The Grating Roar

by Engazed

Summary

In a London we almost recognise, Sherlock Holmes is a stroppy, solitary genius shirking his civic and moral duty to care for the unfortunate and dispossessed of New Britain. So what is it that possesses him to bring such a wretched, nameless creature with a dark, unspeakable past to Baker Street? Sherlock's life is about to be turned on its head, and all the world with it.
Mycroft Holmes seldom called his brother regarding personal matters. Their family simply wasn’t like that. Sentimental, that is. Personal matters were private matters, and therefore not to be shared, asked after, or remarked upon. Fortunately, one could categorise affairs of the family estate under *business*, which made the following interaction a tolerable one:

‘Barnaby has died.’

On the other end of the phone, he heard the sigh of a put-upon young man, and Mycroft knew what would follow: some extraneous question to demonstrate a degree of interest in the tragedy (there wasn’t any), a cliché platitude to showcase some feeling of remorse (entirely fabricated), and finally, an adequate but undemanding social response (well rehearsed). Sherlock knew how to play a role.

The extraneous question: ‘Was he ill?’

‘Pneumonia. Two weeks in hospice care. But the man was eighty-seven. At that age, it’s mostly about making them comfortable, isn’t it?’

Sherlock grunted.

The platitude: ‘A damn shame. He’ll be missed.’

Mycroft couldn’t stop himself from calling Sherlock out on this little bluff. ‘Brother mine, when was the last time you even saw Barnaby?’

‘Christmas,’ said Sherlock defensively.

‘Of what year?’

Sherlock ignored him, moving straight to the final checkbox.

‘I’ll arrange for the disposal of the corpse. And flowers.’

Of course, his tact could use a little work.

‘Cremation provisions are already well in hand,’ Mycroft said, sparing him. He was the magnanimous big brother, after all. ‘You needn’t lift a finger but to sign off on the paperwork. It’ll arrive by courier.’

‘Is that all then?’

‘All but the matter of Barnaby’s replacement.’

Again, the bedevilled sigh.

‘I know, I know, it’s so taxing on your time. But unfortunately, Sherlock, this is one civic duty you cannot shunt aside. We all must play our part.’

‘I was thinking of applying for exemption.’

Mycroft snorted. ‘Based on what’

‘Hazardous environment.’
The only plausible response was to scoff. ‘You live as a bachelor in a cosy two-bedroom flat in Central London—’

‘The upstairs is a laboratory, not a bedroom.’

‘—and enjoy the doting of an old housekeeper who feeds you up and serves you daily tea with biscuits. Hazardous environment indeed!’

‘She’s my landlady,’ he countered, as if that explained it. But he was bristling. ‘My work invites all sorts of unsavoury clientele to the flat, some highly dangerous, and there’s no telling when another explosion will rock the kitchen. I cannot be bothered hosting!’

‘Sherlock, if I cannot apply for exemption, as a prominent and dedicated servant of the British government, your tinkering in the kitchen sink and playing detective on weekends is hardly going to qualify.’ He paused, waiting for a reply. None came. ‘Don’t mope. I can hear you moping even from here.’

‘I’m not moping,’ Sherlock moped.

‘Once the expiry paperwork goes through, you’ll have thirty days to submit the registration for a new ward. You know the law. Failure to do so will result in a very hefty fine, and I’ll not loan you any more funds.’

‘I don’t need your funds.’

‘I would, however, be willing to assist in the purchase of the new ward. The good ones are getting pricier, and lord knows you can’t handle one of the bad ones.’

If the sound of rolling eyes could pass through a mobile phone, Mycroft Holmes would have claimed just then to have heard it. ‘I shan’t need to prove you wrong on that count,’ said Sherlock, ‘seeing as how my exemption will be approved before thirty days is out.’

‘So sure about that, are you?’

‘Are we done?’

‘For now. Happy Christmas, Sherlock.’

The line went dead, and Mycroft sighed out his exasperation. Just once he’d like to end a phone call to his little brother on a civil note. Well. No. That wasn’t entirely true. He did so enjoy the jabs.

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Within seconds of ending the call, Sherlock had put Mycroft and the matter of acquiring a new ward out of his head entirely. It was a problem for another day.

He pulled out his laptop and checked the inbox. Empty. Next, he went to his website, The Science of Deduction, to see whether anyone had commented on his last post regarding logical alphabets as a handy tool for novices of deductive reasoning. Nothing. What’s more, his hit counter was low, in the teens. He didn’t understand. He had taken special care to dumb it down so that even a simpleton could understand and successfully employ his methods. It was fascinating subject matter! Why was there not more traffic?

With a sigh, he turned to his phone.
I need a case.
Get me one.

He waited.

While he waited, he brewed himself a pot of tea, reorganised his bookshelves by publication date, and played half of Elgar’s Violin Concerto in B minor. He was just climbing a particularly challenging scale when his phone dinged on the coffee table. He abandoned the concerto and pounced on the phone.

Nothing on right now, I’m afraid.

He glared at the screen. Nothing? In all of London?

A cold case, then.

He wasn’t one for begging. Demanding on the other hand . . .

The phone rang.

‘You know, Sherlock,’ said Detective Inspector Lestrade, ‘I can’t just drop everything and go scrounging around to find you a distraction.’

‘If you have something to drop, you have something to give. What are you working on?’

‘Nothing that requires the refined observational skills of an outside consultant. All run of the mill. Open and shut. You’d be terribly bored.’

Sherlock was already terribly bored. Why else would he be calling? Idiot. ‘I’ll take it.’

‘You don’t even know what—’

‘I’ll take it. Bring me on. What is it? I’m getting my coat. Are you at the Yard or in the field?’

‘Jesus Christ, Sherlock, do I need to get you a packet of Marlboros for Christmas this year?’

‘Not my brand. And no, I’m nine months clean. It’s finally getting exciting, staying away.’

They said the first thirty days were the hardest. Not so. Every day since just became more and more challenging not to go crashing into a tobacco shop, throw a handful of banknotes at the cashier, and demand the lot. He needed a superior distraction.

On the other end of the line, Lestrade sighed mightily. ‘Ten minutes. I’ll pick you up.’

‘That’s more like it.’

It turned out to be fifteen. By the time Lestrade pulled to the kerb, Sherlock—awaiting him impatiently, tapping foot and all—was in a dour mood.

‘London’s criminal class needs to step up its game,’ he griped, fighting with the seatbelt Lestrade insisted on.

‘Well, aren’t you in a strop,’ Lestrade said amiably. ‘Maybe we coppers are just doing a damn fine job of maintaining order.’
Sherlock laughed, a jab at the effectiveness of those practising Lestrade’s chosen profession.

“What’s the matter?” Lestrade sparréd back. “Not enough traction on the old website?”

His laughter stopped.

They arrived at a flat in Southwark, just beside the railroad tracks, where a small convoy of police cars and an ambulance had drawn the attention of the neighbourhood. Before stepping out of the car, Sherlock refitted his gloves and scarf and pulled the collar of his coat up to his ears. It wasn’t just that he had an image to maintain in front of Lestrade’s people; it was also damn cold.

“What’ve we got?” Lestrade said by way of greeting, as they approached the police tape.

The other police officers eyed Sherlock with a modicum of resentment. He was used to this by now. He was good, and they knew he was good; they just didn’t like being bested at their own jobs.

A police sergeant on the scene began to list the details.

“The vic’s name is Lucy Harrison, aged twenty-three. Suspected cause of death is blunt-force head trauma from falling down these brick stairs here. You can see where the blood is pooled around her head.”

Sherlock did see. There was also blood on the edge of the bottommost step, along with strands of blond hair frozen to it. From the way the body lay, and if her skull had met with that final step, it appeared she had gone down head over heels and not slipped, which meant she had been pushed. Foul play, almost certainly.

“Who called it in?” asked Lestrade.

“Neighbour, just across the way there. We’ve got two boys interviewing her right now. Told 999 operators that she saw it happen. The girl was pushed.”

“Who pushed her?”

“Neighbour says it was the brother, Joseph Harrison. They’d been fighting, she says, and he pushed her, then fled. Left her cold on the ground.”

“Fled on foot?”

“Bike.”

“Any other witnesses?” Lestrade indicated the open front door. “Anyone else at home who can tell us what the argument was all about?”

The sergeant shook his head no. “Just the ward. They call him Westie. WSC has already removed him. Seems a pretty cut-and-dry case of domestic assault turned homicide, sir. Not sure what need we have of”—he gestured vaguely in Sherlock’s direction—“additional resources.”

Another officer, holding her com unit to her ear, came jogging up. “Just spotted him, boss. Right outside Bermondsey Station. Units are bringing him in.”

Lestrade turned to Sherlock and gave something of a shrug, half apologetic. “Well, that’s kind of it, then, isn’t it? We know the how, just picked up the who, and we’re about to learn the why. In a few hours, Mr Harrison will be the concern of the courts. I’m afraid there’s not much more to do here.”

Sherlock felt the bitter sting of disappointment. It was just so ordinary. Not even a proper murder,
just a sibling dispute turned violent. He could almost sympathise with that. But he couldn’t lose face, not in front of these coppers, who would just love to see him turn tail and slink away, having deduced nothing. He couldn’t even admit his disinterest to Lestrade, not with his pitying frown and there-there eyes.

‘I want to interrogate Harrison,’ he said.

Lestrade shook his head. ‘Not your job.’

‘Then I want to listen in.’

‘Jesus, Sherlock, you can’t possibly be interested in this anymore.’

‘Lestrade.’ God, he didn’t want to beg, and he was right on the cusp of begging. He finished pathetically, ‘You might miss something.’

Lestrade sighed. ‘You’re sure you don’t want to spend more time with the body?’ he asked, as if offering a treat to a petulant child.

‘She fell down the steps and cracked her skull,’ Sherlock said peevishly, walking back to the car. ‘Next.’

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Joe Harrison was a lanky, twitchy white man and bike courier. When he met Sherlock, he said sullenly (having just been arrested), ‘Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street? I have a delivery for you.’

‘It’s a small London after all,’ Sherlock said drily.

‘Start from the beginning, Mr Harrison,’ said Lestrade, leaning back into his chair and folding his arms. He had adopted a sudden tone of impatience, and Sherlock realised he wanted to play bad cop. He wasn’t terribly good at it. And in this situation, it wasn’t exactly called for. Joe Harrison was deeply ashamed, and deeply ashamed people didn’t play hard ball.

Still, they lied. In that seat, under the hot lamp of accusation for a terrible crime, everybody lied.

‘I just come home from a run,’ Harrison said, talking to his hands, which rested on the table top, joined together by silver bracelets. ‘And I seen Lucy and Westie together on the sofa.’ He sniffed angrily, and his hands balled into fists. ‘They was . . . they was . . .’

‘What, Mr Harrison?’

‘Westie was two-dij-up-mij, that’s what,’ he spat.

‘What?’ Lestrade and Sherlock asked together.

Harrison sighed and rolled his head. ‘You know.’ He stuck two fingers into the air and made a rude, plunging gesture.

‘Oh,’ the detectives said.

‘Yeah. That, and, and, and his mouth were all over her Bristols.’ His own mouth twisted into an ugly line. ‘If I shoulda stoved in anyone’s head, it woulda been his. He’s a cas, but that don’t stop wards like him. He was raping her, know what I’m saying? It was violation.’ He sniffed again and rubbed a shaky hand under his nose.
Sherlock lifted his chin a little, quirking an eyebrow. ‘Are you sure?’

Harrison froze in the act of rubbing, and his eyes went wide, scandalised. ‘Eh?’

‘Are you sure she wasn’t enjoying herself?’

‘You mother fucker, you prick!’ Harrison made an aborted movement, trying to get to his feet, but the restraints kept him in the chair.

‘Sherlock,’ Lestrade said as warning, the bad-cop routine dissolving. He’d forgotten who he was playing with.

‘I mean, was she struggling? Trying to get him to stop?’

‘Shut him up!’ Harrison cried. ‘Ain’t no way Lucy would fuck a ward!’

‘Of course not,’ said Sherlock smoothly, ‘because that would mean she raped him.’

That was the law, after all. A ward could not legally give consent, not to anyone, and certainly not to a host. Any host who elicited sex was abusing his or her power. But it happened. Sherlock had seen cases like these—they didn’t always end in murder—a hundred times before. There was an entire division devoted to host-ward sexual abuse cases at the Yard. But hosts almost never, ever admitted to coercion. What happened instead was a shift in blame. Suddenly, a ward with no history of violence or misbehaviour was a violent, sexual deviant. ‘She attacked my son,’ the sobbing host claimed, or ‘He came into my room. I was helpless.’ Ward detention centres were filled with such inexplicable deviants.

‘She weren’t no slag!’ Harrison protested.

‘Then the question, I guess,’ Sherlock continued, unperturbed by his outbursts, ‘is why she was the one who wound up dead, and not the ward. Your sister wasn’t fighting the ward, was she? She was fighting you.’

‘No.’

‘You walked in on her getting off with the ward—’

‘It weren’t like that.’

‘—and she screamed at you to get out—’

‘It were all his fault.’

‘—and then what did she say, Joe? That she was in love with him? Is that what really set you off?’

Harrison flinched.

‘Mr Harrison,’ said Lestrade, shooting Sherlock a look to tell him that he was about to take over, so don’t test him. It was the official detective’s job, after all. Damn, and it was just getting fun. ‘Was Westie your ward, or your sister’s?’

‘Family ward. Both our names is on the registration.’

‘So you and Lucy shared a residence.’

‘Yes.’
‘And when did you acquire him?’

‘Lucy and me inherited when Mum and Dad reached exemption age, four years ago. But he’s been in the family since I was five, Lucy three.’ He sniffed, long and hard. ‘Westie was my age. Supposed to be a playmate for me. Mum even let me name him. But he was rubbish, I never liked him. Always thought there was something wrong about him.’

‘But let me guess,’ said Sherlock, unable to shut up. ‘Lucy took to him just fine.’

Harrison glowered.

‘Tell me about what happened, after you found Lucy and Westie together,’ said Lestrade.

‘I shouted,’ said Harrison. ‘Told him to get the fuck offa her. And . . . Lucy’d always had a soft spot for him, said it weren’t his fault, what he done to her, but I knew better. I knew. Then we was arguing—and I’m trying to get her away from him, see, and next I know we’s at the front door, and . . . It was an accident. She slipped. It was an accident.’

‘She slipped,’ repeated Lestrade. ‘Could you tell she was hurt?’

Harrison’s eyes were downcast. Tears spilt onto his cheeks. ‘Yeah.’

‘But you didn’t call an ambulance?’

‘I dunno. I was in shock, wasn’t it? I thought it weren’t so bad.’

‘Mr Harrison, her skull was cracked open.’

‘I didn’t see . . .’

‘Right there, at the bottom of your steps, where you pushed her.’

‘No . . .’

‘There was a lot of blood.’

‘I didn’t . . . It was Westie what hurt her.’

‘And you just hopped on your bike and headed for the tube? With your sister lying dead? Where were you going?’

‘It was Westie. All Westie. It was the ward.’

At that, Joe Harrison broke down into sobs, and they could get no more out of him.

They left him in the interrogation room with a glass of water and a constable well known for calming down hysterical murderers, and stepped out into the hallway. Lestrade’s hands burrowed into his front trouser pockets and he rocked a little on his heels. ‘Well damn,’ he said. ‘This means a trip to the pound.’

‘He’s clearly lying,’ said Sherlock. ‘He wasn’t breaking up an assault. Not on Westie’s part, anyway. And if he believes he was, that’s just the cocaine talking.’

‘Cocaine?’

‘Run a drug test, inspector. The sniffing, the dilated pupils, faint traces of white powder on his
trouser knee. He’s a user. He was high when he came home, and in a state of paranoia, delusions, and poor judgement, whatever he saw or imagines he saw led him to become aggressive and murder his own sister. Cut and dry, like you said.’

‘We’ll still need the ward’s testimony.’

‘Those never hold up in court.’

‘Doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear it. Are you coming? Or has this case finally bored you?’

Sherlock drew himself up proudly, offended at the suggestion he would skive off now. ‘I’m coming. Though I don’t fancy a trip to the pound any more than you do.’

Lestrade sighed and shook his head. ‘No one does.’
Mistreatment

Before Sherlock decided to fashion himself a career as a detective, no Holmes had ever stepped foot inside of a pound. Or rather, a Ward Shelter and Holding Facility. But that was a mouthful. So people just called them pounds.

No, the Holmeses had always acquired their charges through more respectable means, such as at silent auctions and from high-priced distributors known for scouting out and placing good-stock, high-quality wards with good-stock, high-quality Britons. Barnaby had been one of those wards of good stock. He had been brought to the household when Sherlock was only seven. Though an older ward—even older than Sherlock’s father—he came with impeccable paperwork outlining his steady character and mild temperament. No stealing, back-talking, trouble-making, or midnight-running from this one. He was respectful and compliant, apparently exactly what Mr Holmes was looking for, after the fiasco with Redbeard.

When Sherlock turned eighteen and by law became a host for the first time, he inherited Barnaby. That is, his father signed over the registration. It was good, he said, for a first-time host to already be familiar with his ward. But when Sherlock went off to school, Barnaby stayed on at the estate, making Sherlock a host in name only, which suited everyone just fine. Mycroft’s ward, Henrietta, was of the same ilk: inherited from his mother and managed at the estate as he pursued his career elsewhere. As the wards aged, the Holmeses hired part-time and then full-time caretakers to see to their needs, as any good host ought. Having reached the age of exemption themselves, they no longer took on new wards but were still of sufficient means to manage their sons’.

Sherlock’s parents were now gone, and with the estate falling to Mycroft, the elder Holmes managed all of the affairs related thereto, including the wards. In time, Henrietta died of stroke, and since her passing, Mycroft had taken on four wards, all elderly, and kept them until they, too, expired. It was his way. He saw it as philanthropic. Elderly wards needed hosts, too, but few families were willing to take them on. So thank God for the benevolent Mycroft Holmes. But Sherlock saw it for what it really was: the most hands-off approach to hosting he could design. Both brothers lived in London; the estate lay to the south, and there were kept the aging wards, cared for by well-paid geriatrics nurses who saw to their end-of-life transition.

Only now, Barnaby was dead. And by law, Sherlock needed to replace him. Unless, of course, he could qualify for exemption status. Which he intended on doing.

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The pound had a distinct odour of industrial-grade disinfectant. One could smell it from the car park. Lestrade was already sniffing irritably.

They entered through the double glass doors and into a foyer-type reception hall where, behind a long desk plastered with brightly coloured posters (All wards need a little TLC! and Did you remember to vaccinate? Ask about handy fridge magnet reminders! and One out of every three wards suffers depression. How to keep yours healthy and happy), three harried-looking women stood with a phone in the crook of her neck, managing a queue, and typing rapidly at a computer while talking to an unhappy couple, respectively. A string of fairy lights and a plastic, ragged, bedecked tree in the corner failed to imbue the room with a festive spirit, if the looks on the patronages was anything to judge by.

Lestrade and Sherlock skipped the queue and cut their way to the front, ignoring the dropped jaws and dagger-eyes and the one outraged man who said, ‘Just where do you think—?’
'Excuse me, sir, back of the queue,' said harried woman number two, pointing with two fingers because at some point in her past, she had been told it was rude to use just one.

'Detective Inspector Lestrade.' He produced his identification.

Sherlock would never admit it out loud, but he loved that moment. If he ever chose to actually join the Met, it would be solely for the purpose of getting to do that. ‘I’m a consulting detective’ was never met with the same obsequious response. If it wasn’t a scowl, it was an eye roll, or worse still, a confounded ruffle of the forehead followed by, ‘You’re a what now?’ A little more deference would be lovely.

‘And my colleague, Mr Holmes.’

It would do.

The telephone slipped, the keyboard stopped clapping, and the queue quieted with intrigue.

‘Pardon,’ said the woman. ‘What’s this about?’

