<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Sherlock (TV), Sherlock Holmes &amp; Related Fandoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, Greg Lestrade, Sally Donovan, Mycroft Holmes, Mary Morstan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Case Fic, Sickfic, PTSD Sherlock, Fight Club - Freeform, Martial Arts, Mixed Martial Arts, financial crime, Drug Addiction, old habits die hard, Protective Lestrade, alone protects me, Autistic Sherlock Holmes, Don't copy to another site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>The 7PercentSolution Starter Pack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-08-19 Completed: 2017-11-17 Chapters: 36/36 Words: 85876</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Devonshire Squires

by 7PercentSolution

**Summary**

Post THE/Pre So3, John and Sherlock try to rebuild bridges, but a demanding case challenges both of their assumptions about what happened to the other one during the hiatus. Lestrade tries to play peacemaker, but Mycroft's meddling is counter-productive. Case fic, sickfic and angst all rolled into one misery-laden ball of reading pleasure

**Notes**

Follows on from A Pocketful of Rye in the Got My Eye on You series.
He winced slightly as the shampoo got into the cut on the side of his temple. The others had healed well, but for some reason this one was proving more troublesome. He kept knocking off the scab and making it bleed again. *At least the soap will disinfect it.* John kept scrubbing. It made him remember the whole thing again. "Remember, remember, the fifth of November." The old slogan had taken on a new meaning, after he ended up as a real-life Guy Fawkes on the bonfire.

As he stood under the stream of hot water, rinsing off, his train of thoughts got tangled up in another train, this one underground, and what he had said to Sherlock. In the whirlwind of publicity that followed, there had been little time to follow up on that exchange. He was still angry at being taken for a ride, yet again, by the man, being fooled into revealing perhaps too much of what he thought. There was a reason why John always kept his cards close to his chest. That thought resurrected another memory- a darkened warehouse and a superior voice's comment- "Trust issues, it says here." Then the question, "Could it be that you've decided to trust Sherlock Holmes of all people?"

He'd given his trust quickly then; could he do so again, now that he knew what depths of deceit that Sherlock was capable of?

By the time he was toweling himself dry, his thoughts had moved on. "John? Come quick- there's something on the news you'll want to hear." Mary's voice drifted into the bathroom. He pulled on his bathrobe and came out into their bedroom.

"He's done it again; made it into the headlines." She was sitting at the end of the bed, watching the TV screen on the wall. "It was the second story of the bulletin- Sherlock's just broken a slavery ring."

He pulled the towel away from his hair, which he'd been rubbing dry. "Slavery? In Britain? How's that even possible?"

She patted the bed beside her. "Come watch."

So, he did. And learned about the police operation, involving the Met, Kent and Essex police forces working together to break a human trafficking operation based at Tilbury. The BBC reporter was standing at the dockside, with a big cruise liner behind her.

"The operation started before dawn, when the Metropolitan Police swooped on the *MS Gemini* behind me, liberating some twenty women, who were being held hostage and about to be sold to buyers due to sail on the *Braemar* in two days' time." The camera swung away from her and to another ship across the water.

"And from the cargo ship *Morning Linda* over there another twenty seven women were freed. I'm joined here by Detective Sergeant Sally Donovan. She works with one of the Met's Murder Investigation Teams. Is it true that the operation began because of an investigation of the murder of a police officer?"

Dressed in a suit that looked as professional as the image she was projecting, Sally responded to the reporter. "The Metropolitan Police were called in to assist in the investigation of what appeared to be three unrelated murders in the past three months, here at Tilbury, that became four, when Police Constable Simon West was found shot dead."

"Is it true that Sherlock Holmes was the one who solved those murders and led the police to the
"slavery ring?"

Sally nodded. "Yes. Yes, he did. At some considerable personal risk, too. On our own we might have got to the answers eventually, but because he was able to find answers so quickly, forty seven women will now go free instead of being sold as domestic slaves. His work exposed the links to the criminal networks. It's a great step forward for law enforcement in the UK, and we have Sherlock Holmes to thank for it."

John sat more upright, startled. "Wow- that's a surprise."

"What do you mean?" Mary took her eyes off the screen and saw his surprise.

"She's the one who always called him 'Freak'; she was the one who first accused him of committing the crimes so he could solve them."

"Oh, so she's forgiven him, too." There was a touch of mischief in her tone, and she put her arms around John. "Wonder what she said to him the first time she saw him again?"

John just tilted his head in a *don't-you-start-on-this* again look.

They watched, sitting on the edge of the bed. The news report gave it plenty of air time, including a bit of backstory about the plight of domestic servants brought into the country on tied visas. Then the reporter described the sheer scale of the crimes involved and the number of prosecutions that the police were now working on.

"Bloody hell, John. This is enormous!"

John just kept watching as the reporter described what had happened. "In a dramatic midnight police chase on the Thames, Sherlock Holmes was taken hostage by the gang leaders, who were armed. Despite a hail of gunfire, the Kent & Essex marine units working with the Metropolitan Police helicopters managed to thwart the gang's attempt to escape capture. Holmes ended up thrown overboard while tied up and had to be rescued before he drowned. Discharged from hospital, he has declined to comment on this, his latest daring adventure."

Mary smirked. "I'll bet he gets a knighthood for this… and for saving Parliament as well."

John sniffed. "Nope. Already turned one down; thinks honours are hypocritical.*" He was still watching the TV, rapt.

Mary saw a fleeting emotion chase across her fiancé's face. "Oh, you wanted to be in on the action, too? He was right, you know. You do miss this. The thrill of the chase."

John tore his eyes away from the screen and glared at her. "I'll quote you one of his favourite sayings-' that was then; this is now'. He's had two years of doing things on his own. Besides which-are you trying to get rid of me? I would have thought you'd want me safe and sound, not dodging bullets or going for a swim in the freezing Thames."

Mary hugged him. "Of course, I'm glad you're safe. But I love the man you are, and if that involves backing up his nibs, then who am I to say no?"

He gave her a slight, wistful smile. "Don't think it's likely to happen that often now. He's got used to being without me."

"Why not give him a call? Or better still, go over to see him?"
John grabbed his phone by the side of the bed. But it went straight to voice mail. A bored baritone came on. "You've reached my number. Explain why I should bother returning your call. Or better still, leave a text; it's easier to delete." John smirked. *Still being obnoxious then.*

So he left a text.

**10.18am Saw the Tilbury news. Great work. You OK? JW**

He decided to put his initials at the end. He didn't know if Sherlock had his new number on his contacts list.

There was no reply.
"You're going to like this one."

"That's what you said about the last two. They were boring."

It had taken Greg Lestrade three attempts before Sherlock would actually pick up the phone and talk to him, so he wasn't going to let this one go. *Keep him on the line.* He knew he'd have to bait the hook with something enticing. "This one's different."

"Gimme."

Greg took some comfort in the slightly mocking baritone. Sherlock was using the same words that Greg did to express his frustration whenever the consulting detective had not passed on his deductions in what the Met DI considered to be a timely manner. That he would do so now, after the two years' break in their working relationship, suggested that things were better today than they had been when Greg last saw him. Whatever the press had made of the Tilbury slavery ring case, Lestrade had been worried about the gloom that descended around Sherlock as soon as it was over.

He'd tried to find a decent case in the ten days that followed. The first had been rejected out of hand, as "mind boringly obvious, even for you, Lestrade." The second had been solved in ten minutes, without Sherlock even leaving the flat. The solution- to arrest the brother-in-law who had both motive and opportunity once you discounted the *obviously false alibi* - was texted, with a little *ps. Try harder, or don't bother,* signed as ever with the initials SH.

He'd dropped by Baker Street when that case was solved, to bring Sherlock up to date on how it had played out- and to keep an eye on the man. The sun had set at just past four o'clock, but the lights were not on in the living room, and the front door was opened by Mrs Hudson.

"Oh, do come in out of the cold, Detective Inspector." The late November wind was whistling down from the north end of Baker Street.

"Where's Sherlock?"

She shook her head. "I wish I knew. He's in such an odd mood these days. He went out a couple of hours ago. He was out all night, too." She looked concerned.

"Still in a funk, then?"

She nodded. "I suppose I should be grateful he isn't pacing all night, keeping me awake with creaking floorboards, but I think I'd rather that than seeing him come in at the crack of dawn this morning looking like he's walked halfway across London and back again. And in this weather, too! I just don't know what's up with him."

Lestrade tried to muster a reassuring smile. "Well, the next time you see him, tell him I dropped by to tell him that he was right about that case. And I'll try harder to find something more interesting."

Two days later, Greg finally found one worthy of interest, and this time at least Sherlock finally answered the third call, so he jumped straight in: "Right- the DB is lying on his back on the floor of an underground car parking garage. He's stripped naked, been beaten, but at first glance, it doesn't
look enough to kill him. The interesting part is that the garage is in a building that has been sealed up for seven weeks, awaiting demolition - but the body doesn't appear to be any more than a week or so old. Can't tell for sure, because the ME isn't here yet- he's been detained by an arson case in SE5."

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. "Who discovered the body?"

Greg heard the nibble of interest, and decided to set the hook more firmly. "To inspect the foundations, the demolition team opened the site yesterday, ready for their machinery to arrive on Monday. The security guard they posted on site for the weekend followed his nose this morning and found the body."

He didn't hesitate before adding the really interesting bit. "For the past seven weeks the whole site's been tight as a drum- all outside entrances into the building are actually welded shut. Only way into the car park is by lift- but there's been no power in the building for two months. This is better than a locked room mystery- it's a locked building, which should be enough, even for your exacting standards."

"Curious. Text me the address."

Greg smiled. Gotcha! "Okay. See you shortly." He started typing in the details:

12.43 pm Artillery Lane and Font Street, E1 7LS.

After he hit send, he realised that attracting Sherlock's interest these days seemed harder. He hoped that the new case would bring some of the spring back into the man's step. But that made him recognise that the difference between Sherlock then and now was still an issue- John wouldn't be there. He started to think. No Medical Examiner. He started scrolling down his contacts list and found the one he was looking for, and pressed call.

"Hello?"

He thought he recognised the voice, but to be sure –and not land the doctor in it- he checked. "Uh, hello- I'm trying to reach Doctor John Watson? It's DI Lestrade here."

"Oh, Detective Inspector! I'll get him- he's just out the back, putting the rubbish out. This is Mary Morstan. Hang on." He heard her walking away from the phone and then her voice calling out "John? Phone!"

She must have told him who it was calling, because the next thing he heard was Watson's voice, "Lestrade. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, sure. Look, I'm sorry to interrupt your Saturday afternoon, but…if you don't have anything else to do, would you be willing to help me out with something?"

In a slightly hesitant tone, John replied, "Such as?"

Greg took a breath and decided to go for it. "I'm at a crime scene. Sherlock's on his way."

"He hasn't returned my texts- is there something wrong with his phone?"

"No- he's just been busy." Greg found it odd. Clearly, the consulting detective was still keeping John firmly out of things. That wasn't good. He'd allowed it at Tilbury because he wasn't given a choice. But this time, maybe, he could bring the two back together again. He decided he could get away with it.
"I've just been told the Medical Examiner is going to be hours yet- caught up in an arson case south of the river. But I need a medical opinion. You know how impatient Sherlock can get….will you come?"

There was a pause. Greg heard Mary's voice from somewhere in the room. "Go on, John. Please, you know you want to, and it's okay." That made Greg smile. Maybe having the doctor underfoot all the time was something that she realised wasn't good for him. He thought he might well have an ally in Mary Morstan.

"Please, will you come? We need your help,"

An intake of breath. "Yeah, okay. Where's the crime scene?"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: If you want to know more about the BBC report in the first chapter and here Lestrade's reference to "Tilbury", then read my story, A Pocketful of Rye, in the Got My Eye on You series. And if you want to know why Mrs Hudson is worried about creaking floorboards, read Ex Files, the chapter entitled Exhort.
"Damn."

The woman whose name was not Anthea turned to the young man at the desk. Ashley Lewis had been assigned surveillance duty on the hardest man in England to watch without being caught. She watched as the dark skinned agent muttered another oath under his breath.

"We've been rumbled. HOW?"

She came around to look over his shoulder and saw on the screen an empty room. That it happened to be one familiar to her was not a surprise. She'd been watching footage from 221b Baker Street for ages, even if there had been the two year break recently.

"Rewind." Her order was quiet, and the young man obeyed. "I don't know how he figured it out. That is the latest technology, I placed it myself. There is just no way in hell he could have found it. It's utterly fool-proof."

She smirked. "Well, you're new. The one thing I can guarantee you is that Sherlock Holmes is no fool, so the only fool is you if you thought that he wouldn't find any surveillance device."

The timer on the screen reached 13.05. The screen readjusted and began forward play at normal speed. She watched as Sherlock came into the living room. He was dressed in the new suit she had picked out herself- a smart Spencer Hart from Brook Street. The bespoke versions would have to wait until he could be bothered to go to the Saville Row shop. He'd come back slimmer than before in the waist, but broader in the shoulders. No tie, of course. The younger brother was about as different sartorially as it was possible to be from his elder brother. Still, he cut an attractive figure. And the fact that his gait seemed comfortable as he walked into the room also pleased her. Almost a month ago that had only been possible with a hefty dose of pain relief.

Sherlock had come to a halt in the middle of the room, and was now looking around warily. As soon as he turned, she saw the shadows on his face. Still not sleeping properly. He looked tired and drawn, his eyes a little sunken, the cheekbones a bit more prominent than the last time she'd seen him in person, at the Diogenes Club. That worried her.

Mycroft Holmes had been curious about his brother's activities from the moment he got back into Baker Street, but had not pressed for a full scale surveillance exercise, at least not at first. As ever, she was able to sense when the two Holmes brothers had struck some sort of private, unspoken deal. She guessed it was something along the lines of "I'll find your underground terrorist as long as you back off your watchdogs." The fact that the deal had been honoured was a testament to how frustrated the elder Holmes had been in not being able to solve the problem himself.

It worked. Sherlock found the plotters in time, Moran was arrested, the Houses of Parliament saved. There was a brief hurrah as the papers celebrated the return of their consulting detective.

But then things went pear-shaped and all deals were off. She wasn't sure what had happened, but her boss had gone to Baker Street for what was supposed to be a brief conversation and had ended up spending the whole night there*. Sleepless, too, by the look of it when he arrived back at the Diogenes Club the next morning.
Over the past three weeks, the team had been slowly building up their capacity to keep an eye on their boss's brother. As the relative of a person automatically accorded close protection, Sherlock would always be considered a potential target. But now, especially given his recent tour of duty, he would have warranted his own bodyguard, if he could have been persuaded to accept one. Without his agreement, surveillance was the only option left.

It had been awkward during Sherlock's Tilbury case. To start with, he was in a difficult place to use CCTV, without tipping off the London Port Authority Police about it, and even then, it was pretty much useless at being able to track his movements inside the port area. The events that led to his capture, his near drowning in the Thames and the mayhem that followed – well, most of that was reported by DI Lestrade, well after the fact.

That was the last straw for her boss, who ordered a much higher level of surveillance. Hence the decision to put cameras back into Baker Street. She asked the agent, "When did you put the new device in?"

"Yesterday, while he was at St Barts. Didn't take more than a couple of minutes."

It had been installed in the mirror over the fireplace. Invisible to the naked eye, hidden from both the front and the back of the mirror, it should have been undetectable. And yet, Sherlock's eyes were moving around the room, as if he knew there was something new, something different.

"You didn't touch anything on the mantelpiece, did you?"

"Well, of course I did. I had to move the skull to get the mirror down."

She sighed. "He has a photographic memory. There is no way you'd get it back perfectly."

"I took a photo on my phone and re-positioned it exactly. No way could he tell from that."

"Did you think to replace the dust? He makes sure the place is left dusty for a reason." She leaned a little closer to the agent and picked up the scent of Paco Rabanne Invictus cologne. "Were you wearing that yesterday?"

He looked confused. "Yeah- but that was yesterday."

She sighed. "Sherlock Holmes is hypersensitive. He's probably smelled that and realised that someone's been in the flat."

The young man laughed incredulously. "That's impossible- it was thirty hours ago. But even so, even if he knows someone's been in the flat- that doesn't mean he could find the camera. But, somehow, he does; just watch."

Holmes came up to the mantelpiece, his eyes sweeping right and left across it. She watched his nostrils flare a little. Then he turned his head, and the watchers were treated to the sight of first his right profile, and then his left.

"Oh, he's listening for it."

Lewis turned from the screen and looked at her askance. "Listening? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Not even an electronic sweeper is supposed to be able to pick that model up. It's silent."

She shrugged. "To you and me maybe, but he's able to hear high frequency noises- a fluorescent bulb, a phone charger, a sensor beam."
She smirked, as Sherlock looked straight into the mirror, brought his mouth up closer, directly into line with the camera before mouthing the words, "Piss off, Mycroft." Then he turned on his heel, pulled his scarf and Belstaff off the peg and clattered down the stairs at speed.

She laughed. "Well, it least he left it in place. How many more are there?"

"Three. And the two men stationed across the road in 216."

"He will have sussed them out within hours of their setting up shop."

Lewis grimaced. "No wonder they said this was a hardship posting."

"Shush. Watch and learn. He's as good at fieldwork as his brother is at strategy."

"You got a soft spot for him?"

"Well, I've known him for a long time." Her initial smirk faded a little. "I'm glad he's back. It's one less worry for his brother, even if it is one more worry for you and me. He's driven us all half mad over the years. It will be interesting to see whether he's learned enough new tricks over the past two years to drive us right over the cliff into stark, staring bonkers."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: * Exhort, in Ex Files explains what the two brothers got up to that night. Even if you've read it before a while ago, it might be useful to re-read (and review;) so what happens next makes sense.
Crime Scene

The nerve. Sherlock was still seething about the camera while the taxi fought its way eastwards on the Euston Road. Saturday traffic was different from the rush hour. More idiots about. The regular commuters knew where they were going. But with Euston, Kings Cross, St Pancras and Liverpool Street rail stations between him and the crime scene, he was bound to get caught up in tourist and traveller traffic. Predictably, there were also road-works, as contractors decided that weekend traffic would be lighter. So up came the barriers, diversions and lane closures that had the exact opposite effect of making the traffic even worse than on a weekday.

He found himself fidgeting in the back. With so little sleep over recent days and nights, Sherlock’s mood was foul- and that was before discovering his brother’s snooping. He just wanted to get to the case so he could stop thinking about anything else. He needed the focus.

Traffic eased a bit past Angel and they positively whizzed through the Old Street roundabout, but then the so-called silicon businesses in that area seldom worked on weekends; they were probably plugged into their computers at home, moaning about work-life balance. Then it was down the City Road and a right turn onto Bishopsgate, where the backside of Liverpool Street station came into view, bracketed by the modern buildings, almost all of which were occupied by financial firms. Then a left turn onto Brushfield Street before the black cab came to a complete halt amidst pedestrians. There were several people already signalling to the cab, oblivious to the fact that his yellow rooftop light was still off.

The cab driver turned on the intercom. "Closest I can get you. Mate. Saturday market, innit."

Sherlock snapped, "I'm not an idiot. If you could have been bothered to go down to Artillery Lane, you'd have missed all this, but then you would've had longer to wait for another fare." He pulled his wallet out. "That cost you any tip, so I want the change." He got out of the cab and stood by the driver's side window until the cabbie reluctantly handed over the correct change from the twenty pound note.

"Want a receipt?" This was uttered in a surly tone.

"No." Turning away, Sherlock flipped the collar of his Belstaff up to shelter from the strong east wind blowing down the road. There was a feel of snow in the air, and the low, glowering grey clouds above did little to dispel the sense that winter was coming. As he wove his way through the Spitalfields market crowds, he caught snatches of conversation about the "pre-Christmas shopping" and the "Noel Festival" that opened next week.

A year ago, Sherlock had been in the Far East in role as Lars Sigurson, and for the first time in his life, Christmas was not an issue. In fact, he'd even forgotten what day it was until he spotted a calendar in one of the business offices. When he realised that it was the 27th of December, he smiled- the first time in his life that he had successfully avoided his least favourite time of the year. Bah humbug.

It was an appropriately Dickensian comment to mutter now in an area of London that still had remnants of Victorian architecture. He turned right down Font Street, heading due south on the narrow road, marked with double yellow lines and no pavements. The hoardings of blue wood proclaimed that Balfour Beatty working for TIAA Henderson Real Estate was a "Considerate Contractor" and that the new Steward Building Development would be opening in the autumn two years from now. The dilapidated building behind the wooden walls looked to have been built in the 1960s- a multi-story concrete monstrosity, probably built on a World War Two bomb site.
He reached the only break on the wooden palisade to find a wire security gate that had been dragged aside, and a couple of police cars were parked inside on the uneven ground. Lestrade's unmarked car was there, too. He lifted the yellow tape and went in, walking some ten feet before attracting the attention of a constable.

"You Holmes?"

He nodded.

"Then follow me."

The ramp down to the parking garage was on the side fronting Artillery Lane. As he passed through what had once been a double height opening, he had to duck through a hole cut in the metal grill door, made with an acetylene torch. He could still smell the faint traces of the burned metal, his nose automatically analysing the elements present in the steel alloy- a high carbon component joining the iron and...just a trace of nickel. He ducked through the hole that was no more than a meter in width and less than twice that in height, cut into the door of an opening that must have originally been big enough to take lorries as well as cars. Once through, he scanned the surface of the steel plate with his torch, to be sure that that it had been secure before presumably the police had cut through to gain access. The constable waited, having switched on his own torch.

"Right. Carry on, Constable." Sherlock swept his torch from side to side in front of him as they walked down the ramp. He sighed. Idiots! A mass of footprints on the dust and rubble meant that there would be no clues left that had not been obliterated through sheer police stupidity.

By the time he got to the bottom, he was already fuming. Ahead, he could see an area that opened out to a large space, which went up two floors. Temporary lights had been rigged, and he could hear the sound of a generator running as he entered the area. It was cold- a bone-chilling sort of cold that made breath vaporise into clouds of mist. The lights cast odd shadows- although bright, because they were not high off the floor, so there were areas in deep shadow as well as those too brightly lit. He could see a Crime Scene Examiner at work. Lestrade and Donovan were in the middle- and there was a body, which he could see even at this distance, the nakedness a splash of pale whiteness in the dark.

The underground garage was interesting. The delivery area was about twenty square feet, surrounded by the two floors of car parking, both of which overlooked the area. An efficient use of space, he thought, instinctively measuring the angles and volume. The single ramp could be used by both forms of traffic. Against the back wall, Sherlock could see a service lift. Presumably, each of the two car parking floors had their own passenger lifts and stairs. The air in the garage felt stale. He sniffed, drawing it in slowly through his nose and then deep into his lungs. He could smell the petrol engine, and was frustrated- it blocked more subtle scents. Even so, he could just about detect the distinctive odour of decomposition.

Lestrade had seen him, and beckoned him over.

"Afternoon, Sherlock."

Sherlock did not want the DI to see his face too clearly, so he kept the portable light behind him. In the shadows, his tiredness would show less. He had no time for the man's inevitable questions. He couldn't be bothered to reply to the Lestrade's greeting, his attention focused now on the dead body. He pulled on his blue forensic gloves, crouched beside the body, and dragged his pocket magnifier from his pocket.

The naked man about three inches shorter than Sherlock. Well built- he obviously worked out and
had a lot of muscle across his shoulders and arms- and a tight abdomen that could only be the result of serious gym work. The man was somewhere over thirty, but less than mid-forties, with brown thinning hair, cut short. A moment of silence passed as Sherlock examined the unmarked face, the heavy bruising over the torso. He lifted the man's bruised hands, his nose detecting the faint aroma of adhesive across the knuckles.

"Prints?" The single word question was asked without looking up at either Lestrade or Donovan, but it was the Sergeant who answered. "Nothing in the system." Scanners and mobile uploads made fingerprint checks so much quicker these days.

Sherlock lifted the man's head, and felt the skull underneath. He allowed a frown to cross his face, but he did not comment as he stood up and looked around. Donovan started to speak, but Sherlock decided to cut her off. "Wait. I need to look around first."

He felt their eyes on him as he walked back into the centre of the space. The body was lying to the left of centre, by about two meters. The shape of the floor area was a perfect square, with the upper floor of car parking acting as almost a balcony, on three sides, the walls just high enough for someone to look over it, should they have been interested to do so.

*Like a theatre.* He smirked, the beginnings of a hypothesis taking shape.

He could see the young CSE working - placing small lettered signs on the floor, with the ruler strips, in preparation for photographing. As he looked about the floor, he realised that twelve such signs had been placed, most but not all in a sort of circle about two meters from the centre.

Sherlock turned back to Lestrade and was just about to speak when he heard the sound of footsteps coming down the ramp; the sound of a firm heel strike, a shortish stride, with a certain military cadence to it. A sound he recognised. Whatever he might have said was choked off as he watched John Watson come into the light cast by the temporary lights.

He turned away from John and snarled at Lestrade, "Who invited him?"

Lestrade stiffened at the tone of voice, but didn't duck the accusation. "I did. We need a medical opinion and the ME isn't available. And, if you know what's good for you, you'll just shut up about it." He walked past Sherlock to close the distance between him and the doctor. "Hello, Doctor Watson. Glad you could make it."

Sally Donovan was watching Sherlock, who didn't turn around to look at John and the DI. He let nothing of what he was feeling show on his face, but was surprised as the woman's eyes showed compassion. He looked away, trying to set his features in an even more neutral state, and then decided that retreat was the better option. He walked away from the body, as John came over to it. Sherlock didn't look back.
As John stepped towards the body, he was trying to focus on the job at hand. Of course he had heard Sherlock's accusatory question to Lestrade. *So, he doesn't want me here.* That answered one question. No, actually, it answered two. Not only why Sherlock hadn't been the one to text him about the case, but also why he hadn't bothered to reply to any of John's previous texts over the past ten days, since the news about Tilbury had broken. John had been trying to come to terms with the silence and what it meant. It had even sent him off for a futile session with Ella Thompson*. Fat lot of good that did.

Twice over the past week, John had started to tell Mary about how left out he was feeling, but he instinctively knew what she would say. She'd look at him with those big eyes of hers, tell him to stop being a prat and go over the Baker Street and talk to Sherlock. He knew that was what he should have done. But, whatever hesitations he might have been feeling had just been confirmed. *He doesn't want to work with me.* He was surprised how much that feeling hurt. He glanced up to see the swirl of the dark coat as Sherlock left the delivery bay and went into the car parking area, without a backward glance.

The doctor set his shoulders and started to get to work, as Lestrade came up to where he was now crouched beside the body.

"So, you didn't bother to tell him I was coming…Got a spare pair of gloves? I don't carry them anymore. Got out of the habit." Lestrade handed a pair over. John snapped them on and started to feel the body's arm muscles to assess the state of rigor.

"Got a torch I can use?" Wordlessly, Lestrade handed over his, which John used to examine the wounds. He lifted the hands and saw the bruised and bloody knuckles.

"He fought back."

The DI nodded.

Looking more closely at the bruises on the body's chest, John saw patterns of older, fading contusions. "He's been in a fight before tonight. See? The new bruises are on top of old ones. And this cut on his shoulder is probably at least a week old; there are signs of healing, whereas the one on his left elbow is fresher."

Lestrade looked over John's shoulder. "I suppose a time of death is asking too much."

John grimaced. "Unlike a proper Medical Examiner, I don't have a liver thermometer. That said, he's too cold down here to make that simple. Assuming that he's been here the whole time, then I'd guess he's been dead for about a week to ten days."

"Is a cause of death any easier?"

John sat back on his heels. "Well, he didn't die from any of these wounds." He reached forward and lifted the head off the concrete floor, feeling the bones at the base of the skull and the top of the spine.

"Oh!" John's surprise was clear. "Well, that's unusual."
"What?!" Lestrade went down on one knee beside the doctor.

A baritone voice drifted down from the car park area on the floor above where the body was lying. "He wasn't murdered."

John grimaced. "Well, that's possibly, maybe even probably, true. He broke his neck, probably in the fall, or maybe because of an existing weakness." He felt the neck bones. "Could be a previous accident or cervical spondylosis— in which case, even if he didn't know he suffered from the condition, just one good blow or even a simple fall could have snapped his neck. I'll need a proper autopsy to be sure, but it's probably the case."

He stood up. "Sherlock? Why did you think it isn't murder?" He pitched his voice loud enough to carry a distance.

A figure appeared above them, looking down. "Up here, and I will explain why."

When they managed to find the stairs and then walked over to where the consulting detective was standing, he didn't turn to look at them. Instead his attention was focused on the floor of the delivery area. In the darkness of the car park area, John could see little more than the silhouette of Sherlock, in his Belstaff, with his collar turned up. He just pointed over the wall and said, "look."

John peered over the balcony and down to the floor where the body was lying. Sally Donovan was there looking up at them. It was a strange sight. The floor area was now pock marked with the little evidence signs, and the CS Examiner was still laying them out. Lestrade was looking, too, but exchanged a little glance at John, his eyebrow raised in question. The DI left it to John to ask.

"Okay, Sherlock. What is it that you observe that we're not even seeing?"

"What does this feel like to you? What does the layout remind you of?"

The doctor shrugged, "You tell me."

There was a soft sigh of exasperation. "It's a theatre, John. And we're in the box seats. Look at the blood spatter that has been identified. I could almost predict where he will find the next one."

Lestrade huffed. "You're saying that someone was up here watching the murder?"

Sherlock snorted. "I'm not the only one who says there hasn't been a murder here. Your medical professional's opinion supports that hypothesis. Think of it as an accidental consequence of what was going on."

"I'm still lost."

"Oh really...it's obvious. If you use your torch and look to your left, you'll find footprints. Scandalous that your forensic team hasn't bothered to look up here yet. You're bound to find similar footprints all the way around—probably trace, certainly cigarette ash. The audience paid good money to watch this. Swab the sticky patches, and you'll probably come up with wine and spirits." Then he whispered, "Party time."

"What— an audience watched the guy get killed?!"

"No, what they watched, and presumably bet a lot of money on, was a fight. Given the blows, this one looked like bare-knuckle boxing, or BKB to its followers. That's different from a cage fight. Mixed martial arts fights have nearly no rules at all, but it is legal, so long as it is registered—but then unfettered gambling can't take place, which is what was going on here. This is a Fight Club venue,
Lestrade. That man is probably an accountant— the callouses on the pads of his right fingers suggest he uses the calculator part of a computer keyboard on a constant basis. Given where we are, it's a fair deduction that this is the venue for a regular fight—probably once or twice a week. And several bouts of different styles, so there is likely to be more than the victim's blood down there."

John was looking down on the body. As soon as Sherlock described it, he could see the splatter pattern— the sort of blood spray from a fist across a cheek, or into a nose or mouth. The CSE took another pace out from the previous label and planted another. The doctor could visualise the man on his feet, boxing with an opponent, and getting hit with a left hook that would knock him off his feet and onto the floor, his neck snapping under the whiplash effect as he hit the floor.

"An accountant. Why would someone with a professional job be fighting?"

He heard Sherlock's snort. "Thrill seeking. Burning off steam. Adrenaline junkies— takes one to know one, John. Amateurs—mostly City professionals with too much money and too tightly wound up after another boring day's work; they come to a place like this where there are no rules except that you can't be a professional fighter. They fight to add some excitement to an otherwise mundane life, where nothing ever happens to them."

John shifted uncomfortably at the undertone in the man's tone. Being quoted from his own blog felt like salt being rubbed into his wounds.

Sherlock continued his deductive train of thought. "The accountant just got unlucky and broke his neck when he fell. The promoters stripped him of clothing to remove trace and took off. Given that this space was due to be demolished, they probably thought the body could be safely left behind and no one would know the difference until the building was brought down- and even then he might well have been swept away in the rubble."

"But why would an amateur fight attract an audience?" Lestrade was still struggling with the concept.

"Money. The fight clubs are quite exclusive; you have to know someone to get in to bet. The teams of fighters are all City people themselves, organised into clubs within a league. The betting is illegal but amazing, because it's fuelled by bonuses."

Lestrade was looking at Sherlock with incredulity. "How do you know this stuff?"

"I know people who know people. I also know you'll never get anywhere with a proper police investigation. There is no way of finding out which of the teams were using this space. Collecting trace down there on the floor will probably be pointless, because very few if any of them will be in the system. And they will have moved on, not just because of the body, but also because of the demolition."

"So, what do you suggest?"

"Step one— prove that I'm right. Get your forensic crew up here to get the trace. They might have cleaned up the victim, but the audience is a different matter. You could get lucky, maybe one of the paying guests will have data in the system. Then get Donovan and your team onto the City accountancy firms, looking for a missing employee that matches a photo-fit version. Clean it up so they don't know why—no need to spook the horses into bolting for cover. Keep the circumstances of this quiet, and allow the demolition go ahead. Let the pathologist confirm the diagnosis about cause and time of death. Mark it as suspicious, but unproven. I'll try to dig up some more data." With that, he turned on his heel and strode away.
Lestrade exchanged glances with John. The consulting detective was in a strange mood, and his words were not the usual deductive thread but rather a set of orders, issued in an authoritative manner.

John shrugged. "Don't blame me. He's not my responsibility anymore."

That made the DI frown. "Yeah, and that worries me. Nobody is keeping an eye on him these days."

Chapter End Notes

If you want to know what happened between Ella and John at the latest session, go check out Chapter 41 of Ex Files.
As Sherlock walked back across the delivery bay floor towards the exit ramp, the CSE started to take photographs, in rapid succession, of the blood splatter. The pop and brilliant white light of the flash was broken only by the high pitched whine as the flash recharged. Sherlock flinched, then ducked his head, trying to limit the sensory stimulation. He suddenly felt his stomach cramp with a wave of nausea. He'd developed an aversion to sudden bright lights, but tried to ignore it now. Just a leftover from China. He decided that retreat was better than a second look at the body, so he bolted into the darkness, pursued by the flashing lights.

Less than ten minutes later, he was curled up in a ball, his head buried in his arms, trying to get his breathing back under control. The mad dash that took him up the ramp to the next level of car park and then up four flights of stairs lit only by the beam of his torch ended when he collided with the door to the roof.

It was locked shut and he couldn't budge it, no matter how much he shoved and pushed in blind panic. He tried to still his shaking hands long enough to get his lock pick out of the soft leather roll that he carried in his suit pocket. After dropping it three times, he picked it up and stared at it, as if it were something alien to him. His hand was shaking so much that he knew he'd never be able to feel the tumblers give way. He threw it against the wall in a rage, and then sank to the floor. There is no escape.

Somewhere buried deep in the storm of physical and sensory distress, he knew he had to stop panicking. A part of his brain knew this for what it was- a panic attack brought on by PTSD- but in the hormonal soup that seemed to be coursing through his veins, the voice of sanity was being drowned out by a cacophony of screaming voices, some of whom were speaking Chinese in a Manchurian dialect.

There was another door that was bolted shut, too; he knew without even trying that his Mind Palace was ...closed...off-line...out of service. His access these days was limited solely to the work. If he tried to get in for anything else, he found a smooth stone wall- no doors or windows. Even when he was working and he did get in, it was as if someone had down-sized the place while his back was turned. Only a few corridors were left, the rest seemed to have been bricked up. Now it felt more like a Mind Lab- a few rooms, a bit of technical equipment, but everything that wasn't a memory directly related to a case was just...out of reach. That had happened in China. A lot happened in China, most of which he didn't want to remember. To stop remembering that, he'd had to erase large areas of his hard disk. Even the corelet programming was fragmented and cluttered with useless rubbish that got in the way of coherent thought.

Rhlung lang po mthong mang po, Rhlung lang po mthong mang po, Rhlung lang po mthong mang po. He repeated it over and over in what started as a stuttered gasp, but began to lengthen as the meditation techniques kicked in. While in Tibet, he'd taught his body to calm itself; muscle memory could be recalled even when the gates of the Mind Palace were welded shut. He'd ditched the scriptural words the monks had used, resorting instead to the name that the abbot had given him. It had resonance- "angry one who sees too much", **

When eventually his breathing started to return to some semblance of normality, he knew what would come next. He pushed himself upright and leaned back against the wall. If neither fight nor flight was possible, the scientist in him knew what would happen. Tears - the product of too much
adrenaline in a blood system already saturated with distress. He had no more control over it than he had over the sun now setting over London. He switched off the torch- no point in wasting the battery. He could feel the progress of fluid down his face, and tried to moderate the gasping rhythm of his breathing.

Through blurred vision, he forced himself to look at the luminous dial of his watch. Seventeen minutes of 'lost time', when he had no idea what had really happened to get him up the stairs to where he was now sitting. But, the panic was easing, allowing him to regain a bit of control.

*The look on their faces.* Lestrade's had been concerned, Donovan's sympathetic. But it was the pain on John's face that somehow kept interfering with Sherlock's breathing. No amount of meditation could erase the sense of betrayal and the anger that had been John's reaction to his return. He might have forgiven him, but Sherlock heard the truth when John had said, "*You were* the best and the wisest man that I have ever known."

"*Were...*" John's use of the past tense was not a mistake. Resurrecting that look of John's now, he heard a shuddering breath that was half way to a sob, and realised it had come from him.

This *hurt*. It hurt in ways that he had never imagined possible. All through the exile, he'd held onto his image of John as what he had been- loyal, reliable, the only person he could really trust. Worth saving, worth coming back to. But, he'd come home to find all of those things changed. The doctor's loyalties were now tied up in Mary and his new life. Sherlock dare not call him, for fear of being told the doctor had "other things to do that were more important." He'd been replaced; someone else was now the centre of John's universe.

Of course, Sherlock had deduced much of Mary's background from almost the moment they met. But even 'retired' spies had a right to a new life- wasn't that exactly what he was trying to do? He'd been tempted to get Mycroft to work on her background, but then John had put a stop to that when he came to Baker Street after being discharged from the hospital. Sherlock was already on the back foot, apologising not once, but three times to John. He- who never apologised- wanted John to know. But it made no difference.

He couldn't shake the memory of his own casual "How are you feeling?" and John's response "Bit...smoked". There was anger in that- and an accusation that was then actually voiced: "Is it someone trying to get to you through me?" Sherlock had to tell him that he didn't know. It went round and round his head like some horrid CD stuck on continuous replay.

So, following his explanation about Moran as chief rat, his next question – about Mary-had been tentative, as the two of them shared a cup of tea.

"Don't you *dare.*"

Sherlock almost flinched at the venom in the tone. "I'm just asking how you two met. Is that so unusual a question?"

"In anyone else, it might be normal, but you're not anyone. You spent three years sabotaging my love life, telling me everything you deduced about my dates. I won't have you do that to Mary, and that's final. "

A line had been drawn, and Sherlock knew that to cross it would risk losing even what little was left of their relationship. So, Sherlock didn't ask, and didn't tell.

The fact that Sherlock had no idea who had put him into a bonfire or why ate away at his soul. "I will burn you; I will burn the very heart out of you" had nearly come true. Just thinking of John and
how he’d been taunted over the phone the nearer he and Mary got to the bonfire at St James the
Lesser church made Sherlock's guts twist in anxiety. You were supposed to be safe. This was all
about making it safe for me to come back without being a threat to you. But that had gone up in
flames on the bonfire.

To have John anywhere around him before he knew who had done that and why- it was risking
John's life, and he couldn't do that. Alone is what I am left with.

The tears had stopped. He looked down at his watch and realised that another ten minutes had gone
by. This is ridiculous. There were too many things warring for his attention. He felt ashamed that he
had lost control, letting the flashback take hold, again. The fear of being found out now as so badly
damaged warred with anger at why the whole thing had happened in the first place. When he set up
the Sigurson Plan to defeat Moriarty three years ago, it wasn't supposed to end like this, with him a
basket case, and everyone in his life angry at him. Why do I care so much? I'm supposed to be a
sociopath; I'm supposed to not care. This is just WRONG!

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Two sets, leather shoes- three flights down. Not John, not
Lestrade. He knew their strides too well. But two men, certainly. The past two years of keeping an
ear on threats that were heading his way told him that it was probably his brother's surveillance
teams. Or not, as the case may be. He had plenty of enemies who wouldn't mind taking revenge,
now that he was back in circulation.

Got to get away. There was no way he could be caught like this; if they were the mystery men who
had put John in the fire, he needed to escape. The same applied if it was Mycroft's men. His brother
would over-react, as always, and he'd end up in some institution, ostensibly for his own benefit. I
didn't avoid you for two years just to fall into your trap as soon as I get back, brother mine. The
need to flee took over, pushing all other thoughts to the side, and delivering both the focus and the
adrenaline he needed to shake him out of his funk. He scrambled to his feet, scooped up the lock
pick and headed for the door that said Unauthorised Access Not Permitted. He knew it was the lift
shaft, and that it was his way to escape.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: * If you have not read it yet, check out Exempt in Ex Files, for what
happened between John and his therapist.

** What Sherlock did in Tibet to earn him this name is covered in Still Talking When
You're Not There, a new story posted two days ago.
"I'm sorry, sir, but we've lost him. Again."

Mycroft was giving her that look. The one that said he was annoyed on so many levels that she knew he would not say anything, lest he say something he would later regret. In its own way, his silence was more terrifying than anything he could have said. It spoke volumes. And she knew that the only person who could drive him to this level of irritation was his brother, but she had no further news to report.

Even so, the silence was so painful that she felt compelled to make an effort to explain. "He was tracked going into the building. The agent following him said he was watched as he went in. The only entrance and exit from the site was kept under surveillance. Our new man, Ashley Lewis, went in with the tail to see why Sherlock had left the crime scene. The GPS on Sherlock's phone placed him in the building but Lewis found nothing- except his phone. At the risk of compromising the crime scene, we sent in four more people, including one with a heat imager, so if he was hiding in the building, we'd find him. But there was nothing."

He just looked at her, his face stony.

She swallowed and carried on with her report. "I then asked the team to verify that there was no way of escaping. A thorough examination showed the building was sealed- doors and windows welded shut. We have no idea how he managed to get out, but he isn't there now. And he hasn't been picked up anywhere on CCTV in the last four hours."

She watched as he closed his eyes and sighed.

Somehow that was even worse than him saying something. It was a gesture of emotion that she knew he would never share with anyone but her. That didn't make it any easier to take.

"I'm sorry."

The repetition of her apology didn't help matters, but the words just slipped out.

He opened his eyes and they were calm again. "No need to apologise, my dear. None of the team is to blame. He's had two years to perfect the art of disappearing. You may activate Plan Samaritan. Let's see if that turns anything up." He turned back to the file on his desk, and resumed reading.

She nodded, and then left, already texting the stand-by surveillance and protection team that it would have to start digging deeper. Plan Samaritan was simple- find Sherlock, assuming that he needed to be taken into care. CCTV surveillance would be ramped up- fortunately, image recognition software had improved over the past two years, and she could only hope that he wouldn't know where all of the new cameras had been posted. Not yet anyway. The Homeless Network would come under scrutiny. Every drug dealer known to Sherlock in the past would be scouted; hospitals quietly notified. Every known bolthole would be put under surveillance.

Before she had even left the corridor outside Mycroft Holmes' office, she was dialling a certain number in the Metropolitan Police. She wondered if he would recognise the number. Caller ID would probably be reserved for her boss's number; she had only ever played the intermediary.

He picked up on the third ring. "Lestrade." There was wariness in his tone.

"Detective Inspector." She hoped he would recognise her voice, despite the two and bit years' gap.
She would prefer not to have to make up another false name. It was rather tedious.

"What does he want now?" The tone was now weary, rather than wary.

"When his brother left the crime scene on Font Street, did he say where he was going? How did he seem to you?"

"Don't tell me, you've lost him."

She let silence be her answer.

"Bloody hell; if you people can't keep an eye on him, then who the hell can?"

"No one, apparently, Detective Inspector, which is probably what he wants but is most likely not what he needs. Any ideas?" She made it as cool as she dared.

"He's looked like shit for the last three weeks. No better today. In fact, if anything, he's been getting worse. The Gunpowder Plot kept him going for a while, but once that was over, things changed."

She considered this. "The Tilbury Case suggests that his skill and appetite for this kind of work is still there, or are you saying something happened that we didn't see?"

"Yeah, well, you know what he's like once the adrenaline wears off. This time it was like ten times worse. I thought this case might cheer him up, but I made a mistake. I invited John Watson to the crime scene without telling him. To say he was pissed off is putting it mildly."

She registered that fact, which corroborated the surveillance team's own findings. It had been three weeks since Watson had been to 221b, and the phone records showed minimal text contact. "Has he solved the current case?" She knew that if it was still under investigation, then there was more hope that he would surface again.

"Yes, and no. He's given us enough leads that we were able to identify the body about an hour ago. It doesn't look like a murder, but the circumstances of the death are a bit suspicious, despite that. He said he will keep digging, even though this one would be hard to prosecute as anything but accidental death, or maybe illegal gambling, which is not my division."

She raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. "When did he leave the scene?"

"About twenty minutes after he got here. How could you people not have picked him up on camera?"

"That is the question. And we were looking, I assure you. We also checked the building after your team left- no sign."

"What about his usual bolt holes?"

"No luck yet. So, if you do see him, or if he contacts you in any way, we will know because we will be monitoring your phone. Do what you can to get him into circulation again. His brother is greatly concerned."

There was a pause, then Lestrade answered, "Well, I am, too. I'll let you know if he breaks cover."
"I agree."

Molly was looking over John's shoulder at the body of the man now known to be Alexander Robbs. The call from Lestrade identifying the body had come through only an hour ago. After getting her agreement that the man's neck was broken, John had just pointed out an unusual set of bruises on the dead man's chest. She poked at one of the bruises, checking the texture of the muscle underneath. "They don't look like the result of a fist; more like compression contusions."

John gave a little nod. "Thought so. Used to see them a lot on soldiers where CPR was used to keep their hearts beating." He had accompanied the body to the Bart's mortuary, almost out of habit. In his years of working with Sherlock, the pair of them had often taken this same path from crime scene to mortuary. John still remembered their first such occasion, when he had asked why it was so important for the consulting detective to examine the victim before the autopsy.

The taller man had looked across the body at John, with that little crease between his eyebrows- a look that John came to recognise as the surely-you-aren't-so-stupid look. "Obviously it's important to see the body in a neutral environment, before the pathologist mucks it about. Now I can concentrate on the facts without the distraction of the crime scene." Sherlock then became a whirl of motion, the pathologist standing aside, waiting until he was done before she started the autopsy.

This time, John was on his own. Sherlock had left the crime scene without even saying good-bye. He leaned over the body and lowered his head to just a couple of inches over the bruises. A little self-consciously, he sniffed. And then stood back upright quickly, a look of surprise on his face.

"What is it?" Molly asked, intrigued.

"A scent of something I recognise but can't immediately place." Unlike Sherlock, John didn't have a Mind Palace stuffed with a dictionary of scents and aromas. He had to work at it.

The Pathologist bent to take her own sniff.

"Oh, that's easy. It's the smell of the corn starch powder inside medical gloves."

John recognised it immediately once she said it. "Yes. And that's why I had to remember it. It's been a while since I've used them. GP gloves aren't powdered; the clinic doesn't cough up the extra to pay for them."

She nodded. "I have to use forensic gloves un-powdered, due to possible contamination." Then she looked down at the body. "Does the scent matter? Maybe the ambulance crew used them."

John shook his head. "Unlikely, the NHS tends to be careful on cost. My guess…" He stopped, and then corrected himself, "…my deduction is that there was a medical professional at the scene of the crime. Proper boxing matches have one on the scene, just in case. Sherlock thought it was a Fight Club, so it would make sense. When this poor guy died from the neck injury, someone was there to examine him- and maybe took off his gloves after the exam when he realised the guy was dead. That dropped the powder out of the glove."

That's when John thought about what Sherlock would do with this deduction. "Have you got a magnifying glass?"

