juicy for more than a day, chances are Drake knows it too."

"Yeah, all right." He double-checks his watch; Ollie isn't supposed to be meeting him for nearly fifteen minutes yet. "Since you're down here, you may as well just give it to me straight. How bad is it?"

"Honestly? Not bad enough to warrant your impending dental surgery face," she replies, cocking her head. "As far as the rumour mill, there were a few guys putting it around that you were a murder suspect, but that dropped off a bit after Dimmock refused to confirm anything."

"Good man."
"Another strong faction was convinced you'd had a nervous breakdown. But nobody knows what to believe, now, not since I dropped a hint here and there that you'd run off to elope."

"Sally!"

"What? It could happen!"

"Fine. Whatever. Thanks for muddying the waters, anyway. And, outside the rumour mill?"

"Oh, no worries. We pulled a couple new cases, of course, but nothing too hairy. And you'll be glad to know we closed out the Inman thing, last week."

"Yeah? Good. I knew you could handle yourself without me."

"Well, I wouldn't have to, if you didn't make such a bloody habit of getting yourself thrown on leave," she remarks. "And before you ask me for the tenth time, yes—I am considering finally putting in for the promotion next year. If only to make sure you do your own work more often!"

The teasing tone is practically mandatory for seasoned Yarders; Sally's always been a master of good-natured snark. But they're alone, and Greg's time on holiday has thinned that protective shell of his a bit, so he ignores the opening she's left for a return volley and tells her seriously, "You should. You'll do great things with your own team under you, Sally."

"Don't I know it," she says softly, and there's real warmth in her eyes. "I learned from Parsons' own Golden Boy, after all. Or, well. Silver, I should say."

The door opens behind her, then, saving Greg the embarrassment of a heartfelt reply. "Oh, it's a party already! Hello, Donovan," Ollie says, cheerfully edging past her to set an evidence box down on the table.

"Morning, sir."

"Greg invite you down to listen to the tape?"

"Uh, no; I was just updating him on a few things. I should get going. Back to work soon, I hope, boss?"

"Probably," answers Greg. "Give it another day or two and it should all be buttoned up; I'll let you know. Thanks for carrying the load, Sal."

She nods briskly and exits, leaving him and Ollie to the business of the evidence box.

"I figured I'd just put it on in here," says Ollie, lifting the lid. "I mean, I'm letting you listen to this off the record, and all; no need to sit in the icebox over there, eh?"

"No, this side of the glass is fine, mate. I appreciate this."

"Seemed like you'd have a vested interest in hearing it, before I turn everything over to MI5. Hold on, I think there's a power switch hiding on the bottom somewhere..."

As Ollie fiddles with the unwieldy Bedtime Elephant doll, Greg reaches into the box and retrieves the slim plastic wand that pairs with it. Dressed in a quaint buttoned nightgown, fuzzy slippers and a long striped cap that drapes over one floppy ear, the plush pachyderm holds an open book in its lap. The playback controls are big, simple buttons built into the plastic "pages" of the book, but the remote Greg's studying is decidedly adult-oriented; it's meant to be used and safely stored away
before the doll itself is ever given to its young recipient. Greg remembers that the elephant's packaging boasted its capacity to record as many as six bedtime stories, up to twenty minutes long each: an impressive claim. When he purchased this toy two weeks ago, he'd never suspected that Sherlock had requested it in case he needed to secretly record his own attempted murder.

Repressing a shiver, Greg stalls for time. "I still can't believe how lucky Sherlock got, having you out there that night. How in the world did you ever figure out he was in danger?"

"I don't know," Ollie admits. "I have no idea how, I just knew—something was wrong, and I had to go. It was the craziest thing, Greg. I just knew."

"That's amazing. Honestly. Well, a really good copper gets a kind of sixth sense, doesn't he? You must have some of that, I bet. All those years of experience, telling your gut what's up."

"Yeah, I guess." Ollie shrugs, smiling crookedly, and presses the bright green Play button. "Right; showtime!"

The doll's recording begins with rustling, then silence before the click of a door. Sherlock had sat down with Greg just last night, to explain how he'd hidden the controller in the side of his mattress and practiced stealthily turning it on, and the memory of their talk is so vivid that Greg doesn't really listen to the first few seconds of recorded conversation. His attention doesn't truly key in until he hears that eerie conditioning phrase: "But...you trust me, don't you, Sherlock?"

"I trust you. —No. No. I don't!"

"Oh, it's simply charming to watch you struggle so," the woman says sweetly. "Those restraints are for your own good; you've harmed yourself, and we can't have that, can we? Just lie back and try to relax. Are you still feeling very poorly?"

"You can drop the act, Ms Kavanaogh," Sherlock rumbles after a moment. "You have me where you want me. I'm not to leave this room alive."

"Oh, very good! I admit I'd begun to wonder whether you could possibly put it together in time. I'd heard so much about your incredible genius, but when I finally got in to meet you, you were a distracted, daydreaming idiot!"

Greg winces, remembering how the ripples had intermittently caught and held Sherlock's attention during those months.

Sherlock speaks again, sounding almost plaintive. "I still don't understand. Please. You've won. All I ask before I die is that I be allowed to know you for who you are."

"I've already laid my whole history out for you, Sherlock," she tells him, scornful. "The least you could do is to show some effort."

Like an anxious game show contestant, he blurts out, "Angela Hosmer is dead. Not in London. Years ago."

"Correct again, well done! Angela was such a sweet and trusting child. Not very bright, though, even when compared to the average moronic five-year-old. She'd follow after me and my sister, no matter what we did—Maeve told everyone it was an accident, afterwards. Maybe she even believed that for a time."