‘We’re just here to talk to one of the wards who was recently brought in. Registration number . . .’ He slowly extracted his notebook where he’d scribbled down the information, and Sherlock rolled his eyes. Lestrade was far too old-fashioned for his own good.

But Sherlock, having heard it once, had already memorised it: ‘YR3914-23. Goes by Westie.’

‘Give me just . . . a . . . moment . . .’ she said, beginning to type. ‘I need to look it up.’

While they waited, Sherlock noticed in the adjoining space two children, four and six if he had to guess. The older girl held the little boy’s hand, but she herself looked close to tears. Beside them, two adults conversed. One was clearly a social worker, and was wearing a Ward Social Care badge as proof; the other looked to be a worker at the Ward Shelter and Holding Facility. The WSC officer occasionally touched the little girl’s head (it was easier to reach), but otherwise, the children were more or less ignored.

Sherlock honed in on the conversation and filled in the details of their story in a matter of seconds. The children’s parents had recently been on holiday in New France, where a car crash had taken both their lives, leaving their son and daughter orphaned. There were no blood relatives to assume custodial care. Their family assets would be liquidated and absorbed by the government. Today, officially, the children had just become wards of the state.

An unfortunate occurrence, but not an uncommon one, Sherlock mused. More common stories involved biological parents with drug addictions or unlawful sex habits or violence, but there were the tragedies as well. Car crashes, cancer, heart attacks, boating mishaps, murder—there were a thousand ways to make an orphan. And the State of New Britain had one grand solution for all of it: the Ward Social Care Programme, a product of the Compulsory Foster Care Act of 1958.

These children would be bought quickly. The younger, the better. They wouldn’t spend long in this place, and just as well. Each might go for as much as £20,000, given their previous home environment and healthy status. Doubtful they would be sold together, though. Family units were obligated to provide care for only one ward, after all. Two was being unnecessarily generous.

I don’t have interest in hiring on a nanny, Sherlock thought vaguely, then caught himself, wondering why he was thinking about it at all. He was applying for exemption. Tonight. Best get it over with quickly.
'YR3914-23,' repeated the woman, having found the file. ‘Male, Indian stock, twenty-four years old. Sound right?’

‘That’s him,’ said Lestrade.

‘We have him on four. Let me call down Rudy, AMH warden. He can escort you.’

Adult Male Holding comprised the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors of the building, and was the least trafficked of all the divisions. Hosts coming to buy a ward from the pound avoided it, because who wanted to host a full-grown male who had ended up here? Best to stick with the ground floor and first level, the Child Sanctuary, where children were kept in rooms resembling playgrounds, clean and brightly decorated with toys, crafts, and wall art to hide the cracks in the sheetrock. The best and brightest didn’t last long. Those who were not purchased within a reasonable timeframe were ‘obligated’, that is, placed into the citizen lottery. If your number came up, you took on an additional ward. It was like being selected for jury duty, only permanent. Unless, of course, you could finagle a sale, trade, or bribe.

The second and third levels were designated AFH, or Adult Female Holding, and Sherlock had spent some time there on cases (the most recent: ‘She stole my gran’s pearl earrings and sold them. Make her tell you where they are!’). There, the women sixteen years and older slept three to a room holding two bunks and a single, but there was a decent-sized common room and cafeteria, and on the north end, a show-room. Older women not yet of exemption age often went for an adult female and kept them on through retirement. When the host died, though, the ward often ended up right back here. Men were restricted from purchasing females, unless married or homosexual, but even then there was no guarantee there wouldn’t be trouble, and Sherlock had been called in on those, too: when the police were scraping for evidence and couldn’t turn anything up, Sherlock usually could. Female wards were far too frequently abused; some were calling it an epidemic.

Females on the AFH had an expiry date of three months, at which point, if not placed with a host family, they were removed to Storage. Well. Colloquially, it was called Storage. The state called it a Permanent Shelter for Unplaced Wards. Unwanted. That’s what they meant. Those shelters were far outside of the city, somewhere they wouldn’t be a bother.

A child came to a pound because of a tragedy.

A woman found herself there because her host was rotten.

And a man? A male ward ended up in a pound because he was rotten.

Maybe that’s why adult males occupied the top three floors, the farthest from potential hosts. Violent, lying, deceiving, stealing, renegade wards were by and large male, and host families were not expected to cope with them for long. Not even the pound was expected to cope with them for long. Male wards had an expiry period of only two weeks before being sent into Storage. Few were ever placed again.

The lift doors opened, and Sherlock and Lestrade followed the warden, Rudy, into an expansive room where individual holdings ran in long rows and blocks like storage lockers. The children ran free and played; the females moved about and socialised. The males, however, sat behind chain-linked doors on state-issued cots, waiting for their turn for the loo or their shift in the cafeteria for dinner. Breakfast and lunch were served in brown paper sacks through a slot in the chain links.

‘Just down there,’ said Rudy. ‘Holding number 38.’

The ward, Reg. No. YR3914-23, sat alone, hugging himself and rocking on the cot. He had been
processed and placed there just within the past hour. What’s more, his host of nearly twenty years had died earlier that day. It was no wonder he looked to be in a state of shock. Had things played out differently, he might never have seen the inside of a pound.

‘Westie, is it?’ Lestrade asked the dark-skinned, large-eyed young man. He showed his ID through the chain link. ‘I’m a police detective, Westie. And I’m here to ask a few questions about what happened earlier today between Lucy and Joe. Can you stand up and come closer to the door, please?’

The ward pushed languidly to his feet and came closer, still shaking, still hugging himself at the elbows.

‘Tell me about this morning, Westie. About Lucy. Before Joe got home, what were you and Lucy doing?’

Already distraught, the sorry-looking ward pushed a hand under his nose and murmured almost under his breath, ‘Nothing bad, sir. Nothing bad.’

‘You’re going to have to tell, Westie. And it’s important that you tell the truth. You’re not going to get into trouble. Do you understand?’

Withholding a sigh of impatience (a mask for his discomfort), Sherlock turned away on the pretext of having an interest in the layout of the floor, as if he didn’t already know it well. He honestly hated ward interrogations. He hated wards. Not the wards themselves, necessarily, but there was just something about them, as parts of a whole, that made everyone a little prickly, and Sherlock was no exception. He pretended he was an exception. He was good at pretending. But the less he had to do with wards, the better.

Westie was nodding.

‘Were you touching Lucy? Was Lucy touching you?’

‘Weren’t nothing bad, sir.’

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay.’ Lestrade was scratching in that goddamn notebook again. Couldn’t the man type notes into his phone like a normal policeman? ‘You’re going to have to be more specific for me, Westie.’

As Lestrade continued in his line of inquiry, Sherlock’s roving eyes landed on a holding at the end of the row, fifteen paces away and in the corner squarely facing Westie’s cell. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the holding itself. It was the man sitting inside of it. Maybe it was the way he sat so erect on his cot, spine as straight as a soldier’s at attention. Maybe it was the contrasting forlorn expression. He stared, but the man didn’t stare back. Rather, he seemed to be looking at nothing at all. But why was he sitting so tall, so rigid?

‘Was this the first time Lucy had kissed you?’

Sherlock refocused on the interrogation. The ward’s head was hanging; his hand covered his eyes. But he shook his head no. ‘She loved me,’ he wept.

Hosts can’t love wards, Sherlock thought. Not like that.
‘Westie, I need you to pay attention and answer the questions, all right? Had Lucy ever kissed you before, or asked you to kiss her?’

Sherlock couldn’t bear to listen to this anymore. Feigning purpose, he wandered down the long row, toward the fair-haired ward at the end. He wasn’t sure why. The ward’s curious posture suggested there was something of a mystery about him, and Sherlock enjoyed mysteries. Maybe that was why. A moth to a flame. But he moved slowly, passing empty holdings or sleeping wards or wards lying on their cots and staring up at the ceiling and its greying, peeling paint. When he was only feet away, the ward’s eyes slowly lifted, and he noticed Sherlock’s advance for the first time. A hand closed into a fist on his knee.

Then Rudy reappeared, making sweeps of the rows. Instantly, Sherlock pretended to be interested in something else. But from the corner of his eye, he saw Rudy stop in front of the mystery ward’s chain link door and sigh. Rudy reached into a slot large enough for a bread loaf.

‘Is this lunch?’ He withdrew a brown paper sack, untouched, weighted down with food. ‘You barely touched your yoghurt this morning. What is this, a hunger strike?’

The ward made no reply, and Rudy waved a hand, saying, ‘Bah.’ He continued down the row. When he passed by Sherlock, Sherlock didn’t stop himself. He followed after and began to pry.

‘What’s his story?’

‘Which? The ward who won’t eat his veggies?’

‘That’s the one.’

The man shrugged. ‘They called him Tiny on the outside. Won’t answer to it now, but that’s what he came in with. I wouldn’t say he’s been a problem. Noncompliance is my biggest complaint, but it ain’t nothing big. Only stopped eating yesterday, I reckon.’

‘No, why is he here?’ Sherlock took the paper sack and opened it. A cucumber sandwich, it looked like, wrapped in cellophane, and an apple. Rudy had left the water bottle in the cell.

‘Mistreatment, that one.’

‘Who did he mistreat?’

Rudy shook his head, taking back the untouched lunch. ‘You got it the wrong way ’round. He were the one being mistreated. You don’t see it so often with the males, but it happens.’

‘What do you mean? What happened to him?’

‘Host was a cock, that’s what. Near as I can tell, starved him, beat him, messed him up pretty good, just because he could. You know the type. In your line of work, you know what I’m talking about. Bastards. They’re the kinda people who should be locked away, not the wards, and I’m not the only feller who thinks it.’

Sherlock grunted noncommittally. ‘So someone reported it?’

‘Guess you could say that. Neighbour heard a gun go off in the middle of the day.’

‘He was shot?’ Sherlock looked back at the holding and the ward, who had not moved a muscle.

‘Poor bugger,’ said Rudy. ‘Took it in the shoulder. Fairly fresh. Still on antibiotics, that one.’
Mistreatment, Rudy had said, but Sherlock was fairly perplexed. In his line of work, that was called attempted murder.

‘Why was he shot?’

‘Search me. Not important now, I guess. It’s a wonder the sod is still alive, to be honest. They say it was an hour or more before someone got to him, and him all bleeding out like. Shoulda killed him, that.’ He sighed again. ‘Pity it didn’t. Been here ten, eleven days already, and no one will take on a damaged ward like that. We’ll have to move him to Storage by week’s end, and that’ll be that. Not the best way to spend Christmas, make no mistake.’ Then he said it again: ‘Poor bugger.’

Something funny was happening in the back of Sherlock’s brain, something ticklish and bothersome. He forced himself to ignore it.

‘And the host?’

‘The standard, I imagine. Five thousand pound fine for mistreatment of an adult male ward. He won’t be allowed to host for another five years, and only on condition of mandatory care-giving classes. He can appeal, but my guess is, it’s just a snazzy way of getting out of his civic duty.’

‘Sherlock.’

Lestrade had come up just behind them and was slipping his notepad back inside his jacket. ‘Got what I need. Joe’s a liar and his sister was a molester. Ward thinks he was in love, but we know how judges react to those kinds of claims. Open and shut. Anything else you wanted to do here?’

He’d heard almost nothing of the interview for himself, and Sherlock realised that he’d now lost interest almost entirely. Glancing back at the ward that had inexplicably distracted him from the job, he saw that the fist had relaxed again and flattened itself on his thigh. Other than that, there had been no change.

‘No. Let’s go.’

Lestrade gave a sharp nod to the lifts. ‘Well then. How was that for time well spent? Bet you’re thrilled you came.’

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‘It was announced today that the pilot employment programme, under proposed Bill W-459, which would amend the CFCA, has been cancelled. Among its critics was the Lord Commissioner of Emancipation himself, Lord Mag—’

Sherlock snapped off the television. He needed a superior distraction.

He was back at Baker Street. The case had proved dull, unworthy of his extraordinary talents, and had barely taken a handful of hours. And yet, he fell uncharacteristically unsettled. Maybe it had started with Mycroft’s phone call, but it had certainly culminated at the pound.

He didn’t want to examine it. So he didn’t. He just turned up the music.

The way others might drown out their thoughts in stereo, Sherlock poured his into the violin. Fervent concertos like Bach’s Chaconne from Partita in D minor, followed by Locatelli’s rapid Caprice in D major, and he was just in the middle of a series of cascading runs in Paganini’s Caprice no. 4 in C minor when Mrs Hudson popped her head in with a yoo-hoo!
'Goodness, Sherlock, are you in a strop?' she asked when he screeched the string and whipped around with lightning in his eyes.

'I'm fine, Mrs Hudson.'

She bore a tea tray and set it on the coffee table. He had no idea why she did this, as if he were incapable of making his own tea. She was his landlady, not his housekeeper. Not that he ever stopped her. He didn’t much like bothering with making tea; he did quite like when it showed up uninvited.

Only, just now, he was too peev ed to say thank you.

‘You’ve been at it for hours. I thought you could use a break, before you cramp.’

He sighed to let her know how irritated he was, then set the violin aside and accepted the cuppa. ‘I don’t cramp,’ he said sulkily, catching himself before he shook the strain out of his left hand. He’d flex it when she wasn’t looking.

‘All the same.’ She piled extra biscuits on his plate.

‘Mrs Hudson, you’re of exemption age,’ he stated plainly.

She laughed. ‘Quite a few years beyond the minimum, dear.’ She paused in the act of pouring herself a cup. ‘Why?’

‘What happened with your last ward? Did you sell, or . . . ?’

‘Oh no, dear. I . . . Well, I found her a good home. We all try to do best by the wards in our care, don’t we? I did mine. And she’s happier for it than if she’d stayed on, if you gather my meaning.’ She smiled at him, but her eyes were a little evasive. Sherlock understood. No one much liked talking about how a host-ward relationship terminated. One way or another, there was always some measure of guilt involved. So he let it go. He didn’t really want to seek her advice, or anyone’s, on the matter of Barnaby’s replacement.

‘I’ll come back for the tea tray later,’ she said. ‘You go back to your music, dear.’

He wriggled his nose and drank the tea.

An hour later came another interruption to his recital: the promised courier, bearing Barnaby’s expiry forms and a reminder of his thirty days to re-establish himself as a host, according to British law. He flung the papers at the cold fireplace and ignored them the rest of the night.

That night, quite against his will, he found himself tossing and turning in bed, thinking of Redbeard. He didn’t know why he had bothered to go to bed in the first place. He wasn’t the least bit sleepy, and his brain was absolutely refusing to turn off. But he was seeking respite (from what?) in sleep, and it just wasn’t happening. Maybe he should get drunk and just pass out. He wasn’t much for drinking, let alone drinking alone. He often preferred other sorts of depressants—a tempting thought. But in the end, he just ended up throwing back the covers, marching into the sitting room, and turning on late-night snooker, a thing he hated above most things. He sat in his chair, knees drawn up, and silently mocked the players for their form, fails, and fashion choices.

His phone sounded close to his ear. Sherlock startled awake and fell out of his chair, only then realising, despite his best efforts, he had fallen asleep in it somehow. The sky was only morning-grey, which meant it wasn’t even seven o’clock yet. He crawled to the coffee table (Mrs Hudson had never returned for the tea tray) and saw Lestrade’s name on his caller ID.
‘What?’ he greeted.

‘So. I’m on my way back to the pound. Wondered if you cared to join me.’

‘The pound?’ He sat back on his heels. ‘What for?’

‘They found him asphyxiated in his cell this morning. The ward.’

‘The one that was shot?’ Sherlock rose swiftly to his feet, morning haze clearing rapidly.

‘What? No, *asphyxiated*, I said. With the bedding, Westie. They think it’s suicide. I want you to come with me to see if they’re right.’
The small screen was on when Sherlock slid into the taxi and directed the cabbie to the South London Ward Shelter and Holding Facility. It was tuned to the BBC:

‘New Britain is once again being heralded on the world stage as a leader in social welfare after the Office of National Statistics’ recent audit-and-census report revealed the State’s homeless population to be zero for the thirteenth year in a row. The eyes of many nations are now turned to us, says the Prime Minister, Alistair Spell, as an example for how to improve—’

‘Could you please turn this off,’ said Sherlock to the cabbie. He preferred it quiet on his way to a crime scene. And from a crime scene. And in most circumstances, generally. Unless, of course, he was the one making the noise.

The cabbie clicked off the screen.

He met Lestrade in the car park. They nodded their grumpy morning greetings, shrugged their shivering shoulders inside their winter coats, and grimly walked inside the pound and straight up to AMH.

The holding wasn’t large enough for two grown men, not with the body of YR3914-23 taking up most of the floor, so Sherlock entered by himself. Lestrade lingered by the open door to watch him work.

The Yard photographer had already shot the body at all angles, and the rest of the holding besides. Other officers guarded the stairwells and lifts on AMH so no unauthorised persons came wandering through, staff included. The wards nearest number 38 had been removed from their holdings and taken to a separate room for questioning. Did they see anything? Hear anything? Why did no one call or help?

Sherlock pulled off the blue latex glove and rose from his crouched position by the body. ‘Clear case of suicide.’ He tossed the glove at a forensics technician standing by, who scowled at him.

‘Must have taken an awful lot of willpower then,’ Lestrade said. ‘Fighting every instinct to save himself.’

The story was clear. Sometime in the middle of the night, YR3914-23, once called Westie, had undressed his mattress. Twisting the sheets tightly, he had fashioned a sort of rope, which he then tied into a knot around his own neck. The other end, he had secured to the chain link, near the top. It would have rattled, drawn attention. And then, he had simply let his legs go slack. Despite his deadly desire, the body would have rebelled, fought for air. He would have kicked out, flailed, rattled the door some more. Two minutes, maybe, on the outside, before he was unconscious. Though it would have been the most fraught and terrifying two minutes of his life. One would think.

Even without the evidence of the sheet-turned-rope, strangulation was almost certainly the cause of death. The victim’s eyes were bloodshot. Bloodwork would probably reveal elevated carbon dioxide levels. What wasn’t entirely clear was what had led up to the moment, or why he had done it. Or whether he had been made to.

Trouble was, he was a ward. And Scotland Yard was unlikely to allocate time and resources to investigate very far. Which was why Lestrade had brought in Sherlock: to expedite the process, and
push as far as they could, as fast as they could, before they were told to close the books.

‘Preliminary assessment puts time of death between midnight and four o’clock,’ Lestrade said.

Sherlock, staring down at the body as though expecting it to speak and answer his questions, nodding mutely.

‘So then. What’s next?’ Lestrade evidently had on his thinking cap. ‘We’ll talk to the wards. See what they know. Then check the logs, see who was supposed to be on the floor last night. There’s no video footage in the building, so we’ll have to check alibis and crosscheck witnesses. Then we should see whether there’s any connection between Joe Harrison and a member of staff . . .’

‘It was suicide, inspector,’ said Sherlock impatiently. ‘Not murder.’

Lestrade wasn’t dissuaded from his line of thinking. ‘Right, but . . . so close on the heels of Lucy’s death? Sure, he was upset by it, but not even a ward turns suicidal like that.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Joe killed her, but he blamed Westie. Could be he wanted to get revenge. Could be he orchestrated a hit.’ He was getting excited now by the possibility that there was a larger conspiracy at work.

But Sherlock wasn’t impressed by his leaps of logic. ‘Courier Joe, orchestrate a hit? From inside a jail cell? In under than twelve hours?’

‘You’d be surprised . . .’

‘You’re grasping at straws. It was suicide, Lestrade. Westie was in love with his host. He couldn’t imagine a life without her. End of story.’

Lestrade frowned. As he turned away, he muttered under his breath, ‘I hate these.’

The investigation had lost its steam. Everything was now by the book. The paramedics were loading the body onto a stretcher to remove it from the building. A pathologist would run basic tests to formally determine cause of death. The body would be cremated. Finally, the record of Ward No. YR3914-23 would officially be closed. Sherlock watched Lestrade’s back a little regretfully as the detective inspector walked down the row of holdings toward the room where they were keeping the wards. He would dutifully conduct his interviews, but they both knew nothing would come of them. The other officers were packing up, closing shop, getting ready to turn the floor back over to the shelter staff.

