A Christmas Carol

by TheSovereigntyofReality

Summary

Oh, not another bloody Christmas Carol fic!

Yes, another Christmas Carol fic, but this one's a bit different.
Manhattan, New York, 1947

Howard sighed and shrugged his jacket on. Another long day, and another painful meeting. Some of those board members really needed to loosen up. It was Christmas Eve, for crying out loud. Looked like it’d be a quiet day at home tomorrow though. The only way they’d been discouraged from pulling some men in for work was the fact that no workers would show up for religious reasons.

Well, Peg was working on some case with the SSR so they’d declined his invitation to drop by for a Christmas dinner. Thompson was still in hospital – hadn’t woken up – so they were running all over the place trying to work out who shot him. That was okay, though.

Howard pulled up in front of his gates and waited as Jarvis rushed out of the garage to open the gates for him. It looked like he’d just finished shovelling snow from the driveway for the billionth time. Howard pulled in and drove into his garage. Getting out, he glanced back at Jarvis. The butler had just finished closing the gates again and was heading back to the house. By now, he’d want to turn in.

That was fine with Howard.

Howard went for the door from the garage. As he reached for the handle, though, something strange happened. Movement made him lift his eyes. The door had circular patterns in the wood. One of them had appeared to shift and resemble an extremely familiar face.

‘…Ma?’

The visage seemed to smile and then it vanished. The wood was suddenly just a circular pattern again. Howard reached up and touched it. Normal wood. He must’ve been overtired. Howard shook it off and continued into the house. Heading upstairs, Howard decided he didn’t even have the energy to go down and tinker in his workshop.

Stepping into his bedroom, he shrugged off his jacket and plopped down in the armchair he had in the room. Sometimes he liked to sit up and tinker and the armchair was good for that. Right now, though, it was good for collapsing and falling asleep. The next thing he knew, a clock tolled. For a moment, he completely ignored it.

Wait…I don’t have any clocks that toll.

Howard’s eyes snapped open and he rolled to his feet. There was a distinct chill in the air. He grabbed his jacket and shrugged it on. What the hell was going on? Howard looked around the room. Apart from the fact that the clock seemed to have stopped, nothing was really out of place. His eyes were suddenly drawn to the bedroom door and he watched as…someone very familiar stepped through.
'Sorry about the chill,’ she said. ‘It’s a little side effect. Nothing to be done about it.’

‘Ma?’ Howard stumbled back. ‘But…y-you…’

‘I died in 1943,’ Ainsley Stark said, smiling lightly. ‘I know, dear.’ She walked over and sat in his armchair. ‘And, yes, we’re a bit too logically-minded for this to make any kind of sense. Yet, here we are.’

Howard shook his head, trying to make the elusive sense of this. ‘What the hell is going on?’

‘You haven’t worked it out?’ Ainsley cracked a smile. ‘It was your favourite Christmas story as a child.’

That pulled Howard up short. ‘A Christmas Carol?’

‘Precisely.’

‘But I’m not a bitter old miser!’ Howard knew that for sure. ‘Rich, sure, but I don’t keep my money to myself.’

Ainsley’s smile turned kind, like when he’d had trouble understanding something as a child. ‘Mr. Dickens’ basic theory was right, but he was mistaken with a few factors. For starters, this sort of thing isn’t done after a person has gone bad. It’s done when the process begins.’

‘Process begins?’ Howard asked, all kinds of worry beginning to churn in his gut.

‘The hope is that the process can stop you following the path you’re on,’ Ainsley said. She leaned forward and steepled her fingers. ‘It is generally done at Christmas because it’s in the dead of winter. And this is when the magnetic fields that make up the barrier between the living and dead worlds are weakest.’

Okay, magnetism. Scientific explanation. He could work with that. ‘Er…what about the past, present, and future thing?’

‘Projections,’ Ainsley said. ‘Lots and lots of projections. And a hell of a lot of energy funnelling. The first spirit shows you simple replays of the past; events that you may have overlooked or that have slipped to the back of your mind. The spirit for the present simply lifts your consciousness from your body, so the outside world only perceives you to be sleeping. I believe it’s otherwise called astral projection.’

‘And the future?’

‘The same principle an accurate seer uses: a combination of cause and effect, and the balance of probability. It shows you what your life is most likely to become if you continue as you are.’

Howard nodded. ‘So it is somewhat scientific?’

‘Somewhat, yes.’

‘And the spirits themselves?’

‘Another misconception on the part of Mr. Dickens,’ Ainsley smiled. ‘They are not three random spirits of Christmas past, present, and future. Why should such beings be interested in a single mortal man?’

Howard nodded his head in acquiescence.
No, these spirits are the souls of the most perceptive of your forebears. In this case, the Holmes brothers: my father, your grandfather, Sherrinford, Uncle Mycroft, and Uncle Sherlock.’

Howard sighed and dropped his hands into his head. ‘When the bell tolls one?’

‘No, actually,’ Ainsley said. ‘My father will come in here practically as soon as I leave.’ She stood up.

Howard heaved a sigh. ‘Is it true?’

‘Is what true?’

Did HYDRA really poison you?’ He remembered when that British doctor, apparently sent by his cousin in England, had knocked on his door and told him that he’d found arsenic in his mother’s stomach. He hadn’t wanted to believe it, but it couldn’t be denied that she had died damn young considering that nearly all of her forebears had hit at least 90. She’d been 65.

‘It is,’ Ainsley said. ‘Just don’t ask me how they got it into the food. Tomorrow morning, contact our relatives in England. You’ll see what I mean.’ That said, she turned and walked out of the room.

Howard let out a deep breath. He walked over as the room temperature returned to normal, and sat on his armchair. He flicked on the lamp and lifted a hand to his neck. If nothing else, his own pulse would tell him whether he was asleep or awake.

75. I’m awake. Which meant his mother’s…ghost had just been in here.

The temperature dropped again.

Howard looked around. ‘I suppose you’re my grandfather?’

‘Correct.’ A man’s voice spoke in the same British accent that his mother had spoken with. Howard watched as a man in a waistcoat and black suede shoes stepped out of the fireplace. He had trimmed whiskers running down the side of his face. Howard squinted. Sherrinford Holmes chuckled. ‘The law of primogeniture.’

Okay. That explained why this clearly rich man could be his grandfather when he’d grown up dirt poor. ‘And…why didn’t you marry ma to money, then?’ Because that was what rich people did with their daughters back then – they married them into the same social class.