"So that makes you Saoirse Kavanaogh."
"At your service," she replies simperingly, and Greg imagines a mocking curtsy. "But little Angie's story isn't the one you want to hear. Things were still boring when we were nine. You want me to tell you about Jim, don't you?"

"Please."

"We were twelve, and queens of our little domain. All the shopkeepers on our street knew us, and the roughs in the alley behind it too; we had a way of getting what we wanted, wrapping them all 'round our fingers. And before you go picturing our childish rewards—well, there were sweets, of course, but the power was sweeter. Then one day Jim came to stay with Old Uncle. He'd hurt his leg, I think, and needed a place to lie low for a while; when there was sun, he sat with me and Maeve in our little courtyard. He was the only one who ever figured out what happened to Angie."

"But he told no one," Sherlock surmises.

"He liked us. I daresay he felt a kinship. Two sweet lasses, whip-smart and power hungry...we were Irish, like him. Out of place in the common world, like him. Angry—so angry, oh yes. Like him, that fire. He came back a few years later, and took us under his wing."

"Protégés, then."

"We earned the title. Moriarty. We put in the work, for years. We indulged his every whim. And then we were left to deal with the fallout when he shot himself in the head! So imagine our surprise, to learn that the meddling prat who'd pushed our mentor to suicide and then spent two years destroying the best of our friends was about to be exiled to certain death—just as we'd set up shop in London and got ourselves into position? We'd earned our vengeance by inheritance," she snaps.

"I was so relieved to be allowed to stay, given the chance to prove my worth, that I rationalised away every clue that should have told me I was wrong," confesses Sherlock. "But now I see; that video message—the bombing plot? That wasn't him at all, was it? It was you."

The recorded scene continues, echoing Greg's unsettling memories. Ollie doesn't stop the playback until the crash and shout of his own heroic entry come eerily through the doll's moving mouth.

"You okay, Greg? You're looking a little pale."

"No, I'm good," he answers, shaking off the surreal flashback. "I'm glad I got to hear this. It puts things into perspective."

Now that he's heard Saoirse's taunting declarations for himself, he's reassured that the murder case keeping him from the office will very shortly cease to be a problem. After all, the fact that the dead woman in question is neither Angela Hosmer, nor the woman who'd used that identity in her dealings with him, should go a long way towards clearing his name.

Most importantly, though, it firms his confidence in Mycroft's ability to get the sisters properly put away—and given all that they've done, Greg fervently hopes they'll be put far away. For a long, long time.
When Greg signed Sherlock into rehab, he'd tried not to think too far ahead. Sherlock's history of ditching treatment was established; his relatively mild-mannered stint as Greg's houseguest, though promising, did nothing to change that. Greg could defend the man's sincere commitment this time around—and he had, repeatedly—but, privately, he'd simply set his hopes on eventually being able to sign him out of rehab.

Naturally, he'd imagined himself checking Sherlock out of the same place he'd put him into. That had become something of an impossibility. But despite everything that's happened, or perhaps because of it all, he regards this day as a victory.

The Humboldt Foundation is a far cry from Anderbrooke's lavish gardens; housed neatly within the two uppermost storeys of one of the tallest office buildings in Croydon (which isn't saying all that much), its aesthetic is clinical and cold by comparison. Greg had worried, initially, that Sherlock would object to the lack of the luxury spa amenities and relaxed visitation policies that had appealed to him during his original selection process. Even more likely was the chance he would reject the place simply because Mycroft had chosen it. However, once provided with a detailed overview of the treatment his brother had arranged, and having seen John make great strides towards wellness in the forty-eight hours following surgery, Sherlock had willingly turned himself over to the centre's care.

Humboldt is no more a typical rehab centre than Anderbrooke. If anything, it could be described as an intensive, private recovery experience, tailored individually to trauma survivors and victims of abuse. In Sherlock's unique case, special accommodations had to be made—a transparent, wholly scientific approach to rebuilding his trust in the therapeutic process.

Greg hopes it's done the trick.

"Well, this is it," he says, signing his name on the release form with a flourish. "Your chariot awaits."

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but steps into the lift without a disparaging comment.

Once they're alone in the car he relaxes somewhat, though he plucks unconsciously at the collar and cuffs of his dark blue dress shirt. "Thank you for coming, Lestrade. John had wanted to be here today, but he's been obliged to pick up extra shifts all week. Dr Leopold covered for all four weeks of his leave, and now she's fallen ill."

"You know I don't mind. I'd always planned on doing this for you, anyway. So, you and John have been talking a lot, then?"

"Over an hour every night. It was the most valuable freedom I had in that place, really. Of course I recognise the benefits inherent in focused isolation and one-on-one discussion, but by the end I very nearly found myself wishing for one of those obnoxious group games nights!"

Greg makes a mental note to have Molly suggest Charades, later, if only to see his face.

It's an hour's drive in from Croydon to Baker Street; they pass it in companionable silence, for the most part. Sherlock ignores Greg in favour of the passing scenery, occasionally noting changes in buildings or businesses aloud, content to refresh his familiarity with the city.

"Oh," he realises at one point, "if we'd taken a different route, we might have stopped by John's surgery. He's working 'til four."
Hiding a smile, Greg replies, "Sorry, didn't think of it. But wouldn't it be distracting for him, if you showed up while he was seeing patients?"

"No, you're right. I suppose I can wait until the afternoon." The crestfallen acceptance in Sherlock's voice very nearly makes Greg burst out with a laugh, as terribly inappropriate as that would be—luckily, Sherlock is gazing out the window, and misses the telltale contortion of Greg's face.

At last they arrive; as they approach the door to 221, Greg steps up close. "Here, why don't you let me take your bag for you?"