As for himself, Sherlock didn’t know what he was waiting for, exactly. He normally didn’t stick around this long, when he was no longer needed. But he stood by Westie’s holding, staring at the spot where the ward had decided to die, trying to imagine why. Over a broken heart? Foolish. A heart would mend; a dead body would not.

This is stupid, he told himself. Go home.

But as he turned to obey his internal directive, he saw it again: at the end of the row, the ward sitting upright on his cot. He’d been there the whole time. He was far enough away from holding 38 that he hadn’t been removed for questioning, but really that didn’t make sense. No ward had a clearer view of Westie’s cell than he, even if he was at some distance. And there he sat, in the exact position as the day before. There was no untouched brown paper sack this time—in the commotion of discovering a dead ward, breakfast had not been served—and nothing at all indicated that he had moved from that spot since Sherlock had last seen him. But that couldn’t be true. He had slept, surely. Or had he?

Sherlock didn’t hesitate any longer. He walked straight up to the holding (number 55, he read) and
hooked his fingers into the chain link.

‘You there,’ he said.

The ward lifted his eyes, but the rest of him remained still, and Sherlock finally got a good look at him. He was a small man, thin of bone and slight of muscle, and his pale skin shone with sweat. Sweat? The fourth floor was poorly heated, and in fact a little chilly, so it wasn’t the temperature. Perhaps he was ill. Nervous? His clothing was standard shelter issue: a shapeless, long-sleeved, polyester grey shirt without buttons and a wide, scooping neck revealing a white t-shirt underneath overlaid with a scratchy brown cardigan. The dark-grey trousers were of the same heavy polyester held up by a drawstring and lacking pockets, and too long for him, so the hem was rolled at least three times. On his feet he wore white woollen socks and a pair of cheaply made brown loafers. Everything was oversized, like they hadn’t even bothered to look at the tags when issuing his clothing.

With the cardigan, it was impossible to tell which shoulder had taken the bullet. The left sloped a little more steeply, though, so if Sherlock had to guess, he would guess left.

He gestured with his head. ‘Come here, I want to talk to you.’

The ward reached for the concrete wall on his right. Then, bracing against it, he leant forward on the cot, planted a foot backward, and slowly, slowly pushed himself to his feet, and Sherlock thought, if he didn’t get more momentum going, he was liable to fall right back to the cot. As he languidly found his feet, Sherlock noted that the ward clearly favoured his left side, and he felt an inner sense of satisfaction for having guessed right. Or rather, left. It wasn’t far, only a matter of three steps, but the ward took them gingerly, and Sherlock thought he detected something of a limp in his right leg.

At last, when the ward had steadied himself, Sherlock turned to point. ‘The man in the holding just down there died in the middle of the night. Killed himself, unless you can tell me differently. Did you see it happen?’

The ward answered simply. ‘No sir.’ He didn’t follow Sherlock’s pointing finger with his eyes, but then, they were half hidden behind shaggy, unkempt hair, like hadn’t had a proper cut in months. ‘Did you hear it happen?’

‘No sir.’

Sherlock frowned. ‘You have a direct sight-line into that cell from here. There would have been noise.’ He took hold of the chain link door and shook it loudly to demonstrate. The ward did not so much as flinch. ‘But you’re telling me you didn’t notice a man strangling himself to death?’

‘No sir.’

He waited for the ward to offer up some excuse. They turn out the lights at nine, or, It was the middle of the night, sir, I was sleeping like the dead. But no excuses came. The ward was being asked yes or no questions, and yes or no answers were what he was returning. It was not obstinacy or challenge. No, there was something more . . . tired about it. Tired? Sherlock knew that wasn’t the word, but he could think of none better.

Sherlock tilted his head, evaluating the man before him. He lowered his voice and leant closer, almost like they were sharing a secret. ‘And if you had,’ he said, ‘would you have stopped him?’

Seconds passed, and it seemed as though the ward was choosing not to answer. Then, just as Sherlock was preparing to move on to his next question, the ward said in a small voice, ‘No sir.’
At that moment, Sherlock was seized by a bout of madness. That’s what one called it, wasn’t it? When an insane impulse entered the brain, when all logic fled, and self-mastery gave way to emotional whims? Lunacy. Stupidity. For a quick moment, he tried to fight it. \textit{No. No. He was a sodding detective, he had an active and dangerous job to perform.} But the words were already leaving his mouth, and once they were out, he made no effort to recall them.

‘How do you feel about the violin?’

The ward blinked a few times, trying to puzzle through the question, as if it were a riddle or a test, but he couldn’t crack it. ‘Sir?’

‘I play the violin when I’m thinking, and I don’t like to be disturbed. Do you know how to make a good pot of tea?’

Wary, the ward nodded.

‘Speak up.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘That can be your contribution. Tea in the morning and again in the afternoon, and otherwise, silence. Think you can manage that?’

‘Yes sir.’ The ward wasn’t looking at him anymore. He had grown fairly rigid, but his left hand was balled at his side.

‘I dare say you can.’

At that moment, with rather impeccable timing, the warden returned to the floor, having been allowed back. He was pushing a cart laden with brown paper sacks for distribution. He was about to push it down the opposite row when Sherlock called out to him.

‘Rudy! A word!’

His heart was thudding quite inexplicably as he reached into his coat pocket to withdraw his seldom-used chequebook. It was a wonder he was even carrying it. But then he remembered: He’d been made to pay a fine at the courthouse past week (loitering) and had forgotten to remove it from his pocket. Fortuitous, he supposed. If that was the word.

‘Ah Mr Holmes. Glad to see the investigation is wrapping up. Anything more I can help you with . . . ?’ His voice trailed off when he saw Sherlock standing before holding 55, scratching in the date onto a blank cheque: \textit{December 2, 2030}.

‘How much?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

Sherlock wrote out \textit{South London Ward Shelter and Holding Facility} along the Pay line.

‘The registration fee for this ward. How much?’

But the man was flummoxed. ‘Come again?’

With a great sigh of annoyance, he dropped his hands to his side. ‘For this one, I am compelled by the state to serve as a host to a ward, and I am in the market for a replacement. Would you stop me from fulfilling my duty to king and country? No? I thought not. I’ll be taking this one back to my flat
on Baker Street today. You can send the registration paperwork via courier—preferably via one that has not recently murdered his sister—but I shall pay for him now. So I ask again: how much?’

‘For this one?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘This one?’

‘Good God, man, are you having a stroke?’

Maybe he himself was having one.

Inside the holding, the ward was shuffling backward, away from the chain-link door. He put a hand to the concrete-block wall to steady himself.

‘Beg pardon, Mr Holmes,’ spluttered Rudy, ‘I just . . . Well, I mean, if you’re sure . . . That is, he’s a write-off, this one. A rescue ward, and hardly a young one. We have dozens more to choose from, younger ones, healthier ones, more sociable or suitable or, you know, less troubled, if you’d like me to show you around.’

‘No.’

‘Well, er, if you’re sure . . . The registration fee would be low, very low. The minimum, I reckon. Seventy-five pounds.’

Sherlock’s pen froze in the amount box. He had been prepared to write out at least four digits. Children were the priciest of course, but an adult of good stock could still go for as much as eight or nine thousand pounds. He shook his head and in bold strokes wrote out a cheque for £1,500. Then he signed it.

‘That seems more appropriate,’ he said, tearing out the cheque and handing it over.

The moment it was finished, Sherlock wondered what the hell he had just done.
By the time Sherlock was born in 1995, the Holmes family had been hosting for eleven years, ever since their wedding day when the groom’s family had gifted the happy couple with an extended holiday in Australia, a set of antique silverware that had been in the family for two centuries and had even survived the Great War, and a ward of their very own. He was of Irish stock but mild temperament, known for his green thumb and lovely tenor, and his hair was as red as copper, which he grew at length and tied into a tail. He sported a long, full beard, which he wore in plaits, one or three or a dozen, depending on the week. So they called him Redbeard.

As soon as Sherlock was able to distinguish one face from another, he showcased a discernible preference for Redbeard’s, and seeing it was the quickest way to bring a smile to his face. In time, through his toddler years and onward, Redbeard became his favourite playmate. He had all the traits of a suitable friend: He could tell a real corker of a bedtime story. He was tireless as a garden pony, or a bedroom gnome, or a nursery prince, or whatever role Sherlock would fashion him into during playtime. He was the first to teach Sherlock draughts and mancala, and the only one who could bear to sit and listen to Sherlock practise his tiny violin. Mrs Holmes hardly had any need of the nanny, not with Redbeard at hand (but they kept one on, for appearances’ sake).

Being so young, Sherlock didn’t understand about wards or the CFCA. He wouldn’t have understood if he was told. As far as Sherlock was concerned, Redbeard was just another member of the family. So it came as a violent shock to his tender child’s heart when, at the age of seven, Sherlock discovered what Redbeard really was.

Since then, Sherlock had wanted nothing to do with wards, neither his own nor anyone else’s.

So he could scarcely explain what he was doing with one now.

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With his cheque accepted and his signature placed on the transference forms, Sherlock was free to take his new charge from the premises. The government file on the ward would be sent to him within the week, once the registration went through. But the law required that, before being brought into a domicile, a ward undergo a medical evaluation. Not only was it part of the official paperwork for registering the ward with the new host, but it was also a protective measure to ensure that new charges were not carrying disease or hidden infirmity along with them.

Fortunately, adjoining the pound was the vet’s. Or rather, the Ward Treatment Centre. Like all WTCs, it was staffed almost exclusively by retired RAMC officers, army veterans who could not find work anywhere else and were willing to provide medical treatment for a miserly monthly allowance provided by the State. Sherlock didn’t know who hated the vet’s more: the wards, the hosts, or the vets themselves, but the reputation was all-around terrible.

If one good thing could be said, it was that the wait wasn’t long. Sherlock and his new ward were taken into an examination room almost immediately. Sherlock was surprised. Not by the quick admittance, but that he was expected to be present for the examination, as if he were bringing in a dog that had stopped eating and he needed to be there to explain the symptoms.

‘Standard procedure,’ said a nurse, when he tried to protest and say he would remain in the waiting room. ‘Hosts need to be fully aware of their wards’ medical profile.’

In other words, there was no doctor-patient confidentiality. Not where it concerned wards. Was this
standard practice? He had never attended one of Barnaby’s medical exams.

‘All right, buddy, disrobe, clothes go there, and let’s get you on the scale.’

The ward began to unbutton the heavy brown cardigan, but while his left hand struggled to close properly around the buttons, his right bore the slightest of tremors, so it was slow going. The nurse impatiently slapped her hand down a couple of times on the stainless steel gurney (was there no proper examination bed? no paper covering for sanitation?) and said, ‘Come on, lad, we haven’t got all day, have we?’

‘He’s hurt,’ Sherlock said, aggravated. He stepped forward to help, which is what he figured the nurse should have done first, before shouting her grievance.

At his approach, the ward’s breath hitched, but he kept still as Sherlock deftly undid the buttons and then eased him out of the cardigan. ‘Need help with the rest?’

The ward’s eyes flicked up, meeting Sherlock’s briefly before falling away. He nodded, ashamed.

The trouble was, with the shoulder wound, the ward could barely lift his left arm more than a few inches, so manoeuvring him out of the grey polyester shirt was a challenge, and Sherlock made him wince in pain at least three times in the process. At last, the polyester shirt and t-shirt were removed, revealing a much skinnier man than he had anticipated beneath the oversized clothes. Too skinny. He could count each rib and each vertebra protruding from his back like beads on a string. To Sherlock’s surprise, the registration tattoo marking every ward appeared just below the bulbous C7 of his spine, right at the base of the neck. It was round, about the size of a ten-pence piece, etched with patterned criss-crossing lines of blue ink. He’d never seen one placed on the back of the neck before. The tats were almost always on the inside wrist or in the crook of the left arm. What reason would there be to put it anywhere else?

While the nurse tapped her pen irascibly on her tablet screen, Sherlock helped the ward out of his shoes and socks, then trousers, but he had to be prompted by the nurse (‘Pants too.’) before he dispensed with the rest.

‘Right then, on the scale, let’s go.’ Unfazed by its unusual placement, she scanned the tattoo into her tablet with a mechanical beep, and they were ready to start.

Without the shield of clothing, the ward’s limp was more pronounced. Or maybe that was because Sherlock could at last see what caused it, and it made his stomach turn. The bones of the right ankle protruded, slightly but noticeably, and his foot was turned inward at an angle. Sherlock wasn’t a doctor, but he was fairly certain that it wasn’t a natural-born deformity. Rather, it looked like the ankle had broken some time ago, but hadn’t been set correctly, and he waited for the nurse to comment on it, or ask the ward about it. But she didn’t. Maybe she wasn’t concerned with non-emergency features of health. Corrective surgery would be cost prohibitive. Sherlock wondered if he should get the man a cane.

‘50.8 kilos,’ recited the nurse, reading from the scale. Sherlock had to close his eyes to breathe. Then she pressed a button, and the machine also read the ward’s height (5’6), body mass index (17.9; underweight), blood-pressure (90 over 60), and temperature (38 degrees, a few ticks higher than normal). While the WTC seemed to contain quite a number of old instruments—remnants from hospitals of twenty or so years ago—they at least had technology modern enough to run quick assessments. So she took a blood-analysis with a samples-gun in the ward’s right arm and recorded the results in her notes. She also had the ward pee into an analyser cup right in front of her (it came out dark yellow), and jotted down the readings. It was a strange mixture of modern advancements and something much more medieval, but Sherlock supposed that was just how things were with
wards.

‘Doctor will be with you shortly,’ she said, leaving the room abruptly without so much as a nice to meet you.

For the first time, Sherlock was truly alone with his new ward. For a man who seldom allowed himself to feel uncomfortable, he had never felt more self-conscious, and he was the one wearing clothes. He felt like he should apologise for this, or offer his coat as cover, at least until the doctor came in. It was cold in the examination room, and the ward, wearing naught but his skin, was already so slight of frame. He was discernibly trying not to stare at the deplorable sight of him, not least of all because everything he saw made him question what he was doing. For his part, the ward did not try to cover himself, or warm himself, or provide for his own comfort in any way. He did not complain of the conditions, as perhaps he should have done, but stood staring at the floor as though simply waiting for it to be over. One knee bobbed up and down without ceasing, though out of nerves or pain, Sherlock couldn’t discern.

Floundering for something meaningful to say, Sherlock gestured toward the plastic chair against the wall. ‘Maybe you can sit until—’

But that was when the doctor came in. He was a young man, younger than Sherlock anyway, but had an old, haggard look about him, like he struggled daily to get out of bed. He barely glanced up from the tablet containing the ward’s charts.

‘Dr Bill Murray, hello, yes, you’re Mr Sherlock Holmes, welcome.’

‘Is it necessary that he be naked for this?’ Sherlock asked, suddenly indignant. ‘It’s freezing in here, and he’s in no state to—’

‘Won’t be long,’ said the doctor apathetically. ‘It expedites things. All right then. Registration number JW6462-11, male, thirty-seven, British stock, and requisitioned just today, is that correct? So a standard domicile health inspection, is it?’

‘Yes, and I’m eager to get him home. How long will this take?’

‘Not long, not long. Not if he’s cooperative.’

Sherlock huffed. ‘He’s been nothing but cooperative.’

‘Then there shouldn’t be a problem.’ Dr Murray checked a box on the form. ‘Right then. Let’s have a look-see at what we’re dealing with.’

The vet snapped on a pair of latex gloves to begin his examination, and Sherlock stood to the side to watch with folded arms, holding onto his anger because, at the moment, it was the most familiar of emotions he had to contend with.

First, the doctor tested the ward’s vision, which was ‘right where we like it’; then he shone a light in the ears, up the nose, down the throat. Without saying a word, he shook his head and scribbled something down in his notes. He proceeded to probe the ward’s throat, check his scalp, listen to his breathing and heart, inspect his skin, tap his abdomen, assess his muscle strength and reflexes, and examine his genitals, rectum, and prostate, the latter exam being the only one eliciting much response at all from the ward—a clenched jaw and a tight wince—but he still never made a sound. At the last, Dr Murray glanced over the bullet wound, front and back, and changed the dressings, all done with military proficiency and expedition. But the whole examination seemed cursory at best.

‘All right, the run-down,’ said Dr Murray with a sigh when at last he was finished. To the ward, he
said, ‘You can go ahead and dress.’

‘He needs help,’ Sherlock said, moving to collect the clothes himself.

‘Help him then,’ said Dr Murray without interest. And as Sherlock began to redress the ward, the doctor began to list the results of the health inspection:

‘First, the good news. Bloodwork reveals high white blood cell count, but I wouldn’t ring any alarm bells. That’s common when recovering from a gunshot wound and other infections. Urinalysis suggests some dehydration, but nothing to concern ourselves over. Have him drink a glass of water when you get home, let him urinate, and then two more glasses, two litres total before bed. He’s a cas, so you won’t have any problems with arousal or aggression. Should be fairly docile. Shoulder wound is clean and healing nicely. You’ll still need to help him dress the wound twice daily and apply a medicated cream. We’ll send you home with some. Also, we’ll give you a leaflet for exercises he can do to regain mobility in that arm.’

Sherlock felt like he was being instructed in the watering needs of a houseplant for all the care the doctor was showing.

‘He’s underweight, so feed him up a bit. Two kilos should be the short-term goal, but ten, ten-and-a-half will put him more comfortably in the middle of the healthy weight range. He’s just coming off antibiotics for that shoulder, so it’s probably affected his appetite, but do make sure he eats. And keep him well hydrated, especially if he becomes constipated or diarrheic over the next few days. Transitions can upset the gastrointestinal tract before things stabilise. Any blood in the stool, you’ll want to bring him back . . .’

The more the doctor talked, and the more Sherlock observed while dressing the ward, the more overwhelmed he was feeling. The ward was worse off than he thought. Castration was not uncommon in a male ward, but even Sherlock could tell that a messy job had been done of it. Not to mention the sprinkling of scars on the back of his neck or the faded contusions lining his ribs and outer thighs. There was also a curious scar on the inside wrist of his left arm, where the registration tattoo should have been. It was an old scar, but an ugly one, and the doctor hadn’t even mentioned it. Maybe an explanation would be in the file. But the truth was, Sherlock should have done his research beforehand. He knew virtually nothing—nothing—about this creature.

What’s more, he was beginning to doubt he could handle this. What the hell had he just signed on for? Was it too late to back out and spare his pride? No one really knew what he had done yet, no one that mattered. He’d left the pound without seeing Lestrade again, Mrs Hudson didn’t even know his last ward had expired, and Mycroft likely expected Sherlock to wait until his grace period of thirty days was nearly over before enacting a last-minute resolution. So no one would know. Hell, the cheque was still sitting on top of a to-do pile, just waiting for him to return to tear it to shreds. He had obviously acted without thinking, which wasn’t like him at all.

‘Three things that need immediate attention,’ Dr Murray continued. ‘One: both ears are infected. There’s swelling in the throat and Eustachian tubes. Might be the result of a recent illness. They’re tender, eh?’ He snapped his fingers near the ward’s ears. The ward winced. ‘And it’s probably affecting his hearing. I’m sending you home with drops and instructions to help drain the ears. If the antibiotics for the shoulder haven’t helped the ears, we’ll have to change his meds. You’ll get new pills for that.’

‘What recent illness?’ Sherlock asked, but the doctor just shrugged.

‘Probably cold or flu. Could be just an allergy. Nothing came up in the bloodwork or urinalysis, so whatever it was, it’s passed, and left behind the ear infection. Two: your ward has lice. Nits and lice.’
Sherlock closed his eyes, shook his head. ‘He does?’

‘Not unusual. Sanitation at the pound in AMH has never been a top priority. Nothing in the pubic hair—not that he has much—but you won’t want his head touching a pillow until you get that sorted. Easiest solution? We shave his head here and give him a good scrubbing down with hot water and medical soap before you take him home.’