She walked over to the autopsy counter and rummaged through the top drawer, and then a cupboard
Molly was slightly apologetic when she returned to the body, carrying not only the glass but also a forensic kit. "He always wanted one here, in case Anderson missed something. If he were here, the next thing he'd do is check for fingerprints from whoever checked on him once he'd fallen- they could be from before they realised the man was dead. That said, it could also be from afterwards, and there will be traces of corn flour on the print. We need to spray…"

"… and then use ultraviolet light," John said, finishing her sentence. "Great minds think alike."

She giggled. "He's trained us well, hasn't he?"

They got to work. Fifteen minutes later, they found it a print on the skin below his jaw, oils leaving their trace, no powder. "Probably trying to find a carotid pulse, thinking he was just knocked out," was John's verdict. Then he started to imagine the scene. "He probably remembered to put his gloves on to do CPR, but when he couldn't re-start the heart, he'd check why, and find the broken neck vertebrae. When the exam was over, he'd take his gloves off." He felt almost jubilant- the pieces were slotting together, and he knew that it would be important. If it was a medical professional, then it was more likely that the fingerprints would be somewhere on the system.

Molly carefully pressed the film to it and then closed the flap. "Could you bring me an evidence bag? Third drawer down," The pathologist used her elbow to point over to the counter.

After she dropped it in, he was just sealing the bag when Molly asked the question that he had been waiting for.

"Where is Sherlock then?"

He finished sticking the tape down before answering quietly, "I have no idea."

"You two haven't got back to it then?"

"Back to what?"

"To working together again, like before."

"Does it look like we are?" John hated the bitterness he heard in his own voice.

This provoked a sympathetic look from the Pathologist. "Well, he's not the same now. I don't know what happened to him while he was gone. Whatever it was changed him. Even I can tell that."

"You've spoken with him recently then?" As soon as he heard that, he knew it sounded like he was jealous.

She shook her head. "No. Just after he got back, he did a strange thing- asked me along to one of Lestrade's cases. You probably read about it in the papers- the Whitechapel skeleton and the ripper hoax. He also took me to see the underground train spotter- that was before you got involved." She looked a little embarrassed. "He said it was his way of thanking me. But, really? I think he was missing you."

"Yeah, well, he should have thought about that for the two years I was missing him."

Molly frowned. She looked over at the body on the table. "I suppose I should get to work. But, I keep expecting him to walk in the door and tell me to stop before I ruin his fun. That's what it used to be for him. It makes me wonder what happened to take all the fun away." Then she shrugged. "But
then, he wouldn't tell me anything."

"At least you knew that he was alive and that it was all a fake." There, he'd said it. The thing that had bothered him ever since he learned that Molly had been in on the plot from the beginning, knowing about and helping Sherlock fake his suicide.

"If he had told you, then you would have tried to stop him, or to go with him. And I don't think he was prepared to risk you doing that. Sherlock told me that he wasn't likely to come back, and that I'd never know where or when he'd been killed. It was far harder not knowing whether he might still be alive, or lying dead somewhere. You could grieve and move on. I couldn't. He spared you that."

His face must have betrayed his feelings. Molly looked crestfallen. "Please...don't hate him...or me, for that matter. He only told me because he needed me to sign the death certificate. He..." She ground to a halt and looked away.

"He... what?"

She looked back at him, her eyes now a little angry. "He used me, he always has. I let him do it, too. It's okay- it's all I can do for him. His whole life, people haven't trusted him. It's all he's ever wanted from me. He didn't think about what I would go through having to lie to people about it, watching you and the others grieve. He doesn't understand that sort of thing. He didn't know how much it would hurt me. I can forgive him that. He just trusted me not to tell anyone, and I chose to honour my promise. It was my choice, so don't hate him for it."

Having built up a head of steam, she kept going, "Maybe it was wrong. But when I asked why he wouldn't tell you, he said it was to protect you. Moriarty would kill you, or worse, use you to break him. And it would, you know, something happening to you. I don't think you understand what he thinks of you. I'm not sure you've ever understood that. I still can't get how you didn't see it those last months. He was so sad about the whole thing, about having to leave you in the dark, but you never seemed to see it."

John was shocked by the vehemence of her speech. Defensively, he snapped back, "Well, I can see what he's doing now; he's telling me that he wants nothing to do with me anymore."

He put the evidence bag down and stripped off his gloves. "I'm sorry, Molly. I shouldn't take it out on you; that's not fair. It's not your fault." Anger and resentment were a potent mix, and he found it hard to say anything more for a moment. She was watching him, waiting.

But, he wasn't the sort to talk about his feelings. His own family, being a doctor, and the army- he'd had to spend a lifetime keeping his emotions in check. He'd not really said anything of what he was feeling about Sherlock's return to Mary, so how could he say anything to Molly? But, she was still looking at him, waiting.

He drew breath. Softly, as if hardly being willing to admit it to himself, "it's just everyone expects me to be over the moon about his being back. Yes, of course, I am glad. I missed him more than he could ever imagine. You're right. He has no idea that people would care; it's just useless sentiment in his book. The only good thing about his lying to me is that it gave me a chance to find Mary. Without her love, I wouldn't have made it. But, he couldn't have known she would come along and rescue me. And I think that's why I'm still angry with him."

To put an end to any further discussion, John pulled his phone out. "I need to call Lestrade and tell him that one of the people present at the murder was probably a medical professional, and to get someone over here to collect that fingerprint." He frowned at the phone, because there were no reception bars at all showing.
“You'll have to go upstairs. It's hopeless getting a signal down here.” She turned away, picked up the electric bone cutter, and started to make the initial Y incision of the autopsy. Because her back was now turned, John didn't see the sadness in her eyes.
Hitching a Ride

Lestrade was tired. The paperwork on the Font Street case kept him at the office until nearly midnight. *Yet another Saturday night ruined.* No wonder he'd never had time to date after Louise left him.

Thanks to Sherlock's deductions on scene, they had known where to look. Alexander Robbs was the victim, an accountant at RGL, a consultancy firm based at Devonshire Square. A single man living on his own, but he'd been reported to the police as missing nine days ago by his employers. The police sent his photo to his PA, who identified him. She was in too much of a state to be able to answer many questions—just the basics of when he'd been seen last. Tomorrow, he'd get Sally to dig a bit deeper, and get her to make the formal ID at the mortuary.

John Watson's phone call from Barts had helped. They were chasing up the fingerprint. It wasn't in the criminal records, but he now had the night team at work checking other databases where medical professionals might be registered. Greg had texted the details of John's breakthrough to Sherlock, but there had been no reply. He wasn't holding out much hope that the news would draw Sherlock out of wherever he'd disappeared to, but it was worth a try.

Greg was now worried on so many levels about Sherlock that he didn't know where to begin. The Sherlock who had returned from his one-man war against Moriarty was in pain—both physical and mental. That much Greg could tell from the first week he was back in the land of the living. No matter that he'd saved John from the bonfire and then gone on to save London from the bomb under Parliament; the damage was still evident during the Tilbury case, too.

Lestrade had thought he'd seen Sherlock at his lowest ebb—before John, when his battles against addiction and his own self-destructive impulses put him into rehab twice. But he thought that maybe this Sherlock was somewhere even more lost, because now he was on his own. The post Tilbury crash had been painful to see.

And now this Font Street case just proved the point. He'd watched as Sherlock positively pushed John away from him.

Greg got to within ten feet of his car in the NSY garage and clicked on the key to unlock it. It didn't work for some reason, despite him re-trying. *Damn key fob—battery must be dead.* He used the key to unlock the door, climbed in and started the car. With luck, at this hour, he'd be home in twenty minutes. On the way through the dark streets, his eye kept being drawn to the single male pedestrians. The victim had been dead for days before anyone reported him missing. Even though people were already looking for Sherlock, there was no guarantee they'd find him.

By the time he drove into the parking garage under the block of flats, he was both stressed and knackered, moving more on auto-pilot than conscious thought. The key-fob still wasn't working, so he manually locked the car, and took the lift to the third floor.

*oOo*

Ten minutes later, the automatic lights in the garage went off, because no other car driver had come past the barrier and hit the button that left them on for ten minutes. It was a useful security device that ensured the women who lived in the flat could keep the place lit when they were in the garage.

In the darkness, no one saw Lestrade's car boot pop open and a man get out.
Sherlock stretched his back and neck carefully, using some of his Tai Chi exercises to restore circulation. He'd actually slept a bit while the car was parked at the Yard. He'd thought about getting out there, but decided that Lestrade's garage was a safer bet. In any case, it was ideal for one of his best boltholes- the one he knew his brother would never find, for the simple reason that he wouldn't think to look in Lestrade's own building.

Sherlock had found it eleven years ago, when he was trying to find a place to stash drugs he'd just bought, because the dealer was being rousted out of the territory by a rival gang. He'd run for cover to avoid being caught in the cross fire, and discovered the bolt hole by accident. When Lestrade got booted out of the marital home after his marriage broke up, Sherlock was the one who suggested the place on Portland Rise, just next to Finsbury Park. After all, he knew the area well, and the people who lived in the flats above.

The car park under the flats had a number of lock up storage areas, and that's where he'd built this bolt hole. To get to it, you had to use a key to unlock a grill less than a meter square, then crawl along a very narrow conduit full of electrical cabling for a meter and a half before turning a corner and reaching what looked like a dead end. Slide the metal sideways, however, and you got access to an area just over four meters long and a meter and a half wide. He had deduced that it was probably a space that once housed the block's original heating system, but it was redundant once the flat company switched to gas fired boilers. The original service door had been bricked up. The space wasn't too cold or too hot, and it had power, which he'd tapped into once he decided it would work as a 'home from home' in emergencies. He'd spent a week there once, avoiding his brother while he came down from a rather bad binge.

He hadn't been there in over five years, but he figured that it was probably still there. The lock-pick made quick work of the grill and he managed to slide the metal sheet aside, despite it being a bit rusty. He made a mental note to sneak into Greg's lock up garage where he kept his beloved Norton motorbike and nick some oil. Noise at the wrong time could give him away.

Once he'd slid the metal sheet back into place, he turned on the low energy bulb that gave him enough light to be able to see that the place was exactly as he had left it. Good for a couple of nights at least. The place was a bit dusty and the air rather stale, so he plugged in the fan and opened the louvered grid that gave access to the building's ventilation shaft- a useful left-over from the time when the oil-fired boilers used the space. He surveyed the stack of plastic boxes. The top one had three different sets of clothes, each sealed in a vacuum tight plastic- a suit with a dress shirt, a smart casual package, and then what he used to think of as "street grunge"- the hoodie and track suit, trainers and cap that he would use when working in homeless mode. There was a plastic bucket with a tight top that sealed- a useful makeshift loo.

The second box had a small supply of food; tins and an opener- which he ignored, before pulling out the third plastic box from the bottom. He shook out the contents, extending the inflatable mattress and blowing it up. He stripped off his coat, hanging it neatly on a hook, before wrapping himself in the foil lined blanket from the box that would let him sleep without fear of hypothermia. He lay down to see how comfortable it was, and found himself smirking. The nights he'd spent in the capsule hotel in Tokyo made the space here feel positively palatial. And the sounds and scents of the other sleepers in that hotel made it almost impossible for him to sleep. This would be different.

The smirk faded as he sat back up and considered his surroundings again. At least Tokyo had served a purpose. The Yakuza he was after there was Moriarty's lead man, someone who had regular dealings with Lars Sigurson, but who was about to be forced into betraying the other people in the network. The discomfort, the deprivation, even the damage done to his body and soul, had all been tolerable then, because Sherlock knew it was necessary. Break the network, and go home – it had been his motto, the thing that would make it all worthwhile.
Now he knew better. He felt the pall of depression lurking in the shadows of the claustrophobic room. There had been no point to any of it. He'd come home to find that somehow, without his noticing, the very heart had been burnt out of him.

*Alone.* It no longer protected him, but rather tore at him.

Anger kicked in. To hell with self-pity; he could make his own way. There was another important difference between this bolthole and Tokyo- a mod-con missing from the capsule hotel. Sherlock opened the metal box sitting in the opposite corner and lifted out the glass jar inside, shaking it. His mood started to lift, as the dopamine release of anticipation hit his circulation system. The seal was still intact on the bottle of morphine, and the long shelf life of opiates meant it would be as potent as the day he left it here, years ago. So, he reached for the other contents of the box which, when added together and carefully injected, would give him the hours of blissful release that he so desperately needed.

By the time a stressed out Lestrade turned out the light, four floors below him Sherlock was already drifting into dreamless oblivion.
John spent Sunday morning fretting. To someone who didn't know him, he might have looked like someone enjoying a leisurely breakfast and then reading the paper. Mary knew him better than that. She tried to coax the story out of him, and got the bare bones. A dead body, an accountant, who died in some kind of illegal fight club. Yes, Sherlock had been there. No, John didn't want to discuss it. And yet, he sat there in silence, obviously chewing it over in his mind all morning long. They were not due back in the surgery until Tuesday, having decided to spend a Monday trying to find an affordable venue they both liked for the wedding. The idea of doing that while John continued to stew about this case just didn't seem like much fun. After the third sigh from him, finally Mary had had enough.

"If you don't tell me why this is annoying you, I'm going to call up Sherlock myself and ask him what's going on."

"No, you're not." Then he paused, "Actually, it wouldn't matter if you did. Apparently, he isn't answering anyone's calls or texts, not just mine."

"So, tell me exactly what happened."

"What's the point?"

"I want to know."

"Didn't anyone ever tell you, curiosity killed the cat?"

She entwined him in a hug, gave a soft meow into his ear, and then purred, "Go on. This cat wants to know."

John sighed. "I arrived and Sherlock asked Lestrade why he had called me. Greg explained about the Medical Examiner being unavailable. Sherlock was a dickhead and just walked off. I examined the body, while Greg tried to compensate by being polite about me finding the cause of death. But, I felt about as useful as a spare wheel. Then Sherlock called us over, told us what had happened, who the guy was likely to be, and what needed to be done next. It was like a general ordering the troops about. Then he stomped off, still in a strop."

"So, he's in a mood. Your blog says he was often in a mood. You made a lot of fuss about that in... what was it called? Um- the Geek Interpreter. Said he was so grumpy he made the teenagers look positively adult in comparison. And about the Speckled Blonde, too."

He gave a wry smile. "Yeah, he was a pain in the backside on that one. But that was because he kept deducing the wrong thing and never solved it. He doesn't like to be proved wrong."

"So, there. Maybe this is just another one like that. Or maybe he just got out of bed on the wrong side yesterday. Don't take it so personally, love."

She was relieved when John cheered up a bit over Sunday lunch, so over the roast pork loin with home-made apple sauce, she teased out the rest of the Saturday night details out of him- his work at St Bartholomew's mortuary, the discovery of the fingerprint, and his deduction that there was a
medical person involved.

She beamed at him. "You're really good at this, figuring all that out."

The smile faded a bit. "Yea, well, I had a good teacher."

He picked at the last bit of crackling on the pork. She play slapped his hand away. "Off- that's tomorrow's supper, cold, with some nice salads. We've both got a full day of researching and looking at venues, and won't have time to cook. I'll do a potato salad tonight, so we can just eat in front of the telly when we get back in tomorrow."

Lestrade called just as they were doing the washing up. She listened intently, able to get the drift, even though she was only able to hear one side of the conversation.

"An RAMC officer?" John's incredulity made his voice go an octave higher.

Then he slowly said a name, as if trying to place it, "George Hayter? ....Never heard of him. Which regiment?"

She kept wiping the wine glass, trying to use the tea towel to get the last of the water spots off. Eavesdropping came naturally to her; some things you didn't forget, no matter how long since she'd needed the skills professionally.

"Oh. That's before my time. I'll see what I can come up with."

Mary smiled. Good, something that is right up his alleyway. She knew John's tenacity would mean he'd keep digging.

He came back into the kitchen. "That was interesting- the first solid lead in the case- a name. Lestrade says that when they went to his address in Clapham, the suspect wasn't there. I'm going to spend some time on the computer this afternoon, maybe phone a few people. Might be able to help out Lestrade after all."

She beamed at him. "Good. Serve his Nibs right. When you come up with the clues that crack the case, he just might get off his high horse and start treating you with the respect you're due." She blew a kiss at him before turning to put the wine glass back on the shelf.

oOo

By supper time, John had a potted history. George Hayter had been a member of the RAMC alright- and a field surgeon to boot, but had served as a para, rather than regular army. His outfit, the 23rd Parachute Field Ambulance, had seen action in Africa and the Balkans.

"Bloody hell."

Mary looked up from the Sunday cryptic crossword. "What is it?"

"When he was a major, Hayter won a QCVS: ."

"Well, it takes one decorated war hero to know another."

He pulled a face. "No, the surprise is that it was in Africa, so not an active battlefield. He was working in the refugee camps, where he was part of the field surgical team that managed one hundred and eighty six surgical procedures in four months."

She gave a low whistle of astonishment. "That is one hell of a work rate."
"Yeah, that's what I thought. How does that compare with the sort of stuff you got involved with?"

She put the crossword aside. "Well, to start with, most of my camp work was disaster-related, not war zones. You know, Haiti after the earthquake, Sri Lanka after the tsunami. The only African stuff I did for International Medical Corps was in southern Somalia in 2011- but that was famine. Not much surgery involved". Mary had been very careful to build herself a credible back story. If she was going to make a new life, she had to manufacture a believable old life.

John was still looking at his laptop. "Well, this Hayter managed to find the battlefields. Two years after Africa, the 23rd Paras Field Ambulance Service was with the UN's IFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina."

By tea time, he'd managed to piece together more about the guy's service record. When she deposited a cup of builder's tea, one sugar, next to the laptop, she read over his shoulder. Two years after Bosnia, the owner of the fingerprint was back in the Balkans, as part of Operation Agricola, preparing for KFOR deployment into Kosovo.

"Quite the action man, isn't he?"

John gave a hum of agreement. "Yeah, Hayter was part of a helicopter insertion in the Kajanik defile, dropped behind enemy lines, to treat casualties as the main UK force passed from Macedonia into Kosovo."

"I thought there weren't any NATO casualties in Kosovo?"

John grimaced. "No NATO forces- but there were plenty of Kosovans and Serbian militia men wounded, and thousands of civilian casualties, for months. Ethnic cleansing and all that. Pretty hard core medical work for back then."

"So, did he get to Iraq?"

"Nope- I can't find any reference to him after late 1999. I'm going call a few people and find out what happened next."

She watched the latest episode of Downton Abbey, with one eye on his internet use. A piece of her wanted to invent a reason to follow him into the kitchen when he disappeared in there with his phone. She waited for the commercial break, which gave her an excuse to go put the kettle on.

John was pacing. She tried to block out the sound of the kettle as the water started to boil; she really wanted to know what he was finding out. Wonder if he'd like an assistant on this case? And almost immediately after that thought, another came to choke it off. No, don't let your guard down. Mustn't arouse any suspicions. Within the first few days of knowing Sherlock, she had come to realise that the Consulting Detective would be able to deduce something about her past. The more she read about John's blog and got the details of how Holmes and John had cracked the Gunpowder Plot, the more she realised that it was only a matter of time before he figured her out. She filled the teapot, and stirred the two tea bags.

It had been almost a month, and yet Sherlock had done nothing, said nothing to John. About a week ago, she'd realised that he must have made a decision not to be a threat to her. That is his gift to John. And she knew it, and knew that Sherlock knew it, too. That made them co-conspirators in a way, and she was grateful for it. It had made her like Sherlock even more than her initial first impression. Even so, she did wonder whether her secret had something to do with Sherlock's recent efforts to keep his distance.
"You still there, Bill?" John was frowning. He walked a few steps closer to the living room. "Yeah, that's better now. You were breaking up." He was listening intently, then leaned over the kitchen counter to grab a pen and the shopping list pad, scribbling a number. She filled the two mugs with milk, and then poured the tea.

"Okay, I'll give her a call. Thanks. Cheers, mate."

She handed him the tea with a question in her eyes.

John smirked. "If you think army surgeons are bad, wait 'til you meet Bill in person; he is the king of gossips."

She smiled. "Then he's definitely on the wedding invitation list." She knew about Bill Murray- the Army nurse who knew John at med school and ended up in the same field hospital in Kandahar. He was the one who saved John's life when he was shot. John was trying to limit the number of army men he would invite- just Bill and Major John Shloto. She was grateful that John was determined not to upstage her, accepting her story that she had been in the country for too short a time to make a lot of friends, and that her friends from the IMC were too committed and poor to leave disaster zone medicine to attend a wedding in the UK.

John took a sip of tea, and she mirrored his action. They'd started talking about the wedding now. It still gave her a most peculiar thrill. The very idea- getting MARRIED. How was it even possible that she could manage to get something so wonderful, so normal?

He made a shooing gesture. "You know it bugs me to make calls to people I don't know, so a little privacy would be appreciated."

She smothered a grin and left him in peace. It was one of his quirks. He didn't like talking on the phone at the best of times, even with people he knew. It always surprised her that for a doctor, John wasn't at all extroverted. Typical surgeon. When the land line rang in the flat, he never picked it up. "It's going to be for you, so you should answer it," was his argument. "Could be a junk call," she would tease, provoking the inevitable response, "well, that's even more reason for you to answer it."

She went back out to the living room and resumed the episode of Downton Abbey, trying to concentrate on the adventures of Edith, the third daughter of the Earl, as she struggled to find a way to hide her pregnancy from her parents. It made her think about marriage, children, family life- all the things she had told herself would never be possible. And now they are. Just like that. Once again, she gave a wordless thank-you to whoever was responsible for putting her in the path of John, and then she added another one to Sherlock, for not exposing her secrets.

Mary was still smiling when John came out of the kitchen, wearing a thoughtful expression. She turned the TV off and patted the sofa beside her, pulling him into a hug. "So, what've you found out?"

He sniffed. "Bill's contact is a former QARANC* nurse, now working at Derriford in Plymouth. Turns out she served on this fellow's last tour. She thinks George Hayter is an old fashioned hero- brilliant surgeon, all-round great guy, career army man from three generations of serving officers."

"So, why'd he leave the service?"

"In late 1999, the Para field ambulance unit was merged with another- you know, part of the endless re-structuring the army went through. Nancy-- that's the nurse- left at the same time he did. But, Hayter quit medicine altogether and went to work in the City. She thinks he sort of retired two years ago, or cut back to part-time, but she's sort of stayed in touch- Christmas cards and all that. Gave me
his address and phone number."

He was looking down at a scrap of paper. "He lives in Reigate, apparently. Has a flat in London- that's where Lestrade must have gone. But the nurse says Hayter inherited a big house in the country." He was turning the paper over in his hands, a tell that she recognised as his way of showing indecision.

"You're thinking of giving him a call, aren't you?"

He gave a wry smile. "Yeah, well…the proper thing to do would be to pass this info to Lestrade and let him go through channels. Get the Kent police onto it and bring the guy in for questioning."

"What would Sherlock do?"

John snorted. "Turn up on the guy's doorstep and demand an explanation."

"I can't imagine his interrogation technique."

That made John smirk. "You've got to see it to believe it. He scares the hell out of the person, deduces their guilt without a shred of evidence and gets them to confess." Then he shrugged, "Or he lies through his teeth to provoke them into some sort of reaction which usually proves they are either the guilty party or innocent as a new-born."

"Wow- that sounds…um…effective."

"Yeah, and Lestrade hates it when he does it within his earshot, because it is so not police procedure."

"But it works?"

John nodded.

"Right. Go take a look on the web for train times. Tomorrow morning, I fancy a trip to the country. Coming with me, Doctor Watson?"

"I thought you wanted to look for reception venues."

She made a face. "Boring. I'd rather watch you sweet talk some old Army doctor into explaining how his fingerprint got onto a body."

John smirked. "Yeah, well…if you're sure. Why not? I've never been to Reigate."

Mary smiled, as John opened the laptop and started hunting for train times.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

*QCVS= Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service

**QARANC = Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps
On Monday morning, the receptionist at Shad Sanderson Bank's desk at Tower 42 actually remembered him. "Oh, Mister Holmes!" She blurted out, "I was here when you came before…well, before you were famous and all that." Then she giggled and whispered, "Are you in disguise? I sort of expected…you know, the coat." Then she giggled again. "And the hat; I loved the hat."

Sherlock looked at her out of the corner of his eye as if she were some sort of dangerous creature, before picking up the badge that had been prepared for him and was lying on the counter. She was still flustered, but managed to get out "I'll call up to Mister Wilkes' office to let him know you're on your way." He felt her eyes on his back, as he took the badge, stuffed it into a pocket and then walked through the glass gate in the security entrance, and then onto the lift lobby.

Yesterday, he'd "borrowed" Lestrade's motorcycle and swapped the bike's number plate with one of the four he kept in the bolt hole. He'd done this years before, when dodging the cameras. Protected by the anonymous helmet and the leather jacket liberated from Lestrade's lock-up, he felt exhilarated by his ability to move across London without provoking any unwanted attention from his brother and his minions.

So, while an unknowing Lestrade spent his Sunday doing household chores, Sherlock used the Norton to drive down Tottenham Court Road to the electronic discounters. He stopped at the fourth one along, only removing his helmet once he was past the range of the CCTV camera. He bought a new phone, using cash- a legacy from his time of stashing money in a wide variety of locations to ensure his movements could not be traced. This was used to access the internet, get Wilkes' phone number and make the call to set this meeting up. He was spared the pain of actually having to speak to the banker, just left a message on his voice mail. He worded it in such a way that Wilkes would not be able to refuse.

The next morning, he waited in the conduit to his bolt hole. Behind the grill, he listened for the set of footsteps he would recognise. Once Lestrade was in the car and on his way to New Scotland Yard, he was back on the Norton and heading into the City of London.

As Sherlock was being shown into Wilkes' office by the secretary, he decided to short circuit the usual rituals. "No, you can't take my coat. I have no need for coffee, water or any other beverage. What I do need is privacy, so leave now, and shut the door on your way out." In the face of such a barrage of rudeness, the secretary scuttled out. Without being asked, he sat down in the chair opposite a slightly startled Sebastian, who looked like he'd put on a bit of weight over the nearly four years since Sherlock had last seen him.

The man's familiar self-satisfied smirk was firmly in place, though. "Still a little short on the old social skills, I see. And you're looking rather scruffy these days- had a relapse?"

Sherlock looked down at Lestrade's worn leather jacket, then rubbed his chin and gave a sardonic smile. "What's wrong with a bit of designer stubble? I've seen you in far worse."

That provoked a waspish retort from Wilkes. "Where's your friend – that blogger of yours?"

"Dispense with the pleasantries, Sebastian. I am here for one reason- and fortunately for you, it isn't to tell your Chairman or your wife about what you've been up to while in the Middle East."
For the briefest of moments, Sherlock saw a shadow of fear pass over the well-fed face. The banker's smile vanished to be replaced with a hard look.

"Making enemies again? I wouldn't push your luck, if I were you."

"You're not me, which makes this so much easier. I need something from you- a name and an introduction. Isn't that what old buddies do for one another? Networking and all that." He gave a fake smile, which he knew the banker would dislike.

"Who are you after?"

"Not one of your clients, so don't panic. No, it's more what you and your lot get up to in your private lives, when you're off duty. Having a bit of fun, letting off steam and all those ridiculous euphemisms you give to activities not far removed from school boy idiocy."

Wilkes drawled, "…such as?"

"BKB and MMA*. I know there's a City league, and it's right up your street. You've enjoyed seeing other people get hurt for a long time."

Sebastian shifted in his seat. Sherlock did not let him look away, holding his gaze in as forceful a glare as he could muster. Both men could remember a certain incident that happened at university. Neither decided it was time to resurrect a discussion about it.

"So, let's say I did know something about that. Who are you after?"

"I'm not after anyone. Just an introduction to one of the promoters. I fancy a go, myself."

Wilkes' eyes widened. "Really? With you being, well, nearly a celebrity these days, I'd have thought it was a little risky. MMA can be rather brutal, even though these guys are not professionals. And bare knuckle is not a game for amateurs."

Sherlock gave him a wolfish smile. "I've learned a lot over the past few years. I'd like to keep in practice, and no legal martial arts competition gives me the opportunity to really let loose. So, when can I meet your contact?"

Wilkes seemed to think the idea over for a moment, then asked with just a tinge of sarcasm, "Any good at fighting? Last time…"

"Shut up." Sherlock's tone. For the past two years, he'd used that tone to enforce his authority as Lars Sigurson, and he'd not been afraid to back it up with physical violence. There were advantages to being undercover as a criminal. Deniability was key- he worked for no one, and no rules applied. "That was then; this is now. I'd be more than happy to use my new skills on you."

"Okay, okay- just asking. I need to know which promoter to approach. If you're any good, then I happen to know there is a vacancy on one team."

Wilkes' eyes widened.

Sherlock leaned forward in the chair, with a predatory look. "Alexander Robbs, a forensic accountant with RGL Consultants of Devonshire Square. Or should I say, formerly of?"

Sherlock's smile was timed to perfection. He had to make Wilkes willing to co-operate, but not be frightened enough to warn the promoter. "I presume you were there, if that name rings a bell. So,
what's the charge against you to be- accessory to murder? Failing to report a death? Illegal gambling? Or maybe you were one of the spectators indulging in illegal substances?"

"There is no way to prove any of that; I have an alibi."

"How convenient for you". Sherlock leaned back in this chair, knowing he'd won. "Well, actually, you needn't have bothered. I know something that the spectators and probably even the promoters don't know. Robbs wasn't killed by his opponent. He had an existing condition that meant his neck could break at the slightest fall. He's not important. But giving up the names of those who were running the show is important…to me."

The banker's shoulders visibly lost some of their tension. "Look, Holmes, I can only make an introduction. It's not up to me. You'd have to prove yourself to the promoter- they don't take just anybody."

"When can you do this? The sooner, the better. You know I am not a patient man."

Wilkes shrugged. "It's a fight night this Friday- four matches. The three teams put up their in-form fighters, plus there's a novice bout. I'll set something up for you before that with the promoter- if he's interested, he will call you and you can meet him, probably at a gym he uses out near Canary Wharf. If he thinks you're good enough, he'll give you a go. If you win the novice fight, and do it in style, then one of the teams might bid for you- he gets a cut for introducing you. But, I should warn you- it won't be easy. Even if you get him to sponsor you, the opposition always put in one of their best fighters against you- to weed out the time-wasters."

Sherlock fixed him with a steely gaze. "I'm not wasting your time or mine, Wilkes."

Sebastian returned the hostile look. "Good. Then whatever happens, we're quits on that business in the Middle East. You won't come in here threatening blackmail again."

"Blackmail? Hardly. I don't know for certain anything actually happened. Only the guilty look on your face suggests otherwise. But, if I am busy with the Fight Club, then I won't go investigating further, will I?"

Sebastian stood up. "Leave your number with my secretary on your way out."

Sherlock nodded and left without a backward glance. While waiting for the lift, he realised he was clenching his fists in anticipation.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: *BBK = bare knuckle boxing. MMA= Mixed martial arts
John pressed the doorbell firmly, with a confidence that he didn't actually feel. It was all well and good following Sherlock around and letting him do his madman thing; taking on the role himself was something new. Mary's presence made him feel slightly uneasy; what happened if he was useless at confronting Colonel Hayter? Her opinion of him mattered, and he shifted a little uncomfortably beside her now.

They'd travelled down by train from London Bridge to Reigate in just under an hour. It surprised John just how quickly they had left the leafy suburbs of London behind and entered the countryside. Reigate was nestled at the foot of the North Downs. Some thirty miles to the southwest lay Parham Park, on the edge of the South Downs National Park. He had not told Mary about Parham and his trip there to the shooting party. It felt a life time ago.

The area of West Sussex that lay between the Downs was commuter territory- modern housing surrounding older market towns. They had taken a taxi from the station, and been driven south past the serried ranks of look-alike homes built in the 1980s. On the very edge of Reigate, just as the town gave way to fields, the cab turned left and went down a tree lined avenue sign-posted Hartswood, Reigate Grammar School Playing Fields. The immaculately manicured pitches and a modern sports pavilion reeked of money and privilege.

Mary smirked. "How the other half lives…"

John smiled in return. "Yeah, well, my school in Corby didn't manage anything like this. Did yours?"

She giggled, "Nope- not one of them."

That was one of the things he liked about Mary. She was down-to-earth. At one of their earliest dates, she'd told him about her nomadic life as a child in an army family. Her father was a Paymaster, a serving officer in the Royal Army Pay Corps, and the family was regularly moved each time he was posted to a new division. "Seven camps in England and Northern Ireland; then there was Germany and Cyprus. Yep- I've always been on the move. It's why I'm such a chameleon- had to blend in with the natives everywhere I went. Four schools in nine years- but I wanted to be with my parents, rather than get stuck in some God-forsaken boarding school that they couldn't afford."

Hartswood Manor was the address that Bill Murray's contact had given them. Down the road ahead, John could see a sign for Hartswood Farm and Barns, then to his left, an estate agent's sign. As the taxi turned into the driveway beside the sign, Mary was the first one to voice surprise.

"Wow- this is impressive!"

The manor house was big. White painted walls under a red tiled roof, it looked like something that might have started centuries ago, but was now a hodge-podge of different roof lines and chimneys, under three floors at its tallest places. The door was a solid oak under a vine-covered wooden porch. The old fashioned brass doorbell rang somewhere deep inside, but at least they could hear it. The question was, would anybody be at home? John had paid what was on the meter, but asked the taxi to wait, telling him that he could keep the meter running. Nearly two miles out of town, he was reluctant to have to try to get one back, if the house proved to be empty or if Colonel Hayter refused to talk to him.

As they waited, he fidgeted. What the hell was he going to say? "Excuse me, but can you explain
how your fingerprint ended up on a dead body in London?"

That's probably what Sherlock might say, but whether John could pull it off was a different story.

Mary leaned in and whispered, "I hear footsteps."

The oak door opened and a tall, heavy-set man with short grey hair beamed a smile.

"Welcome! I'm delighted you could make it. And early too- how very convenient."

Before either John or Mary could recover from such a hearty greeting, Hayter called out to the taxi driver. "You can go now- I'll drive them back to the station."

As the driver put the taxi into gear and started back toward the gate, the man pushed the door to the house open wider.

"Come in, come in! It's too cold outside to stand on the threshold."

Mary looped her arm around John's and started in, bringing him with her.

"Right- let's get those coats off. I'm George Hayter. The agent didn't tell me your names; just that you'd be here before noon."

While John took a couple of seconds to digest that statement, realising that the Colonel had mistaken them for a potential buyer of the house, Mary stepped in. Slipping off her coat and stuffing her woollen hat and scarf into the sleeve, she beamed back at Hayter.

"I'm Mary and this is my fiancé, John. We're getting married in May, and looking for properties in the area. Thanks for letting us take a look."

After handing over her coat to the Colonel, she turned back towards John. She gave him a look that said clearly play along. John took off his coat and scarf, handing it over, too, with a slightly bemused smile.

After hanging them up on a series of hooks by the front door, Hayter set off. "Right then. Let's start the tour with a potted history. The central portion of the manor house dates from 1615, but we think that some of the timber frames used on the inside of the house date back to even earlier- about 1550. It's mostly plain three- storey Georgian, but inside that you can still find bits of what was the gabled and plastered house of 1615."

Mary was looking at the white and black tiled floor, and the wooden panelling on the walls. "It must be listed."

"Yep- Grade 2- but not starred, thank God, so we've been able to update the plumbing and put in a modern kitchen. And it's also allowed us the split up the original house into three separate ones- we are sort of reverse- engineering. To be honest, it's just one of those houses that started fairly modestly and just kept growing as the family could afford improvements over the centuries. So around the Elizabethan timber framed core, Georgian and then Victorian bits were added. From the front you can see the three different building phases, which have been separated into the three different houses now." As he led them down the corridor, his back was turned, so John shot a look at Mary, who shrugged, and then whispered in his ear, "At least he hasn't thrown us out yet."

Hayter turned to his left. "This is the reception hall." There was a fireplace, and mullioned windows, as well as an oak staircase. The wood panelled walls and the wood floors with Turkish carpets gave the place a warm feel, helped by the log fire. It was impressive.
Mary laughed with pleasure at the carpeted staircase. "A whole new meaning to the phrase *red carpet.*"

Colonel Hayter returned her smile. "You're right. My mother used to say that she made more grand entrances down that staircase than any commoner had a right to make."

John saw a chance to make a start. "So, the house is the Hayter family seat?"

That prompted a chuckle. "Not exactly- that makes us sound like aristocracy. My mother's father was a soldier. When he was de-mobbed in 1947 he bought it off a penniless farmer who owned the Hartwood Farm next door. It was in a shocking state- been a hospital in World War One, and pressed back into hospital service during the second war. Between the wars, it had more lives than a cat- including as a girl's school in the 1920s."

He opened the door to the left of the chimney, and they entered a room that was more than twenty feet wide and just a little less long. Again, it was wood panelled with a stone fireplace. There were four huge red velvet sofas, each looking a little worse for wear, on a rather garish red and pink carpet.

Hayter saw the look in Mary's eyes. "And here's where I start apologising for my mother's taste. She was more concerned about comfort than style, and liked a lot of red. Too much, as you will see. But it's only skin deep."

John tried again. "Your mother- do I take it she no longer lives here?"

The taller man shook his head. "No, she died two years ago. I used to spend most of my time in London, but I've just stopped that. I've turned the smallest of the three houses here into mine- it's the two storied Victorian wing, closest to the road. Parking and entrance are at the back, so there's no shared use of the main driveway you came in.

Mary smirked, "a semi-detached manor house. Sort of a contradiction in terms."

Hayter shook his head. "No, just practical in this day and age of smaller families. This one and the one in the middle are for sale, either to one buyer who wants to put them back together as a ten bedroom house, or to two different buyers. There's no point in me trying to pretend I'm ever going to have a family big enough to fit into all this."

He led them into the next room. This was set up as a dining room, and it was even bigger than the drawing room. The wood panelled walls were painted a soft green, and there was another stone fireplace. John stopped to admire the view through the set of windows onto a paved area west of the house. It was a sun trap, and even on this cold day at the end of November, the weathered garden furniture looked inviting.

"Oh." There was a tinge of disappointment in Mary's voice that made John turn to look at her. She was standing in the doorway of what he could see was a kitchen, with bright turquoise painted walls. The Colonel collected John and went into the oddly shaped kitchen. "Yes, I know- it's quirky." The blond wooded cabinets and gleaming stainless steel appliances felt very modern after the traditional décor of the two main reception rooms.

"It's …rather small for a house this size."

"Yes, well, I agree. My mother's carer lived with her and wanted a modern kitchen. But it was just the two of them. You have a choice, Mary. There is a huge cellar downstairs that can easily be fitted as a modern kitchen. Or, if you bought the adjoining house as well, then there is a gorgeous
farmhouse kitchen with an Aga, and the reception room would make a splendid dining room."

John was getting twitchy. The more Mary led the Colonel on into believing they were potential buyers, the less likely it was that they'd get the truth out of him. He decided to cut to the chase. But before he could draw breath to speak, the Colonel spoke first.

"Um, I hope you don't mind me being nosey, but, well, the two of you are not exactly youngsters, so a family with a lot of kids doesn't seem on the cards. What would you want with seven or ten bedrooms?"

Before Mary could spin a story, John stepped in. "We're not actually in the market for a house, Colonel Hayter. We're here to investigate why your fingerprint showed up on a naked body in a derelict building in Spitalfields."

The silence was so complete that John could hear the clock ticking on the wall above the sink.

Then Hayter said quietly, "You're not the police."

"No, we're not," Mary volunteered. "I'm a nurse, and he's a retired RAMC surgeon like you are, only he left after Afghanistan."

Hayter blinked rather owl-like at her. Then he looked at John, closely. Finally, he nodded and then leaned his arms on the kitchen counter. "Watson, John Watson. I thought you looked familiar."

That put John on the spot. Rather tersely, he asked "How did you know that?"

Hayter lifted his eyes to John and chuckled. "Good Lord, man. Everyone who's been in the Army Medical Corps has heard of you. You're on the telly, in the newspapers, on the internet. The blogger who works with Sherlock Holmes."

"So, are you going to answer the question?"

"Where's Holmes? And why would he be remotely interested in an accidental death?"

"He isn't; I am. In particular why an RAMC officer with your record would be involved in something like what happened on Fort Street."

The Colonel gave a sad smile, and then turned to open one of the cupboards. "To answer that will take a few minutes, so let me make you both a coffee."
"You're sure?"

He gave him a look, a little uncomfortable with the idea that Lestrade would question his judgment. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Proof?"

That earned him a glare from John. "Don't ask me to point to a frayed cuff on his left hand shirt sleeve as if it meant something. I'm not..." He looked down, trying to control a little flare of anger. "I don't work like that." Standing in front of Greg's desk, he put his arms onto the back of the chair and leaned forward. "Colonel Hayter is a straight up guy. Last I heard, saving lives is not a crime."

Greg gave a little snort. "Didn't mean it to sound like I don't believe you. So, let's hear the full story."

Pointedly, John pulled out the chair and sat down. He didn't need to pace about the office, all swirling energy and rapid-fire speech. He kept his hands quiet, clasped together in his lap. He wasn't going to compete.

"He explained what happened to Robbs, and it was..." John couldn't stop the tiny hesitation before continuing "...exactly as described. He was hit, fell, and his neck was broken even before he hit the ground. Colonel Hayter examined him, realised what happened, and stopped the fight. The promoters stepped in, got everyone to leave the same way they got in. They told Hayter they would report the injury, and he was to leave with the spectators and the other fighters. I have no reason to believe he wasn't telling the truth."

Lestrade was leaning back in his chair, flipping a pencil casually through his fingers. "That's interesting; how the hell did they get in and out of a sealed building? Did you ask him that?"

John narrowed his eyes. "I'm not stupid, Greg. Of course, I asked. One of the lift shafts is up against an outside wall. At ground level, there's a maintenance entrance into the service lift. They covered it up with a sheet of metal torched to look like it was welded over the entrance. It's held in place with magnets that they can turn off remotely. Then it's straight into the lift, which is hooked up to car batteries on the roof of the lift car, and down they go into the car park. You can send one of your men to check it out; Hayter's not lying."

"So, what's your honest Samaritan doing at a Fight Club in the first place?"

John lifted his chin a little. "Making sure people didn't kill each other isn't good enough for you? Okay, I'll tell you what he told us. He left the Army and went into the City, for a firm called TradeRisks, where he's been the manager running the back office. He's about to retire, finishing at Christmas. TradeRisk's back office is in Devonshire Square. That's the same area where Alex Robbs worked, in case you've forgotten." John heard the slightly snide tone in his voice, and realised who in reminded him of.

He stopped and drew a breath. "Sorry, Greg, of course you remember. Anyway, turns out that Hayter was walking into work one morning when up the pavement toward him comes Robb and another bloke, Simon Waterman, who worked at the same place - that accounting firm. The other guy just keeled over- passed out and crumpled to the pavement right in front of Hayter."

Greg stopped twiddling the pencil and sat up in his chair. He made a note on the pad on the desk.
John continued. "So, Hayter's instincts kick in and he goes to help the guy, who wakes up after a couple of seconds. The Colonel checks him over and tells Robb to call an ambulance- his friend's got a fractured skull- not from the fall, but something that happened earlier."

Greg wrote something more on the pad.

John tried but couldn't make out the writing, because it was upside down and in an illegible scrawl. He continued, "Waterman doesn't want to go to hospital- just says that he slipped in the shower three days ago, but Hayter insists. When the ambulance comes, Robb says he's going to follow in a taxi to the hospital, and Hayter decides to go with him." John gave a wry smile. "You can take a surgeon out of the operating theatre, but some things never change- he wanted to know if his diagnosis was right."

The DI looked up from his note taking. "And presumably he was right- and the injury was from a Fight Club incident." He gave it that slight upward inflection that made the statement into a question.

"Yeah, that's what Hayter said. Turns out that Waterman had been hit so hard he'd got a depression fracture that was swelling, and there was a slow bleed in there as well. That's when Robb tells him about the Fight Club. If he hadn't gotten to the hospital, his friend would have gone into a coma and died."

Greg's eyes widened a bit. "Then he's pretty damned lucky to have keeled over in front of Hayter."

John nodded. "When Waterman comes around after emergency surgery, Hayter's there alongside Robb. He reads the two guys the riot act, saying it was irresponsible of them to be involved in a fight with no medic present to keep them safe. Robb realised that Hayter had just saved his friend's life, and asks him to come to the next fight to talk to the promoters. He did, and then they talked him into coming to the matches and making sure it was safe."

Greg's brow furrowed. "So, he just joins in an illegal fight scene? That's abetting a crime, or at least enabling others to do so."

John shook his head, laughing. "You sound just like me- that's what I said to him! But his answer made me re-think. The promoters couldn't ask a doctor to take on the job without jeopardising his licence. A retired doctor though would be perfect. So, they talked him into it. He wouldn't take any pay. He says he wasn't involved in any of the gambling- not his thing- and seeing the house that he's selling down in Reigate, I'd say he's certainly not short of a bob or two."

"Did he say where the next fight's going to be, now that the Fort Street venue's being bull-dozed?"

John shook his head. "He quit. Told them he wasn't prepared to keep attending; Robbs' death was sort of a wake-up call. In any case, he's only going to be in London for another couple of weeks, so he told them not to tell him about where they were moving to. He called it his don't ask, don't tell strategy."

Greg was twiddling with the pencil again. "So, in your view, there's no way to charge Hayter with anything."

John shook his head. "He's not going to be found guilty of anything criminal by a jury."

Greg sighed. "Did he give you the name of a promoter?"

"Nope. Said the fighters all went by silly monikers; you know, The Sandman, The Devonshire Destroyer, that was Robbs' name, by the way. What he did say is that the teams were usually location based. Mentioned the Devonshire Squires for example and the Acton Action Men. The
Promoters' names weren't mentioned to Hayter, just introduced as 'the team manager'. They're all trying to protect their identities because they don't want to screw up their professional careers. This is just a bit of action on the side."

Greg put the pencil down. "So, Sherlock was right. No murder, no real crime worth pursuing. We have no real proof of illegal gambling, and the only lead, your fingerprint, turns out to be put on the victim's body in an act of good will. I'd say this case is closed, wouldn't you?"

"What does Sherlock think?" There, he'd said it. The shadow of the Consulting Detective had been hanging over their conversation. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, so he asked, "Has he made any progress?"

"Haven't a clue. He hasn't been in touch since you and I last saw him at Fort Street."

That bothered John. "You'll call him with this news?"

"No way to reach him. He's left his phone behind."

John was puzzling that one out. He'd never known Sherlock to be without his phone.

The DI pinched the bridge of his nose. "I was hoping that he'd been in touch with you." Greg threw the pencil on the desk in frustration. "This is just so…wrong. You, not knowing anything. I can understand him keeping Mycroft out of it, but you. The whole damn thing is just a mess."

John thought about it. Then, coolly, he gave an exaggerated shrug and got up from the chair. "Not my problem anymore. He clearly doesn't want to work with me, and he can't be bothered to tell me what is going on now that I'm no further use to him."

He was half way to the door by the time Greg was on his feet and growling, "Now hold on one bloody minute, John."

John turned back at the door. "Just leave it, Detective Inspector. No crime, no further interest—you said it."

The door was half way open by the time Lestrade came up behind John and reached around him, to slam it shut. The metal slats of the blind rattled against the glass. "You're going nowhere; not until you get something straight."

John didn't like being intimidated and Lestrade was using his height advantage, crowding into John's personal space. He snapped, "I said, LEAVE IT! You have no reason to keep me here, and I've done my bit. Should have listened to Sherlock and kept out of this entirely. It was a total waste of time and energy. We're done here." He reached for the door handle again.

"Dammit, John. Stop this! I swear…" Greg leaned on the door, using his weight to keep it shut as John tried to open it. He could see that Lestrade was angry, but then so was John. It was a stand-off.

"Christ Almighty, I should just handcuff you two together again and leave you to work it out."