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying my own bag, Lestrade—wait. Why would you even ask for it? You have no reason to believe I've injured myself; nothing inside it is important to you; you want my hands to be free when I enter—ugh, no, Lestrade! You haven't!"

"Oh, come on, Sherlock! It's not a real party. Just Molly and Mrs. Hudson; that's not so bad, is it? I thought Mrs H would want a hug straight away, is all!"

Sherlock's disdainful expression softens a little. "Well. I suppose I'll allow that."

"Thank you." Greg takes the duffel bag. "Now, I know you're the world's greatest detective and all, but the ladies wanted this to be a surprise. So act natural, okay?"

"Fine. Let's just go and get the pointless ritual over with, then." With that, Sherlock sweeps inside and marches up the stairs, briskly enough that it's unlikely he's paying any real attention to the minute details of his familiar surroundings—exactly the sort of huff Greg was hoping for.

It isn't until Sherlock steps into the spotlessly clean and freshly child-proofed sitting room, to a chorus of voices shouting, "Surprise," that he comprehends what the real surprise is.

"You told me that you'd be at work," he accuses his grinning former flatmate—not so former, anymore, and it takes only another few seconds before the room's obvious clues sink in. Mrs Hudson moves in to get her hug, and he accepts it without reaction, speaking right over her head as if he's not being jostled and squeezed. "And you've—your things. All your things are here? Caroline's, too?"

It isn't quite the response Greg expected. He thinks it's still a positive one, but he can't help but check..."You look absolutely gobsmacked, Sherlock! John led me to believe the two of you were in agreement on this, or I never would've helped him. You did want him to move back, didn't you?"

Sherlock does answer the question when he regains the power of speech, but he continues to address only John; the two of them can't seem to pull their eyes away from each other. "We'd discussed—I'd hoped you would, yes, but I thought—rather, I assumed you would need time, after I returned, to adjust—to gradually come to a decision..."

"I didn't need time," John tells him, stepping boldly closer and taking up his hands as Mrs Hudson retreats. "Coming home to you is the easiest decision I've ever made."

"Home," echoes Sherlock, as if he can't quite believe his luck.

On Greg's either side, the women react: Molly gives a tiny, expressive squeak and clutches at his arm. Meanwhile, Mrs Hudson wetly burbles something about tea and cake into her handkerchief and rushes off to the kitchen.

As for Greg...he just can't seem to stop smiling.
(Three months later)

During the first hours of his official relationship with Molly, Greg made quite a few promises. In the bright afterglow moments, with the faint sounds of New Year's revels still echoing along the street outside, he was able to drag his mind briefly away from worrying about Sherlock's incarceration and whether Mycroft would succeed in arranging the promised visit. He let his mouth run freely, spinning out rose-coloured descriptions of how he would be better for her, better with her than he'd ever managed in the past—how he would devote himself to making things work, no matter what happened in regards to the ripples and Sherlock.

While these pledges carefully avoided the mention of anything so permanent as marriage, they covered a broad range of topics from the vital to the mundane. *I promise to always hang the towels back the way you like them. I promise to spend quality time with you every week, even if we're both crushed at work and all we can manage is takeaway in your office. I promise I'll give that show you keep telling me about an honest chance, even though I've never liked that actor. I promise to always hear you out, and listen to your advice.*

Nestled shyly against his side in the dark, Molly had heard him out as he rambled on; she'd giggled a bit at his more frivolous suggestions, and even made a few promises of her own. They'd agreed easily on an especially important one, though it wouldn't be feasible to keep right away: *I will make time to get to know your family, and I'll give you opportunity to get to know mine.*

Revisiting that pledge became a priority with the approach of their first anniversary. As a result, they've spent much of the past two months in a whirlwind tour. The last few weeks of November saw them on a holiday to New York, taking cheerful part in the American family's celebration, with a side trip to visit Mike and Jenny's new house in Philadelphia; the busy Christmas season involved a series of trips to Bristol, then Bushmead, then Leicester, and finally Dorchester for a weekend with cousin Susan. Apart from a few farther-flung cousins on Molly's side, that leaves only one important visit to make as January draws to a close.

"I'm so pleased I was able to come along and meet you today, Mr Lestrade." Molly takes a sip of her tea, leaning forward engagingly on the threadbare brown sofa. "Would you believe, my father lectured in geography at the University of Northampton for thirty-five years? Your book collection puts his to shame; he'd be in heaven here, I think."

Greg nods, confirming her statement. Professor Hooper is just that sort of fussy, flighty academic. If not for his wife's domestic influence, more than one room in his house would likely be given over to books and maps.

Ted sits by his rolltop desk, having swivelled its wooden chair around to face his guests. He'd started off playing gruff, as usual, but Molly's irresistible charm has clearly taken effect. "It mainly grows through correspondence with book dealers and other collectors. Mail-order, you understand. I don't get out much."

"Oh, that makes perfect sense," she assures him. "Constant vigilance in public must be exhausting! I mean, Greg's managed it, of course, but it's a terrible burden. I know it still gets to him sometimes."
Greg puts his hands up defensively against Ted's accusing glare. "I kept my word. I never actually told her, I swear! She put it together on her own."

"A likely story," Ted sniffs. "I remember how you bragged to me about spreading your secrets around!"

"Only mine, Uncle..."

"It's true," says Molly, patting Greg's knee. "I was convinced there had to be some sort of inheritance angle; it was the one aspect of the gift Greg wouldn't discuss freely with me. Then when we were in New York, I noticed what close attention he paid to his niece. It wasn't all that far to go from thinking about what he was watching for, to why he was convinced he might see it in her."

"The family tree I've worked out does seem to indicate that Gabriela should be affected," Ted concedes, sitting back with a sigh. "Still no sign, then, Greg?"