‘Er,’ Sherlock stalled. The ward’s hair was shaggy and visibly unwashed, so a haircut and a strong shampoo job were clearly in order. But shaving it all off? Was that a humiliating move? Or a prudent one?

‘It’s cheap and efficient, Mr Holmes. You don’t want the lice to spread. The hair will grow back.’

‘Yes, all right,’ he murmured guiltily.

‘And third’—Dr Murray tapped the side of his jaw—‘rotting tooth. Back bottom molar. Looks to be causing a fair bit of discomfort. Might be another reason why he’s underweight: hurts to eat.’

‘So he needs a dentist.’

‘No trouble, we can pull it before you go. Save you some cash and an extra trip.’

Sherlock felt something cringe inside of him, though his face remained placid. ‘Can’t he have, I don’t know, a root canal or something?’

Shaking his head, not pitiably, but pragmatically, Dr Murray said, ‘Too damaged. Don’t worry. That makes it easier to yank.’ He placed one final slash on the tablet to conclude his notes and said, ‘All right, I think that does it.’ He looked up and saw that the ward was half dressed. Sherlock was just going for the t-shirt, turning it right-side-out and widening the collar to pull it over the ward’s head. ‘No, no, what are you doing? We need to scrub him down. Go on, everything off. Now then, Mr Holmes, you are free to go wait in the front. He’ll be out shortly.’

***

On the taxi ride home, Sherlock nursed the regretful thought: I should’ve bought a cat.

Cats, as they were colloquially known, could more or less take care of themselves. Self-sufficient, self-occupying. All they needed, really, was their host’s allowance card, or whatever it was called, to do their own shopping for food and essentials, and the occasional compliance check. A cat was exactly what a person in his situation— bachelor, professional, independent—should acquire as a new ward, if a new ward was necessary. Instead, he had bought a rescue ward. A mutt.

He felt guilty that he was already thinking of exit strategies. Yes, he’d paid the money, but he hadn’t registered the paperwork. Yes, he now had legal guardianship, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t find a legal reason to put him up for sale or trade. Yes, he was now the host of a damaged mongrel of a ward, but he also knew a few big-wigs on the black market who could arrange to take this particular ward off his hands. There were ways out. There had to be.

They sat together in the back of the taxi in painful silence on the longest ride to Baker Street imaginable. Sherlock could barely stand to look at him now. The ward looked a mess. His clothes had been taken to be burned, so the nurse had given him replacements. They weren’t a proper hospital, though, and they dealt only in out-patients, so this consisted of a loose paper shirt that fell down one shoulder and tied in the back with two strings, and a spare set of crispy, one-size-fits-all drawstring trousers made of white, tearable mesh that came out of a plastic envelope, but no underwear. They gave him back his loafers, but no socks.
As far as a coat, however, they had nothing for him, and Sherlock, who was even less prepared than the nurses, didn’t either. So, when they stepped outside, the freezing December wind stole Sherlock’s breath and the ward turned his face down to bear it, but without a coat, with paper clothes rattled and looked like they might blow right off him, and with a head newly shorn to the scalp, he got the full brunt of chill.

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ Sherlock said, and shucked off his own coat and scarf, wrapping the small body up tightly before walking a slow quarter of a mile to find a free taxi.

Now the ward sat stiffly at his side, staring straight ahead like he had done back at the pound, not saying a word. What was he thinking? Was he even thinking?

‘It’s a decent flat,’ Sherlock said, if only for something to say. ‘First and second floors. I’ll, er, have to make space for you in the second bedroom. It’s something of a laboratory right now. I wasn’t planning on . . . Anyway, we’ll get it in order. Buy a bed.’

And wardrobe. And chest of drawers. And nightstand. And lamps. And clothing. Good God, he hadn’t thought this through at all. The ward was coming with nothing—well, nothing but pain medication for the pulled tooth, and some drops for his ears—and now he had to outfit an entire human being for civilised living.

‘I hope the stairs won’t be too much of a bother, what with your leg.’

‘It’ll be no bother, sir,’ said the ward, though thickly, for the whole left side of his mouth was filled with gauze and his jaw was swelling from the extraction, so he was trying to move it as little as possible.

‘The ankle. How long has it been like that?’

The ward was slower to answer this time, but answer he did. ‘Since I was young, sir.’

‘Sherlock.’ There was no response, and Sherlock figured that the ward had not understood what he meant. ‘My name. That’s my name. Sherlock Holmes.’

‘Yes, Mr Holmes.’

‘No, I mean, you can call me Sherlock. None of this Mr Holmes or sir nonsense. Understand?’

The ward nodded.

‘What about you? What’s your name?’

Again, the slow answer, this time preceded by a hard swallow. ‘Whatever you like, sir.’

‘I don’t have any particular preference.’ When the ward didn’t offer up anything, Sherlock asked, ‘What were you last called?’

The ward licked his lip, contemplative, and Sherlock thought he might lie. But he didn’t. ‘I was called Tiny, sir.’

‘I’m not calling you Tiny,’ Sherlock said with disgust.

He had never understood the way some hosts named their wards. Spot and Tigger and Gizmo were among the worst, as if they were naming a spaniel, not a human. A fifty-year-old man answering to Snoopy? It was worse than belittling. It was dehumanising. He had met a Frizzy, so named for her
hair, and a Weeta, because a couple had thought their three-year-old’s pronunciation of ‘Rita’ had been too cute to waste. Even Mycroft had a penchant for renaming his wards after his favourite historical figures, rendering all of them with names from at least two hundred years ago: Newton, Rembrandt, Napoleon, Antoinette.

And he thought of Redbeard, his parents’ selection. Not for the first time, he wondered what Redbeard had first been called. After all, he hadn’t been born a ward. His birthdate fell ten years before the Surge, and twelve years before the Compulsory Foster Care Act was passed. And it was years after that when he had finally been old enough to grow the beard that would lead to his new moniker. What had been his real name?

The ward answered nothing, willing to accept any name Sherlock might come up with.

‘Did you ever have a name?’ Sherlock asked, trying to control his agitation. ‘A proper name, I mean.’

The ward gingerly touched the side of his face before resting his hand again on his leg. ‘I’ve had a few, sir.’

‘Such as?’


‘Okay, stop. Stop.’ Shit shit shit, that had backfired. Why on Earth had he known so many names? And such horrid ones? Maybe he didn’t want to know this ward’s history. ‘I mean a real name. What was your first name?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, sir.’

‘Sherlock. I told you, my name is Sherlock.’

‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock sighed. ‘What did your mother call you?’

‘I didn’t have one.’

Forestalling a groan, he asked one more question: ‘What would you like to be called?’

‘Whatever you like, sir.’

And they were back at the start.

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Climbing the steps to the flat took considerably more time than Sherlock was used to. He led the way, but slowly, as the ward followed laboriously behind. When they finally passed into the sitting room, even he was out of breath. Sherlock saw the space as though with fresh eyes, imagining how it must appear to one who had never been there before. He thought it embarrassingly cluttered and disorganised, and he was not one to embarrass easily.

‘Right. So. This is it. I’ll of course be—’ he coughed into his fist—‘straightening up a bit. Making space. It’s not always so . . . ’ He trailed off, because it was always so untidy. He hadn’t even picked up the papers from the floor before the fireplace. ‘So! Books are free for your perusal, telly’s in the corner, paper arrives daily. Um. My laptop. Violin. Fireplace. Cold case files.’ Why was he pointing
these things out? The ward had eyes. And those eyes were roaming, a little timidly, as though not
certain he had permission to look. He was clutching the front of the coat and resting most of his
weight on the good leg, looking distinctly out of place. Then the ward’s eyes landed on the skull on
the mantle, and his eyebrows rose. ‘Friend of mine,’ said Sherlock, as a tease. But the ward didn’t
laugh, not even to smile, and Sherlock finished under his breath, ‘As it were.’

He turned toward the kitchen, indicating the ward should follow. ‘All appliances are at your disposal,
and you can help yourself to anything in the fridge. Teas are in canisters by the toaster, plates and
cups in the cupboard. Are you a tea man? Who’s not a tea man? Yes, so, anyway, Mrs Hudson too
often does the washing up. I tell her not to. But now that you’re here . . . That is, if you want . . .
You may want to avoid the coffee pot, for now. Coffee hasn’t tasted the same since the toads.
Anyway, let’s get you into some proper clothes. Can’t have you walking around in a shirt better
suited for wiping your arse.’

Just as he was turning toward the hallway, he caught the ward’s contained flinch at his words.
Remorse pricked him, but he hadn’t meant that as a comment on the ward’s state of dress, but rather
as a dig at the lousy nurses and lousier shelter staff. Ashamed at his faux pas, he chose to ignore the
reaction and proceeded to his bedroom, the ward following him with uncertain steps.

‘My room,’ said Sherlock. ‘Yours will be upstairs, but it’s not quite ready for you yet.’

The ward looked at the master bed, then away again just as quickly. This time, Sherlock hastened to
amend his words.

‘I hope you don’t mind the sofa for a couple of nights.’

Yes, that should do it.

Besides, in all reality, he wasn’t planning to keep the ward much longer than that. Just as soon as
arrangements could be made, and a new buyer could be found. But the ward didn’t need to know
that yet.

‘Right, so,’ he said again, pulling open a top drawer in his chest. His sitting room might have been a
disaster, but he had a certain liking for order in his bedroom, right down to his sock drawer. All of
his t-shirts were folded neatly, next to the pyjama trousers. He pulled out a dark blue t-shirt he
normally slept in (he would never be caught leaving the house in it). ‘Might be a bit big for you. But
it’ll do until we can get you properly outfitted.’

He supposed he would have to do that, at least. He couldn’t very well send the ward off in paper or
borrowed clothes.

Sherlock helped the ward out of his Belstaff coat and untied the strings in the back of the hospital
shirt, taking notice of the intense scrub-job he had endured at the vet’s, as if they’d used steel wool
instead of a sponge, and again the strangely placed registration. Curiosity finally drove him to ask.

‘Any reason for this?’ he asked, giving it a tap. The ward’s skin jumped beneath his unexpected
touch. ‘Not a usual place for the tat.’

‘No sir. No reason.’

Sherlock stepped back around and pulled the shirt over the ward’s head. ‘You don’t say a lot, do
you?’

The ward looked up, then away, chastised.
‘Maybe when your mouth isn’t filled with gauze,’ he said, trying to be gentle, but gentleness wasn’t a familiar attribute.

He helped the ward into the sleeves, then a pair of pants (a little intimate, but what else was he to do?), pyjama bottoms (rolled thrice at the ankles), then socks, Sherlock’s only pair of house slippers, and finally an oversized black cardigan Sherlock never wore. But it was winter, and though the heating worked fine, it was still too cold to go about in short sleeves. Outfitted in Sherlock’s clothes, too large for his small frame, he looked hardly better than when Sherlock had first seen him. Still, he was clean. He smelt nicer. And though his head was shorn close to the scalp, which was spotted red with tiny bite marks, at least there was no more lice. So that was something.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked, just trying to think what to do next with the man.

The ward subconsciously licked his lips. Perhaps just the thought of food was enough to make him salivate. But he still looked uncertain as to how he should answer. He was probably wondering if he could manage anything at all with that mouth. Slowly, he nodded.

There was just one problem: no food in the flat. Well, that wasn’t quite true. There was an expired tin of green olives and a quarter bag of dried ziti in the cupboards, a bag of peas and half a dozen crab cakes in the freezer Sherlock had shoved in there last summer and promptly forgot about, and milk in the fridge barely good for three swallows.

Sherlock didn’t cook for himself. Almost ever. Toast and jam, that was about it, and he was out of both. Mrs Hudson—knowing his uselessness in the kitchen—sometimes brought by nibbles and leftovers, but he more often ate from food trucks and fish and chips shops while he was out and about, or else ordered take-away. There was a stack of flyers on the table in the sitting room, but leafing through it quickly, he realised that none of them would do. The ward couldn’t eat Thai or barbecue or pizza, not with his sore mouth. But he still had to eat.

Remembering getting his wisdom teeth removed when he was eighteen, Sherlock decided to go out and buy yoghurts and ice creams. Maybe a smoothie, if he could find a place. So he settled the ward in front of the telly, gave him the remote, and left the flat on a shopping run.

While he stood in the checkout line, a four-pack of Dannon yoghurts in one hand and a pint of Neapolitan ice cream in the other, his phone sounded in his pocket. He fumbled for it, nearly losing the yoghurts altogether.

‘You disappeared on me,’ said Lestrade.

‘Were you able to find your way out of the building all right on your own?’ Sherlock quipped.

‘Ha ha.’

‘Anything come up in the interviews?’

He heard Lestrade’s predictable sigh on the other end. ‘No.’

‘Pity.’

‘Yeah. Well. We didn’t expect any differently. Open and shut.’

‘Open and shut.’

‘Yeah.’
'So why the phone call?' He moved ahead in line and deposited the yoghurts and ice cream on the end of the conveyor belt.

‘Thought you might be interested in another one.’

‘Another what? Ward suicide?’

‘Well, something that looks like a suicide. But this time, it isn’t a ward.’

‘Who is it?’

‘Sir Jeffrey Patterson. Found dead on the twenty-ninth floor of a high-rise office building under renovation. What he was doing there, how he got in, even how he died—no one knows. Interested?’

‘Text me the address.’

The cashier was just scanning his first item, but Sherlock, pocketing his phone, said, ‘Never mind,’ and walked away.

He’d deal with the shopping later. Right now, he had a case.

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By the time he finally returned to Baker Street, it was dark, and he’d forgotten the yoghurts. The case had attracted all his attention and brainpower, and yet it remained deliciously unsolved, which meant there would be more work to do tomorrow, and that pleased him quite a lot.

So absorbed in his thoughts about Sir Patterson’s mysterious death was he that he completely forgot about the ward he had purchased earlier that day until he put his key in the door. Then he froze, sighed, and his forehead clunked right below the numbers 221B. Damn. He was a host now. And apparently a negligent one. Well. Maybe Mrs Hudson had something suitable in her refrigerator. A gelatine or something soft and cool. And if not, maybe she’d be willing to whip something up. It was only—he checked his watch—quarter past eleven. Damn. She’d most certainly be asleep.

Groaning, he pushed open the door and trudged up the stairs, hoping the ward had just fallen asleep on the sofa and he could deal with it all in the morning.

But when he walked into the sitting room, the only light was the glow of the telly, which was on the same channel as when he’d left, and the remote remained on the armrest as if it hadn’t been touched. The ward was nowhere to be seen.

For a half second, Sherlock thought, Oh my God, he’s a runner. He was stunned, but he almost admired it. The ward hadn’t at all seemed the type to run, but perhaps he was cleverer than Sherlock had initially supposed. After all, he was technically between registrations. Sherlock had paid the fee but not submitted the forms, so if he was caught before reaching Norway—and he very likely would be—the ward’s registration number would be traced back to the pound first, not to him. Maybe this was Sherlock’s out. The pound would deem him an incompetent host, or the court would, and refuse to return him. Could it be as easy as that?

But the half second passed, and that’s when Sherlock heard a muffled whimper from the kitchen. He advanced further into the room and hit the overhead lights, and that’s when he saw the ward, on the kitchen floor with his back to the wall, half hidden behind the sliding glass panels. His legs writhed, and he was curled over his knees, one hand clamped around his mouth, the other holding the side of his swollen face, and he rocked and moaned. A line of blood was dribbled down the front of the borrowed blue t-shirt.
‘Oh shit,’ Sherlock said. Then he dropped to a crouch and tried to pull the ward’s hands away from his face. He met with some resistance. The ward’s muscles were locked tight, and his arms shook as Sherlock tried to manipulate them. His eyes were lined red and swam with tears of pain, and when Sherlock finally succeeded in removing the hands, he saw a mouth and chin smeared with blood. Good God, it must have been the hole left behind by the tooth. Something had gone wrong, and the bleeding wasn’t stopping.

‘Come on, up you get.’

For all his brilliance, he was clearly not thinking, because he grabbed the wrong arm to drag the ward to his feet. At the wrenching of his shoulder, the ward let out a devastating cry, and when he did, when his lips parted and his jaw unlocked, the blood he had been holding inside poured out of his mouth like water from a jar and into his shaking hand.

‘God!’ Sherlock cried, leaping backward.

The ward was left gasping in pain, and his muscles quavered. Sherlock spun away and paced to the other side of the kitchen, knocking against a chair and sending a sharp pain into his own hip. He grunted angrily, and for a moment was seized by the desire to flee—leave the flat for the night, pretend he had never come home, and refuse to deal with this mess. Let the man sort himself out! The awful truth of it was, however, running wasn’t an option for either of them.

He forced himself to calm down and returned to the corner where the ward was curled tighter, sobbing in agony and smearing blood across the lino. Crouching, this time on the ward’s right side, he put the ward’s arm around his shoulder, grasped the wrist tightly, and they rose together. Sherlock was shocked by how lightweight the man was, how easy to lift. Still, he half carried, half dragged him to the sink, where he twisted the tap to cold and bent the ward’s head down near the stream.

‘Spit it out, there you go.’

Out came both blood and blood-soaked gauze, which should have been changed hours ago. And Sherlock remembered the other thing: the pain pills Dr Murray had said needed to be taken every six hours. He’d forgotten that, too. The pills were in his coat, and he’d worn it out of the flat.

He cupped his hand to fill it with water and brought it to the ward’s mouth, first to wash away the blood—as much as he could—but then to help him clear out his mouth. ‘Rinse and spit,’ he directed.

It wasn’t easy. It took time. The ward did as directed, but through gasps and tears. When he stopped spitting red—or rather, when it was considerably lessened—Sherlock left him propped at the sink and hurried to the bathroom for the emergency kit, then to his coat for the pills, and then to the freezer for the bag of frozen peas. Dumping it all in the centre of the kitchen table, he moved the ward into a chair and made him first swallow the pill. He was supposed to have one, but Sherlock gave him two. Then he wrapped cotton balls in gauze and told him to bite down on them over the gap in his teeth. And finally, he gave him the frozen peas to hold against his swollen jaw. At last, heart still racing, Sherlock sat back and breathed a sigh of relief that he’d taken care of it.

Except, an hour passed. Two hours. Two-and-a-half, and judging by the way the ward shook and cried and held the side of his face, the pain was not subsiding.

Sherlock called the number of the vet’s and got a recording for their regular hours, which began at eight in the morning, still six hours away. That was an eternity. What else was he to do? A&Es had been known to outright reject services to wards because they weren’t covered under the NHS. Ambulances came only in life-or-death emergencies. Was this one of those? Most hosts couldn’t afford private health care insurance for their wards, and out-of-pocket care was too expensive. That’s why places like the vet’s existed.
When it was coming on three o’clock in the morning, a frantic, desperate, increasingly tired Sherlock played the only card he could think of. He called an old friend.

On the other end of the phone, he heard the groggy *hmm hum* of a voice trying to clear itself before saying, ‘Hello?’

‘Mike, I’m calling in that favour.’

There was a long pause.

‘Sherlock?’

‘Baker Street, quick as you can.’

‘Bloody hell, Sherlock, do you know what time it is? I was sleeping.’

‘You owe me, remember? You said, anytime, anywhere. Well, that time is now, and the place is Baker Street.’

‘Are you hurt? Call 999!’

‘Just get your arse in a cab!’

‘Why! What’s wrong?’

‘I’ll explain when you get here. Bring your medical bag. You’re making a house call.’ Then he hung up.

Mike Stamford didn’t live far, and, it being the middle of the night, there was no traffic to impede his arrival. Sherlock buzzed him up, and the doctor arrived in his sitting room so fully bundled in coat, scarf, and hat that only his red nose and fogging glasses gave any indication of who was underneath. He set aside his medical bag and began to shed his outer layer.

‘All right, I’m here,’ he said. ‘Are you finally going to tell me—?’