‘Excellent question,’ Sherrinford said, folding his arms behind his back. ‘Here is the excellent answer: upper class men did not appreciate having wives that were more intelligent than them. In fact, they had a tendency to beat their wives if they were too clever. Coming from this family, would you expect anything less?’

‘No.’ In fact, his ma would’ve been far too clever.

‘Of course not. It was far more preferable to marry her to somebody who was perhaps of a lower social class, but who would not mistreat her. The same was true for her sister, your Aunt Avalon.’

‘Right. Thanks for clearing that up.’ Howard stood up. ‘I suppose we’re going somewhere?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’ Sherrinford clapped.

Chapter End Notes
This is actually a Christmas present for my readers. By the time I finish uploading this story, it will be Christmas Day. I always wanted to do a Howard Stark Christmas Carol, but it's been done before so I thought "how can I make it different?"

I hope you enjoy it.

The final chapter will be post on Christmas Day (Aussie time).
The Past

Chapter Summary

Howard's grandfather takes him on a trip through the past. Both his own, and to see some things he missed about a certain Captain.

They suddenly stood in a small shack. Howard looked around. There were crates of fruit stacked up in a corner. A kettle whistled on the stove and his ma walked in. The half-rotted floorboard creaked under her feet. She lifted the blackened kettle off the stove with an improvised mitt and then opened the fire-operated oven. With the same improvised mitt, she pulled a fresh loaf of bread out of the oven.

‘This was where I lived as a kid,’ Howard murmured.

‘Yes,’ Sherrinford said. ‘Quite a cold place, as well. It’s why you never get sick now, isn’t it? Your immune system went through hell as a child.’

That was true, Howard mused as he watched his ma look out the window and then pull down a handmade mug. She started making a cup of tea as the door opened and Howard watched his younger self walk in wearing a coat miles too long and wiping his runny nose on his sleeve.

‘Howard, use a rag,’ his ma said.

‘I believe you were eight years old at this point,’ Sherrinford remarked. ‘You’d been working for a few months and winter was just starting. You remember what you were doing?’

‘I was a newspaper delivery boy. Get up at 4 every morning, be at work by 4:30. Have all the papers delivered by 6. Cash in hand at the end of the Saturday shift.’

Sherrinford nodded thoughtfully. ‘Pretty good job, considering what other kids in the neighbourhood had to do. Do you remember how you got the job?’

‘Ma got it for me. I got home from school one day and she told me she’d gotten me a job.’

‘And unlike other boys and girls, you still went to school.’ Sherrinford cracked a grin. ‘It seems our propensity for neglecting sleep when we’re working came in handy for you.’

Howard chuckled. ‘So, what is this part? A reflection on my childhood?’

‘In a way,’ Sherrinford said as they watched Ainsley walk over and hand Howard the mug of tea. Howard remembered. Tea had been the only hot drink available at the time. He hadn’t yet tasted the marvel that was coffee, so tea had been as good as it got in those days. ‘It’s supposed to show you this period from an outsider’s perspective. I mean, look.’ He waved a hand in the direction of Howard’s younger self and his mother.

Ainsley was currently cutting up the bread. She turned her head. ‘Reg! Breakfast!’

The door to the master bedroom creaked and a dark-haired man walked out, a box tucked under his arm. ‘Get all the papers delivered, boy?’ Reginar Stark spoke in a faint German accent. Most of it
he’d trained out of himself, Howard remembered – enough that people couldn’t pinpoint his birth nation by his voice alone.

‘Yes, pa.’

‘Good.’ He walked over to the small, cobbled-together table and handed Howard the box. ‘You’re to wear these on your rounds through the winter.’

‘I remember this,’ Howard said as he watched his younger self accept the box from his father and open it. ‘It was my first pair of snow boots.’

‘And now you know how much snow boots cost,’ Sherrinford said.

Howard nodded. ‘They must’ve put together every cent they could spare to be able to afford them.’ He frowned, thoughtful. ‘I guess I never thought about that before.’

‘And that’s the whole point of this exercise,’ Sherrinford said. ‘To show you what you didn’t consider at the time.’ Sherrinford clapped again.

This time, they were in a tram car. Howard turned his head. He could see his younger self sitting in one of the seats, holding a familiar device. He was older now – about 16, if his memory served. His father, greying around the hairline, sat next to him. Howard knew when this was.

‘That was my first patent.’

‘Yes, your father took you to the patent office,’ Sherrinford said. ‘He had to dodge a couple of bullets there too, didn’t he? Do you remember what they were?’

Suddenly Howard did. He’d been so excited that day, he’d barely noticed. ‘The patent officer wanted to know what region his accent was from.’

Sherrinford nodded. ‘And your father was a clever man, but he wasn’t a genius. He wasn’t like us. He couldn’t come up with something off the top of his head, which would befuddle the other man to the point that he’d forget to consider that Reg might be dodging the question.’

‘I still got the patent though.’

‘Which means he still dodged the bullet.’ Sherrinford nodded.

It’d never really occurred to Howard before. His parents had done more for him that he’d really acknowledged. Hell, he couldn’t have gotten off the ground and out of that place if it wasn’t for them! ‘Pa died when we were still poor…’

‘Cholera, I believe.’ Sherrinford mused quietly. ‘That must’ve hurt.’

Howard nodded his head.

‘Do you know why your father was never called in for the Great War?’

‘No.’

‘Because, quite frankly, Germany didn’t know where the hell he was. Others were not so lucky.’ He clapped. They were suddenly in a street. Unlike the other two places, this was quite unfamiliar to Howard.

Howard looked around. ‘Where are we?’
‘Brooklyn.’

‘Brooklyn?’ Howard looked at him curiously. ‘Steve?’

‘Yeah.’ Sherrinford headed off and Howard hurried to catch up with him. ‘There are a few important details about him that you would benefit from knowing.’

‘Like what?’ Howard asked. ‘I mean I knew Steve…’

‘For about 18 months, in the middle of a war.’

‘Well…yeah. But he was a good man.’

‘Was he?’ Sherrinford took Howard’s arm and pulled him through a wall, right into a movie theatre. There were a crowd of people waiting for a film to start. Sherrinford pulled him through the theatre until they came to a familiar weedy figure.

‘This is before the war?’ Howard asked.