John turned around to face him. "Work what out? There's nothing to work out. He buggered off and pranced around the world for two years being the world's only undercover consulting detective. Then he swans back in here as if nothing ever happened. Adding insult to injury, he manipulates me into saying that I've forgiven him, making it into one big joke at my expense. Then he actually deigns to say 'sorry', as if he could pat me on the head and make it all better. Only, no it's actually worse. He doesn't want to work together again, which he makes abundantly clear, rubbing my nose it over the
past three weeks- even to the extent of humiliating me at the crime scene on Saturday. I'm no use to him now- just a burden to be pulled out of a fire. I'm beginning to understand all what he wants from me is to make him feel like the hero again. Well, I'm not going to do it. And he knows it, which is why he wants nothing further to do with me." By the time he finished, John was shouting at Greg. During the tirade, Lestrade had backed away until he could lean up against the side of his desk. His arms were crossed – but not defensively, rather in a gesture that matched the patient expression on his face.

"You done?"

"Yeah, I am. With both of you. I won't cross your threshold again, Detective Inspector. And if Sherlock ever bothers to get in touch with you, tell him that he's right off our Christmas card list."

"Go on, then. Run home to your fiancé. Snuggle up to the comfort of the woman who loves you. After all, you're just so much better at dealing with emotions than Sherlock is, aren't you? All grown up and mature, ready to make the big commitment to settling down and raising a family, without a backward glance to the man who gave you the chance to put yourself back together again after Afghanistan."

"How DARE you?!" John exploded.

"I dare because I happen to care about Sherlock- and about you, too. You're both idiots. Only as self-centred as he is, at least he has more of an excuse. It's not easy for him to make friends."

"He doesn't have friends, hasn't he told you that? He's certainly told me." John gave the word the same disdain that Sherlock had used on Dartmoor.

Greg just snorted. "Oh, and you just are so much better at it! Well, let me remind you that I'm not the one who for almost two years refused to return my calls to you. I'm not the one who moved away and tried to cold shoulder every overture of friendship or comfort that was on offer to you. Nope, I'm not the one who turned down every invitation to have a pint and catch up on how life was treating you. Even if you hate my guts, I'm not the one who dropped every single one of the other people who cared for you- Mrs Hudson, Molly, even Mike Stamford, one of your oldest friends."

He drew a breath and then continued in a quieter tone, "Sherlock left you behind, he left all of us behind to keep us alive, to protect us. At some considerable personal cost, which you haven't even had the decency to ask him about. You, on the other hand, you dropped us without a good reason. If it weren't for Mary, you'd be more alone than he is."

"This is outrageous. I'm not going to stand here and be lectured at by you."

"I never thought you were a coward. But if running away lets you pretend that this is all someone else's fault, well, I can't stop you."

John shut the door again and turned to face Lestrade. "You'd better explain that statement. I don't take too kindly to being called a coward."

Greg stood up and dropped his arms by his side. "Be careful, John. You think getting married will solve everything- fill up that hole in you. It won't. I've been there, done that, got the scars to show for it with my ex. No one can live up to that kind of pressure, not Mary, not even Sherlock."

"You're still beating him up about leaving you behind. Because you don't want to admit that you needed him more than he needed you. So, you smash him up on the first occasion he meets you, and throw Mary in his face. And he's paying the price. I've known Sherlock when he was so far down
and out that it was a miracle he didn't succeed in an overdose. And he's worse now, worse than he's ever been. But you don't seem to give a damn. He's been missing for over sixty hours. No one can find him. All I can think, all I can hope right now, is that he's holed up somewhere bingeing on drugs. It's a horrible thought, but at least it would mean he's alive. You know him, John. Just put your bloody pride away and think about it."

John looked away from Lestrade. "Yeah, that's true. I know him." As he opened the door and started through, he muttered, "You're right. I can't stop thinking. I really, really wish I could."
Three men came out of the door, their breath clouding in the cold night air. They lingered for just a moment under the cone of light cast from a single lamp over the entrance, their features caught for a moment before they stepped away into the darkness. The camaraderie and banter in their tone carried across the street to the car park to where a certain observer was watching. Two of the men peeled off, crossed the road and cut-through the few remaining parked vehicles, on their way to the stairs leading up to the Docklands Light Railway. The last trains to the east and west from the Blackwall station would depart in under thirty minutes. Safe in his shadowed vantage point, the observer measured their progress away from the premises of the London Shootfighter Gym.

Then the light went out, as the gym closed up shop right on the dot of half past midnight. Sherlock watched as the last of the men slung his kit bag onto his shoulder and made his way under the Poplar Flyover, heading south towards Trafalgar Way and Canary Wharf. Sherlock had come from that direction, having parked the Norton at the Ibis Hotel, which was surprisingly busy- mid-week business guests used it before morning meetings in the financial institutions that had infested Canary Wharf like fleas. A walk underneath the flyover had brought him to his hidden vantage point where he could keep an eye on the comings and goings at the gym.

He'd got there early so he could watch. But waiting was proving tedious. He felt the friction of his clothes against his skin, the scent of the cars passing overhead stung his nose. Sherlock knew he needed all of his wits about him, so he'd not turned to the morphine that had dulled the irritation of his senses for the past three nights. His fingers beat a twitchy rhythm of anxiety as he watched the last of the clients leave the gym.

The London Shootfighter premises were in a modern office block on the edge of the Poplar Business Park. Unlike the club's west end gyms, which were more in the old-fashioned spit and sawdust fighting venues, this was a modern facility. His texted invitation said he was to arrive at one a.m. but he couldn't wait any longer. Standing still was becoming impossible; his nerves were building up and he decided that waiting was a mug's game. He'd sneak in. If he got caught, so what? He was starting to itch for a fight. If he couldn't dull the pain, then he'd inflict some.

As Sherlock picked the lock of the front door, he realised that the actual exercise floor would be underground; only the now unmanned reception would be taking up valuable retail frontage on the surface. The reception was empty, dark and silent. No security cameras in operation. If there were alarms, they'd been turned off- probably because someone would be coming to open up for him in another half hour. He vaulted the barrier, ignoring the swipe card entry system that was used to track the comings and goings of the gym members. Then he walked past the lift, turning instead to the door marked 'Emergency Exit'. He pulled the small spray can out of the pocket of his hoodie, beneath the leather bike jacket.

Sherlock carefully sprayed the hinges and the lock area with WD40, to make sure that it opened silently. He went down two flights of dark stairs, using his pocket torch, then sprayed the push bar on the metal door at the bottom, as well as the hinges and lock. Once the can was back in his pocket, he very, very slowly opened the door a crack and peered in.

The exercise floor was indeed large- at least four times the floor-plate of the ground level. The lights had been switched off at his end, probably to save money. Was the club being used by the Fight Club promoter, or was he an owner of the gym, supplementing his legitimate income with a little bit of action on the side? The parsimony on lighting argued for the latter.

Through the narrow gap, Sherlock spotted doors on the wall opposite his position- probably the way
into locker rooms, steam and sauna rooms, maybe a treatment room for sports massages. The wooden floor at his end of the gym was strewn with mattresses and exercise mats, taped marks on the floor showed him that this area was used mostly for training sessions.

At the far end of the room, in a pool of light, three men were working inside a traditional boxing ring. Sprung canvas over a wooden floor raised to a height of a meter, the ring was designed to ensure an audience would be able to see the footwork of the combatants. Two of the men in the ring were clearly fighters, the third was older and probably a coach. All of them were concentrating on the task at hand, so he slipped into the room and let the door close very quietly behind him. Then he moved to his left until he reached the set of bars on the wall. He knew that his dark clothing would blend in with them, and give him some cover from a casual glance in this direction.

The two fighters were wearing judogis, the traditional gear of eastern martial arts, and their feet were bare. Even at this distance, Sherlock could tell the difference between the two men. One was a little shorter and a bit lighter in weight. He also moved with less confidence. From their stance, Sherlock could tell that these fighters were proficient in jiu jitsu; the Brazilians had done much to popularise the traditional Japanese teaching structure of judo. They circled each other closely inside the twenty foot square, totally focused on trying to spot a weakness to exploit. Suddenly, the shorter one moved even closer in, his left arm feinting a grab at the taller fighter's elbow. Then, as the attempt at a joint lock was blocked, he tried to slip behind the man, and throw his right arm across the other fighter's chest and up to the back of his neck- what in wrestling would be called a half nelson. It made Sherlock smirk- MMA had led a lot of fighters to mix up techniques borrowed from wrestling.

The defending fighter just batted his attacker's arm away and then caught it in a firm grip, before spinning and leveraging the trapped joint downwards. Overbalanced, the slighter man went down on one knee, allowing himself to then be pushed onto the floor. In that moment the attacker now became the defender- and he tried to convert the move into a throw, to bring the older man down with him. But it didn't work, as his opponent put his forearm against the other's throat and leaned down with his full body weight. The shorter man slapped the canvass twice. The winner released his hold and stood up, laughing.

The coach moved back into the centre of the ring and started talking, his voice just carrying to where Sherlock was listening.

"Dammit, Jones, you'll have to do better than that if you expect to last more than a minute or two." His East End accent sounded like some cliché.

Jones stood up and shook his shoulders. "He got lucky. Let's try again." In sharp contrast, his accent was posh public school- very SW1. From his voice, Sherlock estimated him as being in his early thirties.

"I wouldn't bother; you won't win."

All three men in the ring turned as one at the sound of the baritone voice coming out of the darkness. The coach recovered first. "Who's there?"

Sherlock moved off the far wall and started walking toward the lit end of the gym. "Your one o'clock appointment."

"You're early."

Before Sherlock could reply, the coach followed up with another question. "How the fuck did you get in? The door was locked."
Now closer to the light, Sherlock's smirk was probably visible. "You might want to improve your locksmith and security; this place is far too easy to break into."

"The banker said you were an arrogant sod. Get up 'ere and let me take a look at you."

Sherlock slipped under the tensioned rope, and in one fluid motion was on his feet. The younger fighter was glaring at him; the older was more wary.

"What's yer name?" The coach was eyeing him speculatively.

He rolled his eyes. "Does that matter? None of yours are likely to be real."

The older fighter laughed. "You've got some attitude, mister." He sounded American- East Coast, but exactly where was harder to place.

Sherlock shrugged. "Call me Will. And I'll use the last name of Power."

The younger fighter spoke up for the first time. "What are you here for, Willy?"

Sherlock didn't even look at him, but walked up to the coach, who was still eyeing him. The man gestured at the biker's jacket- "take that off and the shoes. Let's take a look at you."

Sherlock obeyed, stripping off the hoodie, too. Underneath, he wore a simple black T shirt, over a pair of jogging pants. He toed off the trainers; he wasn't wearing any socks. He pushed the clothes off the platform.

"Weight?"

"Seventy two kilos, the last time I bothered to weigh myself."

The coach sniffed. "That was a while ago; you're lighter now." He looked at the other two fighters- "right between this pair."

He walked around Sherlock, who stood looking at the older fighter. The younger one seemed annoyed by that, and flexed his knees, then snapped out "This jerk is eating into my prep time. Get him out of the ring and let's carry on."

Sherlock shook his head, still watching the older fighter. "I don't think so."

The coach was ignoring their exchange. "Where do you fight at the moment?"

"I've been back in the country less than a month. In any case, I'm not a joiner of any club."

The older fighter was sizing him up. "What discipline?"

Sherlock's smile was inscrutable. "None, and yet all."

The coach snorted. "Trying to sound like some Zen master?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Not unless you speak Japanese, Chinese or Tibetan, which I rather doubt."

"And you do?" The American asked mildly, flexing his muscles; the gym was cooling down- another money saving measure, no doubt.

The coach had seen enough. "Right- the Banker says you want a go this Friday. The only way that's going to happen is if you beat Jonesy here. And, after him, then you'll have to last ten minutes with
the Dervish.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "I'd rather just cut to the chase. Forget the novice. There's no chance he's going to win."

Jones bristled. "I've been preparing for this Friday for months, boyo." When he was cross, the posh accent slipped back into a Welsh undercurrent. Sherlock recognised him as a scholarship boy, probably at a second tier public school and redbrick university. A chip on his shoulder to match.

As if he could hear Sherlock's thinking, Jones growled, "And no one is going to stop me, least of all you." He was pissed off and angry, and he glowered at the coach. "You promised I would get my chance; I've paid you enough for this."

The older man just laughed. "You'll get your money back if you get beaten. Think of it as a consolation prize." The Dervish slipped through the ropes and then dropped onto the floor.

Sherlock pushed his slicked down hair back off his forehead—no need to tempt someone to pull it to gain an advantage. The effect made his face even more angular, his eyes hooded, like a raptor. "Rules?"

The coach replied, "No gouging, no fists to the head or the groin. No strikes to the windpipe; blood choke holds only. Shootfighting bouts are ten minutes long. If at any point, you're knocked out for a count of ten, it's over. Five take-downs to win. If you're down and can grab a rope, it counts as a third of a submission. Last the ten minutes without a victory and it's a draw, no matter who's ahead on points."

Sherlock smirked, "How very…civilised."

Jones was now bouncing, trying to warm up the muscles that had been cooling down while they are talking. He tightened the belt around his white jacket and set his face to glower. As the coach clambered off the ring, he started to circle Sherlock, who had yet to assume a martial arts stance. The taller man stood, utterly relaxed, in sharp contrast to the tight muscled fighter circling. A gentle smile played on his lips, and he did not turn as the younger man moved behind him.

When Jones charged forward to grab him from behind, Sherlock seemed to move faster than his opponent had calculated, who was left grasping at thin air. As his momentum took him past the spot where his opponent no longer stood, Jones's weight was for a second all on his right foot—the one which Sherlock swept out from under him, with a well-placed kick to the ankle.

As Jones ploughed down onto the canvass, Sherlock's smile broadened. He didn't follow up with a ground manoeuvre. It was more humiliating to allow the Welshman to regain his feet. Jones' face showed his rage. Once again, he circled—this time keeping a little more distance between him and his opponent. He threw two quick kicks, text-book taekwando. Trouble was, Sherlock had simply moved himself out of the place where Jones had aimed. He kept smiling, relaxed and calm. The contrast with Jones was stark. The more he tried to grapple, the more Sherlock avoided him. And it made the Welshman angrier at each failed manoeuvre. He clearly wanted to get into a clinch, and to get Sherlock onto the ground. But every attempt was blocked or simply avoided. At each attempt at a strike, the taller man meted out a punishment— a blow on one of the pressure points on the younger man's wrists, ankles, shoulders. By three minutes in, Sherlock was grinning, and Jones' face was bright red—anger and embarrassment combined.

Jones' attacks became more and more extravagant. The coach finally spoke up—"For God's sake—put him out of his misery!" The American sniggered.
The next time the Welshman came near, Sherlock's left hand flicked at his cheek and was rewarded by the man taking his eye off of his taller opponent. An open right hand became a fist at the last moment, in a move that was blindingly fast, and delivered as Sherlock twisted his body and shifted his weight onto the right foot. From what looked to be an impossible angle, his fist connected with the younger man's solar plexus, and there was an audible gasp as the force drove the air out of his lungs and paralysed his diaphragm muscle. He staggered back three steps, and then collapsed onto his knees in a heap of gasps. He raised his hands, and was still gasping as Sherlock walked over to the side of the ring where the two men were watching. He leaned on the ropes and said to the American, "your turn." He was still smiling.

The coach came onto the ring with the other fighter. He gave a hand to Jones, helping him up. "Just try to keep your head down; it's going to be hard to breathe for a couple of hours."

The American shed his judogi jacket, and in that gesture, made it clear that he was prepared to do more than the standard throw and joint lock strategy. This was a different kind of opponent, and Sherlock gave him more respect. This time, he moved in a circle, keeping his distance, waiting for a move. The two men were more evenly matched, at least in terms of height. The Dervish was a semi-professional- obviously spent hours working out in a gym, and he probably weighed at least twenty pounds more than Sherlock. His fists were kept locked in the position used in karate and Muay Thai.

Sherlock used the adrenaline from the first fight to push his senses into a state of hyper-awareness, grateful again that he had avoided the morphine. He could see muscles tensing, pupils dilating well in advance of the American starting to unleash a rapid fire series of kicks and punches. At each point of potential contact, Sherlock was able to block the first set of moves, deflecting and transferring the energy of the other man's attack away from him. But then the American managed to grapple and take advantage of his weight told, managing to land a series of body blows to his lower back that unbalanced Sherlock. In the next moment, he'd managed to slip an arm around Sherlock's neck and was starting to execute a carotid choke hold: a classic Hadaka-jime of Kodokan Judo in the Shime-waza list. As black spots began to dance in front of his eyes, Sherlock brought his hands together, elbows parallel to the floor and then brought them to his own forehead, snapping his head back violently into his attacker's face. It broke the hold and he moved off. The American kept his balance and moved off, nodding to himself. He was assessing Sherlock's abilities, just as he was being tested.

Because his opponent was experienced, none of the tactics he'd used against Jones were likely to work, so Sherlock dropped his centre of gravity and moved into a stance that was unusual.

Down on the floor level, Jones had recovered enough to turn to the coach. "What the fuck? This guy thinks he's Bruce Lee?"

To help cement the impression, Sherlock began to move his hands in swirling gestures that were unpredictable. The coach supplied the recognition that he wanted. "That's Wing Chun. Watch it, Dervish."

Thank you. Sherlock let his face go neutral, knowing that the American would now make a series of assumptions about who he was fighting and how best to defend himself. "The art of offense is to fool the opponent" was how the abbot had explained it. Sherlock had learned a lot about fighting while he was away.

His visual acuity caught the tensing of the American's thigh muscles, preparing for a kick. Time seemed to slow as he watched the man's weight shift onto his back foot, and the leg start to lift. He felt like he had all the time in the world to calculate that specific moment when the fighter would be too committed to the kick to be able to react to what was about to happen. Sherlock knew something that the American did not, that it was not possible to process simultaneously an opponent's
movements in three separate planes.

As the man's leg lifted for another kick, Sherlock darted his left hand to the side, drawing his opponent's eye for the briefest of moments. It was enough to allow him to step inside the kick and then deliver the first of three elliptical open hand blows. He struck the femoral artery pressure point on the leg that was carrying the American's weight. As his leg lost sensation and blood flow, the resulting wobble allowed Sherlock to come within striking distance of the arm that was now trying to block and defend. A rapid blow on the bicep muscle to stun it was followed by a grab at the man's wrist. In a split second he had rotated it into an impossible position, whilst taking the back of the fighter's neck in his other hand. He then shifted his own centre of gravity, pulled and turned, using the American's own forward momentum to bring his abdomen into Sherlock's own sharply uplifted knee, while his right hand shifted from the wrist to the man's jaw, wrenching it hard to the left, leaving the man unable to see. He shoved down and the fighter started to crumple, as Sherlock spun him and lifted his knee again, catching him hard across the ribs as he fell. He then continued the rotation over the fallen figure, only pulling his kick at the last minute away from the back of the American's head.

As he walked away toward where the coach and Jones were watching in stunned silence, Sherlock said calmly, "If this was a real fight, he'd now be dead."

The American groaned. "Jee, thanks." He sat up and then gasped in pain.

"That is a grade three rectus abdominus muscle tear, caused by the rotation of your body as I hit it. You'll be out of action for a couple of weeks." Sherlock faced the ashen faced coach. "I'll take his place this Friday."

"What the hell was that, and where did you learn it?" the coach spluttered.

As Sherlock came off the elevated ring, he replied, "It's called Systema Spetsnaz, based on something developed by the Cossacks in the 10th century. And I learned it because I've rarely had the luxury of fighting against a single opponent." He smiled, "it's not the only trick up my sleeve. Now that the odds are so much more in my favour, something tells me I am going to enjoy my Friday nights."

He stepped back into his trainers, picked up the hoody and the leather jacket. That had felt better than drugs, almost as good as solving a case. And he hadn't thought once about John Watson during the fight.

"Text me the location and time." Sherlock then walked back into the darkness.
Mary was taking Thursday afternoon off. The GP practice manager was relaxed about it. "You've been such a good influence on Doctor Watson's attendance over the past six months that I can't argue if you want to take some personal time."

*Personal time.* That's what she needed if they were ever going to get this wedding sorted. Monday was supposed to have been the day they both went to scout venues, but she'd been more than happy to sacrifice it to John's investigation down in Reigate. The whole episode with Colonel Hayter had opened her eyes to another side of the man she loved. The blogs about his past exploits were all well and good, but they didn't do justice to him, always putting Sherlock's skills on show, at the expense of his own. She could understand why Sherlock had told John that he must have missed the "thrill of the chase"- Lord knows, it was the same for her. She'd been willing to sacrifice the adrenaline kicks for the stability of a normal life, but it didn't stop her from missing it at times. So, she'd encouraged John to do his own investigations. To be honest, she enjoyed being a part of it. Nursing did not use enough of her brain.

They'd talked on their way back up to London from Reigate, putting Colonel Hayter's explanation through the wringer. Could he be trusted? John was certain he could. Her own experience made her a little more cautious about accepting people at face value. That said, the puzzle pieces fit together rather well. She wondered what Sherlock would make of it.

When they got back to Victoria Station, John sent her home. "No need for both of us to clog up Lestrade's office. You put your feet up and try to salvage what you can of the rest of the day. I'm sorry to take you so far out of London on this wild goose chase."

But he'd come home from his detour to New Scotland Yard in *such* a mood that it had taken her ages to get him talking again. He went all quiet for the rest of the evening, no matter what she tried to entice him out of his shell. The one time she'd asked him if he was going to pass on the news of their findings to Sherlock, he'd just snapped at her, "Don't *you* start. I don't want to talk about it."

He'd been so *volatile* since Sherlock's return. Once the extraordinary events of his first two weeks back receded, John had become more and more taciturn and withdrawn. At first a tease had been enough to get him talking about Sherlock. Now it was like pulling blood from a stone.

And yet she knew it was important to get him talking. She'd meant what she said to Sherlock. She was determined to bring John around not just to forgiving him, but to actually working with him again. Mary *loved* John. She knew what Sherlock meant to him. Now that she'd met Sherlock herself, and seen the two of them together, she could understand why he'd been so distressed by the loss.

But since the initial flurry of the reunion, something had gone wrong, and their inability to sort things out kept worrying her. *Bloody men!* Talking about emotions and dealing with them just didn't seem to come hard-wired in the gender. Still, she kept plugging away. If only Sherlock would co-operate by making an effort to involve John, she was sure that they could re-kindled the spark that had once driven their relationship. Without that life-line of challenge and danger, John would not be whole, nor would he really be content with a quiet life with her. It just wasn't in him. Recognising a kindred spirit, Mary worried at times that she too would find a normal life too restrictive. Still, it wasn't like she had a choice. For her, it was retire and hide, or die. She was determined to let John have what he needed. She could be happy if he was, and she knew that Sherlock was part of that happiness. Now that she knew Sherlock was no threat to her, she had relaxed.
She was lost in these thoughts as she headed out of the surgery on the fifteen minute walk to the tube station. Even so, instincts take a long time to disappear. Some reflex pulled her attention back to the here and now, so she stopped at a shop window, pretending to look at something in the display. In fact, she was using the reflection to scan the street and pavement behind her.

Yes! A black car was following her. She'd seen it twice since leaving the surgery. In fact, it was no longer making an effort to disguise its presence. She turned to face the car as the driver pulled into the parking space beside where she was standing. The front passenger door opened and a dark-haired young woman, a little bit younger than she was, got out and smiled. "Miss Morstan. Would you be so kind as to get into the car?"

Every instinct in Mary screamed FLEE! Whoever was demanding her presence knew her name. The skip code, John in the bonfire- all of the fears that she'd quietly parked over the past few weeks, thinking that it was something to do with Sherlock- all of that came screaming back into mind. Was her cover blown? Had some former enemy found her? Struck dumb, she froze.

The woman gave her a reassuring smile, and said, "We can drop you back at your flat. It really won't take long."

Mary managed to find her tongue. "Who are you?" She tried to keep her tone of voice calm. For the first time since she'd abandoned her profession, she keenly felt the absence of her weapon.

"I'm not important. The man I work for is. Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's brother."

Oh! John had not explained much about Sherlock's brother. There was no mention of him on the blog; he'd just said the elder Holmes described himself as a 'minor civil servant'. By the way he carefully stepped around any detail, Mary figured that he might be something in intelligence- but exactly what was not clear.

On the one hand, this wasn't someone likely to shoot first and not bother to ask questions. On the other hand, from what little John had said about the elder Holmes, attracting his attention was probably not a good idea. She prayed that it might be something as innocent as wanting to know what was going on between John and Sherlock. Perhaps it would be safest just to go along for the ride. Or could she manufacture an excuse to get out of it, buying herself time to find out more.

As if reading her mind, the woman said. "I can assure you that any attempt to avoid this conversation will provoke an even greater interest in you than he is already showing. And if you were to try to ignore this request, the next time it won't be phrased as a request."

Mary knew she was caught. If she ran now, she'd have to explain why. While her cover was meticulously well built, it was a fabrication. The identity, the life she was building away from what she had once been- all of it was on the line. And she had fought too long to lose it all, just because Sherlock's older brother was getting nosey.

Her decision made, she gave the woman a smile she didn't actually feel and walked to the back door, opened it and got in.

As she pulled it shut, the door gave a very solid clunk shut. She recognised the sound of armoured-plating, and her estimation of Mycroft Holmes' importance went up several notches. Not a minor civil servant then- someone rating a driver in a secure car was not some backroom analyst.

"Miss Morstan."

She looked at him and saw little physical resemblance between the two brothers other than their
height and perhaps a certain keenness of eye. She kept silent, waiting for him to make the first move.

As the silence lengthened, his left eyebrow raised a bit. "Of course, we both know that isn't actually your name, but it will do for the moment."

_Oh, shit._ Yet, even as she thought that, she was also controlling her breathing, so that none of her shock or fear would be evident. She'd lived for years in dangerous situations by appearing to be something she wasn't. Time to exercise those skills again.

Calmly, even with an air of casual nonchalance, she asked, "so what can I do for you, Mister Holmes?" _The fact that she wasn't being handcuffed, arrested and frog-marched into a detention cell said that even if her cover had been blown wide open, the man sitting next to her on the leather back seat of the government car was prepared to treat her differently. And that meant _negotiation_. What did she have that he wanted?

"Yes. As you have just realised, if I did know the whole truth and nothing but the truth about you already, then we probably wouldn't be having this conversation."

Again, she waited._ Make him show his hand._

He glanced at her with a slightly bored air. "Until Sherlock returned, your business was yours, and that of your fiancé, John Watson. Neither of you were a matter of national or personal interest to me, I can assure you." He sounded like the very idea was repugnant.

She found her tongue. "But now that he's back from the dead, things are different. Well, resurrections have that effect."

"Yes. I currently have a dearth of information about you that might prove important to my brother. But for me to be motivated to look more deeply into your past, and to reveal that to either or both John and my brother, well- that depends on you, Miss Morstan. You could make yourself…useful."

She kept her eyes forward, watching the traffic. On the other side of the soundproofed privacy screen, she could see the woman working on a blackberry.

"And what would I have to do to keep you unmotivated to dig too deeply or reveal to either of those two what you might find, if you could be bothered to?" She kept her tone light, almost playful.

"Find Sherlock."

That surprised her. "Why _me_?" She gestured to the car and the people in the front seat. "He's your brother, after all. You have plenty of resources, by the look of things."

"Alas, none of them have John Watson's ear. And I do believe that the good doctor is key to getting my brother out of _mission mode_ and back into civilian life. He seems to be having some trouble settling back into a normal routine."

She gave the elder Holmes a wry smile. "I've actually had the same thought about John- he's unsettled at the moment. He's…sulking a bit, kind of pissed off and angry at Sherlock on the surface. Deeper down, what _really_ makes him angry is that he'd not asked him to work on any cases since the Tube bomb. He thinks Sherlock doesn't _need_ him anymore."

"I can assure you that he does, even though my brother's current behaviour is attempting to suggest the opposite. The more Sherlock needs help, the less likely he is to seek it. It's the story of his life. Before you arrived on the scene, my brother _was_ better for having John Watson around. That might be true again. Of course, some might think of you as an obstacle to the two re-establishing their
"But you don't belong in that camp, do you, Mister Holmes?"

"No, I know my brother too well."

"And I know John. Whatever others might think, the truth is simpler, if rarer: a friendship that is not definable. I'm not jealous, for a very good reason. Over the past month, I have caught glimpses of the person that John must have been when he was working with Sherlock - and I found that I love that man even more than the one I first fell for. Sherlock brings out the best in John. On the first night I met him, I promised Sherlock I would try to get John to realise that fact, and that I would bring him round to a reconciliation."

"Then consider this conversation as a meeting of minds, Miss Morstan. I am prepared to make an arrangement with you. Make progress on delivering your promise. Find Sherlock. By all means, get Doctor Watson to help you - that makes it far more likely that Sherlock will come out of hiding. And while you are doing that, I will restrain my curiosity."

The car had turned onto the street where the flat was. Mary smirked. "How convenient. You must have timed this discussion to get to the punch line so perfectly."

When the car pulled up, she got out. Once on the pavement, she looked back in. "Provided you keep your end of the bargain, Mister Holmes, we have a deal."

Mary shut the car door and went up the stairs to the flat's entrance. Only once she was in the hall and the door was safely closed behind her, she leaned up against the wall, closed her eyes and drew in a shaky breath. She now had even more incentive. John's well-being was not the only thing on the line now; so was her own, and their future together. Sherlock, where are you?
As he drove into the parking garage under the flat, Greg's eye was caught by the yellow note stuck on the dashboard. It was there to remind him of something that he'd forgotten for the last three nights, when he'd finally managed to get home after yet another late night session about the most recent robbery by the Waters Gang. Somehow, despite all the meticulous efforts of his team, the second case against them had collapsed three months before, and on Tuesday the last of the burglars' accomplices still held on remand was released. Yesterday and the day before, he'd been hauled over the coals by the Chief Superintendent of Detectives about the recent bank job- it was clearly the Waters Gang- yet NO evidence had been found when the police got to the crime scene. Tonight had been his turn to give his team a blistering assessment of their collective stupidity.

He hated bollocking anyone; it wasn't his management style- but the third failure in eighteen months was just eating a hole in the clear up record of his team. It was bad enough to realise that when Sherlock was away, he'd not managed to close anything like as many cases. That made him and team look bad. And even when he and Donovan had been praised for their recent work with the Tilbury case, it wasn't their case originally. *You're only as good as your latest failure.*

So he let some of his frustration out when he called the team together at the close of business on Friday. "I know you're all thinking about enjoying the weekend. But, I want you to spend some time trying to figure out how we're going to catch these thieving bastards. The Waters Gang has the best paid criminal lawyers in the country. God knows, with the hauls they've been bringing in, they can afford it. But, that's no excuse for giving them the keys to the cell doors by shoddy police work. So, I want your ideas on my desk, Monday morning."

He watched Sally Donovan's face harden. If anything, she was more cross than he was about the most recent fiasco. He figured if he gave them grief tonight, by Monday the team would have recovered their equilibrium and come up with something new.

As he reversed into his numbered slot, took the car out of gear, put the handbrake on and got out, he nearly forgot again to take the note with him, only catching it out of the corner of his eye as he started to lock the car. The key fob was working now, unlike last Saturday night, which was a relief. The batteries for it cost a lot for what they were- and it would need a trip to the police garage to get it sorted.

Greg reached into the car and pulled the stickie out, slapping it onto his coat's left sleeve. Better sort it now instead of being reminded yet again when he tried and failed to pull the drawer of the kitchen cupboard open to get a teaspoon out to stir his morning coffee. The metal runners were not working properly, and he needed to apply a bit of WD40 to get it open again, but had discovered that his can was empty. Tomorrow and Sunday he really didn't want to have to go shopping at the hardware store. Greg knew that he had a nearly full one in the lock-up where he kept his motorbike- he just had to remember to take it upstairs with him.

So, he walked across the car park to the wall of lock-ups. As he bent down to insert the key into the lock, Greg wondered when he'd get the chance to take the Norton out again. One of the frustrations about late November weather was that it meant he didn't really get the opportunity to enjoy it much. All too often it was either pissing with rain or the roads were slick with black ice- hardly an attractive prospect. He promised to look at the weather report tonight, and choose when it would be best. He fancied a spin this weekend; it could help clear his mind.

He flipped up the cantilevered door and reached in to the right wall to flip the light switch.
And then stopped, looking at the blank space where his beloved Norton motorbike was supposed to be.

The air exploded with cursing. Some motherfucker had the gall to steal his bike. HIS bike-a detective's bike! He marched into the little room and glared at the empty space. That's when he saw the license number plate, leaning neatly on the shelf half way up the wall. And the bastard had the balls to put a new plate on it, too. That annoyed him even more. It would be harder to trace if ANPR couldn't be used. He groaned in frustration. The damn bike was a collector's item and if it had been stolen to order, it could be halfway out of the country by now, or even gone for good, as he tried to remember the last time he'd been into the lock up and seen it there.

It was definitely after Sherlock had returned. Greg had come to think of that as "before and after"-such a water-shed moment that it penetrated his conscious calendar. He sighed, rubbing his eyes. Of all the buggering things to have to do tonight, filling in a stolen vehicle form at the nearest police station on St Anne's Road was not one he relished. Friday night nightmare- drunks, domestics, and to make matters worse, a Friday night football match at White Hart Lane would be complicating the local constabulary's lives.

Maybe it would be better just to go in tomorrow. No need to add a couple of hours of nuisance to his already horrid day. He started to turn back to the light switch, fumbling in his pocket for the key again, when the yellow stickie note on his coat sleeve accused him of neglect. Sighing again, he remembered the original reason for coming into the lockup. Greg returned to the tool box on the shelf, rummaging in it to find the spray can of WD40.

It, too, was missing. What thief takes a spray can of oil? He was sure he had one down here. Maybe it was in the metal locker at the back, where he kept his leathers and helmet.

Greg opened it and stared in disbelief. The helmet and the jacket were missing. The trousers were still there, as was the pair of biker boots. What thief takes a jacket and helmet, but leaves the rest behind?

One who plans on riding the bike out of the garage, wearing what someone would recognise as going with that bike. Someone who didn't come with his own gear. Someone who knew him well enough to know that the stuff would fit him, or at least the jacket and helmet, but not the trousers or boots.

Realisation dawned. Who do I know that has shoulders nearly as broad as mine, but who is a lot slimmer? The trousers would fall off Sherlock. And the younger man had big feet- a size eleven-compared to Greg's nine and a half. It had always amused him that despite Sherlock's genius, Greg's helmet fit him like it was made for him. "I always thought you had a swelled head; guess it's just metaphorical rather than physical," he had teased. The last nail in the circumstantial evidence was that unlike a common-or-garden variety motorcycle thief, Sherlock had form when it came to 'borrowing' Greg's bike.

"You bastard." This time, he really meant it. Just Sherlock's MO, too. While the whole damn world was out looking for the man, thinking he was lying low in some unknown bolt-hole, he'd just "borrow" Greg's bike and swan about town, totally incognito.

So, what to do with this information? In theory, he should call Mycroft now, so he could get his people to work; the security teams would be able to scour the footage of the cameras nearest the flat and eventually get the bike's new plates. Then the man-hunt would begin. He sighed at the thought. Mycroft had form as much as Sherlock did. In their current situation, Greg knew that the elder Holmes would be trying to get his brother into a secure institution "for his own good."
That thought made Greg hesitate from calling. He didn't really want to side with Mycroft, given past experience. He'd always tried to see Sherlock's point of view when things went hay-wired. Maybe he should phone John Watson instead? He started to scroll down his phone list for the new number, but then stopped. While the doctor had been the go-to-person for Sherlock in the past, it was clear that their relationship was not yet back to normal.

He groaned in frustration- neither he nor anyone else of Sherlock's old support network seemed able to make the him slow down and talk sense. As daft as John Watson was acting these days about Sherlock, Greg thought that Sherlock was being just as bad. No, actually worse. Watson had his fiancé to keep him on an even keel. Since Sherlock had got back, no one seemed able to reach the man. Watching his behaviour at Tilbury, and then again at Fort Street, it was like he was still on some undercover assignment. It wasn't hard for Greg to imagine how Sherlock must have been acting when he was taking down yet another part of Moriarty's network. *It's like he's not come home yet.*

He found himself staring at the dark greasy stain on the lockup floor. He'd spilled the oil years ago when stripping down the engine, and never been able to shift the patch from the cement. The sight of it brought his thoughts back to practical things. Greg figured that Sherlock would want to keep using the Norton- and that meant he'd try to get it back to the garage sometime tonight. Greg was most likely to want to ride it on the weekend, and Sherlock wouldn't want to risk him finding it missing. He switched on his phone and flicked through to a weather report. The optimum time for a ride would be tomorrow morning, so he guessed that Sherlock would have seen that, deduced the risk and would definitely try to get it back tonight.

There was a folding metal chair in the back of the lock-up, because he'd gotten to the stage that he needed to sit down when getting the trousers and boots on. He opened the chair up and positioned it right where the bike should be parked. He then found the little two bar heater he used to keep the room warm when he was working on the bike, plugging it in and watching the coils start to glow red. Greg then closed the door, switched off the light and felt his way to the chair. Sitting down, he crossed his arms. *I'll wait all night if I have to, Sherlock.*
Simon Waterman flinched as he watched the Devonshire fighter take yet another body blow. His lip was already cut and bleeding from an earlier right jab. The new man taking the place of the Dervish this week had managed three take-downs so far of his Cunningham challenger, but he’d paid a price each time with punishment meted out first before he was able to use the bigger man’s momentum against him. Oddly, it seemed to be the Devonshire Devil’s style—lure the guy into a closer clinch, fooling him into thinking that it would be the decisive manoeuvre. In the process he willingly suffered an initial blow that might have felled a lesser opponent, before turning it to his advantage by taking the man down in a dramatic throw. It had worked very well for the first three times, but now the weight differential was beginning to tell on the weaker man. The bald-headed Cunningham Crusher had a neck like a tree-trunk and a torso of highly developed muscle that just seemed to absorb every well aimed blow and kick that the Devil delivered. It would be a race to see if he could manage two more take-downs before the toll on his own body made it impossible.

Another Cunningham fist found its target. This time it was the cheekbone of the new fighter, who staggered back, dark hair falling over his eyes for a moment. But even so, he managed to evade the grapple of his opponent, who certainly lived up to his name. ‘Crusher’ was a bear of a man, at least three inches taller than the Devonshire Devil— and more than twenty pounds heavier. When one of his big fists connected with bone, muscle or flesh, the sound carried to the audience surrounding the make-shift arena. And each body blow brought another raucous cheer from the Cunningham fans.

This was their home turf, after all. They were in a building just off Fenchurch Street, still under construction. It helped that the office block was being built to house the new UK offices of Cunningham Lindsey, a global loss adjustment company specialising in cargo, commodities, fraud investigations and liability issues. Simon’s firm, RGL Forensics, was often in competition with Cunningham Lindsey, so this was something of a grudge match. After losing the Fort Street venue to the demolition teams, they’d been struggling to find a safe place. Access to the nearly completed building had been finally arranged only yesterday.

The fight ring was on the floor of what would be a reception atrium; the audience was ranged above in the first floor corridors opening onto the atrium. Unlike the old Font Street venue, this building had the advantage of power, so temporary lights ensured that the spectators could see the action below. Even with no heat, it was a damn sight more comfortable premises than the Font Street car park.

The first fight had seen a novice from the Finsbury Fighters get eaten alive by one of the Acton Aces. The bout was stopped after three and a half minutes, when the fifth take-down dumped the newbie jiu-jitsu man in a heap. There was no interest in claiming him for any of the four teams present, and he scuttled off.

The next fight pitted a regular Acton man against a Cunningham fighter, called ‘The Clash’. He was inordinately fond of head-butting, which he did manage in the eighth minute to KO his opponent. Feeling his own headache, Simon fretted at the absence of Doctor George Hayter. He’d been saved from his own fractured skull because of the quick thinking doctor. Fortunately, this Acton fighter was out for just over the count of ten. He got to his feet and bowed to the audience and the victor. The crowd seemed unimpressed.

That changed as soon as this current bout was announced. By-passing the whole novice entry system and the bidding process that normally followed, the newly-christened ‘Devil’ had been signed directly to the Devonshire Team. So, he must be good, or the promoters and coach wouldn’t have taken such a risk. Yet, when he walked into the arena to face the Cunningham Crusher, the whole audience
could see that he was heavily out-gunned in terms of weight, height and reach.

The contrast between the sheer muscled bulk of the Crusher compared to the rather nondescript form of the challenger intrigued the punters. The odds of him winning lengthened, but this was a City crowd, used to betting a bank's money on a tiny shift of a single basis point. Give them a chance to bet on real long shots, and the lure of a big return meant that the money piled into the kitty.

*A bummer to draw Crusher as your first proper fight.* A little voice in the back of his mind whispered, *there but for the grace of God...* If he hadn't been ruled out himself through the injury that put him into hospital with the fractured skull over a month ago, he'd be the one facing this monster. The Cunningham Chancers were a dangerous team- the most feared in the City shootfighters league. Tonight's fighters were drawn from their string of twelve, and this guy was their second-best fighter. Simon's bout had been taken by the new man on the Devonshire team, put into place as a late substitution by the coach when the Devonshire Dervish had been injured in a training bout. Simon never met this unimpressive chap; his headaches had kept him away from the team practices until tonight.

Simon was still on the Devonshire Team- for another week. Whatever doubts he had about getting into the ring again after his injury had been confirmed by the death last week of his friend and work colleague, Alexander Robbs. He hadn't been there to see it, thank God. His injury kept him away from practice until the all-clear was pronounced by the doctors two days ago. But, he was still officially on the team – and earning a percentage of the return- until he gave his final answer next week. So the promoters put him to work tonight collecting the bets. He moved through the crowd, enjoying the banter greeting him on his return. Given his four draws and three wins record, Simon was a fighter respected by the audience.

Once the fight with the new guy got underway, betting was ferocious. The club audiences always liked new blood- liberally spilt, by preference, but unlike a one-sided novice bout, this one was shaping up to be a real duel. He stopped to chat and entice a few more bets, all of which he entered on an iPad. The betting was carefully linked to credit lines pre-authorised before the audience was invited. As the bookies' odds changed with each minute of the bout, bets kept coming in. His pad was already showing over a quarter of a million wagered. Bonus machismo was in full flow; as the calendar year end approached, the traders could tell what was likely to be coming their way in February.

Waterman worked his way through the crowd, seeing whether there was any more appetite now that the new man had proved he could last the first five of the ten minute bout. He came up to a banker he recognised, who had just snorted a line of coke off his sleeve.

"Wilkes- fancy a bet now? You seemed to think that the Devil wouldn't last when I first came around, but he's proved you wrong. You can still hedge your bet with an each way."

Wilkes had his arm around a rent-a-babe- just the sort of arm candy that Simon would expect from the Shad Sanderson banker. The man sniffed extravagantly. "Nope. I know this guy, and he's not got the staying power to last much longer."

The blonde giggled, and teased her date. "But Sebby dear, you said he managed to fight off half a rugby team once when you were at Uni together."

With a cocaine-fuelled grin, Wilkes shook his head. "You weren't listening, Gloria. I said the team took him to pieces. The poor guy ended up in hospital."

There was a roar from the crowd. Simon spun around to see the Crusher finally get his first throw, arm locking the Devil and flipping the slighter man onto the canvas. Before he could recover his
footing, the Crusher dropped onto the man, trying to pin him into an elbow lock and get his arm around his opponent's throat. If he could secure the choke hold, then he'd be only one submission down.

But, somehow, the Devil managed to wiggle out from the attempted throat hold and started to get to his feet. From a prone position, Crusher lashed out with the side of his right foot, catching the Devil hard on his back, just where his kidney would take the full brunt of the strike.

The Devil staggered, and then collapsed onto his knees. As he fell, Crusher tried to get his legs around the man's waist in a scissor lock- his trade-mark move that had earned him his name. Now the Cunningham team members on the ring-side level started baying for blood.

Simon leaned over the balcony with Wilkes and the blonde, drawn by the spectacle. This was the first time the Cunningham fighter had managed to get the Devonshire man on the floor. He was renowned for his wrestling skills, and the teams sensed this was a turning point.

But, the Devil was not down and out. He started a twisting rotation, moving his body weight to the left and drawing the heavier man around with him until he was facing his opponent. He reached up just as the Crusher began to squeeze his legs together, and put his left hand behind the bald man's head and the fingers of his right hand in an odd position against the left side of that thick neck. The Devil then leaned to the right pulling the Crusher's own body weight into the choke hold.

It was a waist lock hold that compromised the Devil's breathing against a blood choke hold against the neck of the Crusher. Which would win? The crowd went wild, shouting and stamping their approval.

It took less than twenty seconds before blood proved more vulnerable than breath. The Crusher's legs weakened as he started to lose consciousness, and the Devil snapped the points of his elbows into the man's huge thigh muscles, paralysing them. He then pushed himself free and scrambled to his feet. Now the score was four to two in his favour; he only needed one more take-down to cause the biggest upset of the season. But he was gasping for breath and unable to immediately build on the success of his escape manoeuvre with a fresh attack.

The bald man took advantage of the breather to sit up and then climb to his own feet, shaking his head. Facing him, his opponent then bent over a bit, as if feeling the effects of the crushing that his waist had endured.

Encouraged by the sight, Crusher leap onto the slighter man, to use his body weight to bring the Devil down again. Even as he grabbed hold of the guy's bony shoulders and locked his beefy thighs around the Devil's waist, the man bent his knees, shifting his centre of gravity and using his long arms to reach over the Crusher's back, grabbing under the shoulders of the heavier man and using his forward momentum to pull him over his own head. The Devil's feet went out from under him and he landed on his back, but the rotating force of the manoeuvre and the Crusher's own weight flipped him high and away, so the smaller man was no longer under him. It all happened so quickly; tipped upside down and unable to get his arms between him and the canvas to protect his neck, the bald man fell heavily on the back of his head and right shoulder.

The slighter man had turned to watch his opponent's fall, and he was on his knees beside the prone figure in an instant. Simon thought that he would now finish the man off, especially as Crusher seemed dazed and unresponsive. The Devil placed his hands almost gently behind his beaten opponent's neck. The crowd went silent, waiting for the coup de grace.

"Don't move." The baritone command was firm. "Are you feeling an electric shock from your right shoulder down to your fingertips?"
The Crusher's eyes went wide, and he croaked a "Yes."

"You may have broken your neck- or it's a stinger syndrome; damaged the C5 cervical vertebrae, and it's pinching the brachial plexus. Keep your head absolutely still. Can you clench your right fist?"

Even from where he was standing, Simon could hear Crusher's whispered, "no."

"What about the left?"

Simon couldn't hear the response, because the crowd had already started to shift rather anxiously. He leaned over the balcony to catch the next words.

"If you're lucky, it's just a ligament thing or a bruised nerve so there won't be permanent damage; but it could be an acute disc rupture, compression fracture or a hyperextension dislocation." The Devonshire fighter looked out of the ring, seeking the coach, as he asked, "Where's your medical man?"

The East Ender was getting into the ring but shook his head. "Haven't got one tonight." The Cunningham coach was also clambering onto the ring, alongside their Promoter, both with grim looks on their faces. "We didn't arrange for one, thinking you'd bring yours."

The Devil then called out to the silent crowd. "Someone call 999 and get an ambulance here. It's not safe to move him unless you want to risk permanent damage to his spine. Let's not have a repeat of the Fort Street fiasco."

His request fell on at least one set of deaf ears. Sebastian Wilkes was already half way to the stairs to escape, his blonde trailing behind him, as he pushed his way through the milling throng of shocked fight fans.

Simon snorted, realising that no one in the audience was going to risk having their phone number identified as being on the scene. He pulled out his Blackberry. No way was he going to let the promoters sweep this injury under the carpet. He owed that much to Alex.