His words were cut off when he heard the pathetic whimper of a ward trying to muffle his pain. Sherlock indicated the kitchen, and Mike stepped closer until he could see the ward, returned to the floor, back in the corner, panting and whining like a sick dog. He was using the frozen crab cakes now; the peas had warmed to mush.

‘Good God, what’s happened here? Who’s he?’

‘My ward,’ said Sherlock tiredly. ‘Had a tooth pulled today, and it won’t stop bleeding.’

‘You called me here about a tooth? I came ready to perform an emergency appendectomy! On you!’

‘Apologies for not presenting you with a greater challenge,’ Sherlock snapped. ‘But I don’t know what to do about him. Look at him, he’s a wreck! I’ve given him his pills, but he’s still in a lot of pain, and I’m running out of cotton balls.’

‘I’m not a dentist, you know.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘Are you going to help me or not?’

‘Yes, yes, *fine*. I’m just . . . not a vet. Never mind. Let’s get to work. First help me move him off this floor. Goodness, is that blood down his shirt? Where’s his room? He’d probably be more
comfortable—'

‘The sofa will do for now.’

Sherlock wished he had called Mike sooner. The man was calm and methodical, not easily ruffled by medical complications or a man writhing and panicked. He took some quick readings with his analyser gun and then administered a quick-numbing agent to the jaw via three injections from a thread-thin needle. Within minutes, the ward began to calm, though his face remained red and glistening with sweat, and the damn thing couldn’t stop shaking. Still, Sherlock could practically see the tension draining out of him as the pain started to dissolve.

‘What’s his name?’ Mike asked as he worked. He was the kind of doctor who liked to address his patients by name.

‘He doesn’t have one yet.’

Mike shot him a hard look. ‘Why not?’

‘For God’s sake, I just got him today!’

Shaking his head, Mike refrained from retorting, but he looked disapproving. Or maybe that was just the dark morning hour. Sherlock was exhausted.

‘All right then, son, I need you to open up. There you go, let me see.’

Son, was it? That was generous. But then, Mike was a generous guy.

Mike worked quietly, and patiently, ignoring Sherlock’s questions and agitated efforts to see better, dancing just over his shoulder, until Mike snapped at him to sit down and let him work. Enervated, Sherlock complied, and flopped down into his armchair to watch with bated breath. The ward made a few more noises of distress, clenching and unclenching his fists on his chest, and feet twitching. But with Mike in the way, Sherlock could see nothing of his face, and he decided it was just as well. It was a hard face to look at.

Thirty minutes later, he was cleaning up the coffee table and packing up his kit, and the ward was asleep on the sofa, having been given a sedative.

‘Alveolar osteitis,’ said Mike, then, in layman’s terms. ‘Dry socket. The blood isn’t clotting over the extraction wound, so the bone and nerves are exposed, resulting in intense pain that radiates through the nerves on the side of the face, down the jaw, sometimes as far up as the ear. You should know, those ears are infected—’

‘I have drops,’ Sherlock hastened to say, though he was only now remembering it.

‘Dry socket is not uncommon after tooth extraction, but it’s more common in women and the malnourished. And I can tell just by looking at him: he’s malnourished.’

‘I know, I know. I’ll fix it.’

‘Anyway, sick or not, dry socket hurts like hell, the poor bastard. I’ve packed the wound, and it should stop bleeding, but it’ll be a few days before he’s recovered. Just soft foods until then. Rich in vitamins, high in calories for this one.’ He paused, thinking, then said, ‘Let me see the pills you were given.’

Sherlock gave him the bottle with enough pain meds for forty-eight hours. Mike read the label but
furrowed his brow, like he was sceptical. Then he opened the bottle and tipped a couple into his palm.

‘Yeah, that’s what I thought.’

‘What?’

‘These are sugar pills.’

‘What?’

Mike looked at the sleeping form on the sofa with pity. ‘Where did you get this ward?’

‘The pound. Why?’

‘So he’s a rescue ward. Figures. What happened here?’ Mike tapped his own left shoulder to indicate.

‘His last host shot him.’

Mike laughed shortly and shook his head at the poor sod’s miserable luck. ‘Here’s the thing, Sherlock. The government doesn’t fund ward health care the way it should. So shelters and vets, they cut corners where they can to save a penny here, a penny there. Like prescribing fentanyl or buprenorphine for pain but actually padding out the number of pills with placebos. In any given prescription bottle for a ward, fifty percent of the pills might actually be sugar pills.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’

‘If your ward hadn’t developed dry socket, you may never have known. He might have handled the pain well enough, and eventually it would have gone away. Rotten luck. Because it looks to me like you’ve been given one hundred percent placebos. And the vet’s just saved a couple hundred pounds. I can almost guarantee he’s been suffering unmanaged pain on that shoulder, too, probably since it happened. A wounded ward is a terrible expense.’

How long had Rudy the warden said that the ward had been there? Nine days? Ten? More? And it had been approximately two weeks since he’d been shot. Had he really been suffering all that time? And then Sherlock remembered how the ward had sat so upright and rigid in his holding cell. It was all making sense now. Even the slightest movement only awakened the pain. And there was Sherlock, telling him to stand and come closer, and then, tonight, thoughtlessly grabbing his arm and yanking. He felt sick.

Mike pulled a handful of small packets from the inside of his medical bag. ‘Oxycodone,’ he said. ‘Enough for three days. They’re for him. Give him one as soon as he wakes up, and then another every eight hours. It’s strong stuff. It’ll help.’

‘And after three days?’

‘I think you’ll be seeing vast improvements by then. Wouldn’t hurt to take him to a proper dentist, though.’ He clipped his bag shut and started to redress for winter. Sherlock pulled out his phone to call him a cab. ‘But Sherlock.’

‘What?’ He scrolled through his contacts until he found the London Black Cab Co.

‘Why a rescue ward? Why him?’
Feeling suddenly defensive, Sherlock glowered and retorted, ‘Why not him?’

Mike lifted his hands as though surrendering the point. ‘All right, all right. Just do yourself a favour. Be patient.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? I am patient. I’m the most patient person I know.’

Mike snorted. ‘Sure. But then, you’ve never dealt with this before. My point is, you’ve taken on a rescue ward, and I don’t think you realise what that means yet. All rescue wards come with problems of one sort or another. I mean, look at him. It’s been less than twenty-four hours, and look what you’ve had to deal with. Health-wise, he’s something of a disaster. Mental health-wise? I think you’re in for an uphill battle.’

‘So what are you saying? Get rid of him?’

Could he get a doctor’s note for that?

Mike shrugged as he pulled on his gloves. ‘I guess it depends. Are you more concerned about his wellbeing, or yours?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘This is a life-changing ward. You keep him, you’ll be making sacrifices. Simple as that. It’s clear he’s had a rough time of things. His last host tried to kill him, for God’s sake. So you can either make his life better or worse, and that will come with a cost to you. And not a financial one. Question is, is Baker Street going to be good to him? Or not?’ He crammed the hat on his head. ‘If he stays, you might want to show him he’s welcome by giving him a sodding bedroom of his own. And a name.’

Five minutes later, the taxi had arrived, and Sherlock stood at the window to watch Mike leave. It had begun to snow. Outside, the world looked peaceful. Inside, the ward slept. Sherlock stared at him, still swollen and red, still wearing the blood-stained, sweat-soaked t-shirt, but asleep. He rolled the bottle of fake pills in his palm and thought about what Mike had said. Was he able to give the poor creature a better life than the one he had known? Was he even willing to? What would it take? How much time, energy, money, and thought would he have to spend in care of a damaged ward? And why had he saddled himself with this burden to begin with? A split-second, thoughtless decision, and his whole world was turned upside down. He must have been mad.

He sat in his armchair, body craving sleep but brain too restless to attempt it. In the morning, no matter what he ultimately decided, he would give the ward the oxycodone and go see if Mrs Hudson had some apple sauce. He’d see about getting the ward some proper clothes. Maybe it would end up being only a matter of days in the end, but at the very least, they could be good days. He would do right by the ward. He might even give him a decent name.
Properly Outfitted

Sherlock knocked on her door at seven in the morning, figuring that, like all old people, she would already be bustling about and ready to leap to the aid of any young person who needed her.

‘I need apple sauce,’ he said.

‘Apple sauce?’

‘Apple sauce.’

Mrs Hudson was indeed dressed in a long-sleeved mauve housedress and smelt of that chrysanthemum-scented perfume she thought was subtle but attracted summer bees.

‘And perhaps’—he really did hate asking for it—‘your assistance.’

‘One of your experiments, is it? Come in, then. I don’t know if I have apple sauce.’ She turned around and headed for the kitchen. Sherlock followed her. Opening the refrigerator door, she took stock. ‘I have apples.’

‘No good. Something cold and easy to eat.’

She turned to him with a frown. ‘Oh dear. Feeling a little off?’

‘It’s not for me.’ He took a breath. Better have out with it. The situation was only temporary, but even she was bound to notice a second body living in her tenant’s flat at some point. ‘Barnaby’s dead.’

‘Your ward?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry, Sherlock.’ She touched his arm consolingly.

‘I’m not broken up about it. He was old, and death is inevitable.’

She withdrew her hand with a pinched mouth.

‘The point,’ he said, ‘is that . . . Well, I’m sure you can guess. I’ve been made to replace him.’

Mrs Hudson’s eyes widened and she gasped silently. ‘You mean . . .’

‘My new ward is upstairs. But he’s just had a tooth pulled, and his gums are sore. So something cold and soft for breakfast would be ideal, thank you.’

‘Oh Sherlock,’ she said breathlessly, resting a hand over her chest. Was she upset with him? Disappointed? Disapproving? He did not understand this reaction. Not that he’d been expecting congratulations. ‘Is it . . .?’ She mouthed her next words: ‘A child?’

‘Of course not. He’s an adult. Just a rotting tooth that needed dealing with.’

She seemed to visibly relax, but there was still a wariness about her. ‘Where are you going to put
him? If you mean to use the basement flat, I’m sorry, but I’ll have to up your rent.’

‘The second bedroom. Naturally. I’ll just rearrange the furniture.’ He was beginning to feel testy. ‘Never mind. I’ll hit the corner market.’

He turned to go, but Mrs Hudson took his arm. ‘Now wait just a minute, young man. You don’t need to go rushing off. I have something for him, if he needs it. What about a cold rice pudding? That’s soft enough, I should think. Or I could blend some ice, orange juice, and a banana. Won’t take but a moment. I’ll bring it right up.’

‘Thank you.’

Sherlock returned to his flat, where the ward was standing in the centre of the rug, holding his left elbow with his right hand and looking anxious, like he didn’t know what to do with himself, or what would happen next.

The ward had awoken half an hour ago, and not gently. Sherlock had been searching websites at the table. The open tabs reflected his contradictory intentions. On the one hand, he was scouting sites where he could post a ward for bid or trade, ferreting out lists of justifiable excuses to return a recent purchase to the pound, and examining the costs of hiring a ward management service; on the other hand, he was exploring sites for furniture companies and DIY ward rehab. He was in the middle of an article about proper ward nutrition when, just over the screen of his laptop, he saw the ward stir on the sofa. A second later, his right leg spasmed and he gasped, then rolled off the couch and hit the floor with a sharp cry—he’d landed directly on his injured shoulder.

Sherlock leapt out of his chair so quickly he overturned it, and he helped the ward off the floor and back to the sofa. The ward seemed startled to find himself in this strange environment, as though he didn’t remember how he got there. His face reddened with embarrassment, and with pain—he tried to hold his shoulder and jaw at all once, making himself appear to be hugging himself. Sherlock hastened to pour him a glass of water and make him swallow the oxycodone pill.

Now, they looked at each other from across the room. Well, Sherlock looked at him. The ward wasn’t very good at the eye contact thing.

‘Feeling any better?’ he asked.

‘Yes sir.’ He still spoke thickly. Sherlock had removed the gauze and cotton, which were once again soaked in blood, though not nearly so much, and replaced them with fresh ones. At least the swelling had reduced about fifty percent.

‘We’ll, erm, need to change your shoulder bandages this morning. But first we’ll get some breakfast in you. Mrs Hudson is bringing you something. Are you hungry?’

The ward looked as though he didn’t understand the question, and Sherlock wondered if, maybe, he’d bought an idiot. Then came a slow nod.

‘Of course you are. Look, you don’t have to just stand there. Go on, take a seat. The armchair is comfortable enough.’

The ward sat as directed.

‘Right. So . . . here’s the thing. About your name.’ Sherlock crossed the room and took a seat in the facing leather chair. The ward watched him anxiously, squeezing the tops of his closely pressed thighs. ‘Your past names are no good,’ he said bluntly. ‘All those ghastly things your last host called you, or however many “last hosts” you’ve had . . . which is how many?’
The ward’s fingers were gathering the pyjama fabric into a closed fist on top of his thigh. ‘Many, sir.’

‘A number would be lovely,’ said Sherlock wryly.

The ward’s eyes dropped to his knees. ‘Seventeen, sir.’

Sherlock struggled to contain his reaction, but he wanted to shout: Seventeen! In thirty-seven years! That averaged to about twenty-six months per host! Wards were supposed to be lifetime responsibilities. Of course Sherlock knew they were bought and sold and traded about, and hosts died and new arrangements had to be made, but seventeen hosts? He was still a relatively young ward. Was he more trouble than Sherlock could even fathom?

He didn’t look like trouble. He looked like a frightened child, not trouble.

‘Right,’ Sherlock said, composing himself. ‘Then that makes me number eighteen, does it?’ Would he really pass him along to number nineteen? Twenty? Thirty?

‘Yes sir.’

‘Your accent isn’t London. Where were you born? Kent? Canterbury, maybe?’

‘Dover, sir.’

‘And since Dover, you’ve had seventeen different hosts, and seventeen different names.’

The ward nodded. His cheeks were considerably redder than when this conversation had begun.

‘And I bet you haven’t liked a single one. Names, I mean.’

There was no response. The ward seemed to be waiting for the next bestowal: a Spot, or a Dobby, or a Dumbo.

Sherlock leant back and crossed a leg over. ‘You know where my name comes from? Sherlock? A bit strange, isn’t it?’

For the very first time, a light of curiosity entered the ward’s eyes.

‘My parents couldn’t settle on a name. Mother wanted William. Father wanted Scott. Terribly dull, the both of them. The names, not my parents. Then again, that’s debateable. They argued about it for days, until the council threatened to fine them for not submitting a name with the birth certificate. Then, as the story goes, my elder brother was looking at me in my crib, and the sun was coming through the window, right into my face. He said it looked like my hair was glowing. And Mother, the family linguist, said it reminded her of a surname, coming from the Old English: scir, meaning bright, and locc, meaning hair. Sherlock. They thought it suited me. I was blond until I reached the age of four.

He grinned, watching the ward’s face flit daringly to his dark curls. Sherlock had always thought the story of his name a bit ridiculous, overly sentimental even, so he never shared it with anyone, even though he was asked endlessly where it had come from. He had no idea why he was sharing it with a ward he’d barely known for twenty-four hours. ‘Wouldn’t think it to look at me now, would you?’

‘No sir. It is . . . an unusual name.’

Ah. An opinion. So the ward had opinions after all.

‘Quite so. But I’ve always preferred it. Because you see, Mother won the argument. They named me
William. But they tacked on Sherlock and Scott as well. And when I was old enough to know them all, I decided I liked Sherlock best, and since then I’ve answered to none other. So in a way, I suppose you could say that I named myself.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘You miss the point of this story. That’s what I would like you to do. I want you to name yourself. Anything you like. But it will be your choice.’

The ward didn’t have time to fully express his astonishment, because at that moment, Mrs Hudson came up the stairs, once again bearing the tea tray. This time, however, it was laden with a pitcher of orange-banana smoothie and two bowls of rice pudding.

‘Here we are, dear,’ she said, setting the tray on the coffee table. Then she stood straight and wringed her hands together, and Sherlock thought her smile looked less natural, more deliberate as her eyes turned to the ward.

The ward pushed himself to his feet with a wince and turned to face her. He dipped his head and mumbled, ‘Morning, ma’am,’ as wards were wont.

Sherlock stood as well and walked to stand by her for a proper introduction. ‘This is Mrs Hudson. She’s my landlady, not my housekeeper, but she often confuses the two.’

‘Oh stop it,’ she said, slapping his arm. ‘He’s helpless, really, or I wouldn’t have to bother so much with him.’ Yes. Definitely nervous, Mrs Hudson; her already high voice had gone up three whole pitches. ‘And what’s your name, then?’ she said to the ward.

‘He’s working on it,’ said Sherlock.

‘Oh. I see. My goodness. What happened here?’ She indicated the bloodstain on the front of the ward’s shirt.

‘Bit of trouble last night,’ Sherlock answered. ‘Thank you for the breakfast. This will do.’

He meant it as a dismissal. There were things to do, and he wanted to get on with it: feeding the ward, helping him undress, changing the wrappings, and then dressing him again in non-blood-stained clothes. Then he had to figure out what came next.

But she didn’t leave.

‘I’m told you’ve had a bit of a bother with your tooth,’ said Mrs Hudson, seating herself on the sofa and thus inviting herself to stay longer. She left Sherlock to serve the ward a bowl of rice pudding himself. But she sat stiffly, and on the very edge of the sofa, failing to appear at ease but trying her damnedest to be civil. ‘I understand, dear, I’ve got a hip. Sometimes when those things start up, it’s all you can think about, isn’t it? I’m sorry I don’t have more of a spread. Yoghurt would have been nice, I suppose. Sherlock wanted apple sauce, and I’m afraid I haven’t any, but then, I normally do the shopping on a Monday. That’s when they get in all the fresh fruits and vegetables, see. You wait until the end of the week, and you’re left with wilting spinach and spotted apples, and we can’t have that. You’d have to eat it all the same day, or it would spoil, and that’s ever so impractical.’

The ward, seated once again in the armchair, held the bowl of cold rice pudding in two hands and stared at Mrs Hudson like he’d never seen anything like her before. Sherlock almost laughed. But the ward seemed too timid to tuck in, despite the fact he must have been starving. So Sherlock decided to offer him a little encouragement.
'Eat!' Sherlock said, and sat himself again in his leather chair.

But the sudden boom of his voice had a rather adverse effect.

The ward’s shoulders jumped and his hands flinched, and the bowl hit the floor at his feet. Rice pudding lurched from the bowl and across the rug.

‘Oh!’ cried Mrs Hudson.

‘Shit.’ Sherlock jerked his feet apart to keep them from landing in pudding.

The ward looked horrified. His eyes lifted to Sherlock, round and frightened. ‘Forgive me, sir.’ Even his voice was shaking. ‘I’ll clean it up.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Mrs Hudson, rising to her feet.

But the ward was already lowering himself to his knees and scooping the sludgy rice back into the bowl with a bare hand.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Sherlock said, flabbergasted, and he rose to his feet where he loomed over the stooped ward. The ward flinched again, ducking his head into his injured shoulder and freezing in the act of cleaning the mess.

‘Sherlock!’ Mrs Hudson said in a hissing whisper, waving him over to her urgently. Still flummoxed, he crossed the room to her, but her intent was only to move him away from the ward. She stepped toward him herself.

‘There now, dear, it was just a slip. Come on, then, let’s get you washed up. Sherlock will clean up the rug.’

‘What?’ said Sherlock, who wasn’t in the habit of cleaning anything. Besides, it wasn’t his mess.

She ignored him and led the ward to the kitchen sink by the elbow. Rolling his eyes, Sherlock went for the kitchen paper.

Afterwards, Mrs Hudson set the ward at the kitchen table for his breakfast, which Sherlock watched him eat slowly, head lowered over the bowl of fresh rice pudding as he chewed carefully on the uninjured side of his mouth. He took the smoothie with a spoon, the better to manage it. After all, the freezing cold mixture was probably not too welcome to exposed nerves, no matter how well the wound was packed. But he ate anyway, eyes shining with wet and looking like he was having trouble swallowing. Meanwhile, Mrs Hudson took what was left and readied it to be stored in Sherlock’s refrigerator.

‘Oh Sherlock, it’s no wonder! You’ve barely a morsel!’