Greg shakes his head. "Nothing I could be sure enough about to risk saying anything to her. If she is hiding a gift, she's bloody fantastic at it. In which case I'm very proud, of course."

"Well, I'm sure you're disappointed not to have the confirmation you were looking for." Ted slides his eyes thoughtfully away to a far corner of the room, and after a moment he appears to come to some decision. "I suppose I have a bit of news that will interest you."

"Oh?"

"Recently, Annika—my charge," he puts in the quick aside for Molly's benefit, "wrote that she's planning an extended trip to the Málaga region of Spain this coming spring. Her favourite cousin is trying to interest her in the gift of some property; he has significant real estate investments in the province, and hopes to bring her closer to extended family who could look after her in years to come. Of course, I doubt she'll actually agree to resettle, but apparently his argument was convincing enough that she's agreed to get to know the area and do some house hunting. And, well...she's invited me to come along and keep her company."

"Really? You're going to do it? You're finally going to meet her! That's brilliant!" Greg's leapt halfway to his feet, jarring the coffee table with a knee in his excitement, while Molly merely reacts politely, bemused at the abrupt shift in mood. "This is huge," he tells her. "You are going to go, aren't you, Ted?"

"I could hardly say no," Ted replies wryly; though his smile is small, it lights his eyes with good humour. "My dear nephew would never let me live it down."

(Six months later)

Please?
SH

I told you, I'm busy tonight.
If it's urgent, you can still
call in Drake. Or Dimmock.

I didn't ask in order to gain a police presence. It's not that sort of case!
SH

Yet. SH

Well, I already have plans.

Your girlfriend won't mind. SH

Still, I'd rather not stand her up! If it's not a case for the police, why call me?

I need someone with me for the stakeout. John's visiting his sister. SH

If you insist on having your date, be aware: you might end up seeing me the less pleasant way... SH

Now, that's just playing dirty.

I'm merely pointing out facts, Lestrade. It's always safest to work with backup. SH

Molly would take it in stride, of course, if a ripple were to briefly interrupt their evening together. But since his homecoming nine months ago, Sherlock hasn't demanded much of Greg; aside from the occasional case worked through the Yard, he and John have kept mostly to themselves. They've been social, up to a point—the gathering they'd hosted at Christmas had been memorable in more ways than one, and spring had brought another party for Callie's first birthday. Greg and Molly have done a fair bit of babysitting, as well, although Mrs Hudson has rightly claimed a larger share of that duty now that Callie lives just upstairs from her.

Still, the sort of emotional support that Greg became accustomed to providing last year seems to be John's purview, now. As happy and proud as it makes Greg to see the two of them so wrapped up in their new relationship, he can't help missing the days when he was the reassuring contact Sherlock reached out for...

All of this flits across Greg's mind in seconds. It's merely a mental exercise to justify a foregone conclusion: he's already begun dialling Molly to cancel the date.
He arrives at the specified address just over an hour later. He's worn jeans, trainers and a thick, shabby old jacket from the back of his closet—it's chilly for a June evening, and he expects a long, uncomfortable wait in the damp of the alley across the way. But Sherlock steps out of the pub Greg had expected to be watching and impatiently beckons him inside.

"Sorry, I thought we were having a stakeout?" Greg asks under his breath, hastily shucking the ugly jacket and folding it over an arm.

Sherlock leads the way to a two-seat table. "Order yourself a drink, and sit here. My target should be attending the private poker game in the back room; my investigation depends on the observation of both his arrival and departure. If I were to linger alone that long, it would be suspicious. Or attract unwanted attention." He glances around with pursed lips, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of fending off flirty strangers.

"So you bullied me into joining you because you needed a drinking buddy."

"I suppose you could put it that way."

"Fair enough." Greg grins and heads for the bar.

They're there less than twenty minutes before their target arrives. Sherlock watches closely as the nondescript man passes them on his way to the back. Greg doesn't see much of anything notable about him, but he knows nothing about the case, and besides, his part in the evening's action is merely to relax and provide conversation. That's not a problem at all; the table Sherlock's chosen is well-placed to allow them to chat without being overheard, and after so long without a private meeting, there's a lot to catch up on.

"I've been holding out on you, you know," says Greg, casually, once the poker game is presumably well underway. "And you've been very kind not to press me."

"I presume you're referring to your family. It was clear to me that you would consider my interest an intrusion. So, having deduced what I could during their visit last year, I chose to drop the matter."

"Rightly so. What've you deduced, then?"

Sherlock leans in with a pleased, feline smile. "The trait comes from your father's side, but not from your father. You believed yourself alone until sometime after my leap from Barts, and in your entrenched isolation it's highly unlikely you would accept a conclusion without solid proof; therefore, it was a living relative of whom you had little to no prior knowledge. Given the dates on record for your parents' divorce and your father's death, I'm inclined to say an uncle."

"Well done, Sherlock. Cheers." Greg lifts his Jack and Coke, clinking it with the lime-garnished club soda in the other man's hand.

"But something's changed. You feel free to tell me, now, and it's not because you suddenly trust me more than you did. Has your uncle passed away?"

"No! He's just...retired, is all. And he's finally given me permission to tell you." Ted's holiday in Spain, experimental as it had been, had gone swimmingly—so well, in fact, that barely three months later he'd made the bold decision to put his Thrussington cottage on the market and pack up to move in with his best friend. "I promised him you'd only use his story to try and understand the ripples, so no tracking him down to harass him, all right?"