‘No, 1943.’ Sherrinford leaned on the back of Steve’s chair. ‘Now, watch what happens when the promotional material for the war comes on.’

Howard looked at him curiously. Then he turned back to the screen. It didn’t take long for the propaganda to appear. Almost immediately, someone in the theatre yelled up at the staff to skip it and play the movie. Howard looked over curiously. ‘Conscientious objector?’ Nothing new. Happened all the time.

‘Yeah.’

Suddenly Steve darted out of his seat and headed at the man who’d yelled out with a set in his jaw. Sherrinford gestured. ‘And Steve clearly unconscientiously objects to conscientious objectors.’

Howard tried to make sense of what he was looking at across the theatre. It looked like Steve had just attacked the guy. ‘Did he just charge at someone who had a different opinion from him?’

‘Not just charged.’ Sherrinford clapped again.

They were suddenly in an alleyway. Steve was clearly seen trying to fight the other guy who, from the look on his face, clearly thought this was ridiculous. He didn’t say anything, though, he just punched Steve into a collection of bins. Steve hit them like a stone but, wheezing, managed to grab a trashcan lid and held it up like a shield as he staggered to his feet.

‘I could do this all day,’ he bragged.

‘Really?’ Howard cocked his eyebrow as the other guy promptly punched the trashcan lid into Steve’s face. ‘He picked a fight with a guy, that he clearly had no chance of beating, over a difference of opinion?’

‘Still sure he was a good man?’ Sherrinford asked.

Howard frowned as Bucky walked into the alleyway. The look on his face – exasperation? – was like this had happened before. He certainly knew where to go and then make quick work of the other guy. As Steve muttered about being able to handle it himself, Howard twisted his lips in thought.

‘But he went out to save the 107th.’
'Did he indeed?' Sherrinford inclined his head. 'Can you remember specifically what he said on the matter?'

Howard thought back…and froze. ‘Bucky. He was only worried about Bucky.’

‘Precisely. The other men were fortunate only in the circumstance that they happened to have been captured in the same regiment. They were in the right place at the right time to get rescued.’

Howard shook his head. There had to be something. Those hadn’t been the actions of a good man – and it’d only been in 1943. Those had been the actions of an egotistical braggart who hated any opinions that differed from his own. ‘Erksine said he was a good man. That was why he picked him.’

‘And how long did Erksine know him for?’ Sherrinford asked.

Howard froze. He didn’t know.

‘Would you like me to show you?’ Without waiting for an answer, Sherrinford clapped.

Howard found himself standing in the middle of his 1943 Stark expo. Sherrinford pointed in one direction and Howard looked as his grandfather spoke. ‘There’s Rogers trying to fraudulently enlist for the fifth time.’ He pointed in another direction. ‘And there’s Erksine.’

Howard looked over. Sure enough, there was Erksine studying Steve intently. No way. ‘Please don’t tell me this was the first time he’d ever met him.’

‘As you wish.’

It was. Erksine had seen Steve once, trying to fraudulently enlist into the army, and he’d decided he was his man. He knew nothing about him, had no background on him, and had decided this kid, trying to do something illegal, had to be the One Good Man he was looking for. There were no words. A dull ache took up residence across Howard’s forehead. He lifted a hand. ‘I think I’m getting a headache.’

‘That’s your brain trying to comprehend the level of stupidity required for his choice of supersoldier.’ He clasped his shoulder. ‘Well, that’s the end of that.’

‘You mean it’s over?’

‘It is.’ Sherrinford clapped again and they were suddenly back in Howard’s room.

Howard collapsed back in his armchair. ‘Grandfather, before you go, can I ask you something?’

‘Certainly, my boy.’ A top hat appeared in Sherrinford’s hand.

‘How did Rogers convince the military, me, and the entirety of the SSR that he was a good man when he’s really…?’ He waved his hand, looking for an adequate phrase.

‘A sanctimonious prat?’

‘That’s good, yes. A sanctimonious prat.’

‘Mainly because he believed it himself,’ Sherrinford said. ‘We all like to believe that we are good people. Those without the capacity for self-reflection often refuse to see the bad in themselves and see only the good. And how do we learn self-reflection? By the well-coined phrase: now go into the corner and think about what you did.’
‘And Rogers was never told that?’

‘He was never even punished for bad behaviour.’

‘By anyone?’ The idea seemed incomprehensible to Howard. If you didn’t get disciplined at home you got disciplined at school.

‘Remember, Rogers’ bones were as brittle as a tree branch infested with termites,’ Sherrinford said. ‘His mother was a nurse and a war widow, with a sickly son. His medical bills ate up most of the meagre pay she did get. Everyone in Brooklyn was conscious of that, and they feared that corporal punishment would have resulted in broken bones.’

‘So out of sympathy for his mother, he was never belted like the other kids.’ Hell! Howard had been terribly well-acquainted with the sting of a leather belt across his knuckles. And he’d had the good sense to know he deserved it. ‘And Steve didn’t have the self-reflection capacity to realise that he never got the belt because of his bones.’

‘Correct,’ Sherrinford said. ‘He believed he never got the belt because he never did anything wrong.’

‘That impossible.’

‘It is.’ Sherrinford flicked the top hat onto his head. ‘Well, I shall be off, Howard. My brother, Mycroft, will be along shortly to show you your present.’

‘Okay. Goodbye, grandfather.’

‘Goodbye.’ And he vanished through the fireplace.

The room temperature lifted again.
The Present

Chapter Summary

It's time for Uncle Mycroft to show Howard what people think of him in the here and now.

Howard’s headache had finally cleared when the room temperature dropped again. ‘Is this going to give me a headache too?’

‘Oh, no, no, no, dear boy,’ a proper English accent assured him. ‘There is no stupidity here. Merely unscrupulous behaviour and gullibility.’

Howard looked up. ‘Uncle Mycroft, I presume?’ This time the man was clean shaven, with neatly combed grey hair and wearing a travelling cloak. He kind of looked like a government official, to be honest. But where his brother had been slim, this man was heavy-set – even overweight.

‘Indeed I am, dear boy.’

‘Okay. Before we go anywhere, there’s something I’m concerned about.’

Mycroft smiled. ‘Your feeling that Project Rebirth was the one piece of good you brought into the world and he turned out to be just as liable to destruction as anything else you have built?’ Even though it was phrased as a question, it was clear he knew.

‘Yeah.’