Bristling, he said, ‘It was hardly a problem until I had a second mouth to feed.’ Then he twirled away to throw himself onto the sofa and sulk. It was nice not to have the ward in his eye line. All the same, he threw an arm over his face. God, he was tired. Not sleeping last night was a mistake: it was going to be a long day.

The sound of a clearing throat above him made him peek under his arm to see Mrs Hudson standing there, hands akimbo, giving him a censorious look. He wasn’t used to seeing that. Not from her, at least.

Her lips moved, but he had to strain to hear her. ‘Don’t. You. Dare.’
He furrowed his brow at her and slowly rose to sitting. As if she’d said nothing at all, she took a couple of steps back and announced clearly, ‘Looks like I’m off to the shops to get you stocked up. *You* have things to do around here.’

With another pointed look, she turned away and left the flat.

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There was one more flinch from the ward, this time when Sherlock was changing the bandage for the shoulder wound.

‘Sorry,’ Sherlock murmured, and he tried to be gentler with his application of medicated cream.

He’d seen the torn tissue while at the vet’s, but now he got to examine it properly. Not that he hadn’t seen a bullet wound before, but usually they were in dead people. This one was healing, and it fascinated him. The bullet had gone straight through, creating a perfectly round hole where it had entered. There, in the centre of the shoulder, the skin pulled tight and a little puckered and red, though the muscle below still bled blue underneath in a wide, web-like pattern, a reminder of the devastating impact of lead punching through flesh, muscle, and bone. But on the opposite side, the exit wound looked more like an explosion in the skin, where that same flesh, muscle, and bone had erupted outward, leaving behind a mass like a starburst. There would have been a lot of blood.

‘Is the medication helping?’ he asked, if only for something to say. He was miserable at small talk.

‘Yes sir.’

Then again, the ward was worse.

He thought of correcting him again, insisting the ward call him Sherlock, not sir. He hated *sir*. Mycroft was a *sir*. But he let it pass. He still felt badly about the pudding.

‘So why did he shoot you? What did you do?’

Already sitting perfectly still in the chair, the ward seemed to have no reaction to the question, but something indiscernible about him seemed to freeze.

Was that one of those ‘impolite’ things Lestrade was endlessly harping on him about? Maybe he shouldn’t have asked the question, or at least waited until he wasn’t actively probing at the shoulder wound to satisfy his own curiosity. But it was out there now, and he wasn’t going to retract it.

‘Was it accidental? Was he, I don’t know, fooling around or showing off or drunk?’

‘No sir,’ said the ward. ‘He . . . he was angry, sir.’

‘What made him angry?’

‘I . . .’ The ward looked a little panicked, like he couldn’t find the right words. ‘I displeased him. But Mr Holmes, sir, I promise: I will try very hard not to displease *you*.’

Sherlock balked. ‘That’s hardly a concern. Nor what I was getting at.’ He capped the bottle of medicated cream and finished dressing the wound in silence. At last, he came around the front with a fresh t-shirt from his wardrobe. As he helped the ward into it, he said, ‘I can see that your last host was a bastard. Maybe I am, too. But not like that. I won’t hurt you. All right? I don’t even own a gun.’
If he thought this might be an appeasing assertion, he was wrong. The ward wasn’t even looking at him now as he gave a shallow nod.

‘Do you believe me?’

‘Yes sir.’

At that moment, Sherlock’s phone began ringing. As he moved to answer, it, he sighed. ‘No, you don’t.’

The caller ID read Lestrade. He answered it eagerly.

‘Sir Jeffrey Patterson, apparently, was having an affair,’ said the detective inspector.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘That’s what I told you last night. Why else would he have two mobile phones? Obvious.’

‘That doesn’t always mean an affair. Patterson was a diplomat, and those sorts commonly have a personal number and a business one . . . But that’s beside the point. Yes, yes, you were right, but now we have more direct evidence of the fact. A witness saw him and the PA together in a decidedly personal and not business manner. Maybe he killed himself out of shame? I don’t know, but it’s a lead. We’re going to go question her now. I’ll be by to pick you up in about ten minutes.’

Sherlock held the phone to his ear but didn’t respond. He rotated slowly, and from the corner of his eye saw the ward carefully rolling his shoulder, like he was trying to work out a kink but not draw attention to himself.

‘Sherlock? Did you hear me? I said ten minutes.’

Sherlock closed his eyes in dismay, wondering what the hell was going on with his life. He’d said no to plenty of cases, but never to ones he found so interesting. He forwent food and sleep and showers and personal matters in the interest of interesting cases. So he cringed when he heard himself say, ‘I’m busy.’

‘Come again?’

God, this was a good case! How could he say no? Maybe he could just drag the ward along and tell him to stay out of the way. But no, that would never do, especially considering his current condition. Why did Mrs Hudson have to go out? She could have been a handy minder. He had to say no, but damned if he would be happy about it.

‘Are you serious?’

‘Something came up.’

‘In the last twelve hours?’ Lestrade sounded utterly baffled, incredulous. ‘After begging me to contact you first thing—’

‘I never beg!’

‘—and insisting I share with you the confidential toxicology report—’

‘Do you have it?’

‘No! It’ll be at least another day. I just figured you’d be keen on talking to the next of kin—and to the other woman.’
‘You can fill me in later,’ said Sherlock. He had to get off this phone. The conversation was just making him mad.

‘Right, but what’s so impor—?’

Sherlock ended the call.

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Sometime in the early afternoon, he noticed that his ward’s breathing became more . . . deliberate. Sherlock didn’t know why he was keyed in to the sound of the man’s breath, of all things, but that’s what drew his attention, which led him to notice the way the ward sat rigidly in the armchair, his back slightly arched and his eyes cast downward, and not at the television Sherlock had insisted that he watch while Sherlock worked, and which should have drowned out the sound of nasal inhalations, exhalations. He noticed, too, the new sheen of sweat on the ward’s brow, and then the way his fingers gripped the armrest. It was not unlike how he’d first seen him, at the pound.

Sherlock looked at his watch.

‘Shit, why didn’t you say something?’ he said, rising.

The ward looked sheepishly up at him through his lashes, then back down, like he dared not speak. Or move.

Sherlock went to the kitchen, where he’d left the oxycodone by the sink. Then he pulled a glass from the cupboard and filled it with tap water. The ward was almost three hours late in taking it, which meant he’d been suffering for three hours without saying a word.

‘You know, you don’t have to wait for permission,’ he said, setting the glass on the side table and passing the pill directly into his hand. ‘Every eight hours, right? You know how to tell time?’

‘Yes sir,’ said the ward, but miserably. He placed the pill at the back of his mouth, but his right hand was shaking too much to lift the glass, and Sherlock knew his left was too weak to grip it. Sherlock watched as the forlorn creature waited for whatever fit had taken control of his hand to pass before he attempted to drink from the glass, but it was no good.

‘Let me,’ he said. And he lifted the glass himself and put it to the ward’s lips until he swallowed.

He was on the cusp of asking about it—Had he always had a tremor in that hand?—when the buzzer sounded, announcing a guest. Or maybe a client? He could really use a client about now. He might even be able to solve a case from the comfort of the sitting room. The thought cheered him.

But when the visitor arrived, his heart sank to see it was only the courier he had been dreading.

‘Signature here, here, and initial here,’ said the boy, a student (unless he wore the London College pin on the strap of his crossover bag ironically) studying . . . Sherlock took a quick sniff. Yes, that was formaldehyde. Med student then. Trying to earn a little extra cash by taking a job as a courier. That meant he didn’t come from money. He was a new adult, so most likely still on his first ward, though Sherlock wondered how much work he put into it. Most students used the state-funded stipend intended for their wards on benders and holidays to New France, the way foolish students always did. It was unfortunate that not even they were exempt from the CFCA.

As he signed and dated the receipt, Sherlock wondered idly whether the kid would be interested in a trade. It might be good practise for the aspiring doctor, taking care of an invalid.
‘Cheerio, mate,’ the courier said as he ran back down the stairs and off to his next delivery.

Sherlock ripped the string on the flap of the flat package and pulled it out: the registration forms from the South London Ward Shelter and Holding Facility. At the top of the page was the ward’s registration number, JW6462-11, and confirmation of payment of £1,500, which had cleared that morning. He scratched his chin as he read through the rest, which required first that Sherlock fill out his own information (name, national identification number, address, phone number, members of the household, next of kin, monthly income, cost of rent, proof of housing, and proof of employment), as well as offering proof of health inspection (he had Dr Murray’s receipt on the desk), and finally, on the back, he found a list of items requiring his initials:

___ I understand that hosting a ward is part of my civic duty as a citizen of the State of New Britain.

___ I understand that my ward is a living creature with needs, and that I am obligated to meet those needs.

___ I understand that it is against the law to use government stipend money intended for the care of my ward for any other purpose.

___ I understand that, according to the CFCA, I must ensure that my ward is clothed both night and day.

___ I understand that, according the CFCA, I must ensure that my ward consumes the recommended number of daily calories prescribed by a ward medical professional.

___ I understand that, according to the CFCA, I must address any of my ward’s medical needs in a timely fashion.

___ I understand that, if my ward is a child, I am obligated to educate my ward from age 5 to age 12.

___ I understand that I am not permitted to take my ward outside the district of registration.

___ I understand that my ward must wear identifying bracelets when out in public, whether or not I am present.

___ I understand that it is illegal to abandon my ward.

___ I understand that it is illegal to buy, sell, or trade with another host, or to let another host assume custody, without proper governmental approval.

___ I understand that it is illegal to use my ward for unreasonable labour.

___ I understand that it is illegal to use my ward in a sexual manner.

___ I understand that it is illegal to talk to my ward about Norway.

___ I understand that it is my responsibility to discipline my ward in a state-sanctioned manner.

___ I understand that if my ward dies or is seriously injured, I must file a report within forty-eight hours.

___ I understand that, after the expiration of my ward or termination of my hosting duties with respect to my ward, I am under obligation to find a replacement within thirty days and continue my civic hosting duties, unless otherwise exempted.

___ I understand that any failure to meet with my obligations to my ward will result in a fine and/or
jail time and/or mandatory ward-care training at my own expense.

Signed ______________________________ Dated ________________

Sherlock scrubbed his chin irritably as he read through the list and didn’t mark anything. He vaguely remembered signing one of these when he had taken over custody of Barnaby, but he’d done so only as a matter of course, a formality. Back then, he had had no need to pay attention to any of it. He turned back to the first page and saw one more item that he had skimmed past:

Ward Common Name ___________________

Well, that was it then, wasn’t it? He couldn’t fill this out yet, even if he wanted to. He set it on the desk on top of Barnaby’s expiry papers and walked away, toward the stairs. Though he couldn’t leave the flat, he nevertheless needed to get away from the ward. So disappearing upstairs to his well-beloved private laboratory would do for now.

‘I’m just’—he also felt compelled to explain his departure—‘popping upstairs for a bit. Just keep . . . doing whatever it is you do. We’ll, erm, have tea in an hour.’

Then he fled up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time and closing himself into the room.

Sherlock had been renting 221B for seven years, and for six-and-a-half of those years, he had enjoyed the use of his lab. Though it wasn’t as sophisticated as those he had used at uni (he had not yet acquired a homogeniser, for instance), it was well equipped with a high-powered microscope, a centrifuge, laboratory scales, spectrophotometer, pH metres, and refractometer, and he was planning on acquiring a microtome next. He was proud of this space. It was worth thousands of pounds and countless hours of entertainment and discovery. These machines let him carry on with his work as a private investigator, so it was also an investment in his profession. What was he honestly expected to do? Clear it all away so the ward could have his own bedroom? Unreasonable. Make the ward sleep on the sofa for the next however many years or decades the man survived? Untenable. Move house and find a three-bedroom flat for the same rate as Mrs Hudson was asking? Impossible.

He sank down onto his swivel stool, put his head on the table, and moaned.

Don’t work yourself up over nothing, he self-chided. He’ll be gone before the week is out.

Of course, there was the kitchen. The table there was a good deal smaller, but it would hold a microscope and scales just fine. Everything else could be . . . spread out. Beakers on the countertop. Centrifuge in the cupboard. Refractometer in a drawer.

You’ll call up Bill Wiggins, and he’ll find you a buyer. No questions asked.

This room would fit a single-size mattress, easy. Or a small double. Or just a regular double. Hell, why not? What grown man wanted to sleep on a single when a double was an option?

Get a cat. Get a gerry. Send it to the estate. Make Mycroft worry about it.

And a wardrobe could stand in the corner. A writing desk by the window. A sock drawer, a shoe rack, a standing mirror.

This doesn’t have to be your problem.

Maybe it didn’t have to be such a problem.

Sixty minutes passed in silence, but he still didn’t know if he would fill out that form.
He trudged back downstairs, but his feet stopped short in the threshold.

‘What’s this!’

The ward was standing by the table at the window, and when he turned around, Sherlock saw that a tea spread had been laid: pot, cup, saucer, sugar bowl, and apparently whatever was left of the milk in a tiny jug.

It was a tea set Sherlock hadn’t used in . . . years, was it? An inheritance from his mother, it was a Victorian-era set with bluebells and painted gold rims, in immaculate condition, and—though he would never admit it—of too much sentimental value to be used for anything less formal than tea with King Charles, as far as he was concerned. Mostly, it was for display. The ward must have seen it in the hutch in the corner and thought it suitable for afternoon tea. In his mind’s eye, Sherlock saw the incident with the rice pudding re-enacting itself with the precious teacups.

‘Did you not ask for tea, sir?’

_Do you know how to make a good pot of tea? That’s all that I require._ Those were the very words he had used at the pound. And then, just now, _We’ll have tea in an hour._

The ward had heard it as a command.

_Be patient_, he heard Mike Stamford say in his head.

Sherlock pursed his lips together and withheld a squeak of horror. ‘I did. Yes. Thank you. I had planned on making it myself, but . . . thank you.’

He took an eye of scrutiny to the delicate pot and cups, expecting to see a chip or crack, but he didn’t. The ward stood by, anxiously awaiting judgement as the aroma of tea rose from the teapot’s spout. Delicately, Sherlock poured himself a cup and added two sugars. He stirred. Then, watching the ward over the rim of the cup, he sipped. Swallowed. Smacked.

‘It’s good,’ he said, and the ward visibly relaxed.

‘Yoo-hoo!’

Sherlock replaced the cup in its saucer and turned toward the clunking noise of Mrs Hudson ascending the stairs. Seconds later, she jostled herself through the door, arms laden with the shopping—bags and bags of it, muscles visibly straining in her neck.

‘For God’s sake, Mrs Hudson!’ he cried. ‘If you had rung the bell, I would have come down!’

‘Oh posh,’ she said, dropping everything in the entryway. ‘You can help me unload it here.’

But it wasn’t just food she had brought back with her. Among the groceries were paper carrier bags filled with clothes. After they had moved the groceries to the kitchen and the cold items to the fridge, she began to lay out the rest on the sofa.

‘Now, I had to guess at your size, dear,’ she said to the ward, while Sherlock stared slack-jawed and the ward stood back, hesitant to show his curiosity at the things she had brought him. ‘But I think I did all right. Come here, come here, don’t be shy.’ The ward toed his way closer, and she held up a button-up collared shirt to his chest. ‘Oh yes, this will do nicely. Don’t you think? It’s a lovely colour on you. What do you think, Sherlock?’
‘Mrs Hudson, you didn’t have to . . . That is, I was going to outfit him myself. Soon enough.’

‘Nonsense, it was on my way.’ Sherlock doubted very much that it was. ‘Besides, he didn’t have a stitch to call his own! And don’t you worry about the cost. I’ll be tacking it onto your rent.’

She hadn’t held back. On the sofa, she stacked five collared shirts (chequered and plain) and three striped jumpers, two pairs of jeans and three pairs of trousers, winter pyjamas and dressing gown, a week’s worth of undergarments and a six-pack of men’s dark socks, a brown leather belt and heavy black coat, not to mention gloves, scarf, and hat. Though they weren’t of the highest fashion nor finest make, neither were they second-hand nor from a ward’s shopping centre. It was hundreds of pounds’ worth of articles. It wasn’t that Sherlock resented it. He was just surprised Mrs Hudson had taken the initiative. And ashamed he’d not done it himself.

‘I didn’t know your shoe size, love,’ she continued, ‘and it’s not a thing one should guess at. So you’ll have to wait on those.’

Sherlock jumped in before he could stop himself. ‘I’m taking him shopping for shoes tomorrow.’ Then, perhaps as compensation, he added, ‘And boots. Shoes and boots.’

The ward looked stunned. ‘Thank you, sir,’ he said, a little breathlessly. ‘Thank you, ma’am. This is all so . . . I’ve never . . . That is, it’s very generous.’

‘Generous nothing!’ said Mrs Hudson. ‘You’re part of the family now, aren’t you? It’s only right that you be comfortable here, and your own proper clothes is a step in the right direction.’

At the word family, both Sherlock and the ward looked away, the former because of guilt at what he was half-planning to do. The ward, whose head seemed perpetually bent toward the floor, muttered another thank you. He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the neatly stacked piles on the sofa, and Sherlock had the fleeting thought: he wondered how much the ward had ever had to call his own. Wards were not technically permitted ownership, in the legal sense of the word, but most of them accumulated possessions of one sort or another. Children had toys, teenagers had pre-approved books, adults had keepsakes gifted to them by hosts. All of them had a limited wardrobe. When wards passed from one host to another, usually they brought with them a traveller’s bag or small suitcase of their meagre belongings. His ward had come with nothing. Literally nothing.

‘Go on, then,’ said Mrs Hudson with a smile, patting the ward’s arm with encouragement. ‘Try something on.’

‘Shall I help you?’ Sherlock volunteered. Then, as explanation to Mrs Hudson, he pointed to his own shoulder and said, ‘Bit of a stiff arm.’

‘I think I can manage all right, sir,’ said the ward.

‘As you like it. Feel free to use the bedroom.’

Mrs Hudson picked out an outfit, from pants to jumper, and the ward walked (limped) to the back of the flat.

‘He’ll be all right,’ she said, nodding her approval. ‘Bit shy, though, isn’t he?’

‘Mm.’

‘Poor thing. You can tell he’s been through a nasty spell.’

Yes, the ward’s last host had obviously been violent. All the classic signs of long-term abuse were
there. Anxiety, fearfulness, difficulty in social interactions, withdrawn personality. He was underweight, malnourished, generally neglected. The evidence of physical maltreatment in the form of scars and discoloured skin patterns and poorly set bones lengthened the timeline of mistreatment beyond weeks or months. Sherlock suspected years. And all that was beside the fact he’d been shot.

Why the hell had he chosen such a ward?

‘He’ll have a right time settling in,’ Mrs Hudson carried on. ‘Looks like we’ll have our hands full.’

Sherlock’s head came around and his eyebrows pinched. ‘We?’

‘Oh, I don’t mean to be presumptuous. Sorry, love. You are of course more than capable of caring for your own ward. Just know that, if ever you should need me—’

‘I need you!’ said Sherlock before he could stop the words from leaving his mouth or think of a more dignified way to say it. He quickly walked back to the tea tray and sipped from his cup, trying to act like he had not just let his desperation burst out of him.

But Mrs Hudson was more tactful than to call him out on it. ‘All right,’ she said mildly.

He poured her a cuppa. As he did, he realised the ward had not poured one for himself. ‘If it’s no bother.’

‘No bother at all. If I can handle you, I can certainly handle him.’

He eyed her sceptically before realising he was being teased. She covered her mouth, giggling, then accepted the cup. ‘Thank you, dear. My, if this isn’t a lovely tea set.’

They sat companionably, drinking their tea and waiting for the ward to return. It took some time, and Sherlock was tempted to go tap on the door and ask if everything was all right, but Mrs Hudson bade him be patient. ‘He shouldn’t feel rushed.’ At long last, they heard soft footsteps coming down the hall, and the ward reappeared, dressed in a pair of jeans and a black-and-blue striped jumper. The transformation was remarkable. But for the shorn head and half-swollen jaw, the ward no longer had the look of a mutt fresh from the pound. Mrs Hudson had a good eye: the clothes looked to fit him well enough (a little loose, but he’d get more meat on him in time), and they suited him besides. He wasn’t exactly smiling, but there was light in his eyes Sherlock hadn’t seen before. Something intelligent he had missed.