"What service, please?"

"Ambulance."

The call was picked up on the third ring and Simon launched in, "I'd like to report a serious injury- a suspected broken neck at 15 Fenchurch Street, EC3M."

"Is the patient conscious?"

"Yes, but he's experiencing paralysis- definitely in his arms; not sure about the legs."

"Are you with him now?"

"Uh- I'm about fifty feet away, but I'm on my way to him now." He started heading over to the stairs, trying to push his way through the people now hurrying down. Simon kept the phone up to his ear, and hoped the signal would hold.

"Don't move him at all, keep him absolutely still and warm. An ambulance will be with you in less than ten minutes. Please give us your name and keep this line open. A medical professional will want to talk to you."
The Devonshire promoter was shouting over the noise of escaping crowd, "I regret to say this is the end of this evening's event. Your bets have been recorded and your wagers will be honoured."

Once down on the ground floor, Simon pocketed the phone so he could use both arms to fight his way against the tide of retreating audience. By the time he reached the ring, the crowd was already thinning out. The fighters and support teams from the Acton Aces and the Finsbury Fighters were nowhere to be seen. He sat on the edge of the elevated ring and slipped under the rope, before heading over to the two fighters. A towelling robe was spread over the Crusher, to keep him warm. Other towels had been rolled and were being used to hold the downed fighter's head and neck immobile. The Devil kept pushing his dark greased hair back as he bent over the fallen man. He was speaking too quietly for the words to be heard, but Simon caught the reassuring tone.

In sharp contrast, the two teams of promoters were having a right old barney of an argument. "This just sucks; he's got to be moved. We can't risk it, or the Cunninghams are going to be compromised. We need this venue for a couple of weeks."

The East Ender growled back. "I don' give a monkey's uncle about yer precious venue. The fighter's what counts. You'd think you would care more 'bout one of your own boys."

"Calm down, coach; e's not dead yet." The Devonshire Promoter was a big man; his sharp suit seemed incongruous when you spotted the size of his hands at the end of crisp white French cuffs and gold cufflinks. He sniffed. "I says, we all just beat it. You heard the guy. Ambulance is on the way. None of us can be here when they arrive, 'cos the filth won't be far behind. The venue's done for anyways. We jus buy a new ring and set up elsewheres next week."

Two of the Cunningham team of three were nodding. The coach looked down at his stricken fighter. "Hey, Crusher, You'll be okay. Just remember the code. No names, no blame. Just keep your mouth shut and you'll be looked after." Then he turned away, following the other men out.

Simon knelt down beside the dark-haired man, and looked into the face of the big fighter lying on the floor. For the first time that night, he saw real fear in the man's eyes. "They're bastards, but don't worry. I'll get you sorted out."

There was a quiet baritone "Thank you" from the man kneeling beside him. The Devil's lip was bleeding freely now, and the bright red trail ended at his chin, dripping onto the canvas. Close up, Simon could see the damage to his cheek, and the purple bruising already starting to come out around his eye. The pale skin of his chest was criss-crossed with angry red patches. *He must be hurting like hell.*

"Do you need to see a doctor?"

"No. I'm fine. Did the ambulance service say they'd put a professional on the line?"

"Oh, God! I forgot." Simon dragged the phone out and held it up to his ear. "Are you still there?"

A new voice answered, "Yes. Are you with the patient now? Is he conscious?"

He nodded his relief at the Devonshire fighter. "Yeah, he's immobile and being kept warm."

"The ambulance is about two minutes away."

Simon relayed this information, and then said quietly, "why don't you leave now? No need for you to hang about. They'll be too many questions."

"So, why are you staying?"
Simon Westgate's smile was sad. "Because I was Alex Robbs' best friend. Because I'd been injured in an earlier fight, I wasn't there for him. I'll see this through- you should go now."

The dark haired fighter looked down at Crusher. "You okay with that?"

A whisper came back. "Piss off. I'll see you at the re-match."

All three men could hear the siren approaching. The Devil stood up, nodded, and then was over the side of the ring and slipping away into the darkness.

Simon looked back down at the Crusher. "You'll be okay. I promise." He pulled up the phone to his ear again and said, "Okay- anything else I should do before they get here?"
Sherlock was glad that it was only six and a half miles from Fenchurch Street to Seven Sisters. Anything more than that and he'd have had problems staying conscious on the motorbike. Every pothole, every bump in the road jarred his ribs, made him hiss in pain. Every time he had to stop at a traffic light and put his foot down onto the street, the pain from his bruised instep ricocheted around his leg and made it hard to see through watering eyes. The leather jacket was too tight across his aching shoulders, and the helmet was just plain agony on his head.

There was a light rain falling—nearly sleet, just a centigrade degree too warm for it, but more than enough to chill him to the bone. In one sense, he didn't mind; it helped to numb the pain. It was a quarter to midnight and traffic was surprisingly heavy with Friday night pre-Christmas party goers. Bah humbug. He wanted nothing more than to stow the Norton safely back in its lockup and crawl into the bolt hole where he would find his release at the end of a needle. Two days of self-medication and he'd be able to function again. Been here before.

In part, to distract himself from the pain and the tedium of traffic, Sherlock dragged out of his Mind Palace the latest data he'd collected at the fight. Sherlock had used the time before his bout to circulate with the ring-side audience, composed of the four teams' fighters, managers, promoters and coaches. The gossip was fascinating.

The Acton Aces, for example, were interesting. Geographically based on the western edge of the City, it was a 'scratch band' of fighters, brought together from the worlds of journalism and lawyers—basically, anyone from the mid-town area of Holborn, south of Kings Cross. Their nominal HQ was on Acton Street and Greys Inn Road, where their practice nights took place in the sports room of the National Union of Journalists. The talk tonight around the ring was all about a break-in that had taken place the night before. Sherlock was intrigued to discover that the teams engaged in what could only be described as prank warfare. In between the fight nights, 'raiding parties' would try to break into each other's territories and steal a trophy.

As the second fight of the night— the Cunningham Clasher versus the Acton Ace of Spades— got underway, the banter escalated.

"Got your candlesticks sitting on my sideboard, dickhead," shouted one of the Acton team fighters. Sherlock snorted. Not exactly a worthy theft. The man whom he was to fight in the next bout, the Cunningham Crusher, was teasing an Acton manager about the ball of twine that he was going to use "stringing up my Christmas lights". The Acton crew were grumbling about the mess the Cunningham team had left behind—ransacking the NUJ Library apparently, before making off with a barometer, a book on Homer and an ivory paperweight once owned by Daniel Defoe, from his early days as a journalist*. Apparently, it was a rule of honour never to steal anything worth something, lest the police need to be informed or an insurance claim made.

As the traffic signal at the intersection of Northwold Road and Stoke Newington High Street finally turned green, someone behind Sherlock tooted their car horn, waking him up from his detour into his Mind Palace. Grateful to be moving again, he accelerated away. He was less than ten minutes away from the morphine, and that spurred him on.

At this hour, he should really switch the ignition off and push the Norton the final hundred feet, rather than risk the sound of a recognisable engine carrying up to the third floor flat. But, as he came...
around the corner and onto Southey Street, he saw that the lights in that particular flat were out, so he took the risk of coming nearly to the garage down ramp before cutting the engine. He let the bike roll nearly to the lock up and then wearily clambered off. His left knee nearly buckled, sending a searing pain through his lower back, as he pushed the bike onto its kickstand. He had to take a few deep breaths to clear his head. He'd learned some pain management techniques in Tibet, but they were being tested tonight.

He pulled off a wet glove to fish his lock pick out of his pocket, and grimaced at the sight of his shaking hand. *Not going to be easy to feel the tumblers.* Luckily for him, the lock was pretty basic, and it only took him twice as long as it should have. *Could've been worse.* He wondered what would have happened if he'd broken a finger or knuckle in the fight.

He shoved the door up and as it started to go up, Sherlock turned back to the bike and hauled it off the stand, only turning back as he heard the metal door rattle when it came to rest in the open position.

There was a pause as his brain caught up with the sight of a detective inspector sitting in the dark with arms folded, in a metal folding chair.

"Had a nice ride, Sherlock?" The question was mildly put, but was accompanied by an accusing look.

"Move, tho I can get the bike back where it belongth before I fall over."

Perhaps it was the weary tone of voice, or the lisping slur caused by the swollen mouth that did it, but Greg's reaction was immediate. The older man was on his feet, and coming out of the lock-up. "What's wrong?"

Sherlock didn't have the strength to answer, so he just pushed the bike past him, back into its usual spot over the oil stain, and then onto the stand. He then stumbled to the now vacant chair and sat down rather heavily, hands up to the helmet. He needed to get it off. His head was spinning, and he wondered if it might be so swollen that it might not come off. He had to give it a yank and it dragged across his swollen cheek and right eye, as well as scraping the barely formed scab off his lip. He grunted in pain.

The light blazed on as Lestrade flipped the switch, and Sherlock cringed. Just what he didn't need-the jolt of visual sensory stimulation shot across his cerebral cortex like a rocket-propelled grenade and he gasped at exactly the same time as Lestrade did, when he saw the damage.

"What the *HELL* happened to you?!!"

He kept his eyes screwed tightly shut. "Fight club."

"You've been...*participating* in a fight club match?"

"Hmmm. Best way to find out what'th happening." This was mumbled around an increasingly sore lip, which was now sending a fresh rivulet of blood down his chin. He cracked one eye open, to see the concerned face of Lestrade, who was crouching down so he could take a closer look. Sherlock quickly shut his eye again. *Go away.* He needed to get to the bolt hole and relief soon. It wasn't like he'd not had to deal with this level of pain before; more than once, Lars Sigursson dealt with the aftermath of incidents beyond his control. He just needed rest, and relief for a couple of days.

Unfortunately, the presence of a detective inspector delayed both, which was a serious nuisance. The pain was heading rapidly to synaesthesia. Even in the darkness of his closed eyes, lightning jolts of
colour and sound were visible each time Lestrade used a hard c phoneme. The scent of iron in his own blood mingled with a lime aroma. Wonder where that comes from? Synaesthesia would be interesting, if it weren't the product of a nervous system overloaded with pain.

"Sherlock, it wasn't murder. You said so yourself- no crime scene, just an accidental death. Why are you still investigating? We've closed the case."

The Cs in Lestrade's use of the words 'crime', 'closed' and 'case' set off a thunderstorm across his eyelids. Sherlock started to shake his head, but the muscles in the back of his neck screamed in protest, so he stopped. "Thumpthing's going on." He grimaced at the way his swollen lip made his words come out funny.

"Thumping? Yeah- and you're the one who's been thumped."

Sherlock tried to smirk through the pain, but wasn't sure if his lip would oblige with the correct facial expression. "You thould thee the other guy; he got carted off in an ambulanth with a suspected broken neck." Ow- even my own hard Cs are starting to hurt.

"Is he going to press charges for battery and assault? Christ, Sherlock- what kind of a mess have you gotten yourself into?"

This time Sherlock visibly flinched at the man's chosen swear work. He managed to shake his head. It hurt marginally less than trying to talk. But the action set off ripples elsewhere. The pain across his lower back was beginning to push its way up the priority list, and he found himself wondering about his kidney. He started to pant, thinking that it wouldn't be long before he needed to vomit. Morphine, I need morphine.

"What else of you is damaged?" Lestrade's voice conveyed his worry.

"I'm fine." All I need is waiting for me in a needle, so just leave me to it.

"Like hell you are. We're going to talk about you nicking my bike without permission- but only after I get you to an A&E."

"No." He delivered this in his most emphatic baritone. "If you eben try, I'm out of here."

There was an exasperated sigh. "Speaking of that- just where've you been hiding out? People have been looking for you since Saturday."

"None of your buithneth."

"It is my business when you steal my bike."

The K crashed like a cymbal in Sherlock's ear. "Didn't ththeal, borrowed."

There was another sigh. "Are you keeping your eyes closed because that shiner you're getting hurts, or is the overhead light bothering you?"

Sherlock decided honesty would work. "Bwoth."

Alldynia was starting, too- he gritted his teeth and started to wiggle out of the biker jacket. The pressure of it across his shoulders has like liquid fire; his nerves were starting to confuse the pain signals. He really needed to get some morphine- even if Lestrade's presence here meant he had to walk away from what was waiting for him in the bolt hole. If he had to go find a dealer, he would. The agitation of his senses was starting to add up- and he knew that a meltdown was lurking just over the horizon.
Sherlock started to get up. Two hands were placed on the top of his shoulders and pushed him back into the chair.

"You're not going anywhere."

"I'm cold, need to move." Uncontrollable shivers were shaking his torso, the result of muscle spasms as much as the temperature.

"Then you're coming upstairs where I can take a proper look at you, get you into a warm bath and see if it's actually possible to keep you out of a hospital tonight."

"Lethtrade." He'd wanted it to come out as a threat, a sort of back off warning, but the cumulative effects of the night seemed to gang up on him, and it came out more as a cry for help. *How did that happen?*

Those same two arms were now under his and helping him to stand. Lestrade must have turned off the light because Sherlock was grateful for the darkness that descended.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: *For those of you into ACD canon, you will have recognised the items as the same as were mentioned in Conan Doyle's The Reigate Squires, upon which a number of incidents and characters in this story are based. I do SO love playing the Moffiss game!*
Damn, damn, damn! Lestrade's hand was shaking a bit as he scrolled down the phone list. He found Mycroft's number. *He's going to eat me alive."

At the time, it had seemed the right thing to do. Lestrade had manhandled a barely-conscious Sherlock into the lift and then into his flat. At the door, he leaned Sherlock up against the wall, one hand on his chest to keep him upright, while he fumbled in his coat pocket with the other hand for his front door key.

He had to half carry Sherlock into the room, and used his leg to pull around a chair before lowering the younger man into it. While his arm was around Sherlock, he could feel the younger man shivering.

"Sit here for a minute while I run a bath." Sherlock dropped his head onto his folded arms in his lap and didn't answer. A moment later, Greg was back with an old towel. "Use this on your face; blood is a bitch to get out of this carpet."

No reply—or movement, either. Greg decided to keep the ambient light to a minimum, switching on just one of the table lamps. He came back and dangled the towel in front of the chair.

"Sherlock, if you *dare* pass out on me, then I'm calling 999."

That threat seemed to provoke a bit of life. A hand reached up and snatched the towel, burying his face into it.

"Right. Do you want a cup of tea before, during or after the bath? Then it's going to be hot soup and I'll make up the couch for you."

No answer.

"Sherlock. A little co-operation is needed here."

There was a muffled reply, the words soaked up by the towel.

"Try again, this time without the towel."

There was a groan, but at least Sherlock lifted his head a few inches. "No tea. I need pain relief. *Throng* pain relief. Heroin will do in a pinch, but morphine would be better." He dropped his head back in his lap.

"Like that's going to happen, Sherlock. If the pain is that bad, then the next stop is Whipps Cross A and it's only fifteen minutes from here."

"Thtop threatening me. I've lived through far worth than thith and not needed a doctor. I juth need to...turn off whath going on in my head."

"Let me take a proper look at what's making you talk funny and that eye."

Keeping his eye closed. Sherlock lifted his head again, and Greg took a look at blood coming from his upper lip. He snorted. "That's the same spot where John clocked you. Open up and let me see if your teeth are still there."

That got him a scowl. "They're *fine*. Juth my lip."
"Open your sore eye." Lestrade was inspecting the purple bruising that was coming out around the Sherlock's swollen eye. He sniffed. The eye itself that opened a crack to look out at him was a bit bleary and blood shot, but he'd seen worse on Sherlock. His pale complexion always made things look worse. And the greased back hair didn't help.

"What've you done to your hair? I hope that muck isn't all over my helmet."

Sherlock snorted. "I'll buy you another when I'm done uthing yourth."

"That's over, as of tonight. In the meantime, let's get you into that bath, and let me see what else looks as bad as that eye."

Sherlock stood up, a trifle unsteadily, but brushed off the offered hand. He stalked off to the bathroom. "I know the way, Lethtrade, and don't need company." He shut the door rather firmly, and Greg smirked as he heard it locked. Snarky was a good sign. If the man felt well enough to be irritable, then he was probably right that the damage was superficial.

With hindsight, that was the second missed opportunity. If he'd actually seen the rest of the bruising and the track marks then, he might have done things differently. But, it had been two years. Greg had seen the damage done to his back when he'd first returned, and Sherlock had seemingly shrugged that off.

Greg went into the kitchen and rummaged in the cupboard. Yes! He had a tin of soup that he knew Sherlock would eat- Heinz tomato soup. An old standby, but over the years, he'd learned what the man would and wouldn't eat. He put it into two bowls, slung them into the microwave and then went into the bedroom. Clothes- Sherlock would need something warm. And bedding- he grabbed a set of sheets and a blanket from the drawer under the box spring mattress.

As he passed the bathroom door carrying his pile, he gave it a thump with his elbow. "You still alive in there?" He dumped the soft cotton pyjamas on the floor beside the door. "Lucky for you, I've got something with a tie-waist that will fit you. It's here when you're ready".

There was a splash, followed by a baritone grunt.

*Proof of life.* That was the third missed opportunity. If the door hadn't been locked and he'd barged in there when Sherlock was in the bath, he'd have seen the damage in its full technicolour glory, as the hot water brought the bruising out all over his lower back and waist.

But that was hindsight talking. Back in the here and now, Greg prodded his phone at the right number and waited for his doom.

Two rings later, a voice he really had not missed for the past two years came on. "Detective Inspector, I do hope your calling at this ungodly hour is good news." Somewhere in the background, Greg could hear the soft chime of an expensive clock striking three o'clock. "Have you news of my brother?"

"Yeah. And the news…well, it's kind of mixed."

"Explain."

Whatever calm civility had been in the man's tone when he answered had vanished. This was Mycroft Holmes in command mode.

Greg drew breath. "Well, the good news is that he is alive and I've seen him. I figured out that he's been using my motorbike. I waited until he showed up at the lock-up at half past midnight. Turns out
he's been investigating that Fight Club death, by going undercover as one of the fighters. Tonight was fight night, and he came back bloody and covered in bruises. I took him upstairs to my flat and got some food into him, and let him crash on my sofa."

"And you didn't call me then. Unwise."

There was more than condemnation in that last word, a lot more than Greg liked. He tried to keep the defensiveness out of his reply. "Yeah, well, I've seen him sleep off worse than this. Or so I thought, at the time."

"What changed?"

"Once he was asleep, I went off to bed myself. About ninety minutes later, there was an almighty crash, and I came into the living room to find him on the floor, having a fit."

There was a brief pause on the other end of the phone. Then, quietly, "how long did it last?"

Greg grimaced. "Can't be sure, can I? He might have been doing it on the sofa, before he fell off. When I was in the room, it was...I don't know a little less than five minutes, but I didn't have a watch on at the time." He tried to keep his voice calm, but it wasn't easy. It had been one of the more horrible sights. A grand mal epileptic seizure was never pretty, and when it was someone he cared about...well, it was hard to shift the image out of his mind. When he was a young constable, he'd had to deal with a man who collapsed in the street. In that case, the man's wife knew about the epilepsy and helped him keep the guy from harming himself until the ambulance came; that had been a status fit- lasted longer than thirty minutes.

An icy tone cut across his reliving the scene. "And now for the bad news; am I to assume that my brother is no longer with you in your flat?"

"Nope. He's done a bunk, though how, I do not know."

"Don't tell me what you don't know. Explain what you do know. What happened when he recovered consciousness?" It was said with steel in the words.

"Well, that depends on what you mean by full consciousness. He was awake fairly quickly, but sort of out of it. I got him into the bathroom and changed out the wet pyjamas." He stopped, not sure how to say the next part without provoking the inevitable "I told you so" from the elder Holmes.

"Just say it, Lestrade. It is too early in the morning to waste time." There was a certain resignation in Mycroft's tone.

"That's when I saw the track marks. He's using again."

"And you still thought it right not to call? That was incredibly stupid."

"Yeah, well, he said it was from when he first got back, when you allowed him to use in order to get him on his feet again and chasing your blasted terrorists."

"And you believed him. Your judgment is highly questionable."

Greg rubbed the back of his neck, which was still hurting from where he'd fallen asleep sitting up. "While we trade insults here, he's out there. So, let me finish, will you?" He took a breath and started in again. "Once he started to come back to a bit more sense, he got bolshie. He just wrapped himself up in a clean sheet, then marched back to the living room. He had no idea he'd had a fit, just told me I was exaggerating. He said he'd had a nightmare and fallen off the sofa; that was all."
He decided not to tell Mycroft about the argument that had then taken place.

"Sherlock, this is serious. I'm taking you into A&E. If you won't come, then I'll call an ambulance."

"Piss off. You try that and I will walk out of here wearing nothing but this sheet." The swelling around his lip had obviously gone down enough for him to sound more normal.

"You're in no shape to argue."

That earned him a Sherlockian death stare. "Don't push it. I am more than capable of killing people. If you try to threaten me, I can incapacitate you quite easily, even in my current state. Don't mistake these bruises; they're the result of having to play by rules." He loaded that last word with utter contempt.

There was something new in that threat. The Sherlock who had returned from whatever he'd been up to over the two years was a different man from the one Greg had known before. Meaner. More volatile and angry. Lestrade had never before been afraid of Sherlock. Afraid for him, yes, but never personally threatened by him until tonight.

*Enough is enough.* "Alright then, I'm calling John."

That made Sherlock stand up. "No- that's even more awful than A&E."

Greg exploded. "What the *fuck* is going on between you two? You two are worse than I was with Louise when we were having our *let's-not-talk-about-what-is-really-pissing-us-off* phase."

Going to sleep with his hair still wet from the bath had given Sherlock a totally dishevelled look. Add to that the effects of the fit, and he now looked half mad, an effect he compounded by shouting "Just STOP TALKING! I don't have the patience to deal with this now!"

"Sherlock, you can't expect me to ignore this. For God's sake, you could have been bleeding into your brain for hours and the fit is just a symptom."

"Shut up. You don't know anything." His eyes now bored into Greg's with a ferocity that was unsettling. "It's happened before the fight- just think of it as an after-shock of something that occurred while I was away. Nothing to be concerned about. Discussion over, I just need to sleep." He flopped down, and threw the blanket on the sofa over him, pulling it over his head, too.

Faced with such implacability, Greg made his final miscalculation of the night. He'd sat down in the chair in the living room, determined to keep watch. Unfortunately, sometime later fatigue got the better of his resolve and he'd fallen asleep. When he woke up ninety minutes later, the sofa was empty.

Greg decided to bite the bullet. "When did he start having fits, Mycroft? That's not been his scene in all the years I've known him."

A brief pause, then Mycroft replied, "He had them as a child, when he was ten. He's had one that I know about since returning to London."

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"The relevant health authorities have all been advised."

"Christ, Mycroft. If I had known…"
"You would have not done anything differently, Detective Inspector. That is your weakness with him. Ever thus; you let Sherlock decide what is right for him. It is the principal reason why you and I have had entirely too many of these calls over the years."

For once, Greg felt that Mycroft's critical tone was probably justified.

"I'm sorry." And he was, truly. He'd botched the one chance this week of getting Sherlock the help he so clearly needed.

"I do not have that luxury of feeling regret, Lestrade. Do me the courtesy of checking to see if your motorbike is still there, while I alert my people. If he left wearing only a sheet, then it should be possible to track him for a short while. Pity you took so long to wake up and call us. He now has too much of a head-start for us to be certain of catching him again, thanks to your stupidity."

The connection was broken, and Greg was left looking down at his phone in dismay. Oh, Sherlock, what is going on with you?
"I've guessed you're a bitter man. Am I right?"

The Detective Inspector looked down at the pint glass of dark amber liquid. It was sitting on a little round table in the Builder's Arms on Bittern Street. At a Wednesday evening at 5pm, the place was heaving, and she'd been lucky to snag a table. Mary had chosen it because it was convenient for the Royal Brompton Hospital, where she 'd just finished a one day top-up course to keep her nursing qualifications up. Once, long ago, it might have been a workers' boozer, but now it was done up in gastro-pub décor, the wooden panelled walls now a rather shocking shade of purple.

She added, "It's real ale- a guest beer called Doom Bar, from Cornwall, although what it's doing up here in London, I don't know."

Lestrade smirked as he sat down. "First of all, you're right. I do prefer a proper beer, none of that lager stuff you're drinking." He gestured dismissively to the half pint of Carlsberg she had in front of her.

As he reached for the glass, he continued, "Doom Bar is from Rock, in Cornwall. It's where all the Chelsea kids go surfing. So, it makes sense that this pub would serve it."

Mary noticed that he stroked a finger down the side of the glass, before picking it up.

She smirked. 'I've left it there for what John says is the statutory seven minutes to warm up, although I can't understand why."

That earned her another smile. "Because London pubs serve their beer too cold." Then the smile faded, and he glanced away briefly.

Mary decided it was time to start the negotiation. "John told me that it was Sherlock who experimented with it to find the right length of time. You like it seven minutes; John prefers ten."

"Yeah, for someone who never drank a pint of beer if he could help it, Sherlock was something of an expert. As for ten minutes, well, John's from the Midlands. He would prefer it warmer."

"I always tease him that he should like it colder, because he probably dreamed about having a pint when he was in Afghanistan."

That made Lestrade look back at her. He took another swallow and then put the glass down. "So, what can I do for you, Miss Morstan?"

"It's Mary, as you well know. And I meant what I said in the text. I need a consultation about a Consulting Detective."

"Why?" There was just a hint of caution behind the question.

She sighed. "Why does everyone assume that I am somehow Sherlock's enemy?" She gave him a look of exasperation. "I love John. When I met him, I knew he had a hole in him- any idiot could see that something was missing. I'm not an idiot. I have tried to fill the hole in, but I'm not enough. When I met Sherlock I realised that together, we can do it. I want that. John needs it. And I think Sherlock does, too. But the two of them are playing silly buggers and won't get back together again."

"Why tell me this? You're preaching to the converted."
He was watching him carefully and saw the momentary tightening around his eyes. "Thank you, by the way, for getting John to attend at that crime scene. If Sherlock hadn't been a prat then, they might have made real progress."

He grimaced. "He wasn't exactly on best behaviour."

She swallowed another sip of her lager. The cold made her teeth hurt. "John came home grumpy as hell. Took me ages to winkle out of him what had happened. Then I thought the stuff about him finding the fingerprint on the body, and then our trip to Reigate would help. What's happened since?"

"Not much. Accidental death- even in a such dubious situation- isn't my division. Officially? The case is closed." He shook his head sadly. "And now Sherlock's gone AWOL."

Encouraged by the frankness of that admission, Mary ploughed on. "So, why is he pushing John away?"

"It's not just John."

"Oh, he's doing it to you, too?"

"And his brother."

Mary knew all about that. But she needed to know what Lestrade wasn't telling her. His whole manner made it clear that he was uncomfortable about something. If she was going to keep her promise, and protect her real identity from Mycroft Holmes, she needed to crack Lestrade's reluctance to share intelligence. Finding Sherlock was an imperative, and Mycroft's clock was ticking.

"Detective Inspector…"

Before she could get the question out, he smiled. "If you want me to call you Mary, then you'd better call me Greg."

She smiled- and it was genuine. "Okay, Greg. I think you and I are on the same page here. We both want them to sort whatever it is that is keeping them apart. Let me help, please."

He took another mouthful of beer, considering her request carefully. "Some people would think that as John's fiancé you would be the last person to want them to reconcile."

She snorted. "As I said before, I am not jealous of Sherlock. I like him. From what John says, he's having some trouble getting back into normal life."

"Sherlock doesn't do normal, even at the best of times."

"I know that. In fact, that's what makes him so interesting. I really want the chance to get to know him better. For my own sake, not just because he's an important part of John's past. I want Sherlock to be a part of our future, too. If I end up as the reason why the two of them don't work it out, then that's going to poison John's relationship with me. And I am selfish enough not to want that to happen. So, that's two good reasons why you and I should work together. Let me help you find him."

"How?"

"Well, you could start by being honest with me. You've seen him since the crime scene, haven't
He put his hands down on the table. "Yeah, and I made a mistake. I realised he was using my
motorbike, and I trapped him returning it to the garage at my flat. But I didn't realise how ill he was,
and I let him get away."

"Ill?" She didn't have to fake the concern. *No wonder Mycroft is worried.*

Greg nodded. "He's not properly recovered from what happened before he returned. According to
Sherlock, Mycroft caught up with him just as he was talking his way out of a prison. I did see the
evidence - he'd been beaten to a pulp, and was on heavy-duty pain relief while trying to find the
underground train plot."

She was startled. "John…doesn't know."

"Yeah, I figured that out. Sherlock hasn't told him anything about what happened."

"But you know? What has he told you?"

"Not much about the torture. And nothing about what happened before that. It's more the evidence.
I've seen his back. And whatever happened has provoked a number of seizures."

"Oh." She shook her head in amazement. "He hides it well. I would never have guessed. He seems
so…I don't know- confident, self-assured. The only time I saw anything but that cocky attitude was
on the very first night- he genuinely thought John would welcome him back with open arms."

Greg smirked. "I saw the result- the split lip. But you have to realise something. Sherlock *let* John hit
him. There's no way he'd have let anyone else lay a finger on him. He's a bloody good fighter... had
to be to survive the two years against the likes of Moriarty's men."

Mary replayed the three collisions- John trying to throttle Sherlock on the floor of the restaurant.
Then the punch in the café, followed by the head butt that gave the man his bloody nose. Not once
had Sherlock even tried to block the blows. *Some sociopath.* She couldn't decide whether it was
Sherlock realising that John had to let loose some of the frustration and pain, or he'd been willing to
play punching bag out of some sense of guilt. Her estimation of the extent of Sherlock's sacrifice had
gone up when Lestrade showed up at their flat and played John the tape of the rooftop discussion
with Moriarty*.

*So, why push John away?* "That's background. What about now? Why has he gone AWOL?"

He hesitated. "It's not the first time. I've known Sherlock for years, and whenever big brother gets a
little too insistent, he does a runner."

"He's not the sort to sit around hiding somewhere."

Greg smirked. "Yeah- you've got to know him pretty quickly." Her comment seemed to answer a
doubt he had, because he then said "Well, let's start with the fact that for him the case isn't over. He's
still investigating Robbs' death, by joining the same Fight Club. Showed up at my flat on Friday
night bruised and bloody. Said he'd won and that the other guy was in hospital with a suspected
broken neck."

"*Oh!*" Her face must have conveyed her delight.

"What?!"
"If so, then we can find out where the fight club met, and ask Sherlock's opponent what's going on."

Greg looked confused. "He never said anything about that. We haven't a clue where it was or who was involved."

She rolled her eyes. "That's because you're not a medical professional. The 999 call would have been recorded. Have you checked to see what admissions were made at London hospitals for that kind of injury on late Friday night?"

His eyes widened. "I'm an idiot."

"No, but I'm sure Sherlock assumed you wouldn't know. See how working together helps? I'm going to call John, and we're going to start asking around."

She knocked back the rest of her lager and reached around for her coat and handbag. "Let's get to work."
By the time Mary finished updating him over dinner about her conversation with Lestrade at the Builders' Arms, John was pacing. And fuming. She seemed to think that getting the police to track down every emergency admission with a suspected broken neck last Friday night was going to tell them a lot.

He doubted that.

She'd told him the story about Sherlock being hurt in the fight, and then sneaking out of Lestrade's flat wearing nothing but a sheet.

He said that was nothing new, he'd once worn one to Buckingham Palace.

She told him that despite the best efforts of Mycroft's surveillance teams, not a trace had been found of the consulting detective for the past five days.

He repeated the fact that disappearing acts were a speciality of his.

And then, when she was finished, he had the first proper argument he'd ever had with her.

"Why are you getting involved?!" There was a little more volume in the voice than he would have wanted, but he was angry.

She smiled back at him. "Because I know you want to; it's a case, John."

"I don't care about the bloody case! Lestrade's just involved me because he can't get a hold of Sherlock."

"And that doesn't worry you?"

"I'm done worrying about Sherlock. If he can't be bothered to respond to my calls or texts- or Lestrade's- then he clearly doesn't care what I or anyone thinks. After all, he's got two years' experience of doing what he damn well pleases. And you need to stop meddling."

She put her hands on his shoulders and given him that look- the one that said I-know-what's-going-on-here. "Meddling is not the right word. Try 'reconciliation'. This is important. Why are you being so hard on him?"

"ME?! Being hard on him?!" All of the frustration of the past month since Sherlock's return came boiling out of him. In fact, so much so, that rather than keep shouting, he stepped away from her arms and turned his back on her.

Mary didn't reply. If she had, John would have lost it utterly. When he finally had his temper back under control, he turned around to look at her. She was just standing there, calmly, waiting for him.

Finally, she spoke. "Right. Now that you've got that out of your system for a moment, let's talk."

He tilted his head to the left, lifted his chin, and prepared to resume the argument.

Before he could open his mouth, she came up to him and drew him into her arms. It was unexpected, and for a moment he froze. But, a hug from Mary was special. For one thing, she and he fit together perfectly. He never felt conscious of his height. Secondly, she was always so warm, and the delicate scent of her perfume just felt right. Subconsciously, the tightness in his shoulders relaxed just a tiny
"Feel that, John? It's called love. You and I know what it is. It's comfort when we are upset; it's consolation when we are hurt. You're upset and right now I want to make that better. But, the cause of your anger and frustration is out there on the streets. He's alone, unwell, and in trouble. He thinks he is totally unloved. You may think he has no one to blame for that but himself. But, I know you. You care. So do I. So does Greg. But Sherlock doesn't know that."

He held her for a moment, feeling the warmth. Then he shook his head. "You don't know him. He thinks all this is just sentiment. Emotion… he once said to me that it was the 'grit in the machine'. "

Her quiet laugh surprised him. "Yeah- Only I'm hearing something in that confession you're not. Emotion that he feels is grit, and it slows him up. That doesn't mean he isn't feeling it."

John sighed. "I used to think that, but I was wrong. By definition, he lacks empathy. Well, I learned that to my cost when he decided to disappear."

She pushed herself far enough away from him so she could see his face, but held on to his arms. "Empathy is about understanding other people's emotions. It doesn't mean he doesn't have his own. Try to see things from his perspective. He probably thought that he was for once putting someone else's needs above his own. So, to save three people's lives, he fakes his death, and stays away until he thinks he'd eliminated the threat to them."

Mary's brow furrowed. "I didn't tell you this earlier, but I will now. Lestrade thinks Sherlock is using drugs again. That newspaper – the one that came out just before he jumped- said he was a junkie, but I thought it was a load of lies like the rest. Lestrade says it was true. Do you think he would relapse now?"

John just closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes. No." He opened his eyes again and said crossly "I don't know, do I? He's an addict. He might be. But I've always had trouble understanding why anyone, least of all a genius, would use drugs."

"Says the man who heads for a scotch every time he gets angry."

He stiffened. But Mary continued. "I'm not saying that you abuse it."

He tried to keep the defensiveness down to a minimum. "I have a rotten temper. A minimal amount of alcohol is a small price to pay for me keeping it in check. And I don't lose control; I have a sister who does enough of that for the both of us."

She smiled at him. "I know that. But maybe that's what Sherlock thinks about drugs. It's common enough; people on the Spectrum are prone to self-medicating."

"Why would he need to?"

"John…we don't know anything about what happened while he was away. Lestrade says he's come home dragging some pretty heavy baggage. And then he's found the one person he really cares about is no longer living in Baker Street, is happy in another relationship, and about to make it permanent. I'm surprised he doesn't hate me. But, he doesn't. Because he loves you."

John sighed.

"No, I don't mean it that way." She shook him playfully.

He sighed again. "If he really felt anything like that, then he would've wanted to work with me
again. You weren't there at Font Street. He was...clear...that he didn't want me there."

"Punching him is kind of a potent way of rejecting someone, John. In the face of that, are you really surprised he is avoiding you? What's the easiest way to avoid pain? Deny its existence. Reject someone first, before they can reject you again. Running away means he doesn't have to face the fact that the pain is still there. And when all else fails, medicate it away. According to Lestrade, Sherlock's a past master at it."

"Yeah, well, that's his own decision. Let sleeping dogs lie is my motto these days."

"John..." Her mobile went off, interrupting her. Mary broke off their hug and picked up the phone from the coffee table. "It's Lestrade." She swiped twice and held the phone up towards John.

"Hello, Greg. I've got you on speaker phone. Have you found something?"

Her eager tone reminded him of someone else. John rolled his eyes.

"Yes. You were right. We've tracked down a couple of 999 calls from last Friday night that fit your description. One was a drunken assault at a Camden boozer, but the second one was to a construction site on Fenchurch Street. According to the Bishopsgate police report, it was a fight club venue and the guy got sent to St Thomas's A&E."

John butted in. "Do we have a name?"

"According to their records the patient was named Stuart Bradshaw. He had a surgical procedure... something called a verte...a verbo..." Lestrade stumbled over the word.

John completed it for him, "a vertebroplasty?"

"Yeah, one of those, whatever the hell that is, and he was discharged on Monday. I've got a home address that's near Peckham. Planning to interview him tomorrow at 9. Want to come?"

John snorted. "Yeah, like I can just drop out of work to do that. I'm not a locum anymore, Greg. It's a nine to five, remember?"

"Well, maybe you'll change your mind when you listen to this. I've got a bit of the recording from the control room. I'm sending it in an MP3 file to you now. Text me if you want in tomorrow morning after you've heard it."

It came through four minutes later. By then, Mary had made them a cup of tea and they were seated again on the sofa. Again on speaker phone, they listened as the first voice came on- the 999 control room operator, who then connected the unknown caller to the ambulance service. The man making the call seemed calm, even though he was reporting what he said was a "suspected broken neck" in a conscious patient who was "experiencing paralysis in his arms." Unusually, the caller said he wasn't near the victim, and they listened as the recording caught his movement through a crowd, with the caller demanding "Let me through." Then in the background over what sounded like a tannoy, someone announced "I regret to say this is the end of this evening's event. Your bets have been recorded and your wagers will be honoured."

Then a lot of voices, some arguing. Then in the background, John heard another voice, one he instantly recognised.

"That's Sherlock, isn't it?" When he nodded, Mary leaned forward, trying to hear, but the words weren't distinct, especially when they were drowned out by another louder voice complaining "This just sucks; he's got to be moved. We can't risk it, or the Cunninghams are going to be compromised.
We need this venue for a couple of weeks."

Someone with an east end accent growled back. "I don' give a monkey's uncle about yer precious venue. The fighter's what counts."

Another voice spoke up. "Calm down, coach; e's not dead yet. I say, we all just beat it. You heard the guy. Ambulance is on the way. None of us can be here when they arrive, 'cos the filth won't be far behind. The venue's done for anyways. We jus buy a new ring and set up elsewheres next week."

A different voice came in; "Hey, Crusher. You'll be okay. Just remember the code. No names, no blame. Just keep your mouth shut and you'll be looked after." Then the sounds of footsteps moving away.

The same guy who had called the ambulance commented, "They're bastards, but don't worry. I'll get you sorted out."

This time, Sherlock's reply was clear- a simple "Thank you."

"Do you need to see a doctor?" The concern in the caller's voice was clear.

"No. I'm fine. Did the ambulance service say they'd put a professional on the line?"

"Oh, God! I forgot! Are you still there?"

A new voice answered, "Yes. Are you with the patient now? Is he conscious?" This one sounded louder, clearer. Mary whispered, "The control room doctor?"

John nodded, as the caller explained "Yeah, he's immobile and being kept warm."

The control room medic's voice calmly announced, "The ambulance is about two minutes away."

Then the caller spoke again, but as if he'd taken the phone away from his mouth. "Why don't you leave now? No need for you to hang about. There'll be too many questions."

Sherlock's question was rather abrupt. "So, why are you staying?"

The reply was sad. "Because I was Alex Robbs' best friend. Because I'd been injured, I wasn't there for him. I'll see this through- you should go now."

Mary sat bolt upright. "Oh, that must mean…what was it that George Hayter said? The name of the guy who had the skull fracture, who keeled over in front of him on the pavement in Devonshire Square?" She paused for a moment, then answered her own question: "Simon Waterman."

Meanwhile, there was rustling on the recording, then from more of a distance Sherlock asked, "You okay with that?"

A bass voice replied, "Piss off. I'll see you at the re-match."

John heard a siren approaching. There were another couple of rustles, then footsteps retreating.

"That's Sherlock."

Mary looked at him. "You can tell the sound of his walking?" She sounded a little incredulous.

He nodded. And knew from the cadence of the walk that Sherlock was hurting. He flinched at the baritone grunt that followed the sound of someone jumping down off what he imagined was the ring.
"Oh. So, that's him leaving."

He barely listened as the man they now knew to be Simon Waterman be talked to by the Control Room medic and then the ambulance arriving.

At the end, Mary turned the phone off and turned to him. "Sherlock's next stop was Lestrade's garage, returning his motorbike. And you know what happened after that. Do you still want to let sleeping dogs lie?"

John kept hearing Waterman's comment, *Do you need to see a doctor?* He knew the answer to that question was not what Sherlock had said. The voice on the recording was the sound of a man who was not *fine*, but rather one in pain. It was also the voice of a man concerned enough about the danger to his opponent's spine that he had obviously stopped the fight and asked someone to call an ambulance. *Some sociopath.* John found himself wishing that George Hayter had not taken retirement. That someone with a medical background could have been there to make both fighters go in the ambulance.

"John?" He realised that Mary was looking at him for an answer to her question.

"No, Damn it. I'm going to Peckham tonight. I can't wait until tomorrow to find out from this Stuart Bradshaw just how much damage he inflicted on Sherlock. Do me a favour and text Lestrade- get the address and text it to me. Don't tell him I'm going tonight."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not. This is something I need to do by myself. If he has any idea of where Sherlock is, then I'm going to try to find him."

Even though she wanted to come with him, he watched her make the decision to accept his judgment.

"Be careful, love."

John gave her what he hoped would be a reassuring smile, and started to put his coat on.
"So, he was right."

John glanced up from where he was kneeling beside the body at Mary who had pronounced this judgment.

"Who was right?" He was still disturbed by the sight of his fiancé standing at a crime scene.

"Sherlock. Last Friday, he told Lestrade that he was still working on the case because he thought something was going on with the fight club, even though the police file was officially closed."

John stood up but looked back at the dead man. The knife wounds were dead centre; his heart would have been shredded by the repeated thrusts of the blade, and the pool of blood below him showed the cause of death clearly. There were two Crime Scene Examiners working the area around the body, alongside the City of London's Medical Examiner.

Lestrade's call had come just as they were settling down into bed after watching Thursday late night telly. They had tomorrow off because they'd agreed to do the Saturday shift at the clinic. The DI was brief and to the point. "Sherlock's still not answering his phone, but I think this one is connected to the Fort Street death and to Bradshaw, too. The City of London Police DI on the case called us in because of those. I know it's late, but can you come?"

Mary heard his side of the conversation, when he started to prevaricate.

"I don't know, Lestrade. it's late. I spent hours last night looking for Sherlock - and came up empty. Paid for it today by falling asleep during a consultation; my patient was not amused. And Sherlock hasn't answered any of my latest texts either." He didn't tell Lestrade about his fruitless journey to Peckham. Despite it being after ten o'clock, there'd been nobody home when he'd got there. He'd never felt quite so frustrated. Having finally decided to try to find Sherlock, John was beginning to realise that it was not going to be easy. And that made him feel even more anxious- and foolish. Served him right, charging off like some madman thinking he could make a difference. Lestrade had also failed to find Bradshaw when he'd arrived this morning, nor was his luck any better where the guy worked, according to Mary, whom Greg had called at the clinic to update them. There was an alert out for the guy, but the DI didn't hold out much hope.

She just leaned over, plucked the phone out of his hand and said to Greg

"We're both on their way as soon as you text the address." She ended the call and stared him down.

He crossed his arms and started to speak, "I'm n…"

She interrupted. "John, we're going. Sherlock or no Sherlock, we've helped Lestrade figure stuff out so far, and people are dying now, so we can't say 'no thanks; we'd rather get some sleep tonight.' Where's your sense of civic duty, Captain Watson?"

Now standing next to a dead body at one o'clock in the morning, he wondered why it still bothered him that he hadn't been able to convince Mary to stay at home. "It's a murder, there'll be lots of blood" he'd argued. In the taxi on the way to Plantation House on Fenchurch Street, she'd just looked at him like he was crazy, and then explained how her aid worker days had put in front of her a conveyor belt of injured, wounded and dying people. "They weren't soldiers, John. If you want
horror, try to imagine the kind of wounds you dealt with but put them on women or old and frail grandparents. And then there were the kids." She had looked at him, cool as a cucumber. "Innocent civilian casualties can out-shock anything you had to deal with. A body at a crime scene? You have to be kidding if you think that's going to bother me." He'd shut up after that.

When they arrived, Lestrade introduced them to DCI Forrester of the City Police as "consultants" helping on the Fort Street case. John felt a pang of guilt, and muttered under his breath. "Nope, he's still the only consulting detective in the world." Forrester didn't hear or react, but Mary gave his arm a squeeze. Forrester then turned away from the body toward a tall elderly man standing just behind him at a bank of desks, looking at a computer screen. "Mister Cunningham, do you know the victim?"

John did a double-take. Cunningham. That was the name that was mentioned on the 999 recording, something about the Cunninghams being compromised if the police found Bradshaw and he talked. He and Mary exchanged glances. She raised a finger to her lips- a gesture to keep what they knew to each other at this stage. John nodded- it made sense to gather more data. If Lestrade let the cat out of the bag, that would be different. But until he did, they would play along.

Cunningham was old- in his late seventies, if John had to guess. He had a strong, deep-lined, heavy eyed face. His frown at the question was accompanied by a strained nod. "Yes. He's my driver. His name is William Kirwan. I've known him for…" he hesitated for a moment, before continuing "…almost a decade." He seemed to be in a bit of state of shock.

Forrester said more gently, "Can you tell us what happened here?"

"I was working late in my office." The old man gestured vaguely upwards. "We have two floors in this building, and several more spread around the rest of the City. Alec, my son, was working, too, with me on the next floor up, along with a half dozen others."

Over the old man's shoulder, John could see the men, who had been herded into a glass-walled meeting room, where they were being interviewed by a couple of officers.

Lestrade asked the obvious question that had been on John's mind, too. "Why were you all working so late?"

The old man looked slightly askance at the question and then snapped, "Because some of us have to work hard to make a living, Detective Inspector. Cunningham Lindsey is a respected firm, but claims management is one of the most competitive businesses going. We were working on a big fraud investigation for a new client…burning the midnight oil is something I expect from my people."

The DI was making a note in his little book. "If you were all working up there, was this floor empty?"

"Yes."

"Lights out?"

"When I got down here with Alec, the lights were off. We turned them on and found Kirwan."

"And you said to the first police officer on the scene that you saw a burglar in here."

"Not here, I didn't. I saw someone running from the building; I was standing at the window overlooking the street. My son saw him going down the stairwell, apparently. You can ask him about it."
"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't see very well. Just from above and behind. Sort of an average sized guy, dark hair, casually dressed, one of those anorak things with the fake fur hoods."

Mary chipped in unexpectedly. "Why do you think he was a burglar; why not a murderer?"

Cunningham looked at her with a perplexed expression. "Well, we didn't know then that Kirwan was dying."

John realised where Mary's question was headed, so he added, "Yes, but the sight of a person on a stairwell, or one going out the front door- this is a shared office building. Even at midnight, there could be people with legitimate reasons for being here"

Lestrade finished the thought, "So, why assume he was a thief?"

A young man came out of the meeting room, walking with power and presence toward them. "I can answer that question, Detective Inspector."

The old man nodded. "This is my son, Alec."