‘Howard, you are 30 years old,’ Mycroft said. ‘Even as a clearly unfit man of this family, I lived to 91 years. You have at least 60 more years ahead of you to bring true goodness to this world. And, yes, one such opportunity was robbed of you, but there will be other opportunities. Just make sure your butler doesn’t get his hands on them.’

‘Jarvis?’ Now Howard was confused.

‘Yes. It was he who gave Miss Carter the blood sample. As I said, gullibility is a factor in this adventure.’

Howard cocked an eyebrow. ‘You lost me.’

Mycroft chuckled. ‘When Miss Carter told him about the blood, she did it in such a tone that implied it was incredibly indecent of you. Mr. Jarvis was sucked in by the tone to such an extent that he never considered she had no right to the blood and he never questioned how you came by it. He didn’t consider that only the spouse or family member could claim it from you. As she was neither, she had no right to it.’

Huh. ‘And Jarvis gave it to her?’

‘Indeed, and then she tipped it into a river. It’s gone.’ Mycroft leaned forward. ‘Do remind me, Howard. How did you come into possession of the blood?’
‘Erksine left me all the samples and data from Project Rebirth.’ As the only other scientist who Erksine trusted even remotely, Howard had apparently been the obvious choice.

Mycroft nodded. ‘So, in effect, they stole it from you.’

‘I guess I should list Jarvis in the “easily led” category,’ Howard remarked.

‘Quite.’ Mycroft turned and a curtain appeared directly in front of him.

‘So what’s the whole point of travelling through my present?’ Howard asked. ‘Aren’t I…kind of…already here?’

‘Very true,’ Mycroft said. ‘But you will find that all people will say one thing to your face, and another behind your back. When I say “behind your back” I mean what they say about you rather than to you. There is a greater capacity for understanding others’ perspectives of you if you know what they say when they do not believe you to be within earshot.’

Howard frowned. ‘I had noticed that in business partners but…everyone?’

‘Everyone.’ Mycroft pulled the curtain aside and they were suddenly in a small room with notes pinned all over the place.

Howard recognised the place from photographs, but he hadn’t been here. Instead, he saw Peggy and Sousa poking around. ‘This was from the Whitney Frost fiasco.’

‘Indeed it is.’ Mycroft locked eyes on Peggy. ‘While it has already happened, it is still very much a part of your present. It also gives the most direct statement from Miss Carter as to her opinion of you.’

‘So…she’s real crazy,’ Sousa remarked.

‘She’s a genius,’ Peg said.

‘Can you decipher it?’ Sousa asked.

‘I don’t speak megalomaniac.’ Peg reached into her purse. ‘Fortunately, Howard Stark does.’

‘What?!” It was out of Howard’s mouth before he could stop it as Peg handed Sousa a camera and told him to work quickly before moving to take pictures herself. ‘Did she just call me a megalomaniac?’

‘Is that how you understood it?’ Mycroft asked.

‘Megalomania is a state of mind that you can’t understand without being one,’ Howard said, watching as Peg and Sousa talked again. ‘If she thinks I speak it, then she thinks I am one.’ He paused and considered. ‘I know she always considered me ridiculous but…a megalomaniac, really? Isn’t that a bit strong?’

‘Do you believe she meant it?’ Mycroft asked.

‘I want to say no but…Can you replay it?’

Mycroft did so, and Howard watched more carefully. This time, he was certain. ‘She meant it.’ She had said it like she was just stating a fact. ‘She really thinks I’m a megalomaniac.’ He frowned. ‘So why does she keep coming back?’
‘Do you really need me to tell you?’ Mycroft asked.

Howard looked up at him. ‘…No.’

‘Good. Now I want you to vocalise it so it really sinks in.’

Howard nodded. This was familiar. It was something his ma used to do. When he discovered unpleasant facts or came to undesirable realisations she’d make him recite them aloud so that they really sunk in; to ensure he’d learned. She must’ve picked it up from her Uncle Mycroft. Howard wouldn’t knock it though. It worked. It made the idea sink in, and it made it easier to accept.

‘She comes around because she thinks I’m useful to her. She views me as a tool, just one with a mouth and a particularly large brain. She thinks I’m a megalomaniac, so she keeps trying to cut me down – that’s why there were all those scathing remarks.’ He scowled as a particular memory came back. ‘She’s treated me like a dog…’

Mycroft nodded. ‘And that was what spurned us into action. We could see it, but you needed a little help.’

Howard glanced up at him. ‘So, Peg…Who else?’

‘Strangely enough, not that many people. As you said, your business partners are quite openly two-faced so there’s no need to go over them. There is one other thing, however, that I should like to comment upon.’

‘And that is?’

Another curtain appeared in front of them. Mycroft pulled it aside. ‘This is earlier. 1946, actually. They were discussing your stolen weapons.’

They, it turned out, were Peggy and Jarvis.

‘He continues to believe,’ Jarvis was saying, ‘that no government – even our own – can be trusted with those particular inventions.’

‘And you were right,’ Mycroft said as they faded away. ‘Any government would kill to get their hands on such weapons. Wars would be waged to claim these weapons. If governments did not use them as a permanent threat over their enemies, they would use them to attack and exert control over their own people.’

Howard studied him. ‘You worked in the government.’

‘I did,’ Mycroft said. ‘I kept the secrets of the British government in my head. It made me quite invaluable to them in the Victorian age.’

‘As I imagine it would.’

‘It was also because of this position, I was able to warn your mother and father when the war begun to heat up.’

‘I always wondered about that.’ With a German father and a British mother, it had always struck Howard as odd that he was born an American citizen. Having an uncle to tell you that war was one international incident away would be very useful for distancing yourself from both countries, and the US would have looked like a good place. At the start, America was a neutral as Greece.
‘Well, now you know.’

‘So what was their problem with it?’ Howard asked.

‘Carter is a 26-year-old government field agent who has no idea how those in the upper echelons work – despite her own methods being disturbingly similar.’

Howard snorted in amusement.

‘Mr. Jarvis, as I said before, is extremely gullible. That, added onto the fact that this is a strange time. It is the first time in human history, wherein the rulers were not considered living deities on earth, when people have complete faith in their leaders. Even in the Victorian era, where the Queen’s word was gospel, everyone knew it was every man for himself and the government didn’t care about the masses.’

Howard knew where he was going with this. ‘And this generation has been taught that the government is only interested in the good of the people.’