‘Splendid!’ cried Mrs Hudson, clapping her hands together. ‘You look marvellous, dear. How’s it feel?’

‘Thank you, ma’am, very good, ma’am,’ said the ward, nodding to her gratefully. He looked at Sherlock and away, but gave a nod in his direction, too.

One thing at a time, he supposed.

***

It was night. After spending most of the afternoon in 221B helping Sherlock tidy the sitting room, Mrs Hudson had returned to her flat. He didn’t fail to notice how the ward watched her go, and a bit of the uneasiness returned. Evidently, he was afraid of being with Sherlock on his own. The presence of the cheery older woman had set at bay those fears, but in her absence they returned. Sherlock was determined to show him that he had nothing to fear from him. He had given him the pain pills just when he was supposed to, and two yoghurt cups Mrs Hudson had bought, and he even complimented him on how much nicer he looked in his own clothing. See? He was a nice guy.
Sherlock was in a much improved mood himself because, ever since Mrs Hudson had offered to be that helping hand, the concept on taking on such a ward was finally seeming . . . manageable. He wasn’t sure what it was, exactly, that lightened the skies, but though it had been only a day and a half, and not an easy day and a half, he was far less inclined to shuck himself of the whole thing and start again.

He could think of the ward as a project. A challenge. A puzzle. He did like those.

‘Pardon, Mr Holmes?’

Sherlock had barely realised that he was lost in his own thoughts; there was usually no one around to pull him out of them. He was seated in his chair, angled toward the fireplace, which glowed merrily as the flames licked away at a log. He’d told the ward to ready for bed, and gave him the space and time to do it, and as before, he took a long time to undress and dress again, but he seemed to prefer doing it alone. Just as well. Now, Sherlock looked up and saw the ward standing at the edge of the sitting room in his new pyjamas and slippers and dressing gown, his hands flexing at his sides as he steeled himself to address his new host so boldly.

‘Yes, what it is?’ Sherlock lifted his head and lowered his steepled hands. ‘I’m afraid it will be the sofa again tonight.’

‘That’s fine, sir, I don’t mind. But . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘You said I should think of something. Something for you to call me.’

Oh. Oh! Sherlock dropped both feet to the floor and leant forward. ‘Yes, I did. Your name.’ Clearly, the ward had been thinking it over all day, silently, without any indication that anything at all was happening in that seemingly quiet brain. ‘You’ve thought of one, then?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Well? Let’s hear it.’

The ward shifted his weight to his stronger leg, and flexed his fingers again. ‘I was thinking, maybe . . .’ His voice was shy, his eyes downcast. ‘John.’

Sherlock stared at him, a little underwhelmed. He didn’t know what he had been expecting. Certainly nothing spectacular, like Reginald or Maximillian, but neither something so commonplace. Why, it was probably one of the most common male names in the whole of the English language! He might as well have called himself John Smith for all that was unique about it.

But then, as Sherlock thought on it, perhaps that was the point. John, an ordinary name for an ordinary man, or rather, just a man. Not a pet or a slave or a prisoner, not a ward shuffled about from host to host like a trading card. Just . . . a man. Like any other.

His pondering rendered the ward doubtful.

‘Is it not a good name?’ the ward asked.

‘No, it is,’ said Sherlock. ‘A very good name.’ Plain. Unadorned. But very . . . human. He smiled. ‘John it is.’

And to show he meant it, he rose swiftly to his feet and walked to the table where the registration
form had been lying untouched for hours. On the line designated, Sherlock wrote in clear, crisp letters, the ward’s new name: John.
He was missing at breakfast. He was absent from lunch. He wasn’t to be found in his bedroom, or
the garden, or anywhere at all in the house. Sherlock stomped around noisily in search of him, letting
his wooden sword drag against walls and rattle railings until Mycroft seized it from him in a game of
keep-away that distracted him for all of twenty seconds before his little brain couldn’t take the
aggravation anymore. He filled his lungs and bellowed for all of Sussex to hear: ‘Where is
Redbeard!’

His best playmate had disappeared, seemingly overnight. Mum and Dad were gone, too, but that was
part and parcel of a day in the life of the Holmes family with work schedules and shopping trips and
visits to relatives and important friends. But Redbeard was always at home, always. Until he wasn’t.

Later, they tried explaining it to him. ‘He’s gone to another home, sweetheart,’ his mother said. He
sat between his parents on the sofa with his arms folded tightly and his pirate hat pulled down over
his eyes. They had confiscated the sword.

‘When’s he coming back?’ he demanded.

‘I know this is hard, son,’ said his father, ‘but Redbeard isn’t coming back.’

He threw his hat to the floor. ‘Why not!’

‘He’s living with another family now.’

‘Why!’

‘That’s just the way things go, sometimes.’

‘But we’re his family!’ he protested. ‘And no one else.’ He wished he hadn’t thrown his hat. He
wanted to hide his face again so they couldn’t see the tears.

His father sighed and his mother rubbed his arm consolingly. He twisted away from her.

‘I want you to understand something,’ said his father. ‘Redbeard was a good friend to you. But he
wasn’t family. He was more like . . . a visitor. And visitors aren’t here to stay.’

This made no sense to him. After all, his whole life, there had never been a day without Redbeard in
the home. Sherlock jumped off the sofa, walked over to his pirate hat, and stomped on it. ‘I hate
Redbeard!’ he cried.

It was his first lesson the differences between hosts and wards, and he did not learn it well.

***

The first week of playing host was a mixed bag of ups and downs. Mostly downs.

To start, Sherlock was unaccustomed to sharing space. He hadn’t done so since his first term at uni,
when he had been forced to share living quarters with some half-baked tweed-clad pompous-chinned
Yorkshireman. The lad was insufferably dim and humourless, so rather than dedicate himself to his
books and lecture notes, Sherlock devised an elaborate plan to oust his undesirable flatmate from the
university altogether and send him back north where he belonged. In this, Sherlock met with success.
He preferred the solitary life. Living alone meant the only body he had to take notice of was his own: he didn’t have to announce his comings and goings, carve out space for another occupant, or rein in his eccentricities and bad habits. But now, he had to fit the ward into the flat, and in a manner that was comfortable for them both. It was a matter of adjustments, large and small. Sacrifices, Mike Stamford would have called them.

One of the first things he did was furnish the upstairs bedroom, and he began by clearing out his laboratory. He enlisted the ward to help him relocate machinery to the kitchen and sitting room, and in doing so had to reorganise the cupboards and counter space, which meant a great deal of cleaning when he discovered what was in some of those cupboards and drawers. What began in the kitchen spilt out into the sitting room, and what he had estimated to be an hour’s worth of work in rearranging turned into two full days of hard cleaning and disinfectants. Fortunately, the ward took well to hard work, and nary a word of complaint left his lips.

Not that the ward did much talking to begin with, and that was one of the things that was beginning to drive Sherlock crazy. Yes, he had told the ward at the pound that he preferred silence, and he thought that was true. But damn, if the ward wasn’t taking that to heart. And when Sherlock tried to start conversations, he got a quick ‘Yes sir’ or ‘No sir’ or some other answer delivered in the shortest, most sure-to-shut-down-a-conversation way possible.

Three days following the ward’s arrival, two other things arrived on Baker Street: the first was a furniture van. Sherlock watched the ward with amusement as the movers made several trips to carry a mattress, bedframe, headboard, wardrobe, four-drawer chest, writing desk, standing mirror, and shoe rack up two flights of stairs. When it was all arranged and the movers had gone, they stood together in the transformed room and took it all in. It was a handsome set of furniture: bevelled maple wood, robin egg duvet and pillows, cream-coloured curtains, paisley rug (Mrs Hudson had been instrumental in selecting from the online catalogue). The ward’s blue eyes were wide with awe.

‘Not too shabby, eh, John?’

‘No sir, it’s quite nice, sir. It’s . . . Am I to sleep here, sir?’

‘Of course you’ll sleep here. And dress here. And do whatever you like here. It’s your bedroom.’

‘I’ve never . . . That is, sir, I don’t need more than the sofa, sir. Or a fold-away.’

‘I’ve told you. Call me Sherlock.’ He sighed, knowing it was no use. ‘And you’re not spending the rest of your life sleeping on a sofa or cot. You’ll have a proper bed. Didn’t you have a proper bed in your last home?”

‘This is very nice, sir, thank you,’ the ward said softly, dodging the question.

Sherlock rubbed a spot between his eyes. Patience. ‘How’s the mouth?’

‘Much improved, sir.’

‘Still tender?’

‘Only a little, sir.’

‘And the shoulder?’

‘The same, sir.’

‘Ears?’
Much improved, sir.

Right. Let’s go downstairs and eat something. I’m famished.

The second thing to arrive was the ward’s registration, file, and host kit. This included the official ID card reading John, Hosted by Sherlock Holmes, followed by the registration number JW6462-11 and physical description: Height (5’6) Weight (118 lbs) Eye Colour (Blue) Hair Colour (Dark Blond) Skin Colour (White), Year of Birth (1993) and attached photograph, taken when he’d first arrived at the pound, in which the ward did not smile. It also included a ward permit bank card so the ward could do the shopping (it was more like a tab card that drew from Sherlock’s account and alerted him to any purchases) and what they called Ward Identifying Bracelets, which were to be worn at all times while in public. There was even the Ward Identifying Collar, but very few hosts made use of it, and only as a disciplinary measure (other state-approved disciplinary tools were offered for purchase in the catalogue).

But what Sherlock was really interested in was the file. It was the official record of the ward’s—no, stop that. John. His name is John—John’s hosting history, medical history, and state-disciplinary recommendations based on an undisclosed history. The file itself was, to say the least, dissatisfying as far as being informative or useful. His medical history was spotty, mentioning only chicken pox contracted at the age of six, the castration at twenty, and the gunshot wound at thirty-seven. The disciplinary recommendations included only ‘strictly enforced curfew’ and ‘close monitoring of use of transaction card’, which, Sherlock believed, were the standard recommendations, widely applicable to all wards. The listing of all of John’s past hosts were also classified, although their locations were not. John hadn’t been lying: before Sherlock, he’d had seventeen of them.

1. 1993 (age 0) Hospital Care, Dover, Kent
2. 1994 (age 14 mos) Host, Dover, Kent
3. 1997 (age 4) Host, Sheperdswell, Kent
4. 1998 (age 5) Host, Aylesham, Kent
5. 1999 (age 6) Children’s Asylum, Canterbury, Kent
6. 2001 (age 8) Host, Lingfield, Surrey
7. 2004 (age 11) Host, Epsom, Surrey
8. 2005 (age 12) Host, Beckenham, Greater London
10. 2006 (age 13) Rehabilitation Farm, Six Mile Bottom, Cambridgeshire
12. 2012 (age 19) Host, Stratford, London
16. 2024 (age 31) Host, Pimlico, London
17. 2025 (age 32) Host, Tower Hamlets, London
18. 2030 (age 37) Current Host, Sherlock Holmes, Marylebone, London

The history stunned him. He had never heard of a ward moving around so much. The question pressing on his mind was why? With so many host families wanting to take in an infant, why had John lingered in hospital care for the first fourteen months of his life? And why had he then passed through three hosts before landing in a children’s asylum at the age of six, and been left there for two years? Why a children’s asylum, and not a pound? Why had he been removed from a host at fourteen to live three years on a rehabilitation farm? Rehabilitated for what?

Sherlock followed the trail through seven London hosts, but he fixated on the last. At thirty-two, John had been placed with the abusive host who would end up shooting and nearly killing him. And
yet, he’d been there a full five years, the longest time he had spent anywhere. Again, he wondered: what had led to the shooting? Was the man insane, or was the ward, despite all appearances, trouble?

He lifted his eyes from the list and watched the ward—John—doing the washing up in the kitchen. Since they’d begun cleaning, John hadn’t stopped. He seemed most content when he was busy, and Sherlock didn’t know what else to do with him, so he let him go for it.

There didn’t seem to be any reason to pussyfoot around the issue. And Sherlock had never been shy about asking questions before. So he alighted from the chair and moved into the kitchen. John stood at the sink, a cupboard open by his head, but he wasn’t loading or unloading anything into it, so Sherlock took the initiative to push it shut with a bang.

John’s whole body jumped and recoiled, all at once, shoulders hunching, head ducking, a sharp gasp in his throat, and Sherlock—stunned—saw that his eyes were wide open in terror, staring down into the murky sink water where his sudsy hands had withdrawn and splayed, dropping whatever he had been cleaning to the bottom of the tub.

Sherlock had seen that posture before—in dogs. Dogs that knew they were about to be struck.

He lowered his hand from the cupboard, only then realising what the raised hand must have looked like in periphery.

‘I was just... closing it,’ said Sherlock pathetically. ‘You don’t think—Jesus, you don’t think I was going to...’

John didn’t move more than his eyeballs at first, and to emphasise that he meant no threat, Sherlock took a couple of steps back until John’s shoulders sagged again and he shuffled slightly to the side while trying to appear like he wasn’t.

‘Listen, John. I want you to hear me when I say this: I won’t ever—ever—hit you. Okay?’

John nodded.

‘I’d like to hear you say it.’

‘I know you won’t ever hit me,’ John repeated obediently.

‘Do you believe me?’

‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock shook his head. ‘No, you don’t.’ He walked back to the sitting room, his resolve to question John about his past now in pieces he knew shouldn’t try to put back together. Not yet.

***

On his way home from the Yard, where Lestrade had refused to give him cold case files for his distraction, Sherlock popped into Speedy’s for a bun. It had been seven days since acquiring the new ward, and Sherlock still had not broached the subject of the seventeen hosts. He was of two minds about it. On the one hand, he thought that perhaps it was none of his business and he should just let it lie. John’s past and secrets were his own, and they had no bearing on his current situation. That’s why such things were kept confidential.

Except no, because on the other hand, his past and secrets seemed to be having great bearing on his current situation—the way he reacted to banging doors, for instance—and that confidentiality was in
place not to protect wards’ privacy (wards had no privacy) but to protect prior hosts, which, given
the circumstances, seemed entirely wrong-footed. As John’s current caretaker, Sherlock felt he had
every right and reason to know about what his ward had gone through so he could more effectively
address it, and it bothered him—as a genius and as a detective—that he couldn’t just deduce it. The
details, anyway. He had a fairly good sense of the broader strokes. The only person who could tell
him anything of use, however, was John, and John wasn’t exactly chatty about his past.

‘Plumbing still giving you trouble?’ asked the baker, a Mr Chatterjee, as he handed Sherlock a bun in
exchange for the five-pound note.

‘Eh?’ said Sherlock, drawing himself out of his thoughts.

Mr Chatterjee made change. ‘I said, you get that toilet fixed yet?’

‘What’s wrong with my toilet?’

The baker shrugged. ‘Nothing I know of. I just assumed. What with your ward stopping in here all
regular-like to use the loo.’

‘He’s what?’

‘It’s no bother. Awfully polite about it, your ward. John is it?’

‘How regularly?’

‘I seen him every day for the last five or so, I’d say.’

Sherlock furrowed his brow in thought, chewing on the bun. He left the man standing with his
change. ‘I’ll see about my toilet,’ he said as he headed back out into the cold.

Mrs Hudson had taken John out (shopping for shoes, if Sherlock remembered right, a thing Sherlock
had meant to do himself, days ago), but Sherlock couldn’t enjoy the solitude of having the flat to
himself for a spell. Instead, he went straight for the bathroom and pulled the chain for the toilet. With
all its usual gurgle and swish, it flushed just fine. That’s when he noticed what was wrong with the
scene: nothing was wrong. Rather, nothing was different. Everything was exactly as it had been a
week ago, two weeks ago, six. His toothbrush was in the caddy, his toothpaste behind the mirror, his
razors in a cup on the shelf. There was as much toilet paper as there ever was, the same towels, the
same hair products and combs. Not one thing was out of place. If anything at all was different, it was
that the countertops were wiped down and the tub sparkled. But it was obvious: he was the only one
using this toilet.

He headed to the second floor, to John’s new bedroom, and what he found there disturbed him to
to such a degree he almost couldn’t process it. On the floor of the wardrobe, beneath where John’s few
new jumpers and chequered shirts hung, was a bucket where Sherlock used to keep the cleaning
stuffs, and inside the bucket, off-brand soap and a sponge, and draped over one of the hangers, a
hand towel. Sherlock gaped. This was what the ward (John! His name is John!) had been using as a
bath! And the Speedy’s he had been using for his toilet.

Why?

An hour later, Mrs Hudson returned home with John, whom she had outfitted with a pair of trainers,
brown boat shoes, and winter boots. And house slippers. And more socks. She beamed at her
success, stayed for a quick chat, and then announced that her show was on and returned to her flat.

Her footsteps had barely faded away before Sherlock said, ‘Is there a problem with my toilet, John?’
John was still carrying the bag of socks and slippers, trapping it close to his chest with one hand while balancing the boxes of boat shoes and trainers with the other. ‘Not that I know, sir.’

‘Hmf,’ Sherlock sniffed. ‘Come on, let me help you carry all that to your room.’

He relieved John of the boxes and indicated he head upstairs with a gesture of his head. Looking suddenly nervous, John nodded and obeyed.

Sherlock dumped the boxes on the bed, strode to the wardrobe, and pulled open the right-hand side. He pointed to the bucket. ‘You want to explain?’

John clutched the socks a little closer to his chest. ‘I’m sorry, sir. I’ll find my own bucket.’

‘What?’ Sherlock felt like he was asking that question a lot lately. He had never faced so much confusion as he had in the past week. ‘No! I’m not asking why you’re using this bucket. I don’t understand why you’re using a bucket at all!’

‘To . . . to bathe, sir. If I may.’

Sherlock threw up his hands. ‘What’s wrong with the shower!’

Cowed, John shuffled back a step, his head once again dipping and turning, and Sherlock was quick to lower his hands, and school his shouting.

‘John. I’m not mad. I’m perplexed. Why are you taking sponge baths and pissing at Speedy’s when there is literally a fully serviceable bathroom in this very flat, right under your feet?’

‘There’s but one toilet, sir.’

‘And?’

‘And it’s yours, sir.’

Sherlock spread his hands. ‘So?’

‘There is no ward toilet in the flat, Mr Holmes, and a ward does not sully his master’s toilet.’

Sherlock stared at him like he was a creature from Mars, whose logic defied that of all Earthly logic. ‘And what, I shudder to ask, do you think would happen if you did use my toilet?’

‘Whatever you wished,’ he said softly.

‘Let me rephrase. What happened the last time you used the host toilet?’

John’s eyes seemed incapable of rising from the floor. ‘A sky bath.’

‘A what?’

‘A sky bath, sir.’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea what that is,’ Sherlock said, shaking his head in bemusement.

John was suddenly talking very quickly, as though to get through something unpleasant. ‘It’s when you shower on the roof, sir, and the rain is your shower, sir, because rain is clean and you are not, sir.’
‘Oh, for the love of . . . John, take a seat. Put down the socks, and take a seat.’

John placed the socks on the mattress beside the shoeboxes and sat on the edge of the bed, and Sherlock, not wanting to loom over him, took the chair by the writing desk. There was so much wrong with this picture, he hardly knew where to start.

‘First of all,’ he said, needing an entry point, ‘let’s get one thing clear. Don’t ever call me master. Don’t even think it. That’s not what this is. You’re not a servant in this house. You’re not even a guest. You’re a member of the household, understand? That’s the whole point of the Compulsory Foster Care Act. And as a member of the household, you are entitled to full use of all the amenities. So I don’t want any more nonsense like this. For God’s sake, use the toilet, and shower like a human being. Brush your teeth to prevent more of this.’ He tapped the side of his own jaw. ‘Shave, comb your hair when it comes back in, sing to your reflection, I don’t care. Just use the bathroom. Got it? We can’t expect Mrs Hudson to install a whole new bathroom up here, and we don’t want you annoying Mr Chatterjee or local pubs anymore. Do you understand?’