Sherlock nods graciously, with a healthy swig of the faux gin and tonic as he settles back to listen.
Greg drains his glass telling about young Ted Lestrade and Annika Rhinebeck, and another round accompanies the tale of how Greg sought out his uncle for advice after Sherlock's death. By the time he's detailed Ted's research into the family tree, and their current working theories on succession and ripple mechanics, he's well into his third drink and feeling the effects. He's not worried, though. Sherlock's only shamming his buzz; his eyes are sharp enough for them both, and he'll stop the conversation if anyone gets too close.

"...So he figures there's some kind of innate value assigned to the charges, from the beginning," Greg explains. "It's either that or a case-by-case risk assessment, I s'pose."

"At that point, of course, any speculation verges into the metaphysical."

"Yeah, I know. Which is why I don't waste a lot of energy thinking about it."

"Could it be our career choices? From what you say, Annika has had quite a career in medicine, especially in areas of the world where her influence could be very important. I suppose, on balance, I've helped more lives than I've harmed..."

"Well, I certainly hope so! But, yeah, maybe that could have something to do with it." Greg pauses thoughtfully. His eyes rove over the pub's oblivious patrons, dim and distant in their apparent normalcy, and for a second he tries to imagine one of them carrying a secret like his—or an indefinable spark like Sherlock's. It's not easy. "I dunno; how much of us is fate, and how much is choice? And how good d'you have to be, then, to warrant a guardian? If you'd decided to live out your life as an accountant, I know I still would've felt the same about you."

Even in the dim alcove of their table, Sherlock's eye-rolling huff does little to disguise the gratified flush that lightly tints his cheeks. "A spectacularly clumsy accountant."

"Spectacularly prone to crossing streets without looking, you mean. Hell, if it had only been that and none of the drugs and guns and goons, that would've been fine by me!"

Sherlock acknowledges the assertion with a thoughtful hum. "But perhaps the career itself isn't the point of balance. Had I become, as you posit, an accountant, I could've stumbled across a far-reaching embezzlement scheme, and ended up making enemies in organised crime..."

"Great. Even in a hypothetical, I end up having to save your skinny arse!"

The longer they sit and talk, the looser Greg feels in his skin. It's been long months since he's had this much private time with Sherlock, and he'd almost forgotten what a restorative it is. The back-room game enters its third hour without outward incident; Sherlock's gestures and expressions gradually widen with the laxity of inebriation, and Greg giggles, understanding that his own state is the benchmark for the performance. When Sherlock suggests they make it a regular thing once more, meeting up together at least once a month "without a stakeout involved, preferably; club soda is so tiresome," Greg eagerly agrees.

"As long as John won't mind me making demands of your time."

"Oh, I'm sure John should appreciate having a night off from me once in a while," Sherlock replies lightly.

"Don't be daft, Sherlock. That man's completely over the moon for you, and you know it! You can't seriously still be thinking you'll somehow screw it up—oh," Greg cuts himself off, realising he's misinterpreted. "Oh! So it's been going that well, has it? You're wearing each other out!"

This time, the blush is completely obvious. Sherlock clears his throat and scrubs his hands over his
face, slouching in his seat. "I hadn't expected it to be this way," he mutters. "We're hardly teenagers, for God's sake, but if Caroline weren't around I'm not certain we'd ever manage to do anything else! Surely such a pace is unsustainable..."

"You're both making up for lost time. Nothing to worry about," Greg assures him. He pushes away from the table to order them another round—if he's about to have to provide this sort of advice, he'd better have a fresh drink in hand. When he comes back, though, it seems Sherlock's thoughts have taken a different turn.

"Why do you—why did you trust me?"

"What?"

Sherlock flaps a hand before his face, with his eyes squinted shut, as though he's being pestered by an invisible fly. "You always have been too trusting of me. You know this. But—John."

Greg's completely lost at this point. "John?" he prompts.

"You let him come with me, you never even complained. For all you knew he was just a—for all I knew, for God's sake, I'd just met him and I'm not even sure what made me bring him along in the first place—but you, Lestrade! What possessed you to let him into a crime scene without a fight?"

"You vouched for him. Or—well, not in words, I suppose, but you obviously wanted me to let him come. I don't...hm, yeah, I don't have a better excuse."

"Even then, you were bent on giving me anything I wanted."

"Apparently. Seems to have worked out in your favour, I'd say."

If anyone else were bothering to closely observe this exchange, they might interpret Sherlock's tone as either disaffected or slightly condescending, despite the softened posture he's adopted in his playacting. To Greg's eyes, though, his expression is a strange, shifting tangle: gratitude warring with a persistent doubt that all he's received could possibly be deserved.

Perhaps, given a little more time, Sherlock might find the words to express it. But that's when the door opens and their target emerges, oblivious to the eyes at once upon him—the case is on.

(Eight months later)

Sherlock suggested that he and Greg set an evening aside each month for the two of them, and so they have. Sometimes they merely reminisce together as they share a meal and a few drinks; more often, they discuss Sherlock's various misadventures in playing second parent—in action, if not in title—to a sweet but headstrong toddler. Greg savours each of these nights, because they leave him feeling grounded and alive. Even Sherlock's more exasperating attempts to bond, like the detailed presentation he gave on scientifically choosing the ideal Christmas gift for Molly, are charming in their own way.

April marks the seventh such meeting; the stress of arranging Callie's second birthday party had drawn Sherlock to cancel the month before. Greg welcomes him in and sends him towards the
sofa, then hurries away to stir his bubbling pan and turn it down to a simmer.

"Goulash will be ready in another twenty minutes or so," he announces, poking his head back in from the hall to get his guest's attention. "Fancy a drink in the meantime? I picked up more of the gin you like."