‘And you learned from your mother that that’s not true,’ Mycroft said. ‘You had the rare advantage, though, of someone who actually knew what she was talking about. It will take a number of years for Mr. Jarvis to realise the method to the madness, but in the meantime he shall be extremely gullible.’

‘He enjoys helping Peg.’

‘Yes, but he’s terrible at it.’

Howard chuckled. That was true. The amount of times Jarvis had come back battered and dazed, and sometimes unconscious…Well, it didn’t need to be said.

‘I’ll be sending you back now,’ Mycroft told him. ‘The final Holmes brother will be with you momentarily.’

‘Thank you, Uncle Mycroft.’

‘You’re quite welcome.’

Howard started awake, lying on his own bed.

‘Back, are you?’
The Future

Chapter Summary

It's finally time for Howard to see where he'll end up if he continues on the course he's on...and it's not pretty.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Howard sat up and scooted to the edge of his bed. The final Holmes brother was sitting in his armchair. Somewhat different to his brothers, his clothes were wrinkled, frayed in some places and he wore old scuffed boots. His hair, while the same colour, was messy and he’d allowed scruff to grow out on his face. He twirled an out-of-place cane in his hand.

‘You must be Uncle Sherlock.’

‘That’s right.’

‘You’re here to show me the future?’

‘Why are you asking if you already know?’

‘Just checking.’ Howard stood up. ‘Can we get a move on?’

‘Certainly.’ Sherlock stood up and abruptly seized Howard’s arm. Howard suddenly felt himself hauled across the room and they passed right though the wall as if it was merely a projection rather than solid wood and plaster.

They came to a stop in front of a projector. The tape was playing and Howard looked at it, confused. He was moving across the screen, rehearsing a presentation for the Stark Expo. ‘What…?’

Sherlock lifted a finger to silence him. ‘Observe.’

Howard watched himself trying to get this presentation perfect, and then screw it up and curse, then try again. This went on, and Howard looked at himself. He looked haggard and the near-black of his hair had faded to medium brown. He had bags under his eyes and worry lines in his face. ‘This is if I keep going as I am? How old am I at this point?’

‘57.’

57? That would have made it 27 years from his present. And he was still running the Expo? Hell, with any luck he would have actually gotten out of weapons and have something decent to show. Uncle Mycroft had been right in that regard. He was still young. He had time.

Then, something caught Howard’s eye – or rather someone. Behind his older, on-screen counterpart, a small boy had wandered over to the Stark Expo display. The kid couldn’t be older than four. He had dark brown hair and was wearing a striped t-shirt. From the spark in the kid’s eyes, visible even on film, he was clearly intelligent. He leaned up, clearly going on tip-toe and looked over the model curiously.
All kids, Howard knew, explored by picking things up and trying to play with them. This one was no different. Little hands reached out and pulled on one of the structures on the model. It popped right off, so it was clearly designed to be assembled and disassembled easily.

Of course when it disconnected, it still would have made a noise.

His older counterpart turned around. ‘Tony!’ he barked, startling Howard himself. Since when did he bark at anyone? Least of all a 4-year-old. His older self turned and bellowed. ‘MARIA!’ He bent over the table and pointed at the boy. ‘Where did you get that? Put it back! Put it back where you found it!’

The boy pouted but he did as he was told – like he was used to getting yelled at.

‘Tony, what are you doing here?’ older-Howard grumbled as someone – clearly an SI employee came over and picked him up. Older-Howard waved his hand in a shooing motion. ‘Go on. Go, go, go.’

Howard froze as the film flickered of. ‘That’s me…?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m not like that!’

‘Yet.’

Howard looked over at him.

Sherlock stared straight ahead with a set in his jaw. ‘By this time, you’re so worn down, emotionally drained, and overworked that you can’t appreciate the fact that you are currently raising the child who will grow into one of the greatest minds of the 21st Century.’

Howard looked back, mind trying to wrap around it. ‘…So the kid is mine?’

‘You already knew that,’ Sherlock said. ‘Otherwise, what else would he be doing in the building? How would he have gotten into that room unless he was your own child?’

Which meant, logically, that the “Maria” he’d bellowed for was either Tony’s nanny or, far more terrifyingly, his mother. Howard pointedly kept his mind off of thoughts of whether or not his older self had been wearing the dreaded gold band on his left hand.

‘How can I be so worn down and emotionally drained that I don’t acknowledge my own kid?’ Howard demanded.

Sherlock gave him a somewhat bitter smile. He seized his arm again and Howard was dragged through another wall. This time, he was in a conference room of some kind. It wasn’t one of Howard’s. But the reasons became clear when the door opened and an older Peggy Carter walked in, leading an even older and even more worn-out looking Howard – all the colour had faded from his hair leaving it completely white. A group of others followed him.

‘We’ll need it done ASAP,’’ Peg was saying, tone brooking no argument. ‘Our men can’t afford to miss out.’

Howard sighed. ‘For God’s sake, Peg, I promised Tony I’d go to his MIT presentation. He—’

‘A little disappointment won’t kill him, Howard!’ Peg snapped. ‘This is far more important than a
16-year-old’s science fair. Whatever it is, he can show you when you get home.’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘Of course, he’d know precisely what was more important if you would stop being so stubborn and let—’

‘No.’ This time Howard cut her off. He glared across the table at her. ‘I know you see use in his abilities, but you know the deal, Peg. Stark Industries funds and supplies S.H.I.E.L.D., but if your guys step within ten feet of Tony, the deal’s off the table and you’ll have to do without me.’

Peg glowered at him.

‘I’ll be in the lab.’ Howard stormed out.

Howard turned to Sherlock.


‘As the SSR becomes more and more inapt, Carter decides to form it into a new spy agency under her command. You end up coming up with the name – Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division – and you pay for everything. The main difference is that nobody knows they exist and they frequently completely disregard the law because they follow Carter’s philosophy.’

‘Ends justify the means?’

‘Yes.’ Sherlock folded his arms. ‘They rely heavily on your money to support themselves, though Carter would also like to enlist your son for her own reasons. As you can see, you end up using her reliance on your money as the only bargaining chip you have to protect the boy.’

‘She wants to use a 16-year-old boy?’ Howard demanded.

‘Since he was 4 and built his first circuit board.’

The sting of his nails in his palm surprised Howard. This kid wasn’t born yet and he was already protective over him? Huh…must’ve been a base instinct. ‘That’s gotta be the worst thing Peg could ever do.’