The younger Cunningham was as tall as his father, but more robustly built, with broad shoulders. Under short blond hair, he had a broad, high forehead. As he approached, John saw he was wearing a navy blue suit- very fashionable, expensive, probably tailor-made. A glint of gold cufflinks and Italian leather shoes completed the picture of flash City clothing. But somehow it looked incongruous on a man with the physique of a rugby front row forward.

Alec wore a bright almost cheerful expression. "The answer is that I assumed he was an Acton man, sneaking in to do a revenge raid on our premises, in retaliation for our prank against their offices last week."

Lestrade frowned. "Prank? What do you mean?"

Alec gave him a smile. "Gamesmanship. It's just something we do to competitors- they break in and steal a few knick-knacks to show us they were here, and then we do the same. I've got a pair of deal tombstones that were lifted a fortnight ago off the Barak Beevour firm at Bedford House; they're part of the Acton crew."

Lestrade looked startled. "You mean, you break and enter into each other's premises and steal?"

As Alec laughed, the old man shrugged. "It's just school-boy high jinks. And our Compliance people accept it as a way of testing our systems and security. We need to do that to protect ourselves and our clients from the real criminals. It's a matter of honour to only take something personal- a photo, memento or the like. Nothing of value is ever stolen."

John looked back at the body. "Tell that to the dead man."

Alec Cunningham sniffed. "Well, obviously, I was wrong. But you asked what I thought at the time, and that's what I thought. It was only later that we discovered the body."

DCI Forrester was watching the exchange. He turned to the old man. "Do you know why your driver was on this floor? Surely he'd have gone up to your office or be waiting in his car?"

"Because I had phoned him to pick something up from the reception desk- a late delivery that I had been e-mailed about. I planned to read it in the car home. I live in North Barnet, so often do work in
the back of the car. That's the whole point of having a driver - adds another productive hour of work at both ends of the day."

John heard the sound of a mobile phone - he recognised the ring tone as Mary's. _The Good, Bad and the Ugly_. It usually made him smile - but not this time. He watched as she mouthed an apology to the men and then walked away down the office toward the stairs.

Unperturbed by her departure, Forrester lifted his pen from the notebook. "Has anyone looked for the document you asked for? In fact, can anyone identify anything that is missing? If this supposed burglar was interrupted, then maybe he stole the document you needed, and was discovered by the driver."

The old man pointed behind him to the bank of computers he had been standing at when the DI first came over. "That's what I was trying to determine. The list of mail room deliveries is up on that screen. Unfortunately, there is no record of the document ever arriving. So, I don't think it could be stolen."

The DCI scowled, and then turned back to Alec. "So, who are the suspects if this is a prank gone wrong? I need names."

The younger man shrugged. "Well, that's not easy. Normally, the team that makes the raid leaves something that identifies which one has been successful. The Acton crew normally leave a playing card, an Ace. But, we've not found anything. Perhaps Dad's driver interrupted before he could lift anything, or leave a signature. I've given the constables a list of ten law firms that might be involved. Even then, although we know more or less the companies that are on the Acton tag team, we don't know names. That's the whole point - you can't be tracked down. Anonymity is important to maintain. So, I'm afraid I can't help you there."

Lestrade butted in. "Gentlemen, I am trying to see if there are any links between this and another crime that took place two weeks ago. Are these pranks linked to a Fight Club by any chance?"

The young man snorted. "You watch too much TV. There's no such thing as a 'fight club'. That's a figment of Brad Pitt's imagination and some Hollywood producers."

John crossed his arms. "So you don't know anything about what happened just down the road from here last Friday night?"

The two men looked blank, so John completed the picture. "A building under construction was used as a venue for an illegal fight, and a man's neck was broken. We've got the evidence; a call to the Ambulance service was recorded."

Alec rolled his eyes. "I haven't a clue what some jerks might have gotten up to last Friday night."

Forrester threw the young man a sceptical look. "So, you won't mind telling us where you were last Friday night?"

The older Cunningham spoke up. "He was with me. It was his mother's birthday, so he came to dinner."

Forrester didn't give up, looking hard at Alec. "Your alibi will be checked, young man."

Lestrade backed him up. "Mister Cunningham, can you really be sure that your son didn't leave the party and come back into the City to join in on that fight?"

Alec laughed. "Yes, he can be sure, because I spent the night. And don't try to make the boys' little
sorties against another firm as anything other than just a bunch of testosterone driven lads out to have some fun."

"Tell that to your father's driver- or rather, his family." Lestrade looked back at the old man, who looked distressed. "Has he got family? I'll need details so we can contact them."

"A sister; he wasn't married. William used to complain that with the hours I kept him working, he'd never get around to a social life or a girl friend." He sighed. "I'll get the details- they're in a personnel file in the third office along." He walked off.

"And, if you don't mind, Detective Inspector, I need to keep checking to make absolutely nothing was taken." Alec turned away, too.

John could see that Forrester was still suspicious. He called over one of the PCs in the meeting room. "Accompany Mister Cunningham here while he does an inventory- he's checking if anything has been stolen." He then called out to Alec, "we will be processing this crime scene for the rest of the night- and possibly into tomorrow morning, when the computer guys will get here. I'm afraid that it won't be 'business as usual' tomorrow; at least this end of the floor needs to be kept clear of workers. But make sure your Head of IT is here- we will need his assistance to get into the system."

The young man stopped walking and snapped. "Our computer files are private; client confidentiality has to be preserved. Unless the regulators agree, you can't block our access. How the hell are we supposed to finish the project if we can't get to essential files? We have fiduciary duties to our clients."

Lestrade interjected, "Aren't you supposed to have contingency plans? What would you do if there was a flood or a fire? Business continuity and all that."

That earned him a scowl. "We'd have to move to a different building. And that's not terribly convenient."

"Yes, I suppose that murder is that, but rather more inconvenient for the victim, wouldn't you say?" Lestrade's sarcasm was clear.

Forrester smirked at the exchange. Then everyone's attention was diverted as the one of the crime scene examiners called out, "Over here, sirs- found something." The elder Cunningham came out of the office in a hurry at the commotion, carrying a file. As the men converged on the body, Mary came back into the room. She was practically fizzing with excitement, so John waited for her.

She came up close and whispered, "That was George Hayter. He's just back from his holiday and got my message on his machine. He's passed on a phone number for Simon Waterman. We can talk to him and find out about Sherlock at the fight last week. Maybe he'll know where the next one is going to be held."

"John..." It was Lestrade, who gestured them both over to the body. "They've found something on the body. It was caught up in the zip of his jacket pocket."

The CSE had bagged what looked to be a corner torn off of a piece of paper, which he handed to Forrester, who scanned it quickly, and then passed it to Lestrade. John and Mary bracketed him as they all tried to decipher what was scrawled.

There were three incomplete lines left on the corner. The top one read "at quarter to twelve", the one under that was "learn what" and then the last bit was just a single word, "maybe."

Forrester asked, "Do either of you recognise the writing?"
Both Cunninghams shook their heads.

"What could it mean?" Lestrade asked.

Forrester kept his attention on the Cunninghams. "Any ideas?"

The old man shrugged. Alec just snorted. "For God's sake, it could be anything, maybe a betting note- Kirwan was fond of the horses."

John gave a wry smile. "Well, it might be a coincidence that he has a note in his pocket with a time on it that is quite likely his time of death. But someone I know used to say that the universe is rarely so lazy as to allow coincidences."

Lestrade matched the smile. "Yeah, and he'd go on to point out that the balance of probabilities means that those words…"

Mary finished the thought for him, "…are the reason why Kirwan was killed."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: * "tombstones" are what City professionals produce as a souvenir or memento of a big deal in which they participated. As Corporate Finance deals can be worth hundreds of millions or even billion dollar transactions, tombstones are trophies that commemorate an individual's participation. Usually encased in acrylic, the item has no intrinsic value, only bragging rights.
He was part way through the seventh move of *Suang Yang Bei Her Rou Ruan Chuan*, as the White Crane spread its wings. The cramp across his Quadratus lumborum muscle which he was trying to ignore suddenly became a sharp stabbing pain that made him grunt and falter in the normally fluid shift of weight to his right leg. That set off an avalanche of associated pain, as the tendons attaching the muscle started to pull on the twelfth rib. He suspected that the rib was dislocated, cracked or broken. For the past six days, the pain had been stubborn, and was now becoming deeply annoying because it was getting worse, rather than better.

Sherlock dropped out of the Tai Chi position and sank to the ground, pulling his knees up to his chest and breathing slowly. *Not now.* He was waiting for Rob to show up, and didn't have time to try to work the cramp out.

A few moments later, the pain had eased enough for him to try to stand again. His mood darkened. The pain was drawing back into play his hypersensitivities just when he really could do without them. The tracksuit itched; he loathed polyester fibres and lycra that seemed to infest sportswear these days.

His attempt to use a mantra to calm himself didn't work. Finally, he sighed philosophically. The clothing wasn't ideal but beggars can't be choosers.

Not that he'd actually had to beg. After leaving Lestrade asleep in the middle of the night, he'd emptied the pockets of his discarded leather jacket, taking his wallet, burn phone and his lock pick with him. Wearing nothing but a sheet, he had beat a hasty retreat to the bolt hole, injected a hefty dose of morphine and slept for the next thirty six hours. When he woke up Sunday, he'd drunk a litre of water and then started to survey the damage.

Apart from the pain in his lower back and a rather spectacular black eye, the rest of the transport was starting to heal. He used Tai Chi techniques of gentle muscle stretches and meditation to restore reasonable levels of activity on Sunday, whilst pondering his next steps.

When Sunday night turned into the wee hours of Monday morning, he re-entered Lestrade's flat and, while the detective slept, Sherlock plundered his lap top, confident in the knowledge that he would not be interrupted because Lestrade was a notoriously heavy sleeper. It still annoyed Sherlock that his fit had woken the man up. If he hadn't fallen off the sofa, then Lestrade would have been none the wiser. The fit was a nuisance, and he knew the solution for them. Once in the bolthole, the morphine put him into a deep enough sleep that he didn't have any more problems. *Yet another reason to keep using it.*

On Monday, Sherlock used his burn phone to summon an old contact, someone who neither John Watson nor Mycroft knew, and whom Lestrade would have forgotten.

Two hours later, an Addison Lee delivery van came down the ramp and pulled into a vacant parking slot. Sherlock slipped into the passenger seat and eyed the man sitting at the wheel, which had specially installed hand controls. The driver was an amputee- his leg below the knee was a prosthetic one*.

"So, how's life been treating you, Rob?"
"Well, nothing to complain about. The phantom pain's a pain at times, but that's nothing new. How 'bout you, laddie?" The Scotsman was looking at the shiner with some consternation.

Sherlock ignored the question. "You've been promoted."

That drew a laugh. "Aye, that I have. I now dispatch courier vans for the whole of east London. I have a disabled guy who's the safest driver out of all of my lot, which is why I could liberate this special little Ford Transit to do your special delivery and keep it off the books."

"I'm grateful for the service. Especially if you've been able to get what I asked for." He'd not seen Rob in years, but he knew the Scotsman was reliable, and still felt he owed Sherlock something. Years ago, he'd saved the man's life when he'd had an accident in front of where Sherlock was busking, when he was living on the streets. He could see that Rob wanted to ask about the eye, but was trying to figure out how to do it. Tedious. He decided to forestall the pointless conversation.

"I don't have all day."

The big man laughed. "Always down to business with you, isn't it, Sherlock? Aye, well...now that you're famous and all, I cannae blame you." He reached into the back of the van and pulled out a series of packages, which he started to hand over to Sherlock.

"Right, first off, the stationery: one roll brown wrapping paper- extra long. Three rolls of duct tape, one packet of blue tack. Then there's the marker pens, thumb tacks, the ream of blank paper, the post-it notes, and twine. Three different colours, as your text said. That was a wee bugger, by the way. Brown and green are easy- garden centre material. But red's harder."

"And the laptop?"

The Scot nodded. "Aye." He reached under the seat, and pulled out a rectangular soft-sided pouch, less than a foot long. "A Microsoft Surface. Better than a laptop. Think of it as a tablet on steroids; the keyboard detaches. I took the trouble to charge it up for you." He handed it over.

"Thank you." Sherlock had pulled the computer out of the pouch and flipped it open. "What about the clothes?"

"Hold your horses." Rob reached behind the seat and pulled out a gym kit bag. "Hope you haven't changed much in size. This is what I could find of the list. The only trouble I had was with the shoes- couldn't find that variety of Nike, sorry. Got you one that looks the same, but who knows; I'm nay good at what's got street cred these days; can't be bothered to waste money on shoes when I really only need the one." He sounded philosophical.

Sherlock started to open his wallet.

"Och, no. Laddie, put tha' away. I won't take a penny. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. This is the least I can do."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "It's been years since your accident."

"Aye- that's years that I would'nae had if it weren't for you. So, wheesht now and take the stuff. An early Christmas present."

Sherlock shrugged. "Suit yourself. But, I do have one more favour to ask."

"Just ask. If I canna do it, I'll tell you."
"I need a lift from here on Friday night; a pick up at 6.45- in a van like this. Only I'll have to be in the back; can't be seen."

That got him a look. "Who're ye hiding from, Sherlock?"

"None of your business."

"Don't be so cankert; it's your own good health I be wishing."

"Don't ask, because I won't tell. It's best you don't know. And, if anyone asks if you've seen me, you haven't."

Rob sighed as Sherlock got out of the van, laden down with his stuff. "Take care, will ye promise me tha' and all?"

Sherlock just gave him one of his manufactured smiles. "See you on Friday. Don't be late." And then he was around the corner and into the stair well. He waited until the van left, and then slipped into his bolt hole.

He spent the next 72 hours working on the make-shift evidence board he set up in the bolt hole. He lined the cement block wall with brown paper, held in place by duct tape, and then started putting up the evidence. The Surface device was useful for research- he could pick and choose between wifi users in the building to piggy back, confident that even Mycroft wouldn't think of bugging the Lestrade's neighbours.

The first task was to do a through research job on the Devonshire Squires, the Acton Aces and the Cunningham Chancers. Who they were, what their business was, who were the movers and shakers behind the fighters. As he suspected, there was a lot going on – and not all of it was strictly legal.

He missed a printer for the first day, then got fed up and just stored stuff on a USB that he always carried with him on his key ring. As soon as Lestrade left for work on Tuesday, Sherlock re-entered the flat and used the man's home printer. No one ever password protected a printer. He used his own paper, but used Lestrade's electricity to recharge the tablet. He warmed up and had a wash, used the loo and felt human for a while. He’d had two years’ practice in being able to occupy a space without leaving any evidence. It was a luxury that here in Lestrade's flat he didn't need to hide his fingerprints. If they were found, then they could be explained by his brief stay on Friday night.

While he was in the flat, he sneaked a look at the DI's own home laptop. The password was ridiculously easy- a mixture of his initials, those of his sister and his nephew, Sam. *Sentiment.* Sherlock's estimation of both law enforcement agencies and the criminal classes had fallen when he realised how easy it was to hack into the remnants of Moriraty's network, as well as the computers used by his Fallen Angels. Compared with the challenges of using the dark internet while he was away, this work was a positive dawdle.

Lestrade made his life even easier by keeping on his home laptop his notes on what was happening once the Font Street case file was officially closed. Sherlock left a mirror virus- one he'd developed while he was breaking Moriarty's network. It simply copied everything that the user was working on that day and stored it in a file that was automatically uploaded onto dropbox just before the laptop was shut down. It was surprising how many users never questioned the little command box that came up demanding that a PC be kept on "while updates are being downloaded".

At midnight, Sherlock got onto dropbox and pulled down all the files. Over the next three nights, he read about John's finding the fingerprint on the body, his pursuit of George Hayter, the discovery that Sherlock's opponent was called Stuart Bradshaw. Little bits and pieces, but nothing that actually
added up, according to Lestrade.

*You see, but you do not observe.* The police and John were just sniffing around without really understanding what they were looking for. They had no idea what the motive for the murder was, simply listing it as a possible burglary gone wrong. Sherlock knew better. The more he dug into the City businesses behind the fight teams, the more he found. But it still didn't add up yet, because he was finding it hard to concentrate. The cumulative effects of the morphine were slowing him down. The drug made him both anxious and annoyed. Just when he needed to be at his sharpest, the fog of the opiate was getting in the way. But, without the morphine, the pain was a debilitating nuisance- it was equally distracting, and annoyingly, the pain was getting worse rather than better.

There wasn't anything new on the DI's laptop about the case when he looked on Wednesday night, but he figured that changed because Lestrade was out half the night on Thursday. The bolt hole made it very easy to keep an eye on the detective's comings and goings. As soon as the weary DI had managed to drag himself into his car on Friday morning and drive off to New Scotland Yard, Sherlock was busy downloading.

By Friday midday, he was up to speed on what had happened at Fenchurch Street and the murder of William Kirwan. The City of London DCI Forrester was no slouch when it came to password protection, but Sherlock managed to crack it eventually- and from there into the Home Office's systems. He was mildly disappointed that it was almost as easy to hack into the HOLMES2 database now as it had been two years ago. *Mycroft, you're slipping.*

Between three and six o'clock, he had posted all the new information on his make-shift evidence board, trying to make the pieces fit together. Pacing, he tried to ignore the pain and focus, but it was proving hard. He fisted his hands in his hair and pulled, trying to get his nervous system to concentrate on something else. He put his coat on, too, growing more aware that the little room was too cold.

He was struggling to see the connection. Simon Waterman worked for RGL; so did the first dead man, the Devonshire fighter called Alexander Robbs. The man whose fingerprint was on the body, George Hayter, had just retired from Traderisk, a financial consultancy specialising in security. Both Robbs and Waterman had been working on a project for the same client- the Liberty insurance syndicate. Their work was a forensic fraud investigation into the sinking of the Greek oil tanker, *Agrikoliades*. It had gone down off the coast of Mozambique, on its way to Durban. He attached green twine to each of the sheets with their names on them, and pulled it tight to the ship, whose photo already had two other pieces of red twine attached to it. The first red string led to the ship owners, Ithaca Avin Marine. The second piece of red twine led to Elbourne Mitchell, a law firm based in Bedford House, who were handling the case on behalf of the owners. One of Forrester's case notes had mentioned another legal firm in the same office block, Barak Beevour, but it didn't specialise in marine law, as EM did. He'd put a post-it note with a big question mark over the Beevour firm, but decided to attach it by red twine back to Cunningham Lindsay, because Alec Cunningham had mentioned it was a target for one of the Cunningham Chancers' raids.

Neither police team, nor John, had been able to prove any link between Kirwan's murder and the Fight Club, but Sherlock knew better. He'd been able to track back through the courier despatch records of Elbourne Mitchell to find the pick-up of the legal document that Cunningham had mentioned as the reason why William Kirwan was on the otherwise empty floor. The package had not been delivered according to the case notes, but interestingly, there seemed to be no record at either the law firm or Cunningham Lindsey of anyone trying to track it down. *Curiouser and curiouser.*

What none of the investigators realised is that there was a *lot* of money at stake. The tanker was a
very large crude oil ship, carrying over two billion barrels of crude oil. Even at today's falling prices that valued the cargo at nearly $100 million. The ship was nearly new and had cost almost as much to build- $93 million- as the cargo. Lose both and the insurance claim was startling. Had the ship been scuttled as part of an insurance scam? The fact that it was being investigated suggested so, but if so, why?

Alongside the sheet on which he'd written the name Cunningham Lindsay, he'd put up a series of post-it notes, with the fighters' names where he knew them. The Cunningham Clash. The Cunningham Chancer, etc He snorted. Sound like comic book superheroes. The work he'd done for the Geek Interpreter case made him aware of all sorts of silly name- the Hulk, Silver Surfer, Doctor Strange, Captain America. Ridiculous. The names chosen by the fighters seemed equally juvenile. Even his own. He might be on the side of the righteous, but because he was more devil than angel, he had chosen it as appropriate. An unbidden echo of a conversation with a certain Irishman started up in his head.

Damn, damn, damn! He pulled his hair harder. His brain was getting distracted by pointless things. This is what he hated about morphine.

He was getting hot; his pacing and frustration were raising his body temperature. He'd slapped on three nicotine patches, partly to cover the needle marks, but also to help stimulate his brain to find a way through the opiate fog. But it wasn't working. Why would Kirwan be killed? Who benefitted? Why were the Cunninghams being so secretive? Wasn't it in their best interests to find out who was behind the murder?

When his phone rang, he knew it would be a text from the Devonshire Coach with the location of this evening's fight.

17.32 Meet at Wharfside Point South. Showtime 8pm, so be there twenty minutes early.

Sherlock was running out of time. Even though he wouldn't be fighting again for at least another week, Sherlock knew he had to attend. It was part of the deal; all the fighters on the team who could still walk had to be there at the venue. In any case, he was counting on it, because he needed more data. But he had to have a clear game plan, or at least an idea of what data he needed and how best to extract it from the people at the fight. Every time he tried to start a list, tendrils of fog just swirled. What a nuisance!

He moaned in frustration as another thought came out of nowhere. There was one solution to both the morphine mist and his need to find a solution quickly. An itch of anticipation crawled up his arm, and just the thought of it stimulated a dopamine rush. He glanced in the corner at the metal box. He'd not stored any cocaine there, because the shelf life was not as stable or long lived as heroin or morphine. He'd have to stop on the way.

By six thirty, as he dressed in the athletic gear that he would be expected to wear as one of the Devonshire fighters, he knew that the focus he needed was only minutes away. If he worked this well, he just might be able to crack the case wide open tonight. That would be good. He was beginning to realise that he wasn't going to be able to keep going for much longer without medical attention.

Sherlock sent a text to a number he had not used in years. Even before leaving Baker Street though, he'd checked that the person was still in business. Just in case had been his thought at the time. Now he knew the case meant now or never.

Moments later, out in the garage, hoodie up and gym bag by his feet, he was indulging in a few Tai Chi exercises in the dark. He thought maybe the weather was warming up, when he heard the metal
door to the stairs open. He dodged between two parked cars, crouching down to avoid being seen. A woman who lived across the hall from Lestrade came out and went to her car. Watching her fumble her keys and then faff about getting her seatbelt on, he thought he might explode, counting the minutes before she left. Come on, come ON! When he was this keyed up, every second felt like a minute.

The lights were still on in the garage when the Addison Lee van come down the ramp. He didn't care anymore about being seen, just bolted to the back of the van, threw open the double doors and climbed in, slamming them behind him.

"DRIVE!" The baritone command was a growl.

"Aye and it's nice to see you again, too, Sherlock."

Sherlock just kept his head down, holding the gym bag. "No time for meaningless pleasantries. I have two stops to make. The first one is straight down the A10 to Hoxton station; once we get there, I'll tell you where to go. Just stop for a minute, then we go on to Poplar."

The Scotsman muttered. "Why not just order a bloody taxi, Sherlock?"

He snapped back, "Because eyes that I need to avoid are watching taxis. Now, that's enough breath wasted on talking. Just drive."

No conversation occurred for the next twenty three minutes as the van moved south.

Even though his head was down most of the time, Sherlock sneaked enough looks at the sat nav on the dashboard to keep aware of their progress. They passed the Suleymaniye mosque on the left and then carried on down the A10 as it became Kingsland Road.

"Do you want the station itself? If so, I need to turn right."

"No. Just keep going to the phone box on the left by the park and then pull in."

As Rob did what he was told, parking on the double yellow line, Sherlock spied a figure in the phone box. "Right, now take this and give it to the person in there, and bring me back what he gives you." Over the back of the seat came a hand waving two crisp £50 notes.

Rob put his hands on the wheel. "Nay, laddie. If the bloke I can see in there is selling what I think you're buying, then it's not something I'm willing to get involved with."

"It's important." He tried to keep the whine out of his tone of voice.

"Maybe to you, but to me it's the kiss of death. If I get caught buying drugs, that's my job. You once saved my life, you birk. I won't let you knacker it now."

There was a sigh of frustration from the darkness of the back of the van. "Then just stay here for a moment. I won't be long."

Sherlock popped open the back doors of the van and came out wearing his hoodie up and a baseball cap. The road wasn't particularly well lit, and the phone box was right beside the Geffrye Museum Gardens. He stifled the urge to look up at the nearest CCTV camera at the junction more than a hundred meters up the road. If he was lucky, they wouldn't recognise him. He didn't have to fake the limp, as a stabbing pain shot up his back.

In less than two minutes he was back in the car. While Rob pulled out into the early evening traffic,
Sherlock was unwrapping the syringe. For the first time in days, he felt his mood lifting.

Chapter End Notes

author's note: If you want to know how Sherlock knows Rob, check out The Stockbroker's Courier, part of the Got My Eye On You series.
The Devil is in the Detail

He put the two cups of tea down on the bedside table and then sat on the edge of the bed. From beneath the bedcovers came a contented, "hmmm. That smells good."

John gave a tired smile. He had come to terms with having someone else in his bed- kept him warm, and when she wasn't there now, he missed her. Mary didn't seem to mind that he was a restless sleeper, often waking several times in a night. Mindful of her presence though, when he was awake John tried to lie still, and ponder what it was that had woken him. He still had nightmares occasionally, sometimes involving Afghanistan, sometimes about Sherlock, occasionally the two would be mixed up together. You're not haunted by the war, Doctor Watson...you miss it. He'd never quite forgiven Mycroft for being able to read him so easily, the very first time they had met.

This morning when he woke, Sherlock was on his mind. Mary and he had got home late last night, when Lestrade said there was nothing more to be got out of the crime scene on Fenchurch Street. On the way home in the taxi, he'd gone from being annoyed about Sherlock not being there, through being irritated, to past being angry. Now, he was not only worried, but actually afraid for his friend. The case had everything going for it- complexity, murder, and an audience who wanted him to be there, showing off how clever he was. But, the man resolutely remained absent. It was uncharacteristic. No, it was worse than that; it was just plain wrong.

Mind you, John had to admit that he no longer knew what was characteristic of Sherlock. The man who had come home and bounced back into his life waving a champagne bottle at him was proving to be elusive, mercurial. John knew that some seismic change had happened, but could not fathom what it was, nor what the consequences were.

Mary stirred, and a hand came out, followed by a blond sleepy face looking for the cup of tea. He handed it to her, with another smile. She sat up and took her first sip with her eyes closed. A blissful sigh followed.

"You have no idea how much I appreciate you getting out of this warm bed on a cold December morning and getting me a cup of tea."

Once she got her eyes open, he realised she was studying him. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

She sniffed. "Yeah, I'm worried about him, too."

"Do you think it's too early to call George Hayter?"

"Why?...oh, wait- do you think he knows where Simon Waterman or Stuart Bradshaw are?"

"Maybe. I keep thinking they might be able to help us find Sherlock."

At that precise moment, John's mobile went off. He hurriedly put his cup down and grabbed it.

"Speak of the devil..." He connected the call. "Colonel Hayter. I was just thinking of phoning you, but you've beaten me to it."

Mary sat bolt upright in bed and tried to snuggle up as close to John as she could so she could listen to the phone, too.

"I'm no longer a colonel, Doctor Watson; I'm not even a qualified doctor now, just a retired country
squire these days. But I thought you would like to know that I was telephoned last night by Simon Waterman."

"Interesting. Can I put you on speaker phone?" She was nodding furiously. "Mary is right here and would like to know what Waterman said."

"Good morning, Miss Morestan. As I was about to say to Doctor Watson, Waterman rang me to say that the fight club is meeting again tonight, and there is still no replacement for me. He was trying to talk me into coming along. 'For old time's sake,' he called it. He's going to tell them tonight he's quitting, and he's trying to get some of the other injured fighters to join together to demand that I'm replaced. He says the chap injured last week was very lucky. He's been released from hospital after a vertebroplasty, which should heal in a month. I understand he's going to argue alongside the others, too."

"Will that convince you to reconsider?" John hoped it would.

Hayter laughed. "I'm through with London now. I'd be tempted to volunteer your name, but it wouldn't be fair to ask you to take on the role, Doctor Watson, because you should never put your licence at risk. You have your future career to consider and responsibilities now that you are getting married. But I thought you might know of someone else—perhaps another doctor who has retired from the RAMC?"

Mary butted in. "Do you know where the fight's going to take place?"

"They always text the venue just a couple of hours ahead of time, to keep it as secret as possible."

John exchanged looks with Mary, who nodded encouragingly. He hesitated for a moment. "Um..." then decided. "There's been a development that you need to know about. I'm going to ask you to keep it confidential because there is a police investigation underway." He paused, giving the man a chance to back out, if he wasn't willing to abide by that understanding. When no response came, he went on. "Last night there was a murder, at the offices of Cunningham Lindsey on Fenchurch Street."

"Bloody hell. It wasn't Alec Cunningham, was it?"

"No, William Kirwan, the Cunningham's driver. Ever heard of him? Is he involved in the fight scene?"

There was a slight hesitation, then, "Not to my knowledge, or at least I don't recognise the name. A lot of the fighters hide behind aliases, but over the months I got to know a lot of them. Partially because TradeRisk works with so many financial services companies that I tended to bump into them on the job. Of course, I have to pretend not to know them. It's all part of the club rules—no names, no blame.

Mary leaned forward. "Why did you think it might be Alec Cunningham who was killed?"

There was a laugh at the other end. "Because he's such a hot-head that he has irritated just about everyone on every team, including his own. Clasher—that's his fight name—is just that—he rubs everyone up the wrong way. It wouldn't surprise me if he offended someone enough to take drastic measures."

John had been thinking a lot about what the Cunninghams had said last night. "He claimed that this was a burglary gone bad—that Kirwan interrupted someone trying to do a prank raid. Have you heard about these raids before?"
There was an audible sigh at the other end. "Yes- it's all part of the hype. Grudges between the teams build up to the point where one of them takes it upon themselves to do a bit of petty thieving. The promoters are happy for it to continue- say it gets the crowds going, pumps up the betting."

"Is there something going on between the Cunninghams and the Acton team? Alec Cunningham was pointing the finger in their direction."

There was a dismissive snort. "The Actons have a law suit against Cunningham Lindsay, been grinding its way through the courts for the past seven years. Relations are pretty strained. He could be trying to implicate them just because he's a mean son of bitch. But, there could be something in it. Was the victim one of the new fighters? I know they've had to fill the gap caused by what happened last week to the Crusher."

"Is Crusher the alias for Stuart Bradshaw?"

"Yes." There was a hint of caution in the reply.

"We've been trying to find him, to talk to him about his opponent."

"The Devonshire Devil?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"Because Bradshaw told me who put him in hospital."

"I've been trying to reach Bradshaw. He's not at home, or at work. Do you have a mobile number for him?"

There was a pause. Then in a suspicious tone, Hayter asked a question. "Why do you want to know?"

John decided to trust Hayter. He really had no other option. "Because the Devonshire Devil is a friend of mine. I didn't realise that he was involved in the fight until I heard the ambulance service recording, and I recognised his voice. He's gone missing. I think he's in a bad way, and I need to find him urgently. Bradshaw could help."

There was a pause, then "You can ask him yourself. He's sitting here beside me, listening in."

Mary's eyes widened, sharing John's surprise, as Hayter's phone was jostled, and then the tell-tale slight echo of being on speaker phone cut in. "Bradshaw here." It was a deep voice, and John tried to imagine the size of the man speaking. "I'm hanging out with the Doc here because I've got no one else to turn to. I live alone, and the hospital wouldn't release me unless there was someone to keep me under observation."

John gave a wry smile. "I thought you'd given up on this role, Hayter."

Mary's eyes widened, sharing John's surprise, as Hayter's phone was jostled, and then the tell-tale slight echo of being on speaker phone cut in. "Bradshaw here." It was a deep voice, and John tried to imagine the size of the man speaking. "I'm hanging out with the Doc here because I've got no one else to turn to. I live alone, and the hospital wouldn't release me unless there was someone to keep me under observation."

John gave a wry smile. "I thought you'd given up on this role, Hayter."

Mary's eyes widened, sharing John's surprise, as Hayter's phone was jostled, and then the tell-tale slight echo of being on speaker phone cut in. "Bradshaw here." It was a deep voice, and John tried to imagine the size of the man speaking. "I'm hanging out with the Doc here because I've got no one else to turn to. I live alone, and the hospital wouldn't release me unless there was someone to keep me under observation."

John gave a wry smile. "I thought you'd given up on this role, Hayter."

Mary's eyes widened, sharing John's surprise, as Hayter's phone was jostled, and then the tell-tale slight echo of being on speaker phone cut in. "Bradshaw here." It was a deep voice, and John tried to imagine the size of the man speaking. "I'm hanging out with the Doc here because I've got no one else to turn to. I live alone, and the hospital wouldn't release me unless there was someone to keep me under observation."

John gave a wry smile. "I thought you'd given up on this role, Hayter."

There was a chuckle. "Think of it as 'after-care', Watson. You know as well as I do that it's not easy to stop thinking about a patient."

That brought John back to the reason why he had called in the first place. "Yes, well, I can understand that. Tell me what happened to the guy who broke your neck."

With a sniff, Bradshaw said, "He didn't, not really. It was my own bloody fault, 'cos I fell badly. The Devil's a clever fighter; I'll give him that. He knows styles of fighting I'm not familiar with, but I've got at least thirty pounds more muscle than him, and should have won, if I'd not been clumsy."
Impatiently, John snapped, "Just what sort of damage did you inflict? That's what I need to know."

"Hit his face a couple of times, and he'll be sore as hell from body blows to his chest and back, plus the bruising when I got his waist in a leg lock. It's my signature piece- why I'm called Crusher." The man's bragging hit a raw nerve with John, but before he could react, Bradshaw continued, "I did get one really good kick in to his kidney. That one's probably the worst of the lot. But, he didn't need a hospital."

"A doctor needed to decide that, Stuart." Hayter interjected before John could say the same thing.

"Yeah, well- there wasn't one. Which is why I'm going tonight. Simon's right. We fighters need to stick together on this. After the bouts tonight, we're gonna talk to the coaches and the promoters and get it sorted."

John was thinking about what he should say next when Mary butted in. "That's why you need to go, too, Colonel Hayter. The voice of reason should be heard. Why not take John with you?"

John turned to her with amazement.

She carried on. "Not to advise officially- you're right, he shouldn't risk his license. But, as an observer, he can help argue the case. So, if you agree to go, then when you are texted the address, send it to us and we'll go, too. Put us on the list as your guests."

"Miss Morstan- sorry, but you're not invited."

She looked nonplussed. "Why ever not?"

Bradshaw answered with a laugh, "Cos the only women who go to these things are prozzies and totty, hanging on the arms of the punters. With respect, lady- you don't sound like the type. And even if you were to try, you wouldn't be allowed anywhere near the ring, or in the team sessions afterwards. Only the docs will get in."

John nodded. "You're right of course." He shot a stern look at Mary, a don't-press-your-luck look. She pouted, as John continued, "Mary will stay here, but I will come; that is, if you agree."

Hayter responded. "Yes, that's a good idea. Expect a text around 5.30 or so."

John couldn't resist asking the question, "Do you think the Devonshire Devil will be there? We need to find him, because we need his help to solve this murder."

Bradshaw's reply was gruff. "Yeah, he has to be there. All team fighters need to be on deck, even if they aren't fighting. That's why I'm going. So the guy will be there."

"Why's he so important then?" The Cunningham fighter's tone had turned suspicious. "Is he a suspect in that murder?"

John smirked. "No. The devil is in the detail, Mister Bradshaw. That was Sherlock Holmes you were fighting."

There was stunned silence on the other end of the phone.
Making Plans

As soon as the front door shut behind John, Mary was reaching for her phone. She decided that she had to call Mycroft first, then Lestrade.

*I'm sorry, Sherlock, if this ends up with you in rehab.* She had to balance her priorities. Keeping John unaware of her past was number one, and that meant satisfying the elder Holmes's need for information about his brother more than the younger one's need for freedom. Besides, if John found out she'd ratted on Sherlock, then she could justify it by saying it was for his own good. If he was using drugs again, then rehab was the best place for him. At least in there, Sherlock wouldn't be able to make John upset by not involving him on cases.

Not for the first time over the past three weeks, Mary felt caught between a rock and a hard place. She genuinely *liked* Sherlock, and loved John. But, because of the past she was fleeing from, she didn't have the option of ignoring Mycroft. So, *needs must.*

Two rings, and then that patrician voice, "Miss Morstan. I do hope that this is going to be a meaningful call, because I am beginning to get curious about your back story."

She ignored the threat. "No need for *that.*" She drew breath and then continued. "I'm going to assume that you know everything that Detective Inspector Lestrade knows- either because he's told you or you found out by other means."

"That would be a correct assumption."

"Then you know Sherlock's using again."

There was a silence. Then, "your utility to me is in direct proportion to how much you tell me that I *don't* know. You are not yet proving to be at all *useful.*"

She had dealt with people like Mycroft before, but none quite so…scary. She took a deep breath.

"Then listen. You need to get your people to tell you what John was just texted. It's an address. I don't know where, because he refused to show me. Something that I do know that you don't is that Sherlock's going to be there. It's the fight club venue for tonight. Things kick off at 8."

"Wait." It was a command, and she obeyed it, counting off the seconds it would take him to communicate with his people.

Faster than she expected, he was back on again. "Thank you, Miss Morstan. One small step in the right direction. Is there any more *useful* information you can provide?"

"Stuart Bradshaw and Simon Waterman are going to be at that fight tonight. They're two fighters linked to the first death at Fort Street. And Bradshaw is the *Crusher-* the one who fought Sherlock last Friday. He fights for the Cunninghams, who were in the middle of the murder last night of William Kirwan. But I don't understand the connections."

There was a bored sigh on the other end of the phone. "*Domestic* crimes are so mundane. I am not interested in this *case,* Miss Morstan." His inflection on the word 'case' conveyed his total lack of regard.

"Well, you should care more, because it's what is keeping Sherlock alive at this point." She might have known Sherlock for only a month, but clearly she knew him better than his own brother did. If
Mycroft was going to be so snippy about this, she wouldn't hesitate to point out what she did know.

Probably because very few people ever had the temerity to reprimand him, Mycroft's reply was a surprised, "I care about Sherlock more than what little puzzles he chooses to waste his time on."

At that point Mary realised that part of Sherlock's problem was that whatever he'd been up to over the two years away might have impressed his brother, but clearly what he did in the real world wasn't up to the same level of respect.

While she mulled the significance of this over, Mycroft continued. "Pity that your fiancé seems not to care anymore about Sherlock."

She leapt to John's defence. "He's on his way to the fight club right now, meeting up with George Hayter who's got him in as a guest. He's going to try to find Sherlock and talk him into getting help. Now listen carefully, because this part is important. Sherlock's doing what he's doing because he hasn't stopped living the way he was for the past two years. If your lot barge in too early, then you won't get what you were talking about the last time we met. Sherlock's clearly rejected any help from you or your employers, so you're going to have to back off. Give John the chance to try to help him re-integrate into civilian life again. I will help, but you've got to let us try it our way. Will you promise me that?"

There was a long silence at the other end. Then an abrupt, "I will be watching. And if I don't like what I see, then the whole deal is off."

The connection was broken from his end, leaving her looking down at the phone. She felt very helpless, relying only on John. It was something that she had rarely ever been willing to do- to trust someone else to do what had to be done. In his current frame of mind, she wasn't sure he'd succeed. Please, John. Hold onto your temper. It's not just Sherlock's future that is at stake; it's ours, too.

She started hunting for Lestrade's number.

\oO\o

As John Watson arrived outside the front door of the Shootfighter's gym just off the Poplar flyover, he was already in fighting mode. The taxi ride had given him too much time to replay his earlier conversation with Mary that had been halfway between an argument and a discussion.

"I'm coming with you, John. I'll drive you there, and wait in the car."

He'd dismissed that. "Not happening. You are far too curious a cat to keep out of things. I know you, Mary. I'll take a taxi. Don't wait up, as I have no idea how long this will take. If I connect with Sherlock, it could take a while, maybe even all night, if I can get him back to Baker Street."

She'd just looked at him, and he could see she was not at all happy with that idea.

She put her hands on her hips and her chin rose, unbidden. "So, why can't I come? I don't buy that line the only women allowed in have to be arm candy. You can introduce me as a possible medical advisor; after all, I have no doctor's license, but could probably diagnose any injuries at a fight just as well as you can."

"It's not about that; this could be dangerous."

"As if I haven't faced danger before in Africa. If you think that it's so risky, then tell Lestrade and he'll break it up before it gets dangerous. He's the one who wants to interview Bradshaw. Just tell
"No." John knew that if the police broke up the fight before he got what he wanted, Sherlock would be furious. Even if he was hurting, even if he was using again, Sherlock would be focused on the case. *He's always been willing to sacrifice common sense when he thinks it's necessary.*

To forestall an argument, he had tried to explain. "Look, you're the one who says I should be sorting things out with him. I can do that better if I'm not having to worry about some crazy bare-knuckle fighter pushing you around because you're not on the invite list. And if the police come barreling in there at the wrong time, then Sherlock's just going to bolt again. Trust me on this. I need to do it alone."

Eventually, she caved in.

Now forty five minutes later, John took one look at the man waiting beside George Hayter at the gym door, and took an instant dislike. Dressed in a purple track suit with a matching sweatshirt incongruously topped by a cervical collar, the big bald fighter eyed the doctor with some surprise. The look on the man's face when he was introduced to John was enough to add fuel to the fire of John's annoyance. Guys who were much taller and bigger tended to give him *that* look of surprise and dismissal, all wrapped up in a bundle of superiority complexes.

"You're John Watson, the blogger who works with Holmes?"

"Yes." He said through gritted teeth, while his left fist clenched in sympathy.

Once in the front door, and their names checked off the list, John steered the two men away from the crowd of suited men and their dolled-up women waiting for the lift, and through a door marked "Emergency Stairs". He used the walk down to the gym floor to explain his game plan. "I don't care why you two are here. I'm here to locate Sherlock and get him out of here. If you spot him before I do, don't tell him I'm here."

Stopped on the landing between the flights, he turned to see if Hayter and Bradshaw had picked up on the undercurrent of anger in his tone.

The retired colonel responded first. "That's okay, Doctor Watson; we have business of our own; we'll be using the time during the bouts to build support amongst the fighters for a medical presence. I'll be working on the Devonshire lot, with Simon Waterman. If we can recruit supporters on all of the other teams, then that will help our case."

Bradshaw chipped in, "I'm going to try to get the Cunningham fighters on side. This damn collar should be evidence enough." He fingered the plastic and Velcro contraption around his neck.

John nodded and clattered down the last set of stairs. When they got to the bottom, John called back to the fighter, "Just don't get any ideas about that re-match, Crusher." If John put a little sarcasm onto the name, it was consciously intended.

Bradshaw had the decency to sound embarrassed. "Look, if I'd known who he was, I wouldn't have fought him. Christ, I have a sister who's a civil servant; she was in the House of Lords during that debate, the night you two were down in that tube tunnel saving London. She's *alive* because of Holmes."

John snapped back, "and so are you. Any other fighter wouldn't have figured out how hurt you were; they'd have just kept going. It's not hard to convert a crushed neck vertebra into a permanently damaged spine. Lucky for you, he wasn't interested in that."
Hayter then asked the question that John didn't know how to answer. "About that….what's Holmes doing picking fights? I don't get why he would be interested."

As he pushed open the door to the main floor, John said, "That's what I intend to find out. In the meantime, don't tell anyone else who the Devil is."

Behind him, John heard Stuart mutter, "No name, no blame."

As the crowd started to build on the gym floor, Sherlock beat a hasty retreat down the corridor lined with treatment and changing rooms. Taking a right into the Gent's loos, he pushed a stall door open and slipped in, squeezing his gym bag into the cubical with him. He popped the seat down and lowered himself a bit gingerly onto it, while swiping into life the tablet he'd just been given by the Devonshire coach.

He couldn't help but let a smile escape. The cocaine rush was coming to its peak just when he needed it the most. The morphine mist was being burnt off by the heat of his rediscovery of just why he was an addict. As the tablet went through its opening routines, he just closed his eyes and enjoyed the ride.

Bliss. He'd actually forgotten (deleted? If so, why?!) this incredible feeling. It had been years since he'd used this particular drug, but he remembered now why cocaine was the solution to all his problems. The clutter and noise of his normal sensory assault just…vanished. Every piece of data coming in was used or discarded without conscious effort. Things just slowed down to the point where he could actually manage the mess that came into his brain. And pain just disappeared- off the radar, did not compute. It wasn't a pain killer- not in the way morphine or heroin numbed him. With cocaine, he just didn't give a damn about the pain. It was no longer important, no longer a distraction. Only the case mattered, and the drug gave him a mainline injection of focus that quite literally blew his mind free of all the detritus that had accumulated over the past weeks. As he drew a shaky breath in, he realised that he had not felt so good, so right in years.

Lucky for him, the fight venue wasn't an abandoned building or one half-constructed. Because the fight club had lost two venues in as many weeks, it wasn't easy to find a replacement on such short notice. With neither the Acton Aces nor the Cunningham Chancers willing to meet at a venue in the other team's territory, the Devonshire coach had used his contacts to get into this venue as a stop gap measure. The Shootfighters Gym had a place like this toilet where he could get the privacy he needed for the next few minutes. There were training rooms, changing rooms and lots of places to absorb the crowd of fighters and their support teams, as well as handle the growing crowd of arriving punters.

At the pre-bout team briefing, Sherlock loitered in the back, keeping a low profile so he could observe the others in the room. The coach had stood up on a bench to be heard by the dozen or so people in the small locker room. "It's not a big night for us, which is lucky, given how many of you are on the injury list." The East Ender shook his head. "You lot of City nancy boys really take the biscuit. The Dervish is out for at least another week." The man searched the crowd for Sherlock. "Devil- are you gonna be fit enough for next week, cos I really need you to be there?" When he got the nod he was looking for, his gaze moved on. "Deceptor- you ready for your novice trial next week? We need you to get into the scene ASAP as we are down so many fighters. If you are willing to live up to that silly name you've chosen, then we'll put you on the team, even if nobody bids for ya. We're that desperate." This drew a ripple of laughter, and a rueful "Thanks for that vote of confidence, coach" from the newbie.

The coach looked down at his clipboard again. "Defender- it's your job next week to polish off the
Cannon Street novice; he's easy meat, according to my spies—just watch his left jab. We're giving you a soft start after your weeks away."

Sherlock leaned forward, looking around the large shoulders of the man in front of him to take a closer look at the Defender. This was Simon Waterman, who had been mentioned in Lestrade's case notes as Robbs's colleague also working on the Agrikoliades case. The man in question was already wearing the turquoise blue hooded sweatshirt with "Devonshire Squires" printed on big letters on the back. Sherlock had put on his own, too, to help him blend in with the others.

Waterman was speaking, "I need to talk to you about that, coach. Me and some of the boys need to sort something out with you."

The coach looked up from his clipboard in annoyance. "Later, after the bouts." He continued, "The first one up tonight is Finsbury's Fiend against the Liverpool Street Lout, the second is the Threadneedle Terror against the Lloyd's Legend. But the real fight is the last one, the Acton Ace of Diamonds against the Cunningham Challenger— that's the real grudge match, and one that should attract the big money. The odds our team is offering have been loaded on your pads. Tonight, it's all about filling our boots with dosh, guys, so get out there and make the punters see your point of view."

As soon as the Devonshire team dispersed, Sherlock had bolted for the loo and turned on his tablet. One advantage of using the gym over the earlier two venues became immediately clear, as wifi connected almost immediately. The betting system managed by the club promoters was dependent on a good signal—if it had to come via the phone network, it was slow.

Sherlock's feral smile came unbidden as he tapped into Dropbox and downloaded his mirror virus. Then he injected it into the betting system accessed via the tablet. He'd cloaked it as a windows update, which would happen as a background task on the main server, wherever it was, when it was accessed by the tablets with the bets tonight. He then pulled out the burn phone and texted Lestrade.