Sherlock waves vaguely at him, leaning back and crossing his ankles on the coffee table. Greg takes the non-answer in stride and shortly brings back two glasses, clinking with ice and already beaded with condensation from the steamy kitchen. He presses one into Sherlock's unresisting hand, and that seems to bring the man around from whatever introspective landscape he'd drifted off into; by the time Greg has settled himself into his armchair and enjoyed his first sip, Sherlock has straightened up and focused his attention outward again.

The first words out of his mouth get directly to the point. "Have you given any thought to my proposal?"

_Damn._ Greg had hoped that taking twice as much time apart might dull his memory, somehow. "I don't know, Sherlock, I just don't think—"

"You're aging, Gilbert. It's undeniable. Other men your age would have long since begun regular screenings for prostate cancer, and that's just for starters."

"How strong a drink do you think it'll take to make me forget you've devoted detailed thought to my prostate? And, come on, fucking Gilbert, really? I expect more creativity from you."

Sherlock's mouth twists wryly, but he's undeterred. "Despite Molly's good influence, your general dietary habits remain poor, putting you at not insignificant risk of heart disease. And then there's the state of your knees; the warning signs of impending arthritis are impossible to miss! At your current rate of deterioration, I project you'll be suffering enough within three years that you'll be begging for promotion to that desk job you've promised yourself never to take."

"I'll be fine!"

"You don't know that!"

"My uncle," he retorts, throwing back half his drink in one shot, "is fine." At last word, Ted had settled well into his new home on the Spanish coast. He may not ever confess to Anni his true purpose in her life, but it seems her reckless days are behind her at last; they both deserve to live out their years together in companionable peace.

"Your uncle sat mouldering in a cottage, studying maps, for decades. You, on the other hand, have let a thirty-five year career on the police force take its toll on your body."

"Fucking—okay. Okay." Greg turns his eyes up to the ceiling and directs a frustrated sigh towards powers unknown. "If I ever want you to stop bloody nagging, I guess I've got no choice. When do you want to do it?"

"Tomorrow will be a perfect opportunity. Your shift ends at five, doesn't it?"

"All right. _If_ I don't have a case on," he warns. He knows he sounds petulant, but that's far better than admitting he's scared.

"Naturally," concedes Sherlock. "Mm, that goulash does smell quite good."
The next evening, Sherlock stands waiting for him directly out front of the Yard.

"Christ," Greg mutters, his step faltering. Should've taken one of the side doors. He wishes he could get away with inventing some pressing case as an excuse to go back in, but that only ever works with Corrie and his Mum.

Steeling himself, he strides up to insist on some ground rules, but before he can say anything Sherlock holds up a finger, turning to reveal the phone at his ear.

"No, Mrs Hudson, if she's asking for her 'Mingo then Lion absolutely won't do. Trust me, I have recent experience in the matter. Try looking underneath John's armchair; that's where I found it last time. It's a fluorescent pink waterfowl half a metre long, how well can she possibly have hidden it?"

By the time he's finished instructing his landlady, he's somehow managed to flag down a cab and fling himself in, gesturing imperiously for Greg to follow. He rings off, gives the address, and then they're in motion: it's officially too late for Greg to put up any real protest.

The surgery has just closed for the day. A tall, redheaded woman is just unlocking the door to let herself out when Sherlock steps up to it; she lights up in recognition and steps aside to let him and Greg through. "He's just finishing up, ducky. Go on in and remind him of the time."

John is visible at the back of the office area behind the reception desk, flipping through the contents of a file folder. When Sherlock draws his attention by knocking on the glass, he breaks into a pleased grin. "Sherlock! I wasn't expecting you. Have you made us another secret dinner reservation, love?" He hurries to open the interior door and tugs Sherlock down by the lapels to give him a welcoming kiss; only after that does he notice Greg standing tensely a few steps behind.

"What's going on? Is Callie okay?"

"Everything is fine, John, and your daughter most of all," Sherlock assures him, herding all three of them back to what is presumably John's examination room: it's the only one left with lights on. "All right; go on, Lestrade."

"So, uh, John..." Greg glances over his shoulder, to gauge the chances he might be allowed to change his mind; Sherlock stands between him and the door, arms crossed expectantly. "You remember, back a few years ago, when you helped me out with that prescription?"

"I do," John says. He takes in their expressions with a frown. "What about it?"

"You had me make you a promise in return, that day."

"And now, he means to keep it," Sherlock breaks in. "Right now, if you please, John."

"Oh? That's great, Greg, I'll be happy to check you over—but, why is Sherlock in here making you do it? Has something happened?"

Greg winces. "Well," he says, "there's a bit more to it than you think. You'll need to, uh, have a few things explained—Sherlock? Are you sure about this?"

"It's John," Sherlock tells him, as if that were all the answer one could possibly need.
"Christ, okay, it's just—well, you can't blame me for feeling a little exposed here! All these years keeping to myself, and now..." The sweeping, helpless gesture Greg makes encompasses his trepidation, and frustration, at the steadily increasing size of his inner circle.

"It will be fine. You worry too much."

"If I didn't worry too much, Sherlock, where would you be now, hm?"

"Point taken."

John blinks, flipping his head back and forth between them like a tennis spectator. "One of you is planning to enlighten me, eventually, I presume? There might be some popcorn, in the staff room."

"Why don't we just get started with what we can?" suggests Sherlock. "Lestrade can explain as you examine him. It'll go faster that way; God knows, none of us want to be here all evening."

One of John's eyebrows lifts. "Right. If we're doing the whole shebang, you're going to have to step out at some point, Sherlock, love."

"Obviously." He makes no move towards the door, even when John steps around him and back, retrieving a blood pressure cuff and other supplies. Greg is oddly grateful.

"Okay. Why don't you take a seat, here, Greg? We'll start with vitals, while you talk."