‘Well, not quite.’

Howard looked over at him. ‘I’m almost afraid to ask.’

‘Hm.’ Sherlock tapped the cane against his palm before grabbing Howard’s arm and pulling him through the wall again. This time, they found themselves in a house that looked like it could belong to Howard. Through the doorway, Howard saw the back of a blonde woman as she played a tune on the piano and sang in a beautiful voice.

Then older Howard brushed past into the room.

The woman broke off from the song. ‘Wake up and say goodbye to your father, dear.’

‘Tony’s mother?’ Howard asked as he watched his older self lift a Santa cap and drop it again.

‘Indeed it is.’

Old-Howard straightened up and adjusted his suit jacket. ‘Who’s the homeless person on the couch?’

The teenaged boy wearing the cap rolled up onto his feet to face his father. ‘See, this is why I love
coming home for Christmas – right before you leave town.’

‘Be nice, dear,’ Tony’s mother said to Howard’s older self. ‘He’s been studying abroad.’

‘Really.’ Old-Howard yanked the cap off Tony’s head, leading the younger version to become startled. He looked back at Sherlock – whom Tony was now a splitting image of. ‘Which broad? What’s her name?’

Sherlock smirked. ‘At least you can be sure he’s yours.’

Howard chuckled and looked back as Tony answered.

‘Candice.’

…And Howard could hear all the remarks now. Chip off the old block. Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Like father, like son.

The older version of himself smirked. ‘Do us a favour. Try not to destroy the house before we get back on Monday.’

‘Oh, so it’s Monday?’ Tony wandered out of young-Howard’s line of sight. ‘I will plan my Christmas party accordingly.’

‘You know they say sarcasm is a metric for potential,’ old-Howard sniped, words dripping with sarcasm himself. ‘If that’s true, you’re gonna be a great man someday.’ He turned to the woman. ‘I’ll get the bags.’ He brushed back out.

‘Wow.’ Howard turned to Sherlock. ‘So I’ll turn into a real dick if I stick around Peg?’

‘In effect, yes.’ Sherlock rubbed his jaw. ‘And for the worst thing she’ll ever do to you, this is only one of three stops. The second stop is a couple of hours after this.’ He grabbed his arm again. This time Howard was prepared to be pulled through the wall. They landed on a road.

‘Where are we?’ Howard asked.

‘You don’t live in Long Island yet,’ Sherlock said. ‘But when you do, this road will become very familiar. It’s the most direct route between your home and the airport.’

BANG! BANG! SRRREEE-CRASH!

Howard jumped nearly a foot in the air and spun around. A car had crashed nose-first into a tree. He watched in mute horror as his older self pushed the door open and fell from the driver’s seat. Blood dripped down from a wound in his head. Fear began churning in Howard’s gut as he backed up. A motorbike pulled up at the back of the car.

‘My wife…’ The older version of Howard begged the new arrival. ‘Please help my wife…’

Howard was too horrified at what he was seeing to absorb what had just been said. But the motorcyclist simply got off the bike, strode over and grabbed Howard’s older self by a fistful of hair. As he did, his face came into the light emitted from the car and Howard could barely believe who he was looking at.

His older self blinked and looked up. Then he squinted.

‘Sergeant Barnes?’
A metal fist slammed into the older Howard’s face. The younger Howard jumped. The woman in the car screamed his name. The man who looked a hell of a lot like Bucky Barnes then dropped his metal arm and let go of the hair. The white-haired Howard Stark dropped to the ground. He didn’t move.

The attacker picked Howard’s body up and put him back in the driver’s seat. He rested the old man’s head against the steering wheel and then walked around the car. Howard watched, mouth dry, as the metal hand wrapped around the woman’s throat and began to strangle her.

Howard spun around and gasped for breath. What the hell had he just seen? It felt like he knew, but the answer just wouldn’t come to him. His breath wouldn’t come fast enough. ‘W-what was that?!’

‘You were just murdered,’ Sherlock said. ‘December 16, 1987. This is the night Tony Stark suddenly and unexpectedly became an orphan.’

‘…That looked like Bucky Barnes?’ As horrified as he was, questions and answers would help him focus.

‘It was,’ Sherlock said. ‘When he fell from that train, there was a river at the bottom of the cliff. I would be the last person to disparage how easily a river can save the life of a man falling from a cliff. HYDRA then found him and have held him ever since, torturing him and brainwashing him. By this point, he does not even know his own name, never mind who you are.’

‘And Peg ties into this?’

Sherlock took a grip on his arm and, this time, pulled him through a tree. He used the cane to point. ‘Observe.’

‘So they were actually murdered?’ a man asked.

‘I looked at the bodies myself,’ Peg said. ‘No one could mistake it.’

‘So, then explain to me why you went to their son and told him that his father was drunk behind the wheel?’

She what?

‘I have been promised an invaluable asset if I were to pass their deaths off as a mere accident,’ Carter said. ‘On top of that, if Tony were to know they’d been murdered, he would ask too many questions. Let’s be honest. Howard’s money is still keeping us ahead. We wouldn’t want to risk losing that when the boy inevitably had a temper tantrum.’

‘Hold on!’ Howard was not a violent man, often only attacking in self-defence, but he really wanted to punch Peg now. ‘Am I hearing this right? She covers up a double murder and lies to my son so she can keep access to my money?’

‘And attain access to international jurisdiction, yes,’ Sherlock said. ‘Before, she could only put her fingers in American pies, as I believe the saying goes. Now, she can go to any country she likes. But mostly for the money, yes. Without the Stark fortune, S.H.I.E.L.D. falls flat on its face.’

Howard raised an eyebrow. ‘Which means S.H.I.E.L.D. can’t get up to that position without the Stark fortune in the first place.’

‘Exactly.’
‘Hold on. That means they’d go after Tony when I’m dead, irregardless of what I’d say?’

‘Fortunately for him, he goes into a hedonistic womaniser lifestyle after that and they’re all completely fooled into thinking approaching him would be moot in point. Only his direct hypercompetent underlings are aware of just how he operates until 2008.’

‘What happens in 2008?’