7:48pm At midnight, check your home email. A dropbox link will give you evidence you need-six files of mine plus another to come with the illegal gamblers' names. It's CHRISTMAS! SH

Then he leaned back, and closed his eyes. He had some thinking to do—the last pieces to be sorted and the evidence board in his Mind Palace updated. Things were starting to make sense, at last. Just a matter of time now.
Inconvenient Encounter

Sherlock paused at the door into the main gym floor. He was standing in the corridor to the locker rooms, looking through the glass windows in the swing doors, watching what was going on out there. The place was a heaving mass of humanity; there must have been at least two hundred people in the room. The rectangular floor was unevenly divided by the fighting ring, which was almost directly in front of him. Elevated, down lit into brilliant clarity, it drew the eyes of the crowd like a magnet. The rest of the gym was in darkness, to keep people's eyes fixed on the entertainment, and to hide from prying eyes the identity of the punters. This was pure theatre, highly illegal and the audience wanted anonymity. To his left in the smaller part of the rectangle, the fighters and their support teams milled about, eyeing each other speculatively, briefly forming conspiratorial knots, and then a flurry of updates would ping into life on the tablet he was carrying.

Other fighters in their team livery were starting to move among the punters, using the tablets to gather in the bets. The audience filled the larger part of the rectangle to his right. The make-shift bar along the back wall was doing a roaring trade in miniature bottles of *Veuve Clicquot* champagne, served without a glass but with a metal straw- rather convenient for those who want to use it to hoover up a nose full of another, more illegal substance.

He opened the swing doors but stopped on the threshold, enjoying the full assault on his senses. The cocaine made him relish, rather than run from it. He could see better in the darkness because his pupils were dilated. He could actually taste the air. Among the smells of alcohol, sweat, expensive after-shave and cheap perfume, he could swear that the scent of cocaine was in there, too. Perhaps that was more wishful thinking, or merely his body responding to the forbidden experience in a new way. In either case, it cranked up his senses yet another notch.

A roar went up from the crowd. His attention drawn back to the ring, Sherlock saw the novice fighter bouncing away from the Finsbury *Fridge*. He must have landed a kick, for all the good it would do him. The Finsbury fighter was built like the eponymous household appliance, and would be able to take any of what the novice would be able to throw at him. Still, the effect on the odds was almost immediate, as his tablet pinged again.

There was a time when a crowd like this would have bothered him, but he'd learned how to filter out what was unimportant, and the cocaine made it even easier to focus. With so many bodies in the room, Sherlock could really feel the heat, so he pushed off the hood, and unzipped his sweatshirt. He moved confidently away from the door and dived into the warm sea of people, weaving his way around the atolls of gamblers. Like a barracuda on a coral reef, he started to hunt.

Sherlock needed to find two people. One he knew by name and face- Alec Cunningham, the *Clasher*. He was one half of tonight's equation. He would be wearing the Cunningham purple livery, so should be straight forward, if difficult to spot in the dark, tightly packed room. The other half was going to be even harder to find- the man who had been William Kirwan's accomplice. The one who escaped from Fenchurch Street when his partner was killed, the person who was carrying the rest of the torn note that had lured them to that place.

Sherlock had no name, no face, not even a description. He had simply deduced the existence of this person. Like the void left when blood spatter was interrupted, showing that someone had been standing in the way, this person's presence had been undetected by anyone other than him – and Alex Cunningham, who was also hunting for this man. Sometimes it was the *absence* of something that was the important thing to see. A corollary to his dictum- one needed to observe what was *not* seen, as well as what was visible. Sometimes, what was missing was actually more important.
There was another roar, and then applause. He vaguely realised that the first bout must have ended. He'd stopped listening to the pinging of the tablet, just carrying it as a way of disguising his reason to be moving through the crowd. A brief lull at ringside raised the volume of conversation in the crowd, and he extended his senses again, trying to hear a Portuguese accented voice, with possible southern African overtones.

As a tall, leggy woman tottered past him in ridiculously high stiletto heels, he briefly toyed with the idea that his prey might be a woman, before discarding the idea. The clue would be the person's links to Mozambique and the oil business, which the balance of probabilities said would be a male. Anything that reduced the possibilities was welcome, because he needed to find this missing puzzle piece before the younger Cunningham did. Sherlock became a sponge, absorbing sounds as he moved, little snatches of conversation were drawn in, filtered and then discarded. He would know when he heard what he needed to hear, or see it when it crossed his line of sight.

As the next fight got underway, he surfed through the noise of the crowd, the rolling waves of cheers and groans as the fighters' fortunes ebbed and flowed. Sherlock kept his eye out for the other predator moving in this sea of humanity. As the prime suspect in the murder of William Kirwan, Alec Cunningham needed to kill the missing link just as much as Sherlock needed to ensure the man lived. The father would be penned up with the fighters on the far side of the ring. But, because he fought last week, the son would be on his side of the ring, gathering in bets. Like Sherlock, Alec would be using that cover to mask his true intent.

In the half-lit gloom that cloaked the audience, Sherlock's hunt was suddenly interrupted by the sight of Sebastian Wilkes, who loomed up on his left.

"So, Holmes, you survived your bout last week. Good to know that you finally did manage to learn how to defend yourself." The fat banker smirked, but Sherlock just ignored him and pushed by.

"Don't you want my bet, then?" Seb called out as Sherlock shouldered his way back into the crowd. No, I don't have time for idiots like you. He didn't bother saying this out loud; Wilkes wasn't worth wasting his breath. Instead, his attention was drawn by the sight across the room of a tall man in a dark tracksuit. Was it Cunningham? Sherlock froze, willing the man to turn around so he could see the face.

From behind him, a hand grabbed Sherlock's left forearm, the one carrying his tablet, and he spun around to give Sebastian an answer that the idiot would actually understand. The forward motion of his right hand was stopped in mid-air by the sight of a face he did not expect to see.

"What are you doing here?" Sherlock snarled.

John didn't let go, but said quietly, "I could ask you the same thing, Sherlock."

He tried to shake his arm free and snapped, "I'm working. On a case."

"So am I. Funny thing, coincidence." John was wearing one of those smiles. The one that he put on when he was actually very angry and wound up tighter than a drum, but was determined to hold it all in. It was something that Sherlock recognised from past experience.

The doctor used his hold on Sherlock's forearm to turn him, so his face would be visible in the light from the boxing ring.

John's smile tightened. "Well, you're certainly enjoying yourself. High as the proverbial kite. Needed that for the case, did you?" He didn't hide his sarcasm.
Sherlock felt a flush of heat across his face; he was warm, and needed to move. "I don't have time for this. Let me go."

"No. Not this time. You and I are going to deal with this, right now." The last two words were said with enough emphasis and command that people standing nearby turned, taking their eyes off the fighting to stare.

Sherlock groaned in frustration. "Not here." He shook off John's grip and marched off, back toward the corridor of training rooms, John followed in his wake, as close as he could, determination made evident in every step he took.

As the doors on the main gym floor closed behind them, Sherlock turned back to John. Then a couple of fighters pushed by the pair and through the doors, so he moved further down the corridor, sighing in frustration. When they were alone again, Sherlock turned and faced John. "Right, this is far enough. Say what you have to say, but do it quickly. A man's life depends on this being over in a hurry."

John rolled his eyes. "That's always the way with you, isn't it? Whenever we need to talk, there is always something else that is more important. You've been ducking and diving away from this ever since you got back."

Sherlock drew another ragged breath. "I mean it, John. Literally. Kirwan had an accomplice, and Alec Cunningham is going to kill him tonight if he can. If I'm stuck back here wasting time when he gets killed, well…"

A little nod, as if to himself, then John stepped closer into Sherlock, invading his personal space.

"Wasting time? Is that what you think? I don't buy it. This is you trying to piss me off as a way of getting out of talking. Won't work this time." John was still smiling that smile that didn't reach his eyes. "So, you invent a murder about to happen. Give me one good reason why I should believe you."

Bitterly, Sherlock snapped, "So, we're back to this again? If you don't trust me, if you think I am lying to you, then just…" Sherlock ran out of words for a moment. "Just leave me alone. I don't need this now." It came out as a whisper.

John's answer was an immediate "Yes, you do. Now more than ever. You're sleeping rough, using drugs, avoiding anyone who gives a damn about those two facts. And you're ill. You're running a fever and favouring your right side when you walk. Kidney giving you grief, is it? According to Stuart Bradshaw, it should be. And yet you don't think you need to deal with any of that, because the case is the only thing that matters now. Well, it isn't. I for one don't want to see "The Work was more important" being carved on your tombstone."

"Actually…” he gave a little laugh, "there's already a real one available with your name on it, so why the hell not? Just add that epitaph and a date to it, and be done with it."

Sherlock looked away. Closing his eyes, he tried to process the pain and anger he heard in John's tone. "I'm not suic…" He stopped, when he realised that he had to keep the rising panic out of his response. A voice from his past tried to help: *Take a deep breath, count to five and release it*. But even her gentle, patient mantra wouldn't help him know how to deal with what he was hearing in John's words.

He had to get away from this, before he lost it completely. He'd had too many conversations like this with his John avatar in his Mind Palace. Memories beat against him, memories of what he was confining in a dark cell in China, of what he'd left behind chained to the wall of the prison when he
was being beaten in Serbia. All this talk was just opening up too many doors, letting out things that needed to be kept locked away. He tasted iron and felt something trickle down the outside of his lower lip; he'd bitten the inside of his cheek so hard it was bleeding.

Angry, he wiped it away and fought back. "You don't understand. This-solving the case-it's more important than some bruises. If you would just leave me alone, then I could get this done. It was easier when I was away, because no one was meddling like Mycroft, or lecturing like you and Lestrade. I could do what had to be done. Now leave me alone."

"No." John was unmoved. "Sherlock, what kept you alive all those months out there? Tell me that. What stopped you from taking stupid risks like the ones you're running right now?"

Sherlock was confused. "What does that have to do with anything?" He was reduced to looking at John with his peripheral vision; full frontal made him want to bolt. The urge to flee was becoming overwhelming.

John rocked on his heels and lifted his chin. "I'll tell you the answer, because you don't seem willing to admit it. You never risked losing it all in one throw of the dice because you knew you couldn't, not if you wanted to shut the whole network down. You had to be careful so we-me, Mrs Hudson and Lestrade-were protected.

"Well, it worked; you won and we're safe. To hell with what it might have cost you-you don't want to think about that, and you don't want anyone to know; it's not important. But you've come back to find things are different, makes you wonder whether any of it was really worth it. So now you think that constraint on you is gone- it no longer matters what happens. That's what's leading you to do daft things and take crazy risks."

Sherlock tried to make sense of this. He heard the words, but could only really see the emotion in John's face. John was so angry with him-well, when wasn't he these days? He was cross with him for not looking after himself better, for getting in the fight club. He had to look away completely, and try to get his breathing under control.

The cocaine rush that had helped him focus his hunting was now being consumed by this argument he was having with John. If he didn't find Cunningham soon, he was going to be unable to stop another murder, and it would be his fault because he wasn't strong enough to keep his panic under control. In desperation, he risked another look at John and just blurted out, "Why does any of that matter to you?"

John's face crumpled from anger to something more…distressed, making Sherlock even more confused and anxious.

The doctor just said quietly, "That's exactly what I mean. You think it doesn't matter to me now what happens to you. Well, you're wrong. It does. And I will not allow you to keep thinking that it doesn't. Just stop this, stop it now. You're going to end up really killing both of us this time."
Whatever reaction John was expecting to his confession, he didn't get it. The taller man glanced away, over John's shoulders, out at the crowd on the other side of the swing doors. Then suddenly Sherlock exploded into action, grabbing John by the shoulders and bundling him right through the door beside them into a small treatment room. As John started to react, Sherlock just shoved him three steps backward towards a gap between the cupboards and a set of lockers. The taller man then wrapped his arms around him and dragged them both into the tiny space. Startled into momentary submission, John found a hand over his mouth, just as he opened it to ask what the hell was going on.

The door into the room opened again, and two people walked in. As John's eyes adjusted to the dim light coming from the single fluorescent tube under one of the cupboards, he recognised the broad shouldered Alec Cunningham, being followed by someone he didn't know. As the men walked around the treatment table in the centre to the far end of the room, Sherlock was also in motion, releasing his hand from John's mouth and silently manoeuvring the two of them around in the tiny space so that he was facing forward, and John was behind him.

Very slowly, Sherlock moved, using his body to push John deeper into the darkness between the cupboard and the lockers, until the doctor's back was against the wall. John felt every muscle in Sherlock's own back tighten up, as if preparing for battle. He could also feel the man's body heat- a raging fever for certain.

Cunningham spoke first. "You're Morrison?"

In a strangely accented voice, the other man replied, "Yes, João Morrison. My mother was from Mozambique, my father Irish. Are you sure this is safe? Kirwan was killed trying to meet with you."

The deeper-voiced Englishman asked, "You didn't see who murdered him then?"

"No, I was late to the rendezvous, and when I got there, all I could see was blood, everywhere. I ran." There was a hint of embarrassment in his voice.

John tried to place the accent. African? But not Afro-Caribbean. He couldn't see around Sherlock, so he replayed the split second when he had laid eyes on the second figure into the room. Smaller, darker. Wiry black hair, very short. In the dim light that had been available, John couldn't figure out if the man just had a deep tan or was naturally brown skinned. When he tried to move so he could see, Sherlock leaned back, pinning John against the wall, so he stopped trying, and just listened.

"So, what was so important that you and Kirwan wanted to tell me? Why was he killed? The police have no suspects." Alec's tone was a little aggressive.

"It was my fault. He was just there to help me, and he was killed for it. I came to London to tell the world the truth. The lawyer at Barak Beevor said I should. I sent him my statement from Maputo; but three weeks ago he said that his offices were broken into and the e-mails deleted before they could be sent to the firm investigating the fraud. The lawyer paid for my ticket, for me to come to London, so I could give a statement in person."

"What are you talking about? What investigation?"
"The Agrikoliades – that oil tanker. It didn't sink; it came into Maputo, offloaded 2 million barrels of oil and then went back to the Gulf. The thing is, the ship when it came into port wasn't named Agrikoliades, but I recognised it. Someone had painted on it another name- The Pitanga Lady, a Liberian registered tanker. So, when I read about the Agrikoliades sinking, I knew it was wrong."

"How do you know this? I mean, who are you to know such a thing?"

"I work in the Maputo docks; I am an engineer. I like the ships; I can remember them all, what they look like, every detail. That's why I knew that this was a fraud."

The smaller man's voice became firmer. "No one at the port would help; they said it was not our business. The lawyer who paid my ticket to London said I had to explain this crime to those investigating the insurance claim made for the Agrikoliades. But when I went to the office of RGL Forensics in Devonshire Square, the man I was to see was missing. His name was Alexander Robbs, and I found out a week later, he was dead, and his colleague also on the case, Mister Simon Waterman, was very badly injured. This scared me. I was running out of money to stay in London, and did not know what to do. The company told me that there was another firm working on the case, too. Cunningham Lindsey; your father's company. So I tried to contact him."

"What is your connection to William Kirwan?"

"None." John could hear the shrug in the man's tone of voice. "Other than he was a kind man. I emailed your father to tell him my information. But he did not reply and would not take my call. The secretary said he had no appointment available for weeks. So I stood on the street outside your offices, and made his car stop by jumping in front of it. Your father told the driver to get me out of the way. Kirwan saw me later, sitting outside the office, when he came out to smoke a cigarette. He asked me why I was so determined. So, I told him my story. He said to leave it with him. Two days later, I got this note telling me to come to the office at eleven forty five at night."

"Brought the note with you?"

"Yes, I brought it, as you asked me to. You will help me? The people who did this, who killed to protect themselves, they must be stopped."

"Let me see the note."

John couldn't see what happened next, but later when he tried to re-construct what took place in the treatment room, he guessed that the note must have been handed over. Then all hell broke loose.

There was a strangled cry from the smaller man, and a great crash as Alec struck him hard in the sternum. But the Mozambican was tough, and stayed on his feet, as Alec came after him again, shoving the treatment bed out of the centre of the room to smack into the cupboards and bounce off sideways. The cupboard light stuttered, the fluorescent tube jarred by the force of the blow. In the blinking light, the fact that John could see all this made him realise that Sherlock was already half way across the room and vaulting over the wheeled bed.

"Let him go!"

The baritone command was ignored, and Alec manoeuvred his arm around Morrison's throat into a tracheal choke hold.

John came out of the space beside the locker aiming to back Sherlock up, but Cunningham shouted, "One more step and he's dead. Stop where you are."

The blinking light seemed to stabilise for a moment, allowing John to see that Sherlock was only a
meter or so from the two men, but he could also see that the fighter was starting to crush the Mozambican's throat.

Sherlock complied, and held a hand back towards John to stop him, too. "Don't. Cunningham, you have two witnesses; you will not escape."

The big man just laughed. "You think you could stop me, Devil? You're not fit, and even if you were, I'm going to add you and your little friend to my tally." His sneer was visible even in the darkened room.

"You murdered Kirwan." Sherlock made it a statement, not a question.

"Yep." The fighter had tightened his grip on Joao's throat, caught in the crook of his left elbow, smiling as the smaller man's struggles started to diminish as hypoxia set in. Alec slipped his right hand into a pocket and came up with a flick knife. "And I'm going to do the same to this stupid cretin, too."

Sherlock opened his hands, and kept them away from his body. "You're the one behind the whole scam, and you're running the fraud investigation to make sure that no one else finds out."

Alec laughed. "Yes. Best place to be when you're the one doing the crime."

"And Robbs, did you... The blond just laughed. "Didn't need to, did I? Jerk did it for me; how very convenient." The knife was flicked open. "You being here gives me another great idea- I can frame you for all the murders, even your friend. You're high- a drug-induced killing frenzy sounds a good explanation to me."

Even as the dim light kept blinking, John could still see that Joao was starting to lose consciousness.

"Cair agora!*" Sherlock barked the command, and Joao just crumpled. The dead weight threw Alec's balance off a little, just as the fluorescent bulb stuttered again. Almost like a stobe, in the alternating darkness and light, John watched as Sherlock lashed out with his foot in a high kick, hitting Alec's right hand and sending the knife spinning free to clatter onto the counter top. The Mozambican fell, released by the fighter as he recovered his balance and moved towards Sherlock, his stance now in full attack mode.

"Fine," he spat, "You first. It will give me a lot of pleasure to beat the shit out of you, after what you did to Crusher."

Once the two men closed the distance between them there was no room for a proper fight; no way to use much more than fists. John had to wrestle his way past the treatment bed to get closer. Alec landed three blows- a left-right-left combination against Sherlock's right side, as the slighter man came in close to drive Cunningham away from the injured man on the floor.

"Keep him alive, John." There was a grunt as he took another fist, this one catching him on the right arm. "And stay out of this."

Torn, John hesitated for a moment, before the gasping breaths of the Mozambican penetrated his consciousness. Training kicked in, as he recognised the sound of a man who was in respiratory distress. He bent down, grabbed Joao's legs and dragged him back away from the two fighting men, toward the doorway. He was then down on his knees beside his patient, trying to diagnose the degree of damage to his windpipe.

It took him only seconds to realise that the upper trachea had been crushed beyond hope. No amount
of mouth-to-mouth would work, simply because the oxygen had no way to get past the shattered cartilage. He grabbed his phone in his back pocket and hit speed dial.

Over the sound of crashing metal work, the treatment bed went over on its side, Sherlock pinned to it by the heavier weight of Alec Cunningham. John rolled João out of the way of the two thrashing bodies and hoped to hell that Lestrade had managed to pick up, because there was no way he could hear a thing. He just shouted "GET DOWN HERE NOW!" Then the trolley smashed his way again and he dropped the phone to protect the patient, only to see it skitter across the floor as the bed was spun sideways by the fighting men.

   oOo

The street outside the gym was ablaze with the blue flashing lights of police pulled up onto the paved area in front of the entrance doors. The Shootfighters club staff who had manned the reception area were already in custody. The area was thronged with uniforms, including some from the armed response unit.

Standing beside Lestrade, Mary was pacing. She had convinced the DI to text a message to John a quarter of an hour ago. "Just tell him you're up here, waiting to help. He's not stupid; he'll have figured out that someone would be watching him leave the flat and head here. Just don't tell him I told you."

As if providing the corroborating evidence needed to convince him, now she spotted the arrival of a black anonymous car, which parked a short distance away. The dark-skinned young man who got out of the front passenger seat and looked straight at her was most likely one of Mycroft's men. Mary wondered if the man himself might be in the back of the car. He had said he would be watching.

She drew Greg's attention to the car, and watched his face reflect what she felt. "Damn it, that's all we need now." The DI looked back at her. "You're sure about this?"

"Yep. Whatever else is going on down there about the case, we've got to give John a chance to get Sherlock to come in from the cold." Mary glanced at the doors. "Relax; he's bottled up in there. No way out except the stairs or lift, so it's not like he can get away."

Greg laughed. "Do you really think that? This is Sherlock. He'd probably come out disguised as one of the women on a banker's arm, high heels and short skirt, and you'd be none the wiser. Or get out through a ventilation shaft into the apartment block above. Are you willing to risk that?"

Mary shook her head. "No, that's why we have to wait. You just need to focus on Bradshaw for your murder case. I've texted George Hayter and Simon Waterman to keep an eye out for Sherlock, too."

The pair of them twitched when Lestrade's phone went off. He grabbed it out of his pocket and said "It's John" on its way up to his ear. Mary watched as his eyes widened. He put his hand down and yelled to the assembled officers. "Now, now- move in!"

Already on the move, he turned briefly back towards Mary to shout, "You're staying up here" before disappearing through the doors.

She just waited until the first wave of officers had moved in and started down the stairs, then headed for the doors. **Damned if I'm going to miss all the action.**

"Ladies first." The door was pushed open for her by a man in a suit- the one she'd seen by the black car.
"Who are you?"

"Nobody." He flashed a smile.

"Me, too." She smirked as they pressed into the throng of officers. When one tried to stop the pair, her unnamed escort showed a badge, and the officer let them through. She took one look at the queue for the stairs and pushed the lift button. Surprisingly, one came up empty. *Probably blocked by the first officers on the scene.* She used the short journey down to text John, but didn't get any reply.

When the doors of the lift opened, it was onto a scene of pure chaos. The officers were trying to control two hundred plus people who suddenly wanted to be anywhere but the gym. Fighters, bankers, women—shouting, screaming, and cursing. The tide of humanity was trying to get out the only set of doors to the stairs and two lifts, just as the police were trying to corral them into groups so that names could be taken, ID’s shown, and threats assessed. Luckily she was small, and she was able to dart through the press of people, with the unnamed agent following in her slipstream. Men seemed more willing to make room for a small woman—especially if she was headed in the opposite direction from them. Once out onto the floor, the crowd thinned a bit and she was able to spot the silver haired Lestrade having a shouting match with the old man Cunningham, surrounded by fighters in colour-coded track suits. She texted again, scanned the swirling crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of John and/or Sherlock, but found it hard. *I'm too damned short!*

"Where would they go for privacy?" The dark skinned agent said this directly into her ear so she would hear it. She thought about it and realised that the last place John would try to confront Sherlock would be in a room this size, full of people. She spotted the double swing doors on the far side of the gym, and pointed. "That way."

They weren't the first to arrive on the scene. As soon as they were through the swing doors, they could see an armed response officer standing at the threshold of a room some five meters down the corridor. He had his gun aimed at something inside.

As she came closer, the officer did not turn his head, but shouted. "STOP. Stay right where you are. This is not a situation for civilians."

"John!?" Mary shouted it loud enough to be heard if he was in the room.

"I'm busy," came the reply from a reassuringly familiar voice.

Then the agent beside her snapped at the gunman. "Sit rep now, officer!"

Perhaps it was the tone that did it, but the officer responded as if to an order from a superior. "Three men down, sir. Medic in attendance. One of the injured is hostile and dangerous, but he hasn't stopped the medic from working."

Mary stepped forward confidently, "I'm a trained nurse; let me in so I can help."

The agent nodded. "Let her do it." So, Mary took the last half dozen steps, went around the armed officer, and in through the door.

The treatment room was dark, a narrow rectangle about fifteen feet long and only six wide. The only light was from the fluorescent strips in the corridor ceiling. But what she could see was terrifying. *Don't panic.* John's hands were covered in blood, and he was wielding what looked to be a flick knife at a man's throat. She switched mental gears away from murder to medical, and realised that he was in the middle of a cricothyrotomy.
Crossing the threshold she caught sight of another body on the floor- further into the room, in front of an treatment bed turned over on its side. Her eyes were getting used to the darkness. This man was crumpled face down, wearing a purple track suit with "Cunningham" on the back. His once blond hair was now a bloody mess.

"Alec Cunningham?" She asked quietly. "Alive?"

"Yep. At least he was the last time I checked." John was focused on the difficult bit, as he started to wipe up the blood with a paper towel, so he could see the hole he'd just cut.

"You need more light." She reached back and hit the switch by the door. There was a baritone howl of anguish from the far end of the room, and as the overhead came up to full brightness, she saw that Sherlock was squeezed into the space between the treatment bed and the wall. He was sitting on the floor with his knees drawn up to his chest, burying his head under his arms. She took in the turquoise hoody splattered with blood at the same time as she heard the panicky words,

"關燈，我求求你…不再"**

Why was Sherlock asking for the lights to be turned off, in Chinese? And a bad northern Chinese accent at that?

John hissed at her. "Turn them off!" The agent obliged.

Mary crouched down beside John. "What's going on?"

Over her shoulder a hand appeared- one with a smart white shirt under a business suit, and it carried a torch. "Take this," he said.

John glanced up briefly at the man, then back down at his patient. He muttered, "Big brother finally gets his ass in gear," before saying firmly to Mary. "Yes, that will do. You know where to shine it."

Mary focused the beam on the man's neck. She could see that his lips had turned blue, and a glance at his hands showed the finger tips were in the same state. "How long's he been down?"

"Don't know, do I? Haven't got a clock on the wall. Long enough." He was focusing now on trying to get the bent metal straw into the hole he had just cut. It was tricky, as most of these operations used plastic tubing that would bend and not tear the passage to the lungs. Still, Mary could hear the sound of bubbling air, which could be the sign that something was starting to get through. The key now would be to get the straw far enough down and stop the bleeding to avoid the patient aspirating blood from the wound.

She could hear muttering in Chinese going on behind her. "What's going on with Sherlock?"

The agent standing behind her said, "Flashback, most likely." He was pulling out a phone and texting.

John grunted. He'd managed to get the straw into position and the flow of air was starting to resume. He now glanced over to the darkest corner of the room and sighed. "He's in a bad way. Fever's making him delirious. And God knows what injuries Cunningham inflicted on top of those he's already got." Then he looked straight into her eyes. "He won't let me get near him. And given what I just saw him do to Alec, I'm not going to assume he recognises me. He very nearly killed the man- probably would have if the lights hadn't gone out. The only thing that finally stopped him was the police gunman showing up and turning the lights on. That pushed him back into flight mode."

Shocked, she looked over at what limited bits of Sherlock she could see behind the treatment table.
"Is it PTSD?"

"You keep asking questions I can't answer." He sounded distressed.

"I know a man who might help. You can do without me for a minute or two, can't you?"

"Give the torch to him," he gestured to the agent, and then continued, "I can't get into the drawers down at his end without setting Sherlock off again, so try to find some tape and gauze. I need to stabilise the entry point until the ambulance gets here." He looked meaningfully at the agent, who nodded.

"Yeah, it's on the way."

Mary was on her feet. "I'll be right back."

She sprinted out of the room and headed for the main gym, texting one handed as she ran; she had to find George Hayter, and in a hurry.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: *"Fall now" in Portuguese ** "turn the lights out, I beg you- no more!"
"Do either of you speak Chinese?" George Hayter asked the question more in hope than in
expectation, but after the half hour they'd just endured, they were due for a bit of luck.

The blonde uniformed woman who was nearly as tall as he was said "no", and her petite companion
paramedic just shook her head. He figured they'd both heard the "Little and Large*" comparisons too
often, so didn't bother. In any case, his normally strong sense of humour that kept him going during
medical traumas was wearing thin by this stage.

The women were the third ambulance crew, and they'd drawn the short straw.

When Mary Morstan had texted him, George was penned in with the fighters being processed by the
police. She'd been forced to stand on the other side of the police tape, until she managed to get the
silver-haired detective inspector to let him out.

"How are you at handling PTSD cases?" she'd asked as they hurried to the swing doors.

"Watson?"

She'd stopped momentarily at the doors and looked at him carefully, before asking "how did you
know about that?"

Hayter had shrugged, "What can I say? RAMC is full of gossip, and he is rather a celebrity these
days. What's happened? Do you know what triggered it?"

She'd shaken her head. "No, not John. Sherlock…"

By the time they approached the treatment room, he'd been given the low-down: injured, high fever,
delirious, drugged up on what Watson thought was cocaine- and in the middle of a flashback, talking
in Chinese. Oh, and highly dangerous, because the second casualty might not live due to the
thrashing he'd been given by Holmes. According to Mary, moving the second casualty would prove
challenging, precisely because of that and how close the unconscious man was to Holmes.

Their conversation was interrupted by a crash of metal and a curse from the room, making Mary
break into a run. George saw an armed officer watching from the corridor, trying to decide what to
do about the commotion.

When they got to the door, a man in a business suit bolted out cursing and holding his forearm. Mary
was onto him in a flash, and pushing up the slashed right sleeve to examine the deep knife wound.
But she still called out, "John, you okay in there?"

"Still busy." It was said quietly, but with some feeling. "Just keep people out and I might have a
chance."

She ripped the white cotton shirt, now splashed with blood. "Well, Mister Nobody, do have you a
name? I prefer to know who I'm sewing up."

"Ashley Lewis."

"What did you do?" she asked, pushing him down so he was seated with his back against the wall of
the corridor. George dropped to his knees beside her and opened his medical kit, pulling out a suture
kit and bandages. Mary ripped open the pressure bandage and applied it rather firmly.
The dark-skinned man grimaced. "Tried to stop him from getting a hold of the knife, the one that Watson had put on the counter after he used it in the op; said it was evidence- possible murder weapon used on Kirwan. I was trying to bag it when Holmes grabbed me." He winced as she applied a pressure bandage. "Trouble is, I don't want to hurt him, but he doesn't have the same idea about me."

She sighed. "Do you blame him? To him, you are a stranger with a knife." She worked Ashley's suit jacket off and then over the bandage, as the swing doors from the gym opened to admit a pair of ambulance paramedics. She lifted the pressure bandage to gauge the speed of blood loss, muttering "You'll live; I'll leave this on for a little while; the suturing can wait until the situation is under control again."

As the two man crew came up and started to bend down to help, Mary shook her head. "Not him; he's walking wounded, and I can do the sutures needed. There are three others in there needing more urgent help. So call for reinforcements."

Perhaps because of the tone in her voice, George smirked as the paramedic in front just pulled out his radio and got on with ordering another two ambulances. The other one started toward the door, only to be hauled up short by another snapped order from Mary.

"And you're not going in there- one of the patients is armed and very mentally unstable. So, let this man and the doctor who's already in there do their work." She looked up at Hayter. "John needs your help- tape and gauze to stabilise an airway so this lot can take the first casualty away. Just be quiet, lend a hand and try to keep an eye on what's going on with Sherlock. Your assessment of his state of mind will help."

He smiled at her. "Thank you, Nurse, for your excellent triage."

She started cutting lengths of tape, adding, "Just what we needed- more strangers when Sherlock is not only dangerous, but armed, as well."

Hayter went in very carefully, making sure that he kept Watson between him and the dark brooding presence in the far corner of the room, now back down behind the upturned treatment bed. Against a soundtrack of growled Chinese which sounded like half a conversation, George helped the doctor stabilise the make-shift breathing tube and get the unconscious African onto a body board. Together they lifted him out of the treatment room and onto a trolley manned by the ambulance crew who took him away. They were less than two and half miles from The Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel, so he felt confident that the man would survive and recover. His respect for Watson's skills under pressure grew, as he wondered whether he would have had the nerve to do the emergency cricothyrodomy operation with a flick knife in the dark.

By then, the second crew were in the corridor; as they came to the door, Watson spoke in a quiet but firm whisper that still managed to carry to the men.

"Not in here. We need a long spine board to immobilise this patient- but we'll do it. Too many people in here will cause problems."

"You could do with more light," said one of the paramedics as he started to reach for the light switch.

"No! Lights off! No need to trigger another violent episode."

The paramedic's hand stopped in mid-air, half way to the switch. George gave a wry smile. You can take the man out of the army, but not the army out of the man. Watson's order had just as much impact as if he'd shouted it, even though it had been said in a barely more than a whisper.
Using a second torch provided by the ambulance crew, he took one look at the extent of the head injuries on the injured man, and then George understood Watson's last comment. The fighter's head had been repeatedly smashed, all along the left temple. This was violence for violence's sake; Cunningham would have been unconscious and no threat after the first blow. As Watson's torch beam focused on the injury, George used his to spot blond hairs and blood on the side of the treatment bed on its side, just behind the injured man. The paramedic was also taking a look in the torch beam and gave a grunt. "Looks nasty. I'll get the collar and side supports."

Perhaps because it was a voice he didn't recognise, but, the volume of Chinese emerging from the other side of the treatment bed suddenly went up, and a definite edge of panic crept into the tone. Not good. While George's hands were busy with straightening out the legs and arms on his side of the comatose patient, his mind was starting to wonder just how they were going to be able to convince the third patient to accept help quite so quietly.

John was trying to focus on his new patient, without thinking too much about the fact that Alec Cunningham was a self-confessed murderer who had inflicted serious damage on Sherlock, not to mention threatening to add him to the body count, as well. He'd faced a situation like it before in Afghanistan, when giving emergency first aid to a Taliban fighter who had tried to ambush a foot patrol, but ended up getting shot himself. Then he'd rationalised it by thinking that the man who was bleeding under his hands should be less terrified of him than he would be if their roles had been reversed.

A good surgeon focuses on the injury, not the person. He needed that mantra right now, as he listened to the panic in Sherlock's words. He didn't need to translate whatever language it was to know that the man was in the grip of a flash-back. It made him wonder yet again what the hell had happened while he was away. John was still reeling from the sight of Sherlock smashing Alec's head repeatedly against the metal leg of the treatment bed. He'd ignored John's pleas to stop as if he hadn't even heard them. Sherlock was intent on killing the man, even after the fighter was unconscious and no longer a threat to either of them. Who hurt you so much that it makes you want to kill?

Hayter quietly slid the long spine board alongside Cunningham and started undoing the straps down at his end while John did the same at his. There was also a cervical collar and side head blocks to immobilise the patient's head during transport. Hayter was closest to the door, with John nearer to Sherlock. He found himself wishing that he had a head torch. Holding the small maglight in his teeth or under an arm was getting awkward, but given the total chaos that happened the last time the overhead lights went on, he knew he just had to make do. Sherlock had simply gone berserk, howling in pain and smashing his way up from the floor, sending the metal treatment bed straight into the side of Cunningham again.

It was as if he couldn't see, couldn't recognise John at all. Actually, on second thought, John realised that it was more that Sherlock was seeing something else, something that wasn't actually there. Hallucinating? Was that the fever, or something else at work? He thought about his own experiences of flashbacks. The remnants of his PTSD bothered him now mostly in his dreams, when his subconscious mind was free to conjure up the ghosts of his past horrors. But, he could still remember what it was like to be instantly transported by some sound or visual stimulus to a different place, where everything he saw and smelled was what he went through in the moments before, during and after he was shot.

From what he had seen, he thought that light was somehow the trigger, maybe due to his sensory processing issues. Was this a meltdown, complicated by drugs, driving him into a flashback? Too many imponderables. While these questions were rattling around in his head, John kept working,
bandaging what he could to try to stop the blood. The two former Army doctors locked eyes in the
dark, silently counted off the one-two-three needed to lift the unconscious fighter onto the board, and
then started to strap him in.

It was his fault that Mycroft's man had gotten the knife wound, but John had been sure that it needed
to be bagged as evidence as quickly as possible. Leaving it on the counter-top, in plain sight of a
mentally-unstable patient just wasn't on. But, he'd miscalculated, thinking that Sherlock was no
longer a threat now that Alec was out of the equation. From out of nowhere, he'd appeared alongside
the agent, and managed to get the knife off of him in a blinding flash. Perhaps his eyes were more
used to it, but he seemed to see what he needed to see, while the others in the room were fumbling
around in the dark.

The agent had spun around to try to get it back, just as John tried to stand up, to stop the inevitable
reaction.

"Sherlock, don't! He's on our side."

The response was unexpected. With his left hand, Sherlock shoved John's shoulder down hard,
dropping the doctor to his knees again, as he slashed out at the agent with the knife, cutting deep into
the suited forearm.

John realised that he had to intervene somehow, if this man wasn't to end as badly hurt as Alec.
Through gritted teeth, he snapped, "Get out! Don't try anything- just LEAVE!" Then more quietly,
John said, "Sherlock just might kill you if you stay here, and if you hurt him, then his brother just
might do the same to you."

From his position on the floor, John then kicked the treatment table hard, and it spun back to crash
into Sherlock's legs, momentarily distracting him.

Wrestling with his training that would have kept him in the room, the agent thought about it for a
split second and then left before Sherlock could resume his attack.

Within seconds, Sherlock was back down in the darkest corner of the room- only now he had a
knife. Fifteen minutes later, that was still worrying the hell out of John, as he finished buckling the
final head strap on the second patient to be removed.

"Okay, ready to go. Slide him out low to the ground, until we're out the door."

Even this quiet statement provoked a rise in volume from the muttering in the corner, which John
tried to ignore as he and Hayter slowly started to move the patient out the door.

_Two down. One more to go._ Triage rules said save the least injured patient for last, but John knew
that dealing with Sherlock was going to be very, very hard, and he had absolutely no idea how to do
it.
Oh, Lord. It's a committee. Mycroft had just pushed through the swing doors to see a knot of people down the corridor. What was amusing for a split second was that they seemed to be having a blazing argument, but in whispers. Then deduction kicked in, and he realised that the subject of the argument was most likely to be Sherlock. The good news was the fact that they were keeping their voices down meant his brother was actually in earshot rather than having pulled another disappearing act. The bad news was that if they were whispering, it probably meant that Sherlock was in the middle of a melt-down.

He sighed.

His presence was spotted by Lestrade, one of the seven people in the knot. Mycroft discounted the two paramedics, and his own agent. That left the DI, John and Mary, and an unknown gentleman, in his early to mid-sixties, short greying hair and more than a whiff of retired military about him. *Ah- the mysterious Mister Hayter, the Reigate Squire.* The surveillance team had briefed him on Watson's movements and the identity of the man he and Mary had gone to see.

Facing away from Mycroft, John was arguing at stage whisper volume with the paramedics. "There is no way to get in there to use a sedative. He's armed and hostile. How many times do I have to tell you? The crew before you just took away a person he nearly killed with his bare hands." He pointed at Lewis; "And this man can tell you about what he's like when he's got a knife."

Mary backed him up, "he's on drugs already- but we have no confirmation of what. So drugging him with something more is not an option." Her whisper was equally emphatic.

Lestrade poked John in the side, and then nodded his head down the corridor. The doctor turned and saw Mycroft, as did the rest of the group.

Having digested the information that he'd just overheard by the time he reached them, Mycroft kept his face in civil service placid mode, "So, what's he done this time?" He put just a touch of boredom in the tone. He didn't bother to lower the volume. If Sherlock was in his right mind, he'd have figured out who he was from his tread down the hall. If not, then keeping quiet wasn't going to help.

"About bloody time, Mycroft." John answered him at something half way between a whisper and a normal volume. "What's taken you so long?"

Mycroft looked pointedly at Ashley Lewis. "Perhaps a breakdown in communications." He spotted the torn cuff and the gauze bandage peeping out of the jacket sleeve. "It was growing tedious, waiting for someone to keep me apprised of the current situation."

John seemed angry –at what or why was unclear, but his tone of voice was tense as he snapped "the situation? I'll tell you what the situation is. Sherlock is in there." The doctor stabbed his thumb toward the doorway behind him. "And he is badly injured, delirious with fever, off his head on drugs and having a flashback of some sort, which means he won't let anyone near him. Oh, and he nearly killed Alec Cunningham."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, "The murderer of William Kirwan?"

John stared for a moment and then rolled his eyes, as Lestrade butted in, "You already knew about
Cunningham? Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because Sherlock was working on the case. If anything was going to bring him out of his bolt hole, this was it." He gave the Detective Inspector his _surely-even-you-could-have-worked-this-outlook._

Lestrade just shook his head in amazement. "So, you let Cunningham stay out there, even though you knew he was a murderer? Christ almighty- he nearly killed someone else tonight!"

"I am pleased to hear that qualifying word _nearly_; does that mean the occupant of the first ambulance was the key to the plot?"

Perhaps he was overdoing the mild mannered sarcasm because John suddenly took two steps closer to Mycroft, intruding on his personal space. Lewis suddenly focused his attention on the doctor's belligerent body language, as John let loose.

"So, you _knew_ about the oil tanker scam? Was that before or after Sherlock decided to join the Fight Club and get himself injured? Just how much have you let him suffer to solve a case that didn't even need solving?"

Mycroft let his eyebrow rise at the presumption in that question. "Really, Doctor Watson; you exaggerate. I had suspicions; that's all. Without evidence, there was little point in proceeding. Sherlock is very good at sniffing out the evidence. It's what he does. And what he enjoys doing, or at least he used to. He's had little enough else to take pleasure in at the moment." It was a rather pointed remark with a sub-text that he hoped the doctor would understand and react with the predicted response.

He got it when John started to flex his left hand into a fist and then released it. The chin came up and the eyes narrowed.

*Good. You need to want to feel protective, if Sherlock is going to get through this.* But before he could take the next step in his plan, there was a baritone snarl from the room behind the welcoming committee. The words were indistinct, but Mycroft could hear the tonal cadence, the swoops and climbs of a language where the consonants were being uttered with the tongue pressed to the roof of a certain mouth.

"So, he's still marooned in China then."

He chose this moment to look over Watson's shoulder at Mary Morstan. An exchange of knowing looks ensued. He knew from her reaction to Sherlock's voice that she had understood the language his brother was speaking. And that spoke _volumes_ about the past she didn't want him to probe too deeply. Mycroft knew that she was already emotionally invested in making sure that her fiancé mended his fences with Sherlock. And he had ensured that she was incentivised in other ways, too. He doubted that the pair would be willing to let Sherlock stay aloof in the future, which was exactly what he had hoped for as an outcome. Sherlock would not accept _his_ help, but he might from John and Mary. For now, that would be enough to keep his curiosity at bay about how she acquired her linguistic skills. If she failed to keep them a threesome, then he might re-consider.

For now, he needed to focus on the harder part - getting Sherlock to stop being so ridiculous about everything. Mycroft started to move toward the open door. And then was stopped by the presence of a hand on his arm.

"Sir, you can't go in there."

Mycroft looked down at the hand holding his arm, and said very quietly, "That is a career-limiting
move, Mister Lewis. Unhand me immediately."

The hand was snatched away, but the dark-skinned agent repeated in a stage whisper, "You can't go in there. He's armed with a knife and dangerous to everyone- even Watson can't get near him."

Mycroft skewered him with a look.

Lewis went a little paler, but stuck to his guns. "Sir; I'm required to protect you and that means not letting you go in there." Again, he kept his voice very quiet.

Sherlock broke the deadlock, by shouting."

"为什么你窃窃私语*?"

Mycroft looked back at the others. "Since none of you appears to speak Chinese, you will just have to leave this to me. I can't stop you from listening, but do not interfere, any of you." It was a command reinforced by a glance that swept the group like raking gunfire. He took off his coat and suit jacket, handing them to Ashley Lewis, and then walked alone into the darkened room, stopping a few steps in front of a treatment bed tipped over on its side. He refused to descend to the depths of the horrid northern accent that Sherlock was using, so reverted to classic Mandarin:

"因为他们是白痴. 你不是白痴**"

His eyes started to adjust to the darkness and confirmed what his nose was already telling him; Sherlock was filthy, his hoodie smeared in blood and he was sweating right through his clothes. He was breathing rapidly- possibly on the edge of a meltdown, but this was a bit more like the night terror.***The face that looked up at him from the corner was flushed, pupils blown wide and there wasn't a trace of recognition in his bloodshot eyes when he looked at Mycroft.

Undeterred, Mycroft continued, "你知道我是谁;只是演绎得当，兄弟我的." For good measure, and to help bring Sherlock come back from wherever he was in China, he translated his own words: "You know who I am. Just deduce it, brother mine."

Sherlock looked puzzled for a moment, then shook his head. "Get back into your room, Mycroft; leave me alone. You can't help me here."

"You think I am a figment of your imagination? A memory from your Mind Palace, perhaps?"

Sherlock just closed his eyes and whispered, "You're not real."

Mycroft took another step closer and then knelt down, so he was on the same level. "Use that brain of yours. I'm sure it's in there somewhere, if you haven't blasted it to bits with cocaine. Take a poke at me, if you must."

Sherlock started to chuckle, and brought up the knife. "Just might do that. For all I know, you're a guard and I'm making him into you."

"You can put the knife down. I'm real and this isn't the Far East, just the East End."

"Out of your comfort zone then?"

"Hmm. Just for you, Sherlock."

"Now I know you're not real." The smile died.

"Why?"
"Because you've never done anything just for me. Another sign that I'm losing my mind. It's called a bucket-list. Learned that while I was in America; my version is rehashing all the things that I always wished would have happened before I died, but never did."

"You're still alive, Sherlock."

"Am I? Even if you're right, then it's not going to be for long." He shifted and almost doubled over, a grimace of pain on his face. Instinctively, Mycroft reached out, over the barrier of the bed, towards Sherlock.

With a snarl, Sherlock sat bold upright again, raising a knife to ward off any further intrusion. "You can stop right there." He lifted the knife which glinted in the dim light. "My head is already killing me, so why not finish the job?" He looked at it and smiled. "Sweet release."

"No." Mycroft was appalled, yet again by his brother's willingness to consider ending his life. What did they do to you? If only he knew what had happened in China, then he might stand a chance of talking Sherlock around. "You can't."

Sherlock continued, suddenly sounding as lucid as if he were talking about the weather. "Now I know you're just a product of my demented mind. The real you wouldn't be sentimental, you'd say it's all for the best." He chuckled again, "For once, I agree, but not for the reasons you do. This way, John will be safe."

The eyes that were looking at him were not really seeing him. The voice was ragged, as if talking was painful, but it continued, "In your case, if the news gets back to London, then the real you will be able to tell Elizabeth that you told her so; you'll enjoy that. You've always liked being proved right about me, pity I won't be there to see your smug delight at proving yet again how useless I am."

"Sherlock, I don't think you're useless." During the two years' absence, Mycroft had realised that the role he had been forced to take- to be more than a brother, to be responsible for Sherlock's well-being- might have been at least part of the reason why Sherlock had felt driven to do the outrageous plan. Was it some grandiose gesture to prove to him that he was capable of being more than Mycroft thought he could be? Mycroft choked off that line of thought. No time for regrets; focus on the now or this is going to go horribly wrong.

He needed to bring Sherlock back to now. "You need to fast forward this little video, brother mine. China is behind you. You were right and I was wrong. You did it. You've come back to London like some conquering hero."

It was as if Sherlock was not hearing him at all, but simply talking to himself. "It's better if I stay here. Stop it all in China, and the world will go on. I've got most of the network now, and this lot..." He giggled, the thin wedge of hysteria creeping into it. "...well, that's the irony of it all. To be caught in the end by a bunch of two-penny hucksters who just want a ransom; they're nothing to do with Moriarty, but they win. Game over. No one will ransom a man who's already dead. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy." His breathing was becoming more ragged, almost coming out in little pants.

Mycroft watched as Sherlock started to shiver. He could see the panic and anxiety building up behind those eyes. If only he could get him to focus on the current case, then maybe he could break through. He snapped, "What is the Agrikoliades?"