"Well, see—right, I know you'll think this sounds insane, but Sherlock knows all about it. He can back me up," Greg begins, throwing another glance over his shoulder for reassurance.

"Your blood pressure's a bit elevated," John murmurs.

"Well, I'm bloody stressed out, right now, aren't I!"

"We can take another read later, and get a better baseline. Just relax; deep breath in, and hold...and again. Good. You were saying?"

Greg swallows and tries to relax. "Uh, so, I grew up with this sort of...connection, you might say..."

"A psychic link," Sherlock supplies.

"Now, I don't know if I'd call it that."

"You have such a strong resistance to any application of terminology. Really, Lestrade."

Greg snaps, "Well, you try living like I have for forty years, and see how picky you are about slapping a label on your supernatural power!"

"Uh, guys?" John has gone completely still, poised near Greg's ear with his lighted scope. "You've lost me..."

Sherlock sighs impatiently, seating himself in a small chair by the door. "I assure you, John, this is no prank. Lestrade, perhaps if you allow me to lay out the basic facts, as I understand them, we can avoid the bulk of your frustrating circumlocution?"

"Fine. Fine! Have at it, then; I've already made a hash of it, anyway."

With a short nod, Sherlock tented his hands before his chin and begins speaking in the same cool, rapid monotone he might use to list evidence. "This condition first presented itself when Lestrade
was thirteen, approximately three months after my birth. The link is indirect and intermittent, activated only by circumstances which present immediate danger to my life or, in certain cases, my overall well-being. Upon activation, he experiences a severe shortness of breath, and generalised paralysis after an initial warning period of between five and ten seconds; his awareness is instantly transported to my location, however distant, at which point he must incorporeally utilise his abilities to influence events and protect me." He looks up, then, quirking a brief, tense smile at Greg. "How did I do?"

"Not bad," Greg answers weakly. "I mean, you've glossed over a few of the fine details, but that's all about right."

Beside him, John's eyes are wide. "That's..."

"All true," Sherlock insists. "I only learned the truth a little over two years ago, but it's been proven to me beyond doubt, John, as unlikely as it sounds. He has first-hand knowledge of events in my life that nobody could have. Not even my brother's surveillance could explain it all; somehow, Lestrade has been present at every pivotal moment!"

"Every one?" asks John. The scope dangles from his fingers, forgotten.

"Yeah," Greg says, "I was in the car—passenger seat, thank God—when you made that incredible shot to take down the cabbie. Knocked my skull on the bloody window when Sally swerved; she thought I was having a seizure."

"Jesus. You saw that?"

"With my own two eyes. Metaphysically. If I hadn't been there, you'd have gone down the wrong corridor and missed your chance."

John passes a hand over his face, slowly, and lets out a long breath. When he speaks again, he's visibly set his disbelief aside for later, returning to a businesslike, if tenuous, calm. "So. Any bloodwork and scans will need to be kept private. I'll have to do the analysis myself--"

"Molly can help, if you need it," Greg puts in. "She already knows."

"She does. Right. Okay. And is this, uh, this—are you having a specific problem with it, now? New symptoms? Something I need to look for?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing special. I just...haven't actually seen a doctor, as such, since 1984."

"Wow. Okay, then. Let's keep our focus on the general health concerns for a man of your age, for now, with special attention on any existing respiratory and cardiovascular strain and possible long-term damage..."

As John finds his footing and continues the examination, Greg looks over to see Sherlock looking immensely satisfied with himself.

(Two months later)
The "June Ball" charity banquet is a gathering of medical professionals representing nearly all of London's major hospitals, in an annual fundraising effort to benefit various youth outreach programs around the city. The atmosphere is collegial and a bit on the self-important side, a table-studded ballroom milling with charismatic surgeons, garrulous hospital administrators and their plus-ones in expensive suits and tasteful cocktail dresses; the decor has made heavy use of velveteen draperies to class up the convention space, and tea candles in faceted red glass jars flicker chips of ruby light across high-quality rented table linens.

Not every doctor here has come for the attention and networking opportunities, of course. Some could care less about brown-nosing their board members and department chairs, beyond the average deference prudent for anyone seeking job security. Molly is one of those; she enjoys having a good reason to dress up in one of those stunning secret-weapon evening gowns she keeps hidden at the back of her closet, and she's glad to donate to the charitable cause. Mike Stamford, on the other hand, seems merely to have jumped at the chance to take his wife out for a catered salmon dinner, a wine bar, and an evening away from the kids.

Now that the dinner, the speeches and the presentation of the silent auction offerings are all through, the party has moved on into wholesale mingling and drinks. At the front of the hall, a five-piece jazz band is cranking out a steady stream of mellow, inoffensive standards, while bidders approach the cluttered display tables nearby and scribble figures down on the cards.

"So what's the verdict, Greg?" asks Mike, tie loosened and cheeks rosy. "How's this compare to a fancy policeman's do?"

Greg responds with a chuckle. "In all honesty, this is a little more straight-laced than I'd expected. A room full of off-duty coppers would have a lot more sloppy drunks, by this point in the evening!"

Rolling her eyes at Mike and the others currently standing in their loose group, Molly jokingly protests, "It's not that different! Just look at Dr Cooper, over there, and imagine five of him, wearing their ties 'round their foreheads and belting the Arsenal fight song."

"Oh, Coop!" Mike cranes his head around to look, as the rest of them share a laugh over her comment. "Yeah, he looks pretty well hammered, doesn't he? C'mon Petey, let's go make sure he's got a ride home. He never brings a date to these things."

Peter Singh, an orthopaedist hailing from St Thomas' Hospital (or perhaps that was someone else—Greg's been introduced to quite a few doctors tonight), nods and accompanies Mike to check on their inebriated colleague. With their absence, the conversation reverts back to a casual discussion of how recent policy changes have affected various hospital departments; Greg nods along and makes appropriate noises of mild interest, but neither Molly nor the others really expect him to contribute.