‘One of your business partners – an Obadiah Stane – puts a hit on him when he goes to demonstrate a missile in Afghanistan. The insurgents he hires, though, end up kidnapping him instead. They want him to build the missile. Tony uses their arrogance and stupidity to his advantage and develops a power-suit to escape. Once he returns to the States he perfects it and becomes a superhero called Iron Man, due to the fact that the insurgents were armed to the teeth with your weapons which Stane had been selling under the table. Following this, S.H.I.E.L.D. starts making their move.’

Howard raised his eyebrows. ‘Thanks for the warning.’

‘You’re welcome.’ Sherlock twirled the cane. ‘Oh, and in 2012, Rogers is found and thawed out. Turns out the serum was good enough to keep him in prime condition despite the years on ice.’

‘Oh, God!’ Howard groaned.

‘“Oh, God” indeed.’ Sherlock grabbed his arm and dragged him into a new place. This time he was looking at an adult Tony and one Steve Rogers circling each other. Sure enough, this looked similar to the normal S.H.I.E.L.D. set up. Steve was towering over Tony and looking down his nose at him. Earlier the sight would have surprised Howard. Now it didn’t.

‘I’ve seen you’re type before,’ Steve said. ‘You’re not the type of guy to make the sacrifice play. The lay down on the wire and let the other guy crawl over you.’

‘I think I would just cut the wire,’ Tony stated.

Steve sneered. ‘Always a way out. Big man in a suit of armour. Take that away and what are you?’

‘Playboy, billionaire, genius, philanthropist,’ Tony shot off.

Steve looked around the room, condescending and smug in much the same way a bully was when he was trying to bully someone and had a gang of followers backing him up. He turned his focus back to Tony. ‘I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. You may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.’

‘What, like you?’ Howard was pleased to see his son refuse to be intimidated. ‘You’re a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle.’

And that was true.

Steve, of course, immediately tried to pick a fight. ‘Put on the suit. Let’s go a few rounds.’

‘If Tony built that thing to escape insurgents, where did this idea that he needs the armour come from?’ Howard asked.

‘Because there was such a focus on his vices – on the idea that because he was born rich you handed him everything – that people forget there’s more to him that that,’ Sherlock said. ‘And when he does go into battle, he’s fighting against artillery so he wears the suit.’
'Well, yeah. That makes sense. It’d be suicide to go against artillery without some kind of protection.’ Howard looked over. ‘Just so I’m clear, at this point Tony still thinks I was drunk driving?’

‘Yes.’ Sherlock pulled out a pocket watch. ‘For another 4 years at least.’

‘What happens in 4 years?’

Sherlock took his arm and pulled him through the wall again. They came into a cold bunker of a sort. It was Howard’s first view of the power-suit in question. It was red and gold and looked like it was made of gold titanium. Rogers and Barnes were there too. Tony’s eyes were glued to a screen of some sort. Howard looked questioningly at Sherlock.

‘HYDRA recorded your assassination for their own purposes. Rogers found Barnes and freed him from the brainwashing of HYDRA. And now Tony is watching you and his mother die on film.’

‘Damn…’ No one should ever have to watch their parents die. The look on Tony’s face was utterly unreadable. He likely couldn’t even make sense of his emotions himself.

Steve on the other hand was completely straight-faced, like this didn’t affect him. He did, however, glance between Tony and Bucky in worry. He already knew…

The film ended and Tony turned his eyes towards Bucky. Shit. Tony watched his parents die and the killer was standing a few feet away from him. Tony took a step towards him, anger becoming the dominant emotion on his face. Now would be a good time to hold him back.

Steve grabbed his arm. ‘It wasn’t him, Tony.’

Tony looked at Rogers. ‘Did you know?’ His voice was tight, with barely suppressed emotion.

‘I didn’t know it was him,’ Rogers insisted.

‘Don’t bullshit me, Rogers!’ Tony snapped, his rage breaking through. ‘Did you know?’

‘Yes.’ The only reason Rogers admitted it was because he was backed into a corner and he couldn’t lie about it.

‘How long?’ Howard asked as he watched his son stagger back a step and turn his head away, hurt and anger warring across his expression.

‘He’s known for two years at this point,’ Sherlock said. ‘He chose to keep it a secret because he didn’t want Barnes to be convicted on murder charges.’ He smirked bitterly. ‘At most, he would have gotten manslaughter.’ Sherlock considered the walking flag with an inclined head. ‘Rogers then proceeded to use Tony’s resources to search for Barnes and had full intention to then use Tony’s resources to support him as well.’

‘So in other words he lied to Tony and then exploited him?’

‘And Tony is realising that at this very moment.’

Suddenly Tony swung his arm and sent Rogers flying. Deserved that. Bucky spun his gun and aimed it at Tony. The helmet, using some kind of system that likely hadn’t been invented in the 40s, slid up and around his head as Tony turned on Bucky. A fight erupted that quickly moved out of this part of the bunker.
‘How does this end?’ Howard asked.

‘One baseline human in a super-suit against two super-humans,’ Sherlock said. ‘How do you think it ends? Let’s just say that Tony is lucky his real friends are so intelligent and efficient, or he’d have ended up in HYDRA’s hands too.’

‘This is a HYDRA base…’

Sherlock nodded. ‘And after beating him to a bloody pulp, Rogers just leaves him here. He’s lucky, in a way. Generally, we don’t have friends and, if we do,’ he lifted the cane, ‘we only have one. Tony has five. They don’t stop these events, but they do lessen the blow.’

Howard clenched his fists. ‘But I can stop all of this hell from happening to all of us?’

‘Yes.’ Sherlock smiled. ‘You need to do three things. First, re-establish contact with the rest of the family in England. Second, distance yourself from Carter. Third, clean out your company so that you may move onto more philanthropic ventures.’

Chapter End Notes

I know I put 1987 instead of 1991, but Tony is supposed to have been 17 when his parents died, so I went for 1987 instead because apparently whoever decided on 1991 (several people could be responsible for that) can't do maths.
Chapter Summary

It's time for Howard to make decisions for the good of himself, for a change, and for the good of his future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Howard’s Christmas Day had started with an international phone call at 5 in the morning. He’d never been so glad for the concept of “old money” before in his life. It allowed them to fax over the information his grandfather and uncle had spoken of. To say the least it was…disturbing.

Mind you, it’d been the most enjoyable conversation he’d ever had.

Howard was up having breakfast and reading through the files. He could see why they’d considered it important he reconnect with the family. His mother had just been the start. Her brother, Lambart Holmes, her sister, Avalon Goddard, and their first cousin, Leland Holmes, had been dead within the next three years. Hebe June. And then both of his Aunt Avalon’s children were gone within just this past year. Regina Ferrier and Alexander Goddard. Already, Howard was planning a little trip.