Sherlock seemed startled by the question, but answered, "A ship... Owned by a Greek... assumed sunk, but not... renamed, repainted and sold, cargo and all. Probably Iranian oil... slipping past the embargo, too."
"And the torn piece of paper?"

"A handwritten note…to lure him and Morrison to their deaths. Written by both the Cunninghams."

"Why both?" That puzzled Mycroft.

Sherlock grunted, and shut his eyes for a moment, his left arm tight across his abdomen.

"Sherlock?"

"It was Alec's idea to make his father complicit, too. Every other word of that note was written by
the old man, under duress…Alec needed protection so his father wouldn't turn him in. The scam…"
He grimaced again in pain. "… worth a half billion pounds."

That figure shocked Mycroft, but before he could ask another question, Sherlock asked one of his
own. "Why does this matter?"

"Because all of this happened after you left China. You got out of there months ago, though I have
no idea how. Actually, on second thought, knowing what happened in Serbia, you probably talked
your way out somehow. You came back and solved the underground bomb plot, saved Parliament
on Guy Fawkes night. Don't you remember?"

Sherlock groaned. "Yes. No. I don't know. Go away, Mycroft. There's no point. I can't delete you;
God knows I've tried. You keep popping up in my head like some crazed jack-in-the-box, blaming
me for being stupid; it's all my own fault." He said these last two phrases in a sing-song, I-told-you-so
kind of tone, before continuing, "I couldn't agree more. Just one thing you got wrong… You
said alone protects me. Well, it doesn't. I didn't know that before… Now I do…too late." He drew a
shaky breath. "Okay, here comes the part where you tell me I'm an idiot. You always do."

Mycroft restrained his automatic reflex to do just that, probably not helpful in the circumstances.
"You're not alone, Sherlock. I'm here. John is here, too. Do you want me to get him for you?"

Sherlock's face crumpled. "Stop torturing me. John isn't here in my Mind Palace now… I had to
delete him to protect him. Can't let anyone know about him, no matter what they do to me…can't
come back to London, because if I do, they'll put him in that bonfire and I won't be able to save him
because I don't know who did it… You see? I won't be able to protect him, because if I do come
back, you'll lock me up again, claiming it's for my own good." He was panting very rapidly now.
"You always do that. So, I won't be able to stop someone from killing him. Well, I won't leave this
prison just to be put in another in London. It's all pointless… If I don't come back, John gets to be
happy with Mary… So, I have to end it here in China."

There was a sigh from behind him, and Mycroft realised that John was now standing behind him.
Before he could react and tell him to leave, the doctor intervened.

"No, Sherlock, you don't. This is now. You pulled me out of the bonfire. You did what you always
do for me- you saved me. Now don't undo what you've done, please. Just listen to me." The doctor
went down on his knees beside Mycroft and reached his hand out to hold the metal bar of the
treatment bed.

Sherlock stiffened and pushed himself back towards the wall, his eyes shocked, as if he'd seen a
ghost. He whispered, "You're not real."

"Yes I am. Think about it. You just said you deleted me from your Mind Palace. So, the only way I
could be talking to you now is if it's for real. So, let me help you."
"Nooo. You can't be here; they'll see and kill you. Go away!"

"Nooo. You can't be here; they'll see and kill you. Go away!"

Sherlock whispered, "No, if you won't go, then I have to."

Mycroft flinched, watching in horror as Sherlock brought the knife point up to the side of his neck. Beside him, John was already in motion, yanking the bed aside and launching himself at Sherlock. Mycroft tried to grab him; John's rash intervention was going to provoke the very thing he was trying to prevent.

As the doctor's left hand slammed into Sherlock's forearm, trying to push his hand away from the carotid artery and jugular vein, the knife point dragged sideways across a suddenly taut and arched neck that was already flushed red. By then Mycroft was on his feet, too, and grappling with the tangled heap of John and a struggling Sherlock. Within seconds, he realised that the movement of his brother was following an all-too familiar rhythm.

"He's seizing."

At that pronouncement, the room suddenly became full of people, and the overhead lights snapped on. One of the paramedics and Mary reached the far end of the room in seconds, trying to separate John from the thrashing limbs of the stricken Sherlock. Somewhere in the midst of it all, a knife clattered to the floor. Then Hayter was there, too, pulling aside the treatment bed, pushing it back to Lestrade who dragged it out of the room.

Mycroft stood up and leaned back on the cupboards a bit unsteadily, but glanced at his watch to time the seizure. He then watched as the petite paramedic took the pressure bandage freed from its package by Mary and pressed it to the bleeding wound on the side of Sherlock's neck. John was now back on his knees and snapped to the woman, "I'm a doctor; let me do it." He put his hand firmly on the bandage, replacing hers as she pulled back. It wasn't easy to keep a constant pressure, as the rapid muscular spasms of the clonic phrase took hold and the jerking became quicker. John put his other hand on Sherlock's forehead to try to keep up with the movement. "He's burning up. This may well be caused by the fever."

The larger crew member now came through the door and barked an order. "Clear out, everyone but the doc; we need room to manoeuvre." Mycroft found it hard to leave, but accepted the logic, and herded Lestrade, Hayter and Mary out of the room, followed by the other paramedic.

After that, things seemed to accelerate. When the loaded trolley came out of the room, John was on it too, kneeling astride Sherlock, his left hand's fingers on the pulse of the artery on the opposite side of Sherlock's neck from the wound. His right hand has holding the pressure bandage down. He was talking jargon with the paramedics at either end of the trolley, about something called a "sternocleidomastoid" and "renal trauma".

Then Mycroft registered the word "tachycardic" with alarm. Mary and Hayter were in a quiet conversation in the corridor; both looked up at that word, too. As the trolley went by him, Mycroft's eyes latched onto the blood seeping out of the edges of bandage on his brother's neck. He could see that Sherlock was still seizing; strapped in but still twitching. He caught the scent of urine and shit, as well as blood and sweat. A grand mal. A glance at his watch told him it had been four and half minutes so far.

As the trolley went through the swing doors at the end of the corridor and was walked at speed across the gym floor toward the lifts, he was already in motion. He caught Mary's eye and said, "With me", and she fell in behind him. Ashley Lewis brought up the rear.
The police were still processing people, but the crowds had thinned out considerably. Mycroft walked in quick march beside the DI, behind the medical team.

"Remain here. You will finish this case properly, Lestrade. I want the Cunninghams to face the full weight of British justice, and I will hold you personally responsible if there is any problem in the prosecution's case."

The medical team were allowed into the lift, but Mycroft, Mary and Lewis were directed up the stairs. By the time they got outside, it was to the sight of the ambulance already turning onto the slip road to join the A1261, blue lights flashing and siren wailing.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Translations: *Why are they whispering? **Because they are idiots. You are not an idiot. *** To get this, read my story in Ex Files, Exhort.

Okay- don't shoot me, but I will not be able to update for a week, because I am crossing the Atlantic ocean from New York to Southampton. There are not cell masts mid-ocean, so I will be out of touch.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Time

It could be both a friend and an enemy.

Four minutes into the ambulance run, as they turned onto Commercial Road, Sherlock stopped seizing. John looked at his watch and announced, "twelve and a half minutes." The paramedic in the seat alongside the trolley noted it on the paperwork. Given that she'd administered a benzodiazepine as soon as an IV was established, John couldn't help but blurt out "too long."

The smaller woman was the driver, and as the ambulance swayed and bucked on its heavy-duty shock absorbers, John fought a wave of nausea, and focused on the blood pressure cuff. "Eighty over forty three". Even knowing that Sherlock's blood pressure tended to be on the low side of the normal range, so he can't help but draw the conclusion. "Too low."

"Pulse is one sixty-four." Too high. Sherlock's hands and feet were warm, which made hypovolemia as the cause of the shock unlikely but then again, he could also be feverish due to sepsis which made that rule of thumb unreliable. He was sweating profusely, which could fit any of those things.

The medic handed him the digital ear thermometer. He inserted it carefully, waited for the beep and then read the digital display out loud: "forty point three." She noted it down. Way too high.

The second bandage was now showing signs of red bleeding through, but not at a rate that would suggest arterial. Not too bad. But John wouldn't rule out a nick in the external jugular vein, not yet anyway.

The finger pulse oximeter was showing sats of 83 percent, probably caused by the rapid shallow breathing. "Tachypnoea," which was duly noted. Not good.

Septic shock? Or blood loss? Or an additional lung issue? He was blind with just the symptoms, and needed better equipment now.

"How long now?"

The big blonde peered through the small window, and turned back to him. "Depends on traffic. But, even at this time of night, we'll be cutting it fine."

OoO

Time flies.

According to the clock on the wall of the resuscitation room at The Royal London Hospital, they'd been here for twenty eight minutes. John was standing at the back, watching the trauma team do their jobs, trying to stay calm.

The x-rays displayed on the digital screen showed a dislocated twelfth rib, located over the right kidney. Blood samples had been taken and a whole barrage of tests ordered, from tox screens and
electrolytes to BUN, serum creatinine and check GFR for renal failure. A CT scan might help figure out whether the shallow breathing had led to a chest infection or vice versa, and to rule out another possible cause from a damaged diaphragm muscle- but that had to wait its turn in line. Or it might be an infection in a bruised kidney that was causing the temperature spike. The patient was severely dehydrated, but what fluids they were pushing weren't showing up in the renal output yet; the bag on the side of the bed connected to the Foley catheter was showing only a trace of cloudy pink liquid; the tell-tale sign of kidney damage. He tracked the team's movements, ticking off each procedure, each result, against his own preferred timetable. He kept quiet, knowing that his presence in the room was a mere courtesy, and that he could be expelled if he interfered. Being here was better than being out there; he'd suffer in silence for the chance to observe.

They were on the case, but it was going to take too long to sort out all the symptoms from the underlying causes. The battlefield trauma surgeon inside his head was screaming for attention. With blood pressure still tanking, it was only a matter of time.

John distracted himself from the tick-tock of his internal stopwatch by thinking about the moment that they'd cut off the blood-stained hoodie, sweat soaked tee shirt and then removed the trousers. The rainbow of bruising around Sherlock's waist and back had been shocking. That and the dislocated rib must have meant he was in constant pain every time he drew a breath. And yet he did nothing; didn't reach out to me. A whole week of increasing debilitation, and he'd never once sought John's help. All the time in the world to avoid ending up here, but he hadn't taken it.

Sherlock's delirious exchange with Mycroft had told him more about what was going on in that head than any conversation they'd had since he'd returned, and quite possibly more than they'd ever talked about, even before he went AWOL.

That's what John had settled on calling it when talking with Mary. Not a "fall", more of a willful jump. But that wasn't the half of it. The disappearing act for two years? Not a "hiatus", because clearly Sherlock had been rather busy during the whole time away. Before tonight, he'd thought that AWOL was the right term- he'd not given his permission to go, so the consulting detective had been absent without his leave to do so. In his own misery and then anger about that fact, he'd not really thought about what Sherlock had endured while away. Sherlock had not said a word about China, or about Serbia for that matter. John made a mental note to talk to Mycroft about both. He needed to know more. But not now. Now's not the right time.

"Another unit, please." The consultant's request was calm, but drew John away from his thoughts like a shout. The IV blood and fluids that were being pumped into Sherlock were slowly beginning to stabilize the hypovolemic shock, but surgery would be needed for the neck wound. Sherlock had been intubated as soon as he arrived; any major neck injury often necessitated it, and his blood ox levels were too low to avoid it anyway. If John was right, the exterior jugular over the sternocleidomastoid muscle had been nicked, so not only would the jugular vein need to be repaired, there were other structures requiring surgical attention.

He waited for the next order from the trauma team. Come on; it's about bloody time you admitted it.

He got what he was waiting for a moment later, when the consultant said, "Get on the phone; the vascular surgeon was due down here ten minutes ago, and we can't wait much longer. He needs an OR now."

At last. But, what if the necessary surgeons weren't available? How long would Sherlock have to wait? John's internal stopwatch started ticking louder.
Time can crawl.

Surgery was performance under pressure; a delicate act of timing. Knowing just how much time under your knife the patient could tolerate, and for how long the means could be withstood in order to achieve the desired ends. Surgery was a brutal business and always cost in the short term, but it was a price worth paying to get long term survival. That's what had attracted John to it in the first place, of all the medical specialisations. One knew by the time the patient was wheeled out of the operating room whether the operation was a success. Of course, things could go wrong later, complications could set in. But, during the operation there was feedback about your progress at every moment. Monitors and the support team kept the surgeon fed with a steady stream of information, beyond what he could see with his own eyes and feel with his own hands. Even the silence inside an operating theatre was reassuring; no news meant good news.

In a waiting room, there was nothing except a clock on the wall that told you how long you should have been in there rather than out here, how long you'd not heard anything at all about what was going on. Mary understood that, and she stayed with him, calm, quiet- her presence a comfort in this most uncomfortable time. She didn't try to utter any platitudes about how Sherlock would be all right. Outside of an operating theatre, no news was just that- no news. It could be that things were going terribly wrong in there, but they would be none the wiser out here, until it was too late, and they'd run out of time.

He'd always thought it would be easier for non-medical professionals. At least they wouldn't be plagued by thoughts of what exactly could be going wrong in there. But, watching the time taking its toll on Mycroft Holmes, John wasn't so sure. The man had stood for a while, sometimes using his phone, uttering monosyllabic comments in response to a conversation that was impossible to follow from this end. In between telephone calls, he paced. Then he sat, but fidgeted. Finally, he'd loosened his tie.

Mind you, Mycroft probably didn't have to wait for many things. When you sat at the top of a national and international intelligence system, what you didn't know probably didn't exist. Or, at least it could be found out if you shouted loud enough. It was different here. He wasn't shouting because there was no point, and he knew it. John didn't interrupt whatever thoughts Mycroft was thinking about the limits of his power.

John kept silent, knowing that nothing he could do would move those clock hands forward any faster.

oOo

Time passes.

John stopped watching the clock, because it was driving him mad. He timed things differently. How many times Mary had been to the coffee machine, and then a short time later her visits to the loo- four so far. Or how many times Mycroft went through his routine of pacing, phoning, sitting, fidgeting- John gave up after ten. The tie had been removed and the collar unbuttoned.

John knew he'd been awake all night because it always distorted his sense of time. He'd learned back in his days of being on-call at night to divide time between light and dark, because that was all that really mattered. Only when it was light enough to be able to see outside would he dare to look at the clock to see how much time was left before the end of the night shift. Only then would he allow himself to think that he'd survived another night without a patient dying.

It was still dark outside when someone came to tell Mycroft that Sherlock was in post-op. But no one was available to talk to him yet, until the patient's "other issues" had been dealt with. It wasn't a
straight-forward surgical procedure, and he might have to go back into theatre for something else.

Dawn had already started to soften the edges of the blackness at some point, just before they were told he'd been moved to ICU. Sometime before the black became grey, Mycroft was summoned to talk to a consultant. When he returned, his face was unreadable.

Mary was the first one to break. "For God's sake, tell us what's going on."

A flicker of something- perhaps annoyance- crossed his face. "I'm not a medical specialist. You would know more about what it means."

John crossed his arms and glared. "Then tell me exactly what they said, and I'll tell you what it means."

Mycroft then reeled off what sounded like a perfect repetition of what had been said to him: "He's critical, but stable. The injury to the external jugular vein has been repaired, and there didn't seem to be nerve damage. The sternocleidomastoid muscle was sliced, although not severed, so they were able to suture it. An infection for which the dislocation of the rib at the costotransverse joint and the resulting renal contusions paved the way, set off complications. He's at A.K.I.N. stage two, whatever that is. The chest infection is secondary – the diaphragm is intact. They left him on the ventilator due to the general situation and the neck injury. The last temperature reading was 39.5. The tox screen came back positive for opiates and cocaine. He's receiving bloods, fluids, IV antibiotics and lorazepam combined with levetiracetam to prevent seizures...The rest was just platitudes and different ways of saying that they don't know what his prognosis really is."

He glared at John, who had stood up. "Translate, please."

John wondered how much it had cost Mycroft to admit that he didn't know everything and had to ask for help in understanding the significance of all that medical jargon. The doctor thought for a moment, and then put it into words. "Okay, in the right order, this is what happened. Last Friday, Sherlock was in a fight when Stuart Bradshaw, otherwise known as the Cunningham Crusher, kicked him in the back. It dislocated the twelfth rib, and damaged the cartilage between the bone and the vertebra. That's the trouble with the twelfth rib- it floats- not connected to the sternum, just to the backbone."

John found his right hand and forearm mimicking a spine, while his left shoved an imaginary bone further into Sherlock's body. "So, the blow freed the rib from the joint and shoved it into his kidney, bruising it; they won't know for sure how much damage has been done, but I saw blood in the renal bag in the trauma room. That said, if the bleeding was too severe then they would have operated after they finished the vascular suture. But an AKIN score of two says the kidney isn't working properly, and that will have all kinds of side effects affecting his recovery."

John drew a breath. "The pain from the rib and kidney would have been excruciating every time he took a deep breath. So he didn't. Shallow breathing for a week almost always sets off congestion in the lungs. The infection took hold; he's got pneumonia. He's probably been cutting down on the fluids, because it would hurt like hell to pee, and he'd see the blood in the urine. Knowing Sherlock, out of sight means out of mind, so he'd cut down on drinking water so he wouldn't have to think about it. That paved the way for kidney damage, and not enough fluids draining through the urinary tract made it all very cozy for an infection. There is a real danger of septicaemia, which could kill him."

John looked up at Mycroft. "Sherlock would justify the morphine as self-medication. The cocaine would be used as a little 'pick-me-up' when five days of morphine took its toll on his deductive capacity. He'd ignore the fever, which by the time he got to the gym must have been hitting 40
degrees. The infection and the cocaine together would be a powerful push on body temperature, which probably made him seriously delusional—enough to pick a new fight with Alec Cunningham, who wanted to kill both of us."

The doctor crossed his arms and gave Mycroft an answering glare. "By the time you got there, Sherlock was hallucinating, high as a kite, in agonising pain and…not in his right mind."

Mycroft listened to the litany, before adding just a single word to the end of the list, "…suicidal."

Trying to fill the silence that now fell, Mary intervened. "We were lucky then that John was able to deflect Sherlock's attempt to cut his carotid artery. The seizure stopped him from fighting back. That's what the IV lorazepam is for, by the way—to stop any more seizures. The downside is that all that thrashing about would have damaged the kidney more if the rib was pushing into it."

She had moved between the two men, and looked from John to Mycroft, and then back again. "Now we wait. Time will tell."

Time could be cruel.

The next four days passed in a series of peaks and troughs. John stayed; Mary went off briefly to make sure the practice could cope with both of them being away, and then made regular relief runs to give John time to rest, wash and poke at some food as if he intended to eat it. Mycroft disappeared, but Ashley Lewis reappeared, and was on the phone entirely too often, still smarting no doubt from the reprimand in the gym. Every piece of medical news, no matter how tiny, was called through.

They hit the first trough seventy two hours in when Sherlock's neck started to swell. John was glad of the decision to leave him on the vent in the first place—the swelling in the healing tissues could have rapidly compromised his airway. Now, it was protected by the intubation tube. It took time, but the swelling abated, and after a steady stream of good news, eventually it was considered safe to bring Sherlock out of sedation. Once he began to react purposefully to what was going on, the intubation tube was removed and replaced with a high-flow nasal oxygen cannula.

At first all Sherlock could manage was just over a barely satisfactory oxygen saturation level, but at least no further seizure signs materialised. The same antibiotics that were supposed to be knocking down the kidney infection were suitable for out-of-hospital acquired pneumonia as well as preventing infection in his neck. It would be a while before the lung infection would lose its grip, but John was glad even of this slight improvement. Over the next four hours Sherlock's vitals improved as the fever retreated a bit and John, too, could breathe a little easier.

Then the next day the urologist consultant announced he wasn't happy with renal function; it wasn't improving. A new CT scan showed that pyelonephritis had set in, visible in the scan slides as an abscess, and the antibiotics weren't making as much progress in that department as they were with the pneumonia. There was also the issue of persistent bleeding within the kidney capsule. That was at least something they could address, so a renal angiographic embolization procedure was arranged to block the bleeding artery, hoping that it would allow the kidney to recover. The alternative was to lose the kidney altogether. John was glad of this option instead of more surgery: instead of the OR, Sherlock only needed to be whipped to an angiography suite for a few hours, and the embolization caused him little distress as he was still heavily sedated.

For the six hours after that, they held their collective breaths, before the regular tests started to show an improvement. Finally, the urologist announced at the end of the night that it had worked. Sherlock's blood pressure began to improve, and his temperature came down even more.
Then, at the end of time's roller-coaster ride, Sherlock regained consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been revised, with input from the invaluable advice of a medical professional, the incomparable J_Baillier. Thanks to her, it now makes more sense.
First and Second Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

First time

As luck would have it, when Sherlock woke up properly for the first time, Mary was there. Before now, the sedation had been so heavy that when he was able to open his eyes to respond to a doctor's probing, he promptly shut them again and drifted off into sleep. Once the doctors started to ease up on the sedation, Sherlock had eventually been moved to a private room, conjured up from somewhere in a hospital whose general surgery wards were chock-full of patients. Just how Mycroft had managed that in an NHS hospital, John hadn't dared to ask. But, Mary was grateful; she convinced him that could take it in turns to watch over him.

John had gone for a walk just before eleven thirty at night, claiming he needed "some air," as he called it. She always gave a little wry smile at the thought that the atmosphere in a hospital didn't qualify as such, but she knew better than to point this out. After so many hours of waiting, the military man in him just had to make use of his muscles. So, she was the one who saw the patient's first purposive motion, a twitch along his left hand's index finger that turned into a fist. Sherlock blinked a few times, then managed to get his eyes to focus a bit.

"Hey there. Welcome back." She said it very softly, but with real feeling. She had silenced the little voice which whispered in her head that if Sherlock were to die, then his brother would have no reason to poke any further into her background. But watching John struggle through more than two days of uncertainty had put those thoughts firmly into the dustbin. If Sherlock died now, after what he had told Mycroft in the treatment room, John would never be the same. She feared that losing Sherlock a second time would become more important than what she had to offer him.

Mycroft Holmes had been right; it was really only as a threesome that they would be able to move forward. She was okay with that, loved John enough to want that for him. She was also selfish enough to know that she would do anything to keep this life that she was building with John going. She knew that she owed Sherlock for bringing John back to life after Afghanistan, but even more for being willing to disappear to keep John alive long enough for her to meet him and fall in love. Their three lives were inextricably linked; she just hadn't realised it before now.

There was no reply to her greeting, nor any recognition that she had spoken. Sherlock was not looking at her; his half-opened eyes seemed to be focusing on something over her shoulder, or maybe on nothing at all. She wondered what he was seeing.

As soon as the decision had been made to move Sherlock to the private room, John had begun to change things. The strip lighting in the room was turned off, the fluorescent tubes removed. The only light on when Sherlock opened his eyes was a small table lamp in the corner with a 40 watt bulb and a dark shade, out of direct line of sight of the bed. The hospital sheets had been swapped for some decidedly not NHS. Most peculiarly, he'd insisted on the room being…well, Mary could only call it washed in plain water.

"Why? It's not like it hasn't been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected." Mary was confused by all the palaver.

John had replied tersely. "Yes. That's the problem. To his nose, this place will absolutely reek of disinfectant." The monitors were swapped for ones that ran more quietly, alarms muted, audio
monitors switched off. "He has SPD. It's just one of the reasons why he hates hospitals."

"You sound like you've done this before."

That stopped him, and he looked up from the IV pump that he was working on. "Yes." He looked back at the monitor and fiddled with a digital read-out. "The biggest problem is going to be keeping him in here voluntarily. You heard what he said just as well as I did. He might have been off his head with fever and drugs, but he spoke more truth than I've heard out of him since he got back. He doesn't want to be locked up again, but that's what Mycroft's going to do. The last time it happened, I went with him* and it… wasn't fun."

It was one of the things she loved about John- his understatement. Another was his determination.

"I have to be here when he wakes up."

"Why?"

"Because he hates hospitals; he has a lot of bad memories about them. I need to be there to tell him that I won't let Mycroft put him in a facility."

They'd talked about it, and agreed. Sherlock would come home with them. There was a spare bedroom. Whatever it took, they'd do it, together. If that involved drug detoxification, then they'd get him through it.

Looking at Sherlock's unfocused eyes, she could only think that John was going to be so cross that he wasn't there.

"Sherlock? It's going to be all right. You're safe."

No reaction; in fact, no acknowledgement that she had even spoken to him. She started to feel uncomfortable, wondering if there might have been some sort of damage. Could this be an absence seizure?

She reached out and touched his hand very gently. "Sherlock, John's just stepped out; he'll be back soon. He's been waiting for you to wake up."

He didn't move in response to her touch, which worried her. Looking up at the silenced pulse monitor though, she saw that the rate had suddenly jumped. He started to breathe more rapidly, and then turned his head away from her. A gasp and wince of pain shot across his face.

"Shhhh, don't try to move your head. Your neck was cut and the stitches will pull." She didn't know whether it would be right to remind him about how he got the wound. *Hurry up, John.*

Sherlock closed his eyes and a moment later, was asleep again.

oOo

*Second time.*

Mycroft had not yet turned the corner from the main corridor, but his hearing was acute enough to know that the man sitting in a chair outside Sherlock's room had stood up. He wondered whether Lewis would be astute enough to know whether it was friend or foe coming toward the room.

His question was answered by the look in the agent's eyes. He'd known *exactly* who it was coming to see Sherlock. *Good; he'll need those skills in his new role.* Ashley Lewis would be assigned
permanently to Sherlock; the knife wound would give him added incentive to pay attention and not be taken in again.

Mycroft simply nodded a greeting and went into the room without knocking. A startled John was half-way out of the chair beside Sherlock's bed, before he recognised who it was.

"You should have knocked." It was said in a whisper, as he sat back down.

Mycroft allowed an eyebrow to rise. "Why should I?" Unlike John, he didn't lower the volume.

"Because I'm still worried about someone out there wanting to take him to pieces, okay? Or is the man you've posted out there just for show?"

"Actually, he's there to keep Sherlock in, more than to keep others out." Mycroft anticipated that this would provoke John into a protective reaction.

He smiled when he received the predicted glare from the doctor.

John then looked back at the still form on the bed. "Well, Sherlock's not going anywhere just yet. He hasn't woken up properly in the past eight hours." He was still keeping his voice down.

Mycroft sniffed. "He will, soon enough. And then we will have to deal with the situation," ramping up the pressure.

John stood up and put himself between Mycroft and the patient. Very quietly, but with a steely determination, John replied, "This isn't something you get to dictate. Not this time. When he's well enough to be discharged, he's coming home with me. Mary and I will get him back on his feet."

"You're assuming he'll go with you." Mycroft knew that John would have to want this to happen a great deal, if he was going to be able to deal with Sherlock at his worst. So, challenging his assumptions should intensify his commitment.

"Of course he will. Given the choice between being locked up by you in some military facility, or being with us- well, there's no contest and you know it."

*Now, to deliver the warning.* "Some people might admire your optimism, Doctor Watson. I choose to see it as a weakness, which he will exploit. You are not trained in psychiatry, and your own…*history* makes it unlikely that you can help him deal with whatever actually happened while he was away."

John's eyes narrowed at the intended jibe about his own experiences with PTSD. "Mycroft, maybe the fact that I can understand something of what he may be experiencing will be *helpful*. Ever thought of that?"

*Good, he's taking the bait.* "Of course I have *thought* of it- and immediately dismissed it. You are not an expert. Why should you succeed in changing his behaviour when all those medical professionals who have attempted to do so before now have so conspicuously failed?" Mycroft knew that the more he was able to challenge the doctor's fitness to take on this role, the more Watson would commit to it. *Reverse psychology is so useful.*

"Just maybe, because I am a *friend*, Mycroft, not another 'medical professional' thrust down his throat by an interfering big brother."

"You think of Sherlock as a *friend.*" He loaded the word with distain, knowing that the doctor would react with an affirmation. Sherlock was going to need John to be willing to commit to more than the
ambivalence that had characterised the doctor's attitudes since his return, so provoking a stronger bond was necessary.

John bridled at the tone, and snapped back, "He needs a friend now more than he needs a brother, especially one who used him to stop a terrorist plot at the expense of his own health and well-being."

Now that you've bought the idea that I'm the villain, let's introduce the fact that Sherlock might not be amenable. "He didn't argue; the necessity was obvious to him, if not to you. But then you ended up in the tube carriage alongside a bomb. I can assure you that he didn't want you to be there with him. Surely that much has become clear since then."

John's back stiffened. As he watched the doctor's left hand flex, Mycroft wondered if the man was preparing to hit him. As useful as allowing such a thing to occur, if only to shake Sherlock out of his comatose state and bond him closer to the doctor, Mycroft was not minded to let it happen. Looking at the still figure on the bed, he sniffed. "Well, if he can sleep through this, then I suppose it is unlikely that he is going to wake anytime soon. I would appreciate a few moments in private with him, nonetheless."

He watched as the doctor warred with himself, but politeness prevailed.

"Thank you," Mycroft said to the closing door. He turned back to the bed. One down, one to go.

"You may be able to fool him, but not me, Sherlock. I know you are awake."

A pair of grey green eyes opened slowly, but did not look at him.

"What, no caustic comment?" He wanted to hear the piss off that would have told him that Sherlock was back to normal.

The eyes closed.

"Oh, Lord. Are we going back to this? I think I prefer it when your depressions leave you anxious and agitated. Catatonia is just so annoying. Avoiding this is not going to help, Sherlock."

There was no reply.

He sighed. Impasse.

He pulled out the chair and sat down in it, noting that it was still warm from where John had been sitting.

"I'm going to take advantage of having you as a captive audience. For once, because your mouth is not being used to push me away, there is the faintest chance you might actually listen to me. So, here's the thing…" He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, as if hoping for inspiration. How to say this? "I'll only do this once, so you'd better be listening." He looked over at the still figure which showed no sign of reaction.

"I've…" Mycroft stopped, and then gave a wry smile that he knew he brother could not see, but would probably deduce anyway. "I've been meaning to tell you something, but the occasion hasn't really presented itself before now." He took another breath. "You know how unhappy I was about your original plans, your grand strategy to take down Moriarty and his network. I made my feelings known about it at the time, I will admit. I thought it was yet more evidence of your impulsiveness and your willingness to take risks."

"But, I was wrong. You were right. The plan not only worked, you actually delivered intelligence far
above and beyond anything I ever expected. The work was methodical, strategic in execution and masterful in tactical delivery." He was watching Sherlock's face, but keeping an eye on the silent heart monitor out of the corner of his eye. "Oh, Lord, I do hope you are awake. I don't intend to prostrate myself a second time."

That brought the tiniest of quirks to Sherlock's lip. He didn't open his eyes, but his lips parted just enough to let out a whisper, "Grovel. It will do you good."

That brought an answering smile to Mycroft's face. "And, despite a number of…shall we call them near misses?...you managed to come back alive, much to my surprise. But, the part that really astonished me was just how effectively you hamstrung me. That was pure artistry. Once I got over the annoyance, I was able to appreciate it more."

"Good…." still a whisper, "Continue."

"I've had two years to re-adjust my thinking about just what you are capable of. I did not think you had it in you, but you showed me I was wrong. And that was reinforced when you came back and solved the underground plot that no one, not even me, had been able to figure out. So, I was prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt when things seemed to go…not quite to plan. Until this latest escapade of yours which makes me wonder whether your work away is just the anomaly. Really, Sherlock, why back to old habits? Taking unnecessary risks, impulsive behaviour, abandoning Baker Street? Oh, and shall I add the usual willful neglect of your health and then, sin of sins, relapsing into drug use?" He sighed- "what am I supposed to make of all that?"

Sherlock took a deeper breath, but it made him cough, and wince of pain shot across his features. "I don't care what you make of it. Just leave me alone."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Walk out the door and don't come back. Easy." Another little cough escaped.

"I'm not going to lock you away, Sherlock, if that is what you are afraid of. It's never done much good in the past, so why should it now? I just want you to re-discover whatever it was that led you to control all those impulses over two years. You're back in London less than six weeks and all the old bad habits are back. Why? Just answer me that."

"No." Sherlock still hadn't opened his eyes.

Mycroft tried one more time. Very quietly, he asked, "What did they do to you in China?"

This time, there was no reply.

Mycroft let the question hang in the air. Silence drew out to an absurd length before finally, he sighed. "Find a solution, brother mine. I am willing, perhaps against my better judgment, to trust you. Now that I know what you are capable of, I don't want to be proven wrong."

There was no reply.

As Mycroft left the room, he wondered whether he'd done enough.
Author's Note: * If convenient, read Sidelined, if you haven't done so before. Even if inconvenient or you have, re-visit and review. Go on, make my day; I know you love sicfic.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Third Time Unlucky

The next time Sherlock woke up, John was with him.

It had been a good day so far. As the antibiotics pushed back the fever, Sherlock's kidney function had improved significantly. It would be some time before the Foley catheter could be removed – while it was a route for a new infection to drawl up, the patient needed to be awake and able to use a bed bottle or start getting to the loo on his own, and it could only be removed after all worries about the kidney's function had subsided. It would be good to get Sherlock to ambulate as soon as possible – it would help his circulation and keep muscle mass from diminishing. John wanted him to wake up and start making progress, but he remained asleep.

The vascular surgeon was also pleased with the sutures in Sherlock's neck wound; he had checked while the nurse changed the dressing, and said they were healing nicely. Sherlock slept through it all.

The general medical consensus was that the acute phase had been passed, and it was now time for recovery to start proper. The lorazepam had been stopped prior to Sherlock being extubated, but pain medication continued, and it could well be that the dose would need to be raised when he began to move about more.

Only, the patient wasn’t in any hurry. For most of the morning, Sherlock had seemed to still be in deep sleep. The good news was that some of it was starting to look like REM sleep, as the dregs of the lorazepam were clearing his system. The drug was in the benzodiazepine family, and it suppressed REM sleep. Cocaine did the same thing. So, whatever else he’d been dealing with, Sherlock’s sleep patterns would have been well and truly mucked about in the week he’d gone to ground. Maybe the morphine was not just a pain relief; the chemist in Sherlock could have been using it as well to deal with the insomnia caused by the anxiety and agitation. But, it too blocked REM sleep. In the end, the lack of that kind of restorative sleep would have exacerbated the pain, causing hyperalgesia. If the fever hadn’t gotten to him first, the pain alone would have driven Sherlock right round the bend.

John sighed. I'm going to need Sherlock's deductive skills to sort out what's actually wrong with him. John had snapped at Mycroft for challenging his medical skills at dealing with his brother's behaviour. But, in his own mind, John wasn't all that confident. Surgery was just easier. The working motto summed it up- "when in doubt, cut it out." Only you couldn't do that to a brain that was malfunctioning.

He and Mary had discussed the challenges over a breakfast in the canteen. She had insisted on it. "You need to eat. Hardly a role model, are you?" She cast a sceptical eye over John's rumpled clothes, unshaven face and drawn look. She had brought a carrier bag with a change of clothes and toiletries. "Ashley can keep an eye on him and if he so much as twitches a finger, he will text you."

She had given the agent one of those You-know-who's-right looks. The agent has been looking equally tired, but nodded.

"And when we're back upstairs, then I promise to phone Mycroft and bully him into sending someone to relieve you." She had given the agent one of her 100 watt smiles, which was gratefully
answered with one of his own in reply.

Over a full-English, John opened up a bit to her about his worries. "I am certainly not going to admit it to him, but maybe Mycroft was right. I don't know the first thing about how to treat someone with PTSD. I mean…” he waved a fork with a piece of plump sausage on it, "…you said it yourself. I'm hardly the best role model in that department."

"I was talking about something that a fry up and clean clothes could fix." She smiled as she put her orange juice down. "I've been thinking about PTSD." Pulling out her tablet computer, Mary popped open the apple green cover, swiped it three times and slid it across the table so it was beside his tray. "Take a look at that."

He popped up the stand, so he could read while he ate. "Combat Stress*…. So what? Of course, I've heard of them; they've been going for yonks, but they only treat service men and women."

"You didn't consider using them?" She asked carefully.

"No." John looked down at his plate. "I…um, well, to be honest, it seemed a bit strange that a doctor couldn't deal with it; you know, 'physician, heal thyself' and all that.**"

She looked at him with sympathetic eyes, seemed to think about it for a moment and then said gently, "Well, that's a load of tosh."

He sniffed. "Past history." He heard the defensive tone and almost winced. "What does that have to do with Sherlock?"

"Look up Tyrwhitt House; it's the Combat Stress residential facility in the south. It's ten miles from Reigate."

John swiped the tablet.

"Look at who's in the photo about the treatment centre."

He peered at the screen, and then his mouth quirked in a little smile. "George Hayter."

"Yep. Turns out he's been volunteering there for the past decade. That's why he's retired- to go do more support work there, as a counsellor."

John put his fork down, and shook his head. "It's still a residential centre. You don't get it; Sherlock can't deal with that kind of place, even if there was some sort of way to bend the rules to get him in. He's not eligible, even if he could stick it. Which he can't, or rather, he won't."

She stifled a snort. "I'm not suggesting that he join in. Oh my God, the thought of him set loose on some poor unsuspecting group therapy session? It would be worse than an IED." She leaned forward to pinch a piece of crispy streaky bacon from his plate.

"No, what I meant is that Hayter can give us some ideas- act as sort of a consultant to back us up. After all, he's got a head start on anyone else out there- at least he's seen Sherlock at his worst, in the middle of a flashback."

Now back in clean clothes, washed and shaved, John was sitting beside the bed, waiting. Mary went away, promising to return at four o'clock. He then took three texts asking for an update- Greg Lestrade, Mrs Hudson and Molly Hooper-almost in succession, which made him wonder if they had been texting each other. While he was typing a message to reassure Molly, another agent arrived to relieve Lewis. This one seemed cut from the same indentikit- but was ginger-haired and more heavily
muscled. He introduced himself as Alex Arthur, and it made John wonder if it was like NotAnthea-a name manufactured for the occasion.

Noon came and went. Every so often, a nurse came in and checked the monitors, and asked quietly if there had been any change. She noted down John's "no" and went away again.

John watched the sun move in shadows- he'd drawn the blinds to keep the light levels low. As the thin beams that still managed to work their way through the slats crept their way across the floor, he thought about whether Sherlock would be willing to deal with a third party like Hayter. And that made him wonder about another medical professional- a certain grey haired petite psychiatrist who had known Sherlock longer than almost anyone apart from his brother- Esther Cohen. John wondered what she would make of this situation. He wondered whether she was still practicing; she might well have retired by now. Wonder if she'd be willing to do a consulting job?

In the meantime, John had time to observe Sherlock. The times they had been in each other's company since that first night in the restaurant- well, they'd all been so busy that he hadn't really had the chance to see what had happened to Sherlock in the two years he was gone. Now, as the hours ticked by, he could trace the differences.

There were two, no- three lined wrinkles across his forehead. He looked… older. That made John smirk a bit. About bloody time. The images that John had kept with him after he jumped- well, his presumed death led John to sort of airbrush out the rough edges. He had not forgotten Sherlock's lack of social skills, but even those had mellowed in his memory to more of an endearing eccentricity. Whether his memory had Sherlock stretched out comatose on the settee in Baker Street, or swirling around with his coat collar turned up at some crime scene in the middle of the night, his memories were of a man who seemed to be younger than the age that John knew him to be.

Not anymore. The sting of that tongue lashing at the Fort Street crime scene lingered still. It hadn't been like that at first, but oddly, the longer Sherlock was home, the more abrupt he had become. The man whom he'd caught up with at the gym was driven by a new set of demons, or at least ones that John wasn't familiar with. More than a week's growth of beard didn't help his appearance, either. Sherlock had always been rather fastidious about keeping himself shaved and washed. The fact that he used a straight edge razor had always freaked John out in the past. He'd not been surprised that Sherlock had taken a dislike to his moustache.

Now it seemed he no longer cared what image he projected. The stubble was reddish- auburn really, which surprised John, given the darkness of Sherlock's hair. It made him wonder how Sherlock had disguised himself when he was away on his mission to take down Moriarty's network. Looking at the sleeping man now, he tried to imagine him with short hair, maybe reddish blond? And perhaps a neatly trimmed beard? Put a pair of glasses on him and the effect would be quite different. Add one of the many foreign languages that Sherlock spoke, and the camouflage would be almost perfect. No one looks for a dead man.

A casual glance at the cannula in the top of Sherlock's left hand made him think, so he pulled very gently up on the hospital ID bracelet, until the left wrist and the underside of his arm were exposed. The red scar tissue encircling the wrist whispered a history of manacles. There was an answering discolouration on the right wrist, too. Those had been carefully hidden beneath the French cuffs of the dress shirts and suit jackets worn like armour since his return; John had not seen Sherlock in anything but that, until the gym.

Why didn't you tell me? No sooner had he thought that, John knew the answer. Because I didn't ask.

But it was the sight of more recent track marks inside the elbow of the left arm that gave John the most discomfort. With his doctor's eyes, he could see the ravages of drugs over the past week taking
their toll. Sherlock's skin was greyish, bringing into sharp relief the fading bruise across his cheek where Cunningham had hit him. *He looks like he's been through the wars.*

Sherlock's eyes were sunk into their sockets with dark smudges on the lids. That's what made John realise that Sherlock was starting another cycle, moving out of NREM. Behind his closed eye lids, John could see the rapid eye movement start, and his breathing became shallower and quicker. John leaned back in the chair, so he could keep an eye on the monitors. Sherlock's heart rate and blood pressure started to climb. If the patient was going to come awake naturally, it would be at the end of REM sleep. So, he might have another twenty minutes or so, if it was going to be a short cycle.

There was the very quietest of knocks at the door and then it opened. Mary entered, juggling two take-away teas in both hands, as Arthur closed the door just as quietly behind her. John realised it must be four o'clock.

Mary raised an eyebrow in a silent question, but John just shook his head and took the tea from her. He wrapped his hands around the heavy thermal paper cup to warm them, and took a sip through the hole in the plastic top. It was hot, and actually quite drinkable, better than the miserable excuse the hospital called coffee.

She bent over and whispered into his ear, "Why not stretch your legs? Take a break- I can watch him."

He shook his head; he wasn't about to miss the chance awakening, like he did the last time. He looked back at the still form under the sheet and soft blanket.

That's when Sherlock gave an almighty twitch- a muscle contraction that ran down the whole of his left side, arm and leg.

Mary said it first, "he shouldn't be doing that, should he? I mean, REM is atonic; his voluntary muscles should be paralyzed." She moved to the other side of the bed from John, so she could take a closer look.

John checked the monitors- the heart rate had climbed a lot in the past minute, and the respiration rate was nearly keeping up. Sherlock was almost panting, and a fine sheen of sweat had appeared out of nowhere across his forehead.

"Is this a seizure? Or a hypnic jerk?"

John shook his head, neither made sense. There was no tonic rhythm to the muscle spasm; only the one contraction, so not a seizure. Possibly a myoclonic contraction? But, no, those and hypnics happened when someone was *falling* asleep, not in REM. He started to put his cup of tea down when Sherlock suddenly spoke.

"**NO! Not again. I can't do this again.**"

The distress in those words startled John so much that he mis-judged where the table was and his paper cup tipped off the edge and headed for the floor.

"Damn."

John wasn't sure whether it was his swearing or the sound of the cup hitting the floor with a pop that did it, but suddenly Sherlock was wide-awake and sitting bolt upright in bed, staring at the door. His eyes were shocked wide open and the pupils dilated in the darkened room. The movement would have pulled at the sutures in his neck, and at the laparoscopy wound over his kidney, not to mention putting sudden pressure on the damaged rib joint. There was a gasp and grunt of pain, mirrored in the
grimace that gripped his pale features.

Mary recovered first, "Sherlock, it's alright. Don't move; you're safe."

Sherlock reacted to her voice, turning his head toward Mary, so John decided it wasn't a night terror, because he actually seemed to be awake and taking in the room.

"It's okay- just dropped my tea. You just surprised me; that's all." John said it quietly, with a little self-deprecating laugh.

Sherlock snapped his head around to stare at John, with a look of horror. He then exploded into action, throwing himself backwards, scrambling as fast as he could backwards on the bed, away from John. The cannula with fluids got caught on the side bars of the bed and broke free from his hand, ripping out of the vein, as Sherlock smacked his back into the headboard and he screamed in pain.

The door to the corridor burst open, and Arthur came barrelling through, just as Sherlock started shouting. "NO! You're dead. I won't watch you die again. Go away!" He ducked his head, covering his face with his arms, bringing his knees up and curling up around himself in a protective reflex whilst still shouting, "Get out of my head. I've deleted you!" Blood poured down from the new wound in his left hand, tracing streaks of red down the arm.

Mycroft's agent took one look at the situation and grabbed John by the arm, pulling him right out of the chair and dragging him toward the door before he had a chance to do anything more than shout, "Let go of me, you idiot. He needs a doctor."

The ginger haired man was twice the size of John and wasn't listening. John tried to block his grip, but suddenly his own arm was being levered up the middle of his back, and he was literally picked up and carried out of the door. Mary came out right behind him.

The agent wrestled him to the floor and pinned him there. Despite his face being shoved into the floor and the man's full body weight settling onto his back, John shouted at Mary, "Go get him help- he needs to be sedated!" She bolted down the corridor.

All the frustrations of the previous hours of waiting now came together as John started cursing the agent. "You're a fucking idiot! Let me go! Sherlock needs help."

The man wrestled John's wrists together and used a plastic strip lock to handcuff John.

"Yeah- and according to what I just saw and heard, he needs protecting from you."

Chapter End Notes

* Combat Stress is real; it was set up after WWI to serve the needs to returning service men and women. Go google it to find out the worthy work that is being done in this area. The centre described is real.

** Check out Ex Files, Exempt, if you haven't read it yet. Even if you have, re-read it because John's attitude towards his own experiences will become increasingly important in this and the next story I publish, called Magpie: One for Sorrow.
"I'm afraid it's a deputation, sir, to see you."

They had come at an awkward time. The Prime Minister's urgent need for a brief on the latest cyber-attack on the US Pentagon's twitter account was pressing. He glanced at his watch.

"Very well, m'dear. Put them in the meeting room. I can spare no more than twenty five minutes. Come rescue me if I'm not out before then."

A few minutes later, once he'd finished reading the file, Mycroft paused before the closed meeting room door to straighten his tie, pull down his waistcoat and square his shoulders. *Into battle.* He opened the door and strode in, taking in the five people sitting at the round table and instantly deducing. John Watson was sitting opposite the door- the chair of authority. Yet he looked haggard and decidedly wary. *As well you might be.* He made sure that the doctor saw his look of disappointment. Whatever he might have thought about the doctor's suitability to help his brother had evaporated in the second episode of rejection.

To John's right the woman who was not really Mary Morstan sat quietly. Poised, her body language and expression were just that little bit too controlled to be natural, although it would take an expert like Mycroft to notice it. She had even more incentive to feel anxious about his disappointment, but was hiding it well, and that spoke volumes about the past she was so keen to protect.

On John's immediate left sat DI Lestrade, whose face betrayed his disquiet. Whatever he might have done to assist Sherlock's recovery from the occasional drugs relapses in the past, this situation was way beyond his capacity, and he looked like he knew that. Even so, he met Mycroft's gaze with determination. He'd been Sherlock's advocate before, and would be again, no doubt.