He enjoys a sip of wine and lets the chat wash over him for a moment, gazing across the room at the band and a few bold attendees who have chosen to dance in the small open area. But then he feels the breathlessness coming on, and he stifles a curse—of all the times for Sherlock to get himself in trouble, it would happen while he's stuck here, with practically every flavour of medical specialist within spitting distance!

Placing his half-empty glass on the nearest table, he slips his hand into Molly's and squeezes, hard, in three quick pulses. *Gotta move*, he communicates with wide eyes when she turns her attention to him, already pulling away from her to make a break for safety. There's not really any good place to hide, though, with so many people milling around. Even the side corridors, hung at intervals with decorative draperies to match those in the main space, are a risk he doesn't relish. *No, I'll have to*
"Dash all the way to the loo, and just pray nobody's in there..."

But he hasn't bargained on Molly's resourcefulness. He expects her to drop his hand and let him flee; instead, she takes the lead and pulls him along into the nearest hallway. There, she presses him backwards into the wall at the edge of a curtain, ignoring his questioning wheeze. She reaches up to snatch the clip from her hair, letting it tumble down, and then she briefly touches his shoulder, checking that he's braced his weight at the wall—then, apparently satisfied, she wraps his hand over her hip, takes his face between her palms and pulls it down to meet hers.

The determined fire in her brown eyes, and the first graze of her lips against his gaping, gasping mouth, are the last he sees and feels before the ripple tears his senses away—and with that his awareness is elsewhere, and he's got a disaster to avert.

Sherlock's speaking earnestly with a homeless boy, at the back of an industrial building Greg doesn't recognise. Behind them, a large lorry is going about the ponderous business of backing into the building's loading dock for an evening delivery.

Sherlock hasn't seen that the driver behind him has aimed badly, and is about to clip a support column; he won't have realised that the flat canopy under which they're standing could come crashing down—the risk is a matter of chance, rather than the fault of his inattention. It's not a difficult save to make, just one quick push to put on brakes and alert the driver to his mistake. And that's a relief, because Greg's usual disciplined focus is somewhat hampered by the lost awareness of the body he's left behind.

Said body, when he returns to it moments later, is being snogged quite passionately by a gorgeous woman.

At least, that's what Greg presumes anyone passing is meant to see. Molly's moving head and loose hair certainly give that effect, but in reality she's only peppering light, feathery kisses around the sides of his open mouth, and stroking the side of his face; her eyes are closed as she gives her all to the performance, not reacting to his inhalation.

"Ohh," he sighs, "you are the woman of my dreams, you fantastic, miraculous creature..."

She lowers herself from her tiptoes, blinking up at him with a flush painting her cheeks. "Everything all right?"

"More than all right. God, Molly, you're phenomenal." His voice shakes a little on the last word; certainty is a warm glow spreading like honey along his limbs.

She glances over her shoulder, biting her lip on a smile. "Oh, it wasn't any trouble really! I just thought it'd be the safest way, here..."

"I wanted to save this for later," he says, half to himself.

Her laugh is a short, tinkling shimmer; she's still coming down from the nervous high, just as he is. "What—snogging me in the hall?"

"No! I mean, yes," he quickly amends, "yes, I think that's a grand idea and we should definitely do more of that, but, ah. I need to say something to you."

"Okay."

He pulls away from the wall, turning them so that they stand parallel to it; if anyone approaches from the party, he'll see them coming. "I've got this...this ridiculous one-in-a-million life, yeah?
And for so much of it, I felt like I was all alone. I went through the motions, and I did the best I could, but—nobody could ever reach me. Not my family. Not Nadia, no matter how I tried. And now...see, the thing is, I'm gonna be fifty-four in a couple weeks. I know I'm stubborn, and too set in my ways—"

"Hardly," she interjects softly.

"—and I'm loaded down with, well, more interesting baggage than most, I suppose..."

"Greg." His hands are clasped between hers; she tilts her head to the side, and a glossy lock of her hair falls over the thin rhinestone strap at her bare shoulder. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"For two and a half years now, you've been showing me I'm not alone anymore. You're the best friend I've ever had, Molls—you're brilliant, and kind, and beautiful—and—"

"Oh," she breathes. Her eyes sparkle with a sheen of moisture as she watches him sink to one knee before her.

"You're my one-in-a-million girl, Molly Catherine Hooper," he declares, his heart fairly leaping from his throat. "Will you marry me?"

Molly's mouth is open, but no sound escapes her. Her cheeks have gone bright red.

"There's—there's a ring. I promise," he hurries to add. "I don't have it with me; I'm sorry, I really wasn't going to do this here—"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Yes, Greg, darling, yes!"

She throws herself into his arms, and he hardly knows he's stood up but he's lifting her off her feet and twirling her around, laughing for the sheer relief of it; his eyes fall closed as they kiss and kiss, awkward and messy through wide smiles.

Thank you, he says to the universe, to God, to Fate, thank you for bringing me here. To his uncle, for helping me understand. To his Baba, for giving me courage. To Sherlock, thank you, thank you...

To Molly, he whispers through kisses and ecstatic tears, "Thank you, my love."

Somewhere nearby, there are murmuring voices, a few women's understanding awws and even a bit of scattered applause. But for once in his life, Greg doesn't care a bit who might be watching.

--fin--
And that's that, at last! Special thanks to my Tumblr cheering squad, my brilliant betas, and my long-suffering husband. ;) You can find the full gratitude list on my blog.
And thanks to you for reading (and commenting, I hope!)
<3 <3 <3 M.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!