And, let’s be honest, it gave him a damn good reason to follow the second instruction.

‘Merry Christmas, Jarvis,’ Howard said as Jarvis finally came out. To be fair, Howard had been awake since 5am.

‘Merry Christmas, sir,’ Jarvis said. ‘New contract?’

‘No, actually,’ Howard said, remembering what two out of the three uncles had said. Gullible. Probably best to only give him the minimum information. ‘I got a recommendation to contact my mother’s British relatives and they ended up sending me this. I’m having a read-through.’

‘I see, sir.’

Howard spent most of the rest of the day on the horn. He was mostly talking to Hebe’s brother and sisters. Despite the severity of the situation, it was quite stimulating talking to someone of equal intelligence for a change. Dr. Wilkes was good, but he still couldn’t keep up with Howard.

By 3 in the afternoon, they’d made a decision.

That was also the time when one Peggy Carter came striding into his living room like she owned the place. ‘Well, I gotta go. I'll see you in a few days. Happy Christmas.’

‘Happy Christmas.’

Howard hung up.

‘Are you finished nattering on?’ Peg demanded as she strode over.
Hm. Had she always given him those kinds of greetings? Most likely. ‘And Merry Christmas to you too, Peg.’ Howard folded his arms. ‘What do you want?’

‘Don’t be rude, Howard.’ She chose to reprimand him. It was ironic considering how she’d entered the room.

‘Forgive me,’ Howard sniped sarcastically. ‘But I couldn’t help but notice every time you come here, when you’re not staying in the mansion, you want something. I’m beginning to think you consider me a useful tool for your little adventures.’

Peg huffed. ‘There’s a club I need to get into with a $2000 entrance fee.’

‘You want me to give you the $2000 to get in.’

‘They’re up to something,’ Peg stated. ‘I need to get in, plant microphones, get some names and find out who’s in charge.’

Howard cocked an eyebrow. ‘Why don’t you just break and enter like you normally do?’

Peg cocked an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed, but evidently chose to ignore his insinuations. ‘Because I need you to build me microphones they’d never see.’

‘So you want two grand and the mikes?’

‘Oh, stop complaining and just get on with it!’ Peg barked.

Howard met her hard gaze. She fully expected to get what she wanted. Well, to be fair he’d never said no before. And what was the result? He was a doormat. He’d mistakenly thought she was his friend, but he could still hear her words from the projections his uncles had shown him last night.

‘I don’t speak megalomaniac. Fortunately, Howard Stark does.’

‘This is far more important than a 16-year-old’s science fair.’

‘Howard’s money is still keeping us ahead.’

‘No.’

Peggy froze. ‘Excuse me?’ she demanded.

Jarvis looked startled.

‘It’s a little two-letter word that means negative. Under no circumstances, by no means, not at all, you may not – pick your definition but the effect is the same. You come in here demanding I give you $2000, which does not grow on trees, just because you know I have it, and build you a bunch of little microphones and you just expect me to do it? Sorry, Peg. The Howard Stark Gravy Train has made its last stop.’

Peg glared at him and strode forward. Howard caught the punch she aimed at him. For a moment, she stared at her fist, trapped in his hand. He may not have liked to fight, but Howard had grown up in the lower east end. He knew how to fight. Peg looked back at him, eyes narrowed.

‘I’ve got other things to worry about rather than your problems.’

‘Whatever you’re talking about can wait. This can’t.’
‘Yes, it can.’ Howard pushed her fist away and stepped back out of arm’s length. ‘It’d just be easier for you if I did. And since I’m a…what did you say? Megalomaniae?’

Peg’s eyes widened.

‘Yeah, that was it. Since I’m a megalomaniac, why should I care about making your life easier?’

He turned and walked out.

‘You’re proving it!’ Peg yelled after him.

‘Now I’m really not helping you!’ he called over his shoulder. ‘You know where the door is!’

***

Howard came to the top of the stairs.

He heaved a deep breath. Walking over to the window, he looked out. A few minutes and Peg was storming out of the house to the car she had waiting. She’d clearly expected to get what she wanted, as she always did. Howard half-wondered if he should have helped her.

He closed his eyes though. All he saw was that little boy in Uncle Sherlock’s visions, looking up at him with his own brown eyes. *You promised, daddy!* If he kept being Peg’s doormat, that was bound to happen. Howard would be damned if he let his own kid feel like an afterthought. Born yet or not.

‘I’m not sure you should have done that, sir.’

Howard opened his eyes and looked at Jarvis. ‘I am.’

‘Well, she did come to ask for your help,’ he said. ‘To—’

‘You call that asking?’ Howard raised an eyebrow. ‘She came in here with demands and then went to punch me when I said “no”.’ He remembered what his cousin had said and considered it might do Jarvis some good.

‘Oh, our servants have been with us for generations. They all have a very deep understanding of our eccentricities and by now they’ve long stopped questioning it. They still call us out for wrong-headedness but they don’t question it.’

Yes, it might do Jarvis some good to mingle with them.

‘So where’s my passport, Jarvis?’ Howard asked. ‘We’ve got to get to Staffordshire in the next few days.’

Jarvis looked surprised. ‘Might I ask why?’

‘Why not?’ Howard grinned.

Jarvis rolled his eyes and shook his head to himself.

‘Well, look on the bright side,’ Howard told him. ‘We’re visiting my cousins and they’re as barmy as I am. You can talk to their servants and bond over having eccentric genii as bosses.’

Jarvis seemed to consider that. ‘…It does sound therapeutic, sir.’
'Well, then, start packing,' Howard told him. ‘And see if Ana wants to come with us. She might enjoy it too.’

Jarvis smiled and moved off again.

Howard sighed and leaned back against the wall. Was he sorry he’d sent Peg off? No. She used him as a tool and looked down on him like he was a particularly useful hound. Not that he had anything against dogs, but he didn’t want to be treated like one. She was going to make his life, and the life of his as-yet unborn son, far more difficult than it had to be – with a little help from Rogers. She would cover up his murder to keep access to his money. Why should he feel bad for cutting her out of his life?

No. He felt lighter.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! I hope you enjoyed your present.

I am currently working on a few sequels to this, but I'm not sure how many.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!