To the DI's left, the man Mycroft knew as George Hayter was sitting. Unlike Mary, the posture of the big man was natural. Not exactly relaxed, but more the approach a military officer would take- *at ease.* His eyes showed a trace of curiosity, as he took in the setting and Mycroft's arrival. He found himself wondering what the others would have said to Hayter about who they were meeting. As a colonel and a doctor, he would have had experience with authority, yet his stance was open, confident, even slightly bemused. What Mycroft had read in the file prepared by his team confirmed his earlier assessment- Hayter was *interesting.*

He delivered his bland civil servant smile to the assembled group as he reached the empty chair and pulled it out. That's when he exchanged glances with the fifth person in the room, whose brown eyes radiated an unexpected sympathy. Yes, well, she would know something about what he was actually feeling. Esther Cohen had twenty five years' experience of reading Mycroft, after all. If he was mildly surprised to see her, it was only because he didn't think that John Watson would ever willingly call in another doctor. Yet here were two. *Revealing.* He'd clearly felt the need for reinforcements when he tried to convince Mycroft to release Sherlock into their care. It would make no difference. The whole battlefield that was his brother's life after his return had changed; Mycroft had to re-trench, buy time and find some other solution than the one he'd originally hoped John would take up.

Once seated, Mycroft placed his clasped hands on the table, and began, "I know you are here to influence what I decide should be done regarding Sherlock. As my American contacts have a habit of saying, 'I'm listening.'" But he let the faintest undercurrent of sarcasm show, to make sure they knew just how unlikely that would affect his decision. He looked across the table at John Watson and waited for him to start.
To his surprise, it was George Hayter who began. "You know why we are here, so I will get straight to the point." The big grey-haired man sat forward, his hands making small gestures to emphasise his points. "From what I saw of you at the gym, your Plan A was to drive John Watson and Mary into taking responsibility for your brother's rehabilitation. But unfortunately your plan hit a snag: after the second incident, it's clear that somehow John has become a trigger for the psychotic episodes that Sherlock is suffering."

Mycroft's left eyebrow climbed. His tactics at the gym had been successful at provoking Watson's protective instincts, but Hayter was perceptive enough to have spotted his technique. To buy himself a little time, he responded with a question. "In your opinion, Mister Hayter, is it a form of PTSD? After all, you've seen a great number of cases."

For some reason, the question provoked a smile from Hayter. "I've seen enough to know that no case is ever alike. And, no, I wouldn't make any kind of diagnosis without knowing the patient a lot more than I currently do."

In his peripheral vision Mycroft caught the tiniest nod from Esther Cohen, as if Hayter's words were confirming something she had thought. He decided to follow that up. "Then I shall ask someone who does know the patient rather well. Doctor Cohen, have you a professional opinion you wish to share?"

She gave a gentle chuckle. "I've known Sherlock long enough to know better. Whatever someone here thinks is going on in his head, the truth is likely to be quite different." Her smile faded as she looked down at her own hands, which were clasped like Mycroft's. As if that fact annoyed her, she pulled them apart. Then more quietly, "From what I have been told, this is new behaviour, and I'm hardly an expert in trauma induced psychosis."

Now Lestrade leaned forward. "If this was just about the drugs, then I might be able to help. Be a sort of Plan B. Been there before, could manage the detox again. But I agree with Doctor Cohen; this is different. Christ, he doesn't even get any pleasure out of The Work anymore. I've never known that before."

A silence fell, as several people looked to John. He'd kept his hands in his lap, out of sight. Mycroft wondered if he was flexing his left one into a fist. *Such an obvious tell.*

Finally, John took a breath and waded into the conversation. "Greg's told me what he knows about Serbia, but I don't think what happened there is the issue. Sherlock's been held captive before, been at the wrong end of a beating, even been tortured; I was there to pick up the pieces then, because he wanted my help. Not this time. So, *what the bloody hell happened to him in China,* Mycroft? What's done this to him?"

Mycroft's jaw tightened, but he projected an air of slight boredom. "I don't know. He's not said a word to me about it, or to anyone." Mycroft looked down at his clasped hands, willing them to stay exactly as they were.

John's brow furrowed. "How is that even possible? You...you *had* to have eyes on him. I just can't believe that you would leave him at risk like that." The accusation was there, and it angered Mycroft.

"You have no idea, Doctor Watson, and it is unwise to pass judgment from a position of ignorance. You were in that gym treatment room; you heard what I said to Sherlock, unless you were so busy performing your surgery that you couldn't be bothered to listen." The sarcastic barb was planted firmly.
And got the expected reaction. John gave that little smile that said he was furious. "I know what you told Sherlock, but that isn't the same as the truth. If anyone's a better manipulator than Sherlock, it's you. You told Sherlock that he'd been such a good boy when he got back, like some page out of a parenting by numbers book. If he'd been in his right mind, he'd have treated that little pep talk with the scorn it deserved."

This was tedious. Now that the doctor was part of the problem, rather than a solution, he had outlived his usefulness, so Mycroft allowed his scorn to show. "Well, we all know he wasn't in his right mind; and that appears to have something to do with you, so much so that at first he tried to kill himself because of you and then at the hospital he declared that you are dead to him. You've been deleted, doctor." He sniffed. "Plan A is no longer viable, if it ever was. Plan B is what the substance of this conversation should be about. If you have no other useful input to offer, then I will thank you for your time, and bid you good afternoon." He shifted in his chair, as if preparing to leave.

"Stop it, both of you. This isn't some custody battle." Mary looked at John and then back across the table. "It isn't about you, Mycroft. And, John, whatever happened before...whatever regrets you have; well, arguing about the past just isn't helpful. How does he put it? 'That was then; this is now'. If Sherlock's going to fix this, then he has to make the decisions. Other people trying to do it for him-well, it won't work. And you both know it. So, please, just stop arguing for now. We all have to focus on what will help Sherlock the most."

Mycroft gave her a knowing smile. "Obviously, I do have a Plan B, but it doesn't involve you, Miss Morstan." She would hear the slight emphasis on the name. She had proved to be something of a disappointment.

George took charge again. "Yes. And you've already discarded your original Plan B, too, or else you wouldn't be speaking with us now. You would have moved Sherlock to a secure facility and told us after the fact."

Esther Cohen tried to smother a smile at that comment, unsuccessfully.

Hayter didn't allow himself to be distracted. "So, let's talk about the alternatives. Bunking up at the Watson flat is not an option. The Detective Inspector works all day, so his place is out of bounds, too. Besides, no disrespect, but this is way out of your comfort zone. Sherlock quit Baker Street, probably because the place reminds him too much of what has changed since he got back. If John is the trigger for psychosis, then anything that reminds him of John is going to be a problem. You've decided against the last place he was held for rehabilitation- and yes, both Doctors Watson and Cohen have told me about that. No one here- not even you- is really thinking your brother would cope with any form of a secure residential institution. From what I hear, over the past two years he made a specialty out of escaping from places far more secure than what we have available in this country. So, if you were planning on something like that, you'd have to keep him so chemically controlled that he'd never get better. No one on this side of the table thinks that is a viable option."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "Tell me something I don't know, or I will have to leave. Duty calls." He brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his jacket cuff.

It didn't faze the big man in the slightest, who just carried on smiling and talking. "Okay, so here's something you won't have thought of before. Plan C is simple: I'll take him home with me- to Hartwood Manor. The middle unit in the house has four bedrooms- one for Sherlock, one for your Mister Lewis and another of your people- because I don't think you'll allow anything else than 24/7 surveillance. The spare room will be shared by one full time psychiatric nurse and another general nurse to see to his physical injuries. The last bedroom will be used by visitors. Doctor Cohen is likely
to be one of those, if he will engage with her. I'll try other people and other approaches, too. Some of those, you probably wouldn't approve of, but it's not your choice; it's going to be his."

Mycroft allowed the other eyebrow to rise as the details came out. There was the faintest possibility that it might work. "Why do you think Sherlock would be any more amenable to that than to a residential clinic?"

"Because it isn't an institution; it's my home. It's not Baker Street, nor any other place populated by people he wants to avoid. Call it an educated hunch. He's not a typical case, so there's no telling what will work, if anything. But at the very least, it will be a sanctuary to give him time to heal physically. And I'll try to find a way to get him talking, so we can bring the other side of the equation into play."

Mycroft chose a sceptical look. "And why would I entrust my brother's mental health to a man who is no longer a qualified doctor, and was never a psychiatrist even when he was? Your little 'good Samaritan' volunteering at the local veteran's club doesn't exactly build confidence." He put just enough obvious sneer in the words to see if the man would rise to the bait.

The smile on the big man's face broadened. "You're good at that, and from what I've heard, your brother is too. Did he learn it from you?"

This time Esther couldn't contain her chuckle, and then she intervened, "Mycroft, please; have the good sense to listen without playing mind games. George has a point worth considering, and he shouldn't have to pass any of your…little tests of character to earn the right to be heard."

Mycroft shrugged. "Why do you think Sherlock wouldn't simply take advantage of you and disappear when he'd recovered physically?"

"Two reasons. The first is that your people will be there to shadow him if he makes a break for it. Choose your best people; from what I hear, he's rather good at disappearing. But out in the country where I live, he's going to be more conspicuous before he can reach London to disappear again."

"I could confine him to Parham if that were the only criterion of success."

"Nope- he knows that place like the back of his hand. He doesn't know my area. That would buy time. And in any case, we'll take a belt and braces approach. You're going to get one of your people to put a small microchip GPS right in the middle of his back, under the skin and muscle, next to the pedicle of the T5 vertebra. It's a bitch to get out on your own…" Hayter demonstrated by trying to reach around his own back to that spot "…and by the time he finds someone to do it for him, you'll have tracked him. He's certainly not stupid, so he won't bolt if he knows he's going to be caught- and you'll tell him, unlike the other people who are currently being tracked by this method."

That comment made Mycroft unclasp his hands and lay them out flat on the table top. He gave a stern look at the former Army doctor. "I can see that your Special Ops training was not wasted. But do tell who is the person leaking our current capability on this matter."

Hayer's smile broadened. "Not a chance, Mister Holmes. I have my sources, as clearly you do, too."

Mycroft sniffed. "And what, pray tell, is your second reason?"

"Because I intend making the process of healing interesting."

That was an unexpected answer, and Mycroft considered whether it just might work. He decided to test the hypothesis he was forming. "Do you have any idea what you are letting yourself in for, Mister Hayter?" Mycroft decided it wouldn't hurt to let a little honest incredulity creep into his tone.
That smile on Hayter's face became a grin. "Yeah, these four think I am certifiable. But, with their help, I think this is achievable."

"Why would you do this rather than spend your days as you had planned, being useful at the Tyrwhitt centre?"

"They've got lots of trained staff working with people who want to be helped. Your brother is in an entirely different situation. He doesn't like people and doesn't want to be helped. I've been looking for a challenge, and I think I've found him."

Anthea knocked and entered. "Sorry, sir; the car is waiting to take you to Number Ten."

Mycroft stood. "Thank you, Mister Hayter. I will consider your plan and get back to you on it tonight."

oOo

Much later, after he returned to the Diogenes Club from Number Ten, Mycroft replayed the video tapes of what happened after he left. As soon as the door shut behind him, John had locked his gaze onto Hayter. "Do you think he will agree? I've never been able to figure out what he is thinking."

Hayter was still smiling. "What do you think, Doctor Cohen? You've known him longer than any of us."

Esther gave a smile that lit up the room. "Yes. He will agree." Then the smile faded. "Of course, that's only the first step. Convincing Sherlock will be much, much harder."

*You and I agree on that point.* Mycroft made his decision.
A few hours later, a car arrived at Hartswood Manor, carrying doctors Watson and Cohen. George was somewhat taken aback by the size of the suitcase that Watson took from the boot of the car, giving it to Ashley Lewis.

"Um, the invitation was for you to stay over just tonight, so I hope that isn't yours, is it? Under the circumstances, I think it best if neither of you were here when he wakes up tomorrow."

That got him a pained look from Watson. "Mrs Hudson packed it with Sherlock's things. I'll explain why that matters once we're inside."

As he settled Watson and Cohen in the big kitchen of the middle house, the sound of a drill upstairs could be heard. While he made them tea, he kicked off the conversation.

"Anything you can tell me about him will help. I've read the papers, seen the stories on TV. That's the public face, but I will need some idea about what he's like, so I can get started."

The sound of the kettle boiling filled the silence as Watson looked down to pour milk into his own cup and that of Doctor Cohen. He didn't offer to fill George's RAMC mug with milk. "It's almost impossible to know where to begin, for someone who knows nothing about him." Once he put the milk jug down, his left hand made a vague gesture between him and George. "Having to explain this all to someone one doesn't understand that? It's... awkward." There was pain and anger in the tone that he was not trying to hide.

As the kettle reached the boiling point and gave a pop as it switched off, George gave him a sympathetic smile. "I know." He knew that he needed to reassure the man. "But, until we know why he's had the reaction he's had to you, it's just too dangerous. For both of you." He leaned back against the kitchen counter and relaxed his own shoulders, trying to get John to do the same. "Let's just see if a third party can be helpful."

"No, you don't understand what I meant. It's not just... him. I was also thinking about you, too. Sherlock can be..." He stopped, and George saw him struggle to find the right words. "I've watched him take people apart at the seams. You have no idea what you've let yourself in for. If you're going to go walking through the minefield that is Sherlock, you'll need to be prepared, and that means you have to know his complete medical history."

As Hayter filled the tea pot and stirred the loose leaf tea, he said warily, "Perhaps it would be better to let him tell me what he wants me to know."

Esther and John exchanged glances, and she shook her head. The psychiatrist gave George a kindly smile. "Not a good idea, I'm afraid. Hell would freeze over before he'd volunteer anything. And you need to know, if you're to have a fighting chance, otherwise, he'll rip you to shreds."

Their attitude made Hayter uncomfortable. He gave the tea pot a vigorous swirl and then poured their tea. "What about medical confidentiality? He needs to give permission for me to get a hold of any details about his medical history."

John blew on his cup to try to cool it a bit. "No, I have medical power of attorney. It's still valid, now that he's alive again." if there was a tinge of bitterness in that word, he didn't seem to notice. John stirred his tea, and then continued. "The care and feeding of a Sherlock is ... well, challenging." The look on his face became a bit sad. "There's just so much you need to know; things he would never,
ever tell you himself. I only know them because I was there when they came to light, and because he gave me the authority to be his medical advocate. He trusts me."

George watched Watson take his first sip of his tea and then make a face. "Too damn hot." He put the cup down and then lifted his chin. "I should be the one doing this. He doesn't have to start from square one with me. You just…." He closed his eyes as if struggling for the right words. "You're not me."

George met John's eyes when he opened them again, and nodded. "No, I'm not. And I could sit here and tell you what you already know- the General Medical Council's guidance is that wherever possible, you should avoid providing medical care to anyone with whom you have a close personal relationship."

John shook his head, but before he could speak, George continued. "Let's set that aside and look at the facts. Letting me try is going to lower the risk of him having another episode. Once I can figure out why you seem to be a trigger for whatever it going on, then I promise you'll be told. But, until we know it's safe to bring you back into his life, the patient's needs come first. You know that, John."

Esther nodded. "John, I'm sorry, but I agree with him. That said, George, you can't go into this without being forewarned and forearmed; without knowing his full history, not only will you not be able to help him, but you could do real harm."

John reached down to the briefcase that he had brought with him. "I sent these back to Mycroft when I thought Sherlock was dead." He started to pull out a set of files and the pile kept growing higher. "A car delivered them to my flat this afternoon, so I could bring them to show you. It'll take you all night to read them, but at least you've got his brother's legal approval- which matters, too."

Leaning his back up against the kitchen sink while he cradled his own cup of tea, George didn't try to hide his confusion. "I don't understand; surely Sherlock has a right to privacy?"

John pushed the foot high pile of files towards George. "Until two years ago, he was designated a vulnerable adult; his brother was his official guardian. Sherlock's on the Autistic Spectrum, has Sensory Processing Disorder and has been sectioned on a number of occasions as a threat to himself and to others. There's been three periods of serious drug addiction, the first one when Sherlock was sixteen. He's overdosed with intent to kill himself at least twice, and those were after he'd been released from rehab."

George's eyes must have showed his shock at the one-two-three punch of those medical facts. When he found his voice again, he said, "I guessed he was on the Spectrum; I seem to recall that was mentioned in that wretched Sun article years ago, but the journalist said Asperger's."

"I really hope you don't believe everything you read in the papers, Mister Hayter." There was a clear warning in that statement, one which George could not miss. He felt acutely aware of the discomfort John was feeling about the whole situation. And he felt for the man. To be a doctor and a friend, and not be able to help would be hard for anyone. To realise that he was somehow a trigger for that friend's distress would be devastating. On top of that, Watson had to face his own PTSD demons at the same time as feeling guilty that he might be involved in some way with Sherlock's own version of the psychosis. George knew that he had to find a way to get him on side.

"Of course not; that's why I am asking you and Esther. You two know him better than anyone else." He wasn't going to back away.

Perhaps to ease the tension, Esther stepped in, "Let's start at the beginning, shall we? He's not Aspergers, rather, full on ASD; he's just smart enough to have figured out how to deal with it better
than most. Most important from your point of view, Sherlock's pathological fear of being institutionalised comes from the fact that he was. When he was ten his mother died, and his father shut him in a psychiatric institution. It was claimed that he was suffering from a major depressive episode, and catatonia, complicated by voluntary mutism. He didn't say a word for seven months. His brother found him, got him out of the hospital and eventually wrestled legal guardianship away from his father. That's when I arrived on the scene. I specialise in psychiatric treatment of autistic children and young adults."

John resumed. "When Sherlock gets depressed- and it's likely that he will be that now- you're going to have to deal with the fact that he won't talk, won't engage. He just shuts everyone and everything out. If you're not careful, he'll regress right back into autistic behaviour- a sort of two fingered salute to everyone else in the world. If and when he gets out of that, then you'll have to get through the triple A...anxious, agitated and aggressive...phase." And he gave a dry laugh. "Oh, and there's the detox, too. I took a short cut with him last time; but Lestrade says the normal process is hell."

Esther chimed in again. "His SPD means that whatever horrors normally accompany a neurotypical person's detox are amplified a hundred-fold for Sherlock. So, that's what the suitcase is for. In there will be sheets of over 800 thread count, his brand of toiletries, his clothes- all of which are designed to limit sensory stimulation. What drives him to drug use is the need to escape what is going on in his head. The cocaine de-clutters the data stream, morphine obliterates it. There is nothing legal I can prescribe that is anywhere near as effective. So, when those are gone, his injuries are going to be causing him pain. In detox? Well, it will be worse. He's likely to get the whole gamut- allodynia, synaesthesia, hyperalgesia- and they will push him into meltdown." She looked down at her tea cup. "What I am saying, George, is that he doesn't need a high fever or to be on drugs in order to have a psychotic episode."

George gave the two of them what he hoped was a reassuring smile, "Lucky for me then that I won't be doing this on my own. I never said to Mycroft that I wouldn't be calling on you both for help. And that means "on call"- any time day or night, if I need a little "translation service" to help me understand what you think is going on."

He gestured to the pile of medical files. "I will wade through that tonight. But, looking at what other people have thought and done in the past doesn't mean I won't form my own view, and that it might be different from yours. Because you've been around the houses with him on this before, both of you've got baggage. Past experiences can get in the way. That past affects his reaction to you, too. You have expectations of how he's going to behave; he thinks he knows what you want from him. It's easy enough to fall into predictable patterns of resistance."

"Time to try something new." George needed their trust and their support, but he also needed room to manoeuvre. "Maybe what he needs this time is a fresh chance- something different, something unexpected. You are going to have to give me the freedom to find the best way to engage him in that. Are you willing to help me try?"

Esther was quick to answer. "Yes. After more than twenty five years of not really getting anywhere, Lord knows, if anyone else can make a breakthrough with him, then I'm all for it."

John didn't reply, and the silence lengthened. Then he smacked his empty cup down on the kitchen table with some force. "Are you having second thoughts now? Because if you're not, you should be." There was anger and challenge in those words. He couldn't have made his unhappiness with the whole situation more obvious.

George sat down in the chair opposite John. "Let's talk about that. Because you have medical power of attorney, then you have to be content with this, and I'm hearing doubts. What's different this time,
John- apart from the fact that you can't be his Plan A?"

John looked out the window over the kitchen sink; he was gathering his thoughts, and George let him. He needed John on side with this.

Without looking at either of them in the room, John started speaking quietly. "Two years ago, Sherlock faked his death. You have no idea what it felt like to think that he'd committed suicide, and that I wasn't able to see it, to anticipate it, to stop him. I spent two years in agony over my failure to keep him alive only to discover that it was all… just a fake."

His voice cracking with emotion, John continued, "But now- in that gym treatment room I watched him try to kill himself -for real, this time. And he said it was because of me. I might have excused that as a result of the drugs and the fever, but the second time, in the hospital, he said I was dead, that he'd deleted me."

His eyes looked haunted as he broke off and drew a breath before he could resume. "I can't go through this again. I can't lose him. This time it will be worse, because I will know for sure that I am somehow responsible for this. So, just so you know, there are two lives at stake here."

"I know." George said it quietly, and gave it a moment to sink in.

Then he continued, "In fact, there are three lives, because if something happens to you, Mary's future is at stake, too. I'm not offering to do this because it's going to be easy- not for me, not for anyone. All three of you are going to have to trust me. Doctor Cohen wants to trust me, but that's not enough. Mary will trust me, if you do. Sherlock will never trust me, if you don't. So, it's down to you. What's it going to be, John? Do I have your permission to proceed?"

His use of the military term was a conscious choice. Into battle. But he needed to know that he had John's support behind him; he wouldn't be able to do this on his own. George held his breath and waited.

Finally, John looked up from wooden table and met his eyes, "Yes. You have my permission." If there was just a hint of desperation in his words, George choose not to comment on it.
Time is relative.

For Sherlock, the next eighteen hours passed without him being aware of it. But, for the rest of the people who cared about that fact, those hours were jam-packed with activity. At the hospital, a medical team of unknown origin arrived without fanfare to see to the sedated patient. Alex Arthur watched in the corridor to keep out any proper hospital staff while a small incision was made, and a tiny tracking device inserted. The sedation levels were increased, to keep the patient unconscious until he could be moved. The room was kept in darkness, and no visitors allowed.

Meanwhile, most of those who might have visited if they had not been not otherwise engaged got to work. Of the five, the DI went back to new Scotland Yard. The Cunningham investigation was coming to a head, with new information being provided by João Morrison, now wide awake and passing information to Sally Donovan. Because of the temporary tracheostomy, he wouldn't be able to talk for another couple of weeks yet, but there was nothing wrong with his fingers as they tapped out on a tablet's keyboard the details that were needed to close this case- and a whole series of earlier frauds, too. Lestrade was co-ordinating a series of arrests with the Serious Fraud Office and various overseas law enforcement agencies, but he promised to keep George Hayter informed.

He'd explained it to Hayter while driving from the Diogenes Club to drop him off at Victoria Station. "Don't worry- Mycroft is going to agree to Plan C. So, you need to start thinking ahead. When Sherlock starts paying attention again, he'll want to know how right he was about the case. This one is big- even bigger than the Tilbury business, at least in terms of pounds and pence. Despite the fact that he's been firing on half the cylinders he should be, he's just broken about the biggest scam in the world shipping industry for the past decade."

George had no idea when or if Sherlock Holmes would start caring about what Lestrade kept calling "The Work"- in a tone that capitalised the first letter of both words and made it sound rather important.

As they turned off the Mall left onto the roundabout in front of Buckingham Palace, George raised the subject that he'd been meaning to ask. "Watson's blog- the cases on it are…well, not to put too fine a point on it…they're interesting but rather quirky. More peculiar puzzles than threats to public security. When did Sherlock go up-market?"

For some reason, that tickled Lestrade. "Don't let him hear you. An interesting case is not defined by how much money is involved or the greatest good for the greatest number of people. 'Boring' was his usual reaction to that idea, rapidly followed by something along the lines of "that's what the British Government pays Mycroft to do. Too tedious.' " He put the sort of distain into that last word that George could imagine coming from the man whose posh accent had still been there despite its owner being delirious with fever and high on cocaine at the Shootfighters Gym.

They passed the Queen's Gallery and then got stopped at the traffic lights where Buckingham Palace Road crossed Victoria Street. George used the time to ask one more question while he had the DI as a captive audience. "So, the underground Guy Fawkes, Tilbury and now this shipping scam- all big ticket stuff. Why now?"

Lestrade shrugged. "Don't know for sure. It's…well, it's almost like he's trying to prove something; that he can do these big jobs, all on his own. He sent John packing and he's pissed off just about everyone at the Yard, too." As the lights turned green, he slipped the car into gear. "But, I do know one thing. He's not getting his kicks out of it. Not at all. It used to sort of worry me how much
he enjoyed solving the weird murder that no one else could. Now it's as if he's had to up the dosage, and it's still not getting him the high he wants."

George filed that away in his mind as he got out at the side entrance of the station, said goodbye to the DI and joined the hordes on the concourse, looking for the platform to find the next train back to Reigate.

An hour later and forty five miles south and a tad to the west of where Sherlock was asleep, George's Reigate 123 taxi from the station turned into the driveway between Hartswood Manor and the farm. As he fumbled for his wallet, George heard his mobile phone ring. Standing in the doorway, inserting the key with one hand, he thumbed on the phone.

3.17pm Plan C is go. He arrives 9 am.

While Esther Cohen had been sure that Mycroft would agree, it was still reassuring to know that she'd been right. Then he found himself thinking about the fact that the text had come from a man to whom he had not given his mobile number. When he checked, there was no number identified as having sent the text, which made George wonder how that was possible. He was used to the more usual "caller ID withheld", but this message denied having been sent by a phone. When he managed to put his keys down on the hall table, he looked back at his phone to re-read the text, but he found that it was gone- some sort of auto-delete function. That made him smile. Who's showing off then?

His friend at Six had been cagey when he had asked him what he knew about Mycroft Holmes. The man was a veteran officer, well versed in the Balkan arena where Hayter had worked.

"I used to think this guy didn't exist- was just used as a bogey man to frighten us into doing things our superiors wanted us to do. Then I met him in October on a certain project that has to remain nameless, and discovered that, if anything, his reputation understates the reality. Be careful, George- Mycroft Holmes is way out of your league."

Always did like a challenge. He had a feeling that he would need to remind himself of that over the next couple of weeks.

He was still pondering that fact when three unmarked white vans turned into the back driveway – the one shared by his house and the middle house. When George realised they weren't coming to see him, he used the communicating door from his home into the middle house, where a number of men who did not introduce themselves were already inside, despite not having a key, and that they seemed to know their way around the place, as if they'd had seen a floorplan. He filed that away for future thought, as well. George was intrigued to discover just how much had changed in the technology since he had last been in the field; everything was smaller, much harder to detect, and infinitely more powerful. His friend in MI6 had been right when he'd said, "You wouldn't recognise it now; tech is more important than weaponry on this battlefield."

That they were being supervised by someone he did recognise- Ashley Lewis- gave him some comfort while he watched them place various surveillance devices at various places.

"Your knife wound- healing nicely?" George was actually pleased that Lewis was one of the two who would be staying behind. Having seen what Sherlock was capable of in his darkest moments was important.

Lewis didn't even glance at his arm. "Yes, just enough of a reminder now to make sure I don't underestimate him again."

George tucked that comment away, too.
"Mister Hayter, the master bedroom on the middle floor will be the patient's room?" Ashley gave it the slight inflection of a question for the sake of politeness- George knew it was the most easily defended room, and it was the only one of the four that was ensuite, which would be needed to keep the patient segregated, if necessary.

So, he nodded and then gestured down the hall to the next bedroom. "The twin-bed room will suit the nursing staff. There's another bedroom across the hall- that will be for visitors; they'll share the bathroom with the nurses. My guess is that you two boys will be using the loft suite upstairs under the roof. It's got the space for the equipment."

But, despite his curiosity, George had better things to do than spend the time watching other people work. His first immediate task was to get the third part of the house, the one that John and Mary had visited while masquerading as buyers, quietly taken off the market and the photos removed from the local estate agent's window. After he made the call, he checked online, and discovered that all traces of Hartswood Manor being for sale had already vanished from the internet. So, no more speculative buyers. He didn't mind; he'd become choosy- too many overseas buyers looking for an investment in which to launder their dirty money. He'd been thinking of taking it off the market anyway. John and Mary had been the couple viewing the property that he had most taken to- it was different when you were choosing your own neighbours.

That made him think of Mary Morstan, who was still in London, working on the recruitment of one of the two nurses that were needed. Before he'd left the Diogenes Club, she had tried to convince him to use her as the general nurse. George didn't doubt her competence and her skills, but he explained "You are indelibly linked in his mind with John. We have to find people he doesn't know." He'd dealt with her disappointment by getting her involved. "Can you help recruit someone to deal with the physical healing? You know his injuries and you know him, so I trust your decision. When you have an idea, send the details to Mycroft so he can vet the person."

Then he turned his attention to the psychiatric nurse. That was easier for George, at least in theory because he had the ideal candidate in mind. A quick scroll through his phone contact list found the number.

She answered on the third ring. "Hello? Ingrid speaking." The faintest Scandinavian accent was like a carpet underlay, not visible but just enough softening of the English to be noticeable. He'd known Ingrid Dowler for five years; she'd been a volunteer at the Tyrwhitt Centre almost as long as he had. Over the past seven years, Ingrid had worked as a part-time Community Psychiatric nurse with occasional stints at Margaret Laurie House, the NHS psychiatric rehabilitation centre in Reigate. She'd helped George on occasion with some of the veterans with head injuries over the years, and had proved invaluable as a phone PTSD counsellor. She'd done many nights alongside of him. Nights were the hardest part; PTSD was cruel, it struck when people were at their most vulnerable.

"Hello, Ingrid. How are you? Did Sam get away alright?"

There was a sigh. "Yes. It's been a week, and I'm still moping around the house. It's ridiculous, I know. But I miss him so much. You'd think I would be used to it by now."

"Ingrid, I have a special favour to ask. I am about to take on a private patient- someone who needs psychiatric nursing, but can't handle a rehabilitation centre. Outpatient treatment isn't possible. PTSD is suspected, but I can't be sure, not until I've had a chance to get his physical injuries under control, and to get him detoxed. I'm doing this all at home, at the manor. It's a very special case, and it would require you to be living on site for at least a couple of weeks. Would you be willing to help?"

"Wow- that's..um. Well, kind of spur of the moment." He heard the caution in her voice.
"Yes, I know. But he's had a psychotic episode and needs help now. There'll be another nurse, with expertise in trauma. Two things that might help you decide: I'm thinking of bringing in Diane Goodliffe as therapist, and I know you worked well with her last year. And if that isn't enough to entice you, then this might; he's a 38 year old on the Spectrum."

He heard an intake of breath. Ingrid's kid brother back in Oslo was autistic. "Oh."

George smiled. That "oh" was a commitment, if ever he'd heard one. He made a mental note to pass her name to Lewis, who would no doubt vet her properly.

"It won't be easy; he's probably going to be the toughest patient I've ever dealt with. So, I could really do with your help. I trust you."

"Of course, George. I can put off resuming work. Whatever you need."

"He's being transferred to Hartswood tomorrow morning at nine. Could you be here at eight?"

"Sure. You can count on me."

As he said goodbye and broke the connection, he knew it was true. He could count on her. One down, one to go. He phoned Mary Morstan's number.

"Hello George."

Just from the cheery tone in her voice, he figured she must have good news.

"Are your ears burning? I've just been singing your praises to your new nurse."

"Tell me more."

"Lidiya Koprila. She's a Czech national, but been all over the place- like me, a disaster junkie, working in camps in Africa, Haiti, the Philippines. I knew her well in Aceh in 2005, after the tsunami. She's tough as old boots, and seen it all."

"What's she doing back in the UK?"

That made Mary laugh. "Yeah, well, that's a bit like me, too. She came here for a little R&R and realised that maybe it was time to settle down. She's been working for the Wellington trauma unit, building up a deposit so she can go live in the country. She'll love the Manor."

"And you think she can cope with Sherlock?"

"Yeah- but even more important, I think he won't mind her. She has a sense of humour."

"How long will she be available?"

"She was getting itchy feet at the Wellington; hates routine. So, she jumped at the idea of a private patient. As long as you can match the wage, she'll be happy."

"Okay; that's fine. And it is good news. Could you ask her to get here later tonight? In fact, why not bring her down yourself? I've asked John and Esther to spend the night here too- need to have a patient conference, before he arrives tomorrow morning at nine."

That made George think. No one had talked about money. Despite the obvious amount of resource being committed to the surveillance, he'd better check with Mycroft.
"Mary, do you have Mycroft Holmes' telephone number?"

"Yes- I'll text it to you. You might get his PA, but she can get a message to him."

He thanked her and told her to text when she knew what train, he'd pick them up from the station. When her text came through, he saved it to memory, and then typed:

**4.19pm Team recruited. Names to be vetted w/Lewis. Is budget limited?**

The response text came quickly.

**4.21pm My brother's health is priceless. Do whatever is necessary.**

George listened to the sounds of activity in the house, and smiled. The supporting cast was getting in place. He just needed to learn his lines tonight, before the leading man arrived. *I'm looking forward to this.*
George dropped off John and Mary at the station just before the December dawn broke, and they joined the commuters cramming onto the 07.27 train. There was a smattering of Christmas shoppers, too- heading up to London, going early in the hope of beating the crowds on Oxford Street and Knightsbridge. The direct service to London Bridge was nearly full, so they had to sit apart; the only two empty seats were five rows away from each other. For the next forty seven minutes, John would be alone with his thoughts.

There were plenty of them- mostly relating to the fact that while he was heading north back to London, Sherlock was being driven south, sedated and unconscious in the back of an ambulance from The Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel. There was something so fundamentally wrong with that fact, it took every ounce of self-control not to get off at the next stop and take the southbound train.

As the train rattled out of the station heading east to Redbridge, John's gaze around the carriage showed him that half of the passengers were plugged into their phones, ipods and laptops. Commuters who weren't preparing for work distracted themselves or just caught a little more shut-eye before the train would deposit them in the world of work. John tried to shut his own eyes in the vain hope that sleep would come now in the way it hadn't last night.

John's insomnia came from being incandescent with rage on Sherlock's behalf. No matter what had happened in the intervening two years, John knew his friend at a gut-instinct, visceral level. Hartswood Manor was just another form of cage, a bit more free range perhaps, but a cage nonetheless. He's going to be livid. If the presence of Mycroft's minions wasn't enough of a reminder, Sherlock's unerring sense of surveillance would know that the place was wired up to the nines. There would be no privacy. The indignity of being micro-chipped like some pedigree dog, and then tracked by satellite? It beggared belief. Whatever Mycroft might have said in the treatment room about Sherlock's success at taking Moriarty's network down, he was now acting like his brother couldn't be trusted at all. It seemed so wrong to do this to a man who had worked the miracles he had over the past two years, all on his own.

And yet... John couldn't ignore the facts. By any reading of the Mental Health Act, Sherlock's behaviour over the past ten days made a section almost inevitable. What hurt almost as much was that when Sherlock was going through all of it, he had not once reached out to John, in fact, had pushed him away. He rehearsed every conversation they'd had- from the first night at the restaurant all the way to the gym floor when he'd known for certain that Sherlock was using drugs again. He kicked himself up one side and down the other for his own pig-headedness. His sense of wounded pride for having been left behind, his hurt at realising that Sherlock didn't need him at all when solving the biggest crime syndicate in the world. He'd been an idiot, and his anger kept Sherlock away, just when he should have been there.

No wonder he'd been deleted. That hurt more than John thought possible, but he knew that he was more than half to blame.

He'd tossed and turned most of the night trying to think of some other way to deal with his friend's breakdown. He had never felt quite so frustrated. Being cut out of the treatment process just burned a hole in his head and his heart. While Mary had slept peacefully beside him in the double bed that would soon be Sherlock's, he'd not been able to stop thinking, imagining what scenes would be
played out in this very room over the coming days and weeks.

He had plenty of material to draw from- memories of Sherlock angry, depressed, hurt- enraged that others were presuming to know what was best for him. Scenes of him being a prat- or worse- replayed in his head all night; someone was bound to poke their noses in too close for Sherlock's comfort- and would then have to deal with having it bitten off. Sherlock was an intensely private person, with a reticence born from years of being misunderstood, misdiagnosed, and mistreated at the hands of those who did not understand him. No wonder he'd developed a repertoire of anti-social behaviours behind which to hide. *Hayter hasn't a clue.*

He'd struggled with his feelings towards George Hayter. Until yesterday, he'd thought well of the man. His background and record made him worthy of respect, but there was more- John had actually liked him. And watching him stand up to Mycroft had been –well, he enjoyed replaying the look of surprise on Mycroft's face during the showdown at the Diogenes Club. But…

That wasn't the same as handing over the responsibility for Sherlock's recovery to him. No matter how much respect he might have for the record, he didn't really *know* Hayter. And that made him mistrustful, anxious. What risks were being taken here?

He kept thinking- no, hoping-and then feeling bad about the thought- that Sherlock would feel his absence. But as soon as he felt guilty about that, hard on the heels of that thought came another- would Sherlock see him not being there as yet another form of John's betrayal? Because looking at it from his friend's point-of-view, which he had not really thought of properly before now, John's behaviour could be seen as that. If you shared the solipsistic world view that Sherlock had, everything should have just returned to "normal", as if the whole two years had not happened. Like someone had hit the pause button, when he returned Sherlock probably thought that life would just carry on exactly as it had before St Barts' roof.

As John listened all night to the grandfather clock in the downstairs hall chiming the passing hours, he couldn't stop the relentless train of thought. He wasn't sure which was worse- the idea that Sherlock needed help that he wasn't being allowed to give, or the pain that whatever was going on in that head of his had made John into part of the problem, rather than the solution. It struck at the very heart of John's sense of his own self-worth and the basis of his relationship with Sherlock.

Alongside that was the fear that this state of affairs might be permanent. That somehow Sherlock would want nothing more to do with him- ever. That maybe his relationship with Mary had somehow become an insuperable barrier. That possibility made him feel wretched. *He loved* Mary. He wanted to marry her, raise a family, become the husband and father that he'd always wanted to be, but had never found the right partner until he met her.

But the thought that his happiness might cost him his friendship with Sherlock kept him tossing and turning. He had angry conversations in his head with Mycroft, with Sherlock, even with Mary. Round and around the thoughts whirled, making sleep impossible.

Even while the train's gentle movement rocked half the carriage's passengers to sleep, John's anger kept him wide-awake. After a quick cup of tea in the farmhouse before George drove them to the station, he had sent Mary back upstairs to have a last word with Lidiya. John used the moment alone with George to let some of his anger show.

"Just so you know…I think this whole set up is wrong. Lots of new faces and not one that's familiar…more than a bit not good for someone like Sherlock. Now that you've read the files, you'll know that he's able to run rings around anyone who thinks that therapy is the way out. He finds his own way back, if he thinks it's worth it. That's where the people who really care for him come in- not a whole load of strangers he has no reason to trust."
He then looked the RAMC veteran straight in the eye. "If I were you…"

"...but you're not." George didn't let him finish. "I appreciate what you have to say, John. I certainly understand more this morning than I did last night." He gestured upwards, towards the minions who were probably listening in to their conversation. "I didn't agree to this level of surveillance. Their physical presence should be enough. I know that the tracker will be horrible in concept, but it's actually less obtrusive in practice. He just might accept it, when he realises that it will give him freedom of movement and the opportunity to be alone. To make that work, I'm going to have to get rid of those cameras, and push the two boys into the background, so they aren't in his face. I know that's a battle that I will have to fight with Mycroft Holmes."

John nodded, but was clearly not placated.

As Mary started down the stairs towards the two men, George finished quickly "And you may be surprised but I agree with you about familiar faces, now that I've read the files. That's why I've asked Esther to stay here, to help me get him through detox, if nothing else."

George wanted Mary to hear this, so he waited for her to join them at the door. "Look, John, I'm not you. I'm not trying to be you, not trying to displace you, or even to be Sherlock's friend. But that doesn't mean I am going to give up on him as easily as some of the medical professionals who've had him in their care. I'm much more willing to try anything so long as I can get enough commitment from Sherlock to really work at this. So, he's going to have a real say in what happens here. Has anyone ever really given him that choice before?"

The fifteen minute drive into town had passed in an awkward silence. The night had been a long one, reading through the pile of medical files. George was a fast reader, but even so, he had only managed to hit the bottom file at well past four o'clock. Despite being fortified with strong coffee, he had been looking at the world through the gritty eyes of someone short on sleep. He could feel the unresolved issues and emotions of John Watson, sitting in the car beside him. But, applying the principles of triage, he had to save more of his energy for the patient who would soon be arriving, which meant less on being polite to John and Mary. As they approached the train station, George had known he probably looked as weary as he felt, but he had still mustered a smile for Mary, as he got her overnight bag out of the boot of the car.

He had handed over a card with his mobile number on it. "I'll be updating you regularly, I promise."

John's parting words had been uttered through clenched teeth; "I expect to be told everything. I'm still the patient's advocate, even if you think I have to keep my distance."

As the train left the station, George was already in the car and heading back to the Manor. There were things to be done. Driving out of the station, he had to turn left onto the one-way Holmesdale Road, and the name made him think yet again of the responsibility he had taken on. A lot of combatants. Either of the Holmes brothers would be challenging enough on their own, dealing with both would be even harder. But after this morning's conversation, he knew he would also have to figure John Watson into that battlefield.

He passed the town hall and headed along main road towards Bell Street. But, the fates were unkind. After passing the library, he watched ahead as a 773 bus pulled away from the kerb just as a car tried to overtake. There was a screech of brakes as an oncoming van heading in the opposite direction tried to avoid hitting the car now encroaching into its lane. It smacked the pavement, mounted it and crashed into a street lamp in front of the cinema, which crumpled on impact and then fell across both lanes, coming down onto the roof of the car directly in front of George.

He managed to hit his brakes in time and came to a stop. Luckily for him, the car behind him had
also left enough room- but it was rear-ended by someone behind them. In the space of thirty seconds, utter chaos erupted as cars travelling in both directions became jammed in the morning school and commuter traffic.

George was on the phone instantly- a 999 call first. Then a quick call to the Manor land-line to tell them he was going to be delayed. Then he was out of the car and on foot, trying to see if there were any casualties.

Fifteen minutes later, he was happy to hand over to the paramedic who had arrived on a motorbike. The centre of town was grid-locked, so the Redhill based ambulance service knew better than to even try to get a rig in here. Fortunately, the van driver's injuries looked worse than they were: some stitches would be needed and a broken nose that would need investigation. He'd banged his mouth and nose on the steering wheel.

Thirty five minutes later, the police managed to get the traffic moving again, and he turned the car south onto Bell Street. He wondered if the bottleneck might have delayed the transport of his illustrious patient. When he turned into the driveway between the Manor and the farm, there was no sign of an ambulance, despite it being half past nine.

Some instinct though took him into the front door of the middle house, rather than his own.

Esther Cohen was standing in the hall, and greeted him with a concerned smile. "Was anyone hurt?"

He shook his head. "Not badly- a broken nose, some cuts. I think he's going to have words with the company- vans should come with airbags. It wasn't even his fault."

He pocketed his car keys and looked up at the hall ceiling when he heard a floorboard creak. "Has anyone called to say how late our patient will be? The centre of town was totally blocked."

"He's here; already installed upstairs, still asleep."

His face must have betrayed his surprise. "No problem getting here? How's that possible?"

Esther gave him a gentle look. "If he can track Sherlock's movements by satellite, Mycroft Holmes will have people who can figure out how to avoid a traffic jam."

That made George snort. "I guess I am going to learn a lot about not underestimating people."

She nodded. "Yes, the pair of them are a lesson in humility. I've lost count of the number of times Sherlock has called me an idiot."

"And yet here you are."

"Of course; compared to Sherlock and Mycroft, I am an idiot. Everyone is. But, you know something, George? Even geniuses have problems that they can't solve, and they need people like you and me."

She turned away and he followed her into the living room. The two nurses were there, sitting on the sofa beside the fireplace; Lewis was standing, looking out the window. There was a person he didn't recognise beside him- a big boned, ginger-haired man with a stern look on his face, who nodded to George. "I'm Alex Arthur. I came with the patient, and will be in charge of his security here."

Before responding to that comment, George waited for Esther to sit down in the comfy chair that matched the sofa.
"Right. Ladies, gentlemen, this is how it's going to play. Now that I've read the patient's medical files and have a better understanding of the needs of someone who is both hypersensitive and living with Sensory Processing Disorder, I am altering the arrangements. I've decided that we need to give Sherlock more space, peace and quiet. So, Lewis and Arthur- change of plan. You two are moving next door- into the big house. I know you've hard-wired a lot of the surveillance stuff up into the loft room here- just change that to a wireless hub and pick it up next door. You have three bedrooms on the second floor over there to choose from. Furnishing is a little sparse on the top floor, but there are beds. Just think of it as an occupational hazard, and a damned sight better than most stakeouts. But, you'll have to get used to it. Neither of you is going to be positioned in this house on a regular basis, and not at all at the start."

It was Ashley who reacted first. "That's not what we've been ordered to do, sir."

George stood firm. "This is my house, Mister Lewis, as are the two houses on either side of this one. And whatever you've been told, you are here because I am willing to accept your presence."

Now Arthur got involved, crossing his arms and glowering. "This is not acceptable. We have our orders, and close protection means just that."

Hayter shook his head. "Close protection? A tracker is right next to his spine, and that's close enough. Ten feet and one wall will make no material difference to your protection duties- but it will make a huge difference to him. Tell Mycroft Holmes this arrangement is what I agree to, and that's that." He glanced at his watch. "You have no more than a half hour to make the move. You have to be out before he wakes up."

There was shocked silence from the two agents."

"Now." George put the command tone in the word, so that neither could mistake it. "Lewis. Mycroft Holmes would have given you discretion to manage the situation as best you can. This is one of those times when discretion is required. Get to work."

Despite the obvious reluctance of his colleague, Ashley Lewis drew breath, nodded and then left the living room. Alex Arthur was left standing, red-faced and rather awkward. George decided to take pity on him. Quietly, he said, "just do it; I will deal with Mycroft Holmes. Get on with it, before his brother wakes up."

As soon as the door shut behind the big man, George turned to the sofa. "Lidiya and Ingrid, you'll be sleeping next door, too- and whichever one of you isn't on duty, will be over there, too. The first floor bedrooms in the big house are properly furnished- I needed to make them look good for the prospective buyers when they viewed the property. The décor is a little faded- but the space should be welcome- and the kitchen is well equipped. I think you'll get on well enough."

Esther was nodding her approval. "I agree, George, the fewer new faces the better. And even old faces that remind him of unpleasant things shouldn't be here either, which means that I need to make myself scarce, too. I'll park myself in your cozy little sitting room next door. If you need me after he wakes up, then you can call me."

He looked down at his watch. "Ingrid, I'd like you and Lidiya to get him out of the hospital gown and into his own pyjamas while he is still asleep. Once the boys are next door, remove the IV fluids; stop the sedation. I want him to wake up naturally, alone."

Thirty minutes later, the house was quiet- the creaking of old floor boards, the muffled voices, the scents of the staff were no longer in evidence. George looked in on the sleeping patient. The hospital paraphernalia was gone. Sherlock was breathing comfortably, and had turned onto his side in the
double bed- a natural position for someone in the middle of a normal sleep cycle. He pushed the door to the bathroom ajar, and then left the door from the bedroom onto the hall landing open. George then went downstairs into the kitchen at the back of the house, switched on the CD player to a low volume, and settled down with his book. As the soft, sad sounds of Bach’s cello suites kept him company, he waited for Sherlock to wake up.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: For those of you who wanted a grand finale, a "kiss and make up" scene between John and Sherlock or a "happy ever after" ending- sorry. For those of you who are familiar with my work, the consolation is that by now you know that I rarely end one story without having another already on the go. Next up is "Magpie: One for Sorrow", which covers what happens next at Hartswood Manor. I promise that you will find out what happened in China, and how Sherlock recovers, and how the newly introduced OCs- Lidiya, Ingrid and Diane work with George Hayter to help Sherlock find his way back. In the process, we will see how the threesome of John, Mary and Sherlock in the So3 broadcast episode is formed.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!