‘Use the toilet in the flat,’ John repeated, testing the waters, making sure he had got it right.

‘Yes.’

‘Your toilet, sir?’

‘Our toilet.’

‘Whenever I—’

‘Whenever you need to. No need to ask permission. Just . . . go.’

‘You won’t be mad?’

‘Honestly, John. It’s a toilet.’

Although the oxycodone was gone, John’s shoulder was still causing him mild to moderate pain. As far as Sherlock observed, anyway. John didn’t exactly rank his pain levels on a Likert scale, and didn’t mention it at all unless prompted, leaving Sherlock to judge based on winces and stifled moans and disrupted breathing patterns, particularly when performing the exercises intended to help him heal. So before leaving the flat every day, Sherlock set out the bottle of paracetamol, instructed John not to ignore it, and hurried on his way. When he came back in the evening and asked after the shoulder, John, without fail, said he was feeling much improved; but he said little more than that. The man lived very much inside his own head. To get him to say anything at all, Sherlock had to speak first, and ask questions that required answers. Otherwise, the conversation was completely one-sided. Often, Sherlock came upon John in a stupor-like state, immobile, unresponsive, staring into space. It happened once in the kitchen, when John was standing at the sink doing the washing up, hands in the warm, sudsy water, but doing nothing at all. Another time, he was on the bottommost stair leading up to his room, just standing there, hand on the railing, as if frozen in place. And yet another time, he was in the sitting room near the windows. Sherlock thought he was looking out and watching the world go by, until he said John’s name, and John didn’t respond. Not until the third, louder call, at which point, he gasped and spun, and looked around fitfully as if rediscovering where he was.

At night, Sherlock sometimes heard pacing above his head. Two o’clock, three o’clock, shuffling, pacing, noises he couldn’t quite make out. What the hell was John doing up there? It was driving him
mad. Once a thump, once a shout. Sherlock hurried to the bottom of the stairs leading to the second storey and saw the light was on in John’s bedroom.

‘All right, John?’ he called.

The pacing stopped. Several seconds passed. Then the lights snapped off, and all was quiet the rest of the night.

***

There were no two ways about it. John was afraid of him. The days wore on, and they settled into a kind of tense, stilted rhythm. Sherlock, who had never been one to walk on eggshells, was walking on eggshells, wary that something he might say or do would be misconstrued as threatening, while at the same time, John seemed intent on doing everything perfectly to please his new host, lest he set off a sleeping dragon.

Which was why John was always awake first, usually before sunrise, to use the toilet and clean it again before he could get in Sherlock’s way, and to make breakfast for Sherlock, who liked to sleep late but was now growing accustomed to the wafting scent of fried bacon in the morning. The sitting room had never been tidier or the kitchen cleaner or tea time more consistent. John was now doing all the shopping, as well as the cleaning, cooking, and laundry, and Sherlock kept looking for more and more excuses to get out of the flat and escape the stifling though pinecone scented air. He took every case that came his way (which, despite the Christmas season, wasn’t much) and met clients in their homes, in parks, and in diners.

He continued to outfit John with a second coat for wetter weather, his own razors and shaving cream (for what little facial hair he managed to grow), and a change of sheets for his new bed, and with each new bestowal John thanked him and complimented the gift, as properly and politely as any subservient. And that was probably the thing that irked Sherlock most—the obsequiousness. He was too servile, too dutiful, too compliant. And above all:

‘He’s so skittish,’ Sherlock complained to Mrs Hudson one morning on his way out the front door to meet another client about a cat. Oh God, he was chasing after lost pets. ‘I can’t enter the room without watching him brace.’ He demonstrated with rigid limbs and a face of stone.

‘Oh dear,’ Mrs Hudson breathed.

‘Well, Sherlock, I hate to say this, but you know how some hosts can be. Those resentful of their duties are the least patient, and their wards sense their displeasure.’

‘I’m not resentful!’ Okay. He was a little resentful. ‘You don’t understand. He thinks I’ll beat him, Mrs Hudson. Like I’ll punish him for sneezing or sleeping late or talking, my God, he never even talks.’

‘Have you, by chance, given him any reason to think you might hurt him?’ she asked delicately.

‘No!’

‘Now now, maybe you should have a think about that.’

He stared at her, nonplussed. But other than the shouty business with the rice pudding on day one, or
the accidental banging of the cupboard and a few other moments of noise and sudden movement that had caused John to jump out of his skin, no, he really hadn’t.

She lowered her voice. ‘I think his last host may have been abusive,’ she said. She didn’t even speak the last word. Just mouthed it.

That much was obvious. Painfully obvious, if Mrs Hudson could see it. And the last host probably wasn’t the only one. But Sherlock didn’t mention the list of seventeen.

‘And you’ll forgive me for saying so, but there are some things in your flat that may make him think you might punish him. Violently.’

He gaped. ‘What are you talking about? What things?’

‘You do tend to, you know, decorate with armaments. For pity’s sake, Sherlock, there’s a knife stabbed into the mantelpiece. There are bullet holes in the wall. You have a sword displayed in your bedroom and a jujitsu trophy on the chest. Handcuffs hanging on the coat rack. A harpoon in the corner. A riding crop in the umbrella stand. And on every wall there’s a skull.’

Sherlock made a noise of defence and shock in the back of his throat, but she continued.

‘If he has been hurt in the past, what do you think goes through in his head when he sees these things? Don’t you think it’s possible he sees them as cautionary tape? A signal that if he puts one toe out of line, this is how he’ll be disciplined?’

Sherlock was horrified at the message he had apparently but unwittingly delivered. ‘But that’s—! It’s not—! I would never—!’

‘I know you would never, but does he?’

‘It’s professional interest! That’s all!’

‘Have you ever really explained your profession to him? Does he know what you do?’

‘I’ve told him. I solve crimes.’

‘That’s all you’ve said?’

‘What more needs saying?’

She smiled patiently. ‘To someone like John, a person who “solves crimes” is just someone who finds wrong-doers and punishes them. He’s trying not to be one of those wrong-doers.’

Sherlock groaned and leant his forehead into wall. How could she be so insightful, and he so blind?

That was not how it was supposed to work for a genius.

‘Tell you what. Invite me to dinner tonight. We’ll talk to him together.’

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘Go on then,’ she said, turning him away from the door and back to the stairs. ‘Go tell him. Seven o’clock. Nothing spicy. I’ll bring a pudding.’

Obediently, he headed back up to the flat, taking the steps lightly, and found John facing the bookshelves, hands folded behind his back and head cocked a little to the right side. For a moment, Sherlock just watched him. His shoulders were still unhealthily bony and his arms still too slight, but
his hair was beginning to fill in again, and before long he would need a trim just to shape things up. And though the hair might have been seeing progress, for three weeks, John had shown very little by way of curiosity about his new home. But that’s when he had known Sherlock was watching. Now, in a private moment, he appeared to be conducting a soft, non-invasive exploration. Slowly, and with the same diffident movements that he always made, John lifted a hand to touch one of the volumes.

‘You’re free to peruse at your leisure,’ said Sherlock, meaning to sound inviting.

But John snapped his hand away and whirled to face his host, who stood in the doorway.

‘Pardon sir, sorry sir,’ he said hurriedly, addressing the rug.

‘John, I don’t care. Read them all! That’s what they’re there for!’

‘Thank you, sir, I’ll leave them be.’

_They’re just books, John! Touch them! Read them! Sneeze into them! I’m not going to smack you for it!_

_Rein it in, Holmes, patience._

But he couldn’t stand it. He marched over to the bookshelves, and didn’t stop himself even as he saw John struggling not to cower at his approach but to stand there and take it. (_Take what?? I’m not going to hit you! Moron._), and he pulled from the shelf the book John had been reaching for: _A History of the Great War, 1914–1925_. Then he shoved it into John’s chest, knocking him back a step, but John caught the book before it could fall.

‘Educate yourself,’ Sherlock declared testily.

John nodded and blinked rapidly, backing away slowly but with a clenched posture.

Jesus, what was he doing? _Calm down, remember what you came back for._

‘Um, right. So. Mrs Hudson suggested we have dinner tonight. She’ll be here at seven. Is that . . . all right?’

‘Of course, sir,’ said John, but Sherlock could almost hear his heart thrumming in his throat.

‘We can keep it simple. Order in. Or, if you’d rather . . .’

‘I can cook,’ said John.

‘Good. Wonderful. All right, then. Seven o’clock. She’s not one for anything spicy, though, so, you know. Keep it savoury. Meat and potatoes or whatever you like. I’ll be . . . out. Working.’

‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock nodded and pushed the guilt down as he headed back to the door. ‘See you tonight, then. And I’m serious. Read whatever the hell you want.’

***

Riding the Tube back from the most pathetic case of his career to date (the cat had been hiding in the dryer), Sherlock found himself thinking he should buy John a laptop. He didn’t seem too keen on television, but maybe he would enjoy the internet. Wards had certain restrictions, and ward-devices all came with software built in to enforce them, but still. He could look up recipes and play games
He needed to find something John would enjoy besides housekeeping. He was so good at it that Mrs Hudson had stopped bringing her feather duster during visits.

He returned to Baker Street at precisely a quarter to seven, where he found Mrs Hudson just leaving her flat bearing a two-tiered chocolate cake with pink iced rosettes.

‘Everyone likes chocolate, I should think,’ she said with a wink. ‘Has he got a sweet tooth?’

Sherlock didn’t know. He and John didn’t really eat together. John did the shopping and the cooking, but that didn’t mean they took their meals at the same time. Sherlock usually took the proffered bacon and toast on his way out the door, found lunch in the city if he was hungry, and rummaged for food in the fridge at whatever hour he got home, as John had taken to making pre-heated meals or cold nibbles for just such purpose, evidently leftovers of whatever he had made for himself, and it suited Sherlock just fine. Cooking seemed to make John feel useful, so Sherlock had stopped telling him that he could fend for himself and just accepted whatever it was John had to offer. So a sweet tooth? He couldn’t be sure. He didn’t even know if John took sugar with his tea.

The upstairs flat smelt divine, and both Sherlock and Mrs Hudson breathed in deeply when they entered. While Sherlock pulled off his coat and scarf, Mrs Hudson walked her cake into the kitchen, saying, ‘That smells heavenly, John. What are we having?’

‘Thank you, ma’am, roast pork loin, ma’am.’

‘Oh, I do love a good pork loin. Anything I can do to help?’

‘It’s nearly ready, ma’am, thank you.’

She left him to it, and re-joined Sherlock in the sitting room. ‘You know,’ she said, ‘I’m used to seeing more busyness on this wall. Your little clippings and photos and such.’ She indicated the fleur de lis wallpaper, on which he had long ago painted a yellow smiley face as target practise for a new bow and arrow he’d acquired. She really was quite the tolerant landlady.

‘It’s been ages since I had a proper case,’ he grumbled.

‘Did you not have a case this morning?’

He was not about to talk about the cat.

‘Lestrade had something on not long ago,’ Sherlock said. Behind him, John began to set the table. ‘Went cold.’ And his website wasn’t getting much traction these days, not even with his more interesting posts, like how to identify a software designer by his tie, or an airline pilot by his left thumb. Brilliant deductions! And no one seemed to care. ‘Been pretty dry since,’ he finished.

‘I’m sure something will turn up soon, Sherlock,’ she said consolingly.

‘Yes. A nice murder.’

‘Hush,’ she said sternly, and Sherlock remembered their earlier conversation.

‘Pardon, Mr Holmes, dinner is ready.’

They turned away from the bare wall and saw that, on the cleared table, John had set out the plates, already served up with two slices of roasted pork loin apiece, a side of mash, a helping of sautéed green beans with onions and bacon slices, glasses of milk, and teacups; and in the centre of the table, the breadbasket, butter, and Sherlock’s mother’s tea set.
But there were only two places set across from each other, and already John was retreating to the kitchen.

Quickly, Sherlock reviewed what he had said earlier. *Mrs Hudson suggested we have dinner tonight.* We. He *had said we,* had he not? But oh—John must have interpreted that as an exclusive kind of *we,* just Sherlock and Mrs Hudson. Which meant, once again, that he had misunderstood. He thought Sherlock had been ordering dinner, not extending an invitation, and obedient as ever, John complied. Here was the evidence for it.

‘John,’ he said, endeavouring to keep his voice as mild as possible. John returned to the sitting room with anxious eyes, ready to fix whatever was wrong. ‘Are you not hungry?’

John’s lips closed together as he swallowed and looked to Mrs Hudson and back again. He was clearly not expecting this. ‘Sir?’

‘Don’t be shy, fix yourself a plate. We’ll wait for you.’

With a disbelieving expression, John stuttered. ‘R-really?’

Sherlock would have laughed if the question weren’t so sad. ‘Yes, really! Go on then.’

John’s head bobbed up and down, and to Sherlock’s surprise, a flash of excitement lit his eyes. Had he never even been invited to eat with any of his hosts? It was unimaginable. Sherlock was far from a good host, but even though his visits to the estate had been few and far between, whenever he did go, he and Barnaby ate together. And here was John, hastening to the cupboards for a third plate like he had just been offered a surprise birthday present if he hurried up and joined them. While John went about serving himself up, Sherlock rearranged the place settings and sat Mrs Hudson at the head of the table and Sherlock and John across from one another. Tactfully, Mrs Hudson didn’t say anything about John’s misunderstanding (or, for that matter, Sherlock’s clear fault in not having established a better precedent). Instead, to fill the time waiting for John to join them, she started carrying on about some of the closings on the Underground that were making it difficult for her to get to her favourite stylist in Soho.

‘Prices just went up again, and now I have to switch trains three times! I’d take a bus, but in the winter it’s just so cold, and what with my hip, the Tube is just the better option.’

‘Take a taxi,’ said Sherlock practically; in the background, he heard a microwave beeping.

‘Oh no, I don’t trust cabbies. The funny looks they give you.’

‘Please, when has a taxi driver ever done anyone any harm?’

‘Besides, far too pricey. Back in my day, I used to take them all the time, all over London. Anywhere you wanted to go for less than a fiver.’

‘Next you’re going to tell me that a decent London flat used to cost twenty pounds a week and you could buy your milk with a shilling.’

She slapped his arm, and as he chuckled she said in mock offence, ‘I did use shillings, you pup!’

At last, John arrived at the table. He set his plate and glass, pulled back a chair, and sat quickly as though to make up for the time he made them wait.

‘Excellent,’ said Sherlock. ‘And just in time. Any longer and our food would go cold—’
‘Oh John,’ said Mrs Hudson lamentably.

Sherlock followed her gaze to John’s plate, and his words stuck in his throat. Instead of cuts of pork loin, John had served himself what looked like a lump of cat food that had been scooped from a tin. On closer inspection, it appeared to be imitation corned beef, and a more unappetizing glob of sickly sludge Sherlock couldn’t imagine. Accompanying it was a small pile of chopped, rehydrated carrots, also from a tin. They had been heated together in the microwave, not on the china Sherlock and Mrs Hudson ate on, but on a plastic dish Sherlock didn’t even know he owned, and the juices from one were mixing with the leaky grease from the other. And last of all, he had poured himself water in a small plastic tumbler, straight from the tap.

And yet, John had been so excited to sit and eat with them. Eat that. Sherlock couldn’t abide it. A feeling of revulsion began to well inside of him. For one, there was barely enough food on John’s plate to satisfy a small child—if any child in the world could stand to eat it without throwing a tantrum, which was exactly what Sherlock felt like doing now. Instead, he bit his tongue, took a deep breath, and forced out a joke instead.

‘Are you trying to poison us?’

John, who was patiently waiting for the signal to touch his fork, went from placid to panicked in the blink of an eye. ‘No sir!’ His eyes darted between Sherlock’s and Mrs Hudson’s plates, looking for the error. He started to rise. ‘Forgive me, it’s all wrong, isn’t it? I’ll remove it immediately.’ He reached for their plates, but Sherlock stopped him by grabbing his wrist.

‘No no no, John. Sit. Please. This looks delicious. Doesn’t it, Mrs Hudson?’

She was nodding fervently, but her eyes glistened.

‘What I’m asking is’—what in God’s name is that on your plate?—‘why you are refusing it for yourself? You made it, after all.’

‘Why am I . . . ?’ John clearly didn’t understand the question.

‘Don’t you like pork sirloin? Green beans? Bread, for God’s sake?’

‘Sherlock,’ said Mrs Hudson softly in her cautionary tone.

John didn’t answer. Instead, he understood only that he had done something unacceptable, and he looked down at his plate in disgrace. His face had gone bright red, and though his hands were hidden beneath the table, Sherlock could tell by the tension in his arm and neck that one hand had a firm grip on the other, and he was ninety percent certain the tremor had started up again.

Sherlock blood quickened, jaw tensed. ‘John,’ he said levelly, but his voice had deepened as he tried to suppress the anger, ‘what is the Happy Mart?’

The alert had shown up on his account. For the last three weeks, John had been shopping there, as well as at the nearby Empire Foods, with which Sherlock was familiar. It was where he had gone for the yoghurts. But the Happy Mart was unknown to him. Nevertheless, now he had a suspicion of just what kind of market it really was.

‘A food centre,’ said John.

‘What kind?’

‘Sherlock, gently,’ said Mrs Hudson in response to his rising ire.
‘A food centre for wards,’ John answered.

Without another word—he didn’t trust himself to speak just then—Sherlock pushed back from the table and marched into the kitchen, opening every cupboard until he found it, in the bottom corner cabinet: a single pantry John had claimed for himself, stuffed full of what had come to be known popularly as ward feed.

The pieces were falling together rapidly. He had left John to buy his own groceries, cook his own food, take care of himself however he was accustomed, and this was what he brought home. Rubbish in the form of second-rate hash stuffed into tins that carried no expiry dates. For his host, and with the transaction card Sherlock had given him, John had bought groceries from a reputable grocer—healthy, quality food, including fresh fruits and vegetables, good cuts of meat, imported cheeses, locally sourced milk, everything to properly stock a kitchen. As cook for his host, he bought only the finest of ingredients.

But for himself, he had gone to the Happy Mart, a warehouse-like market catering to wards. Such places promoted themselves as providing affordable, nutritious alternatives for sustaining wards to alleviate the financial burden placed on a host family already saddled with an additional mouth to feed. But despite the adverts and campaigns, ward food centres were really just shops with low-quality, cheaply processed goods. There was little by way of fresh produce, unless it was whatever wouldn’t sell in the other markets, like bruised fruit and wilting greens. The rest was tinned or dried, non-perishable and stuffed with preservatives. Decent hosts wouldn’t dream of placing their wards on such a diet.

But then, obviously, it seemed that John had never had a decent host. This was his normal. That sludge on his plate was what he had been eating in Sherlock’s own house for the past twenty-three days. To his horror, Sherlock heard his own words echoing in his head:

It was hardly a problem until I had a second mouth to feed. John had heard him. So here was the hoard, John’s attempt at lessening the burden that was himself: a stockpile of boxed instant dried mash, rows of tinned corn, peas, hash, beef-flavoured cubes, imitation tuna, and artificially flavoured creamed soups. Sleeves of saltines on one side, dried sealed bags of banana chips on the other. And three-minute noodle meals stacked in the back. Based on the amount of food he had prepared for himself tonight, the rest of this would last him through the winter and well into the spring. He had probably spent less than fifty pounds.

Chest heaving, Sherlock stood upright again, strode back the dinner table, and took John’s plate away from him. Back in the kitchen, he threw it in the sink and let the clatter make both John and Mrs Hudson quail. Then he pulled a clean plate from the cupboard and loaded it with two thick cuts of the pork loin still resting in a pan on the hob, a hefty scoop of mash, and so many green beans that they almost spilt off the plate. Then he filled a tall glass with milk to the brim.

All this he set in front of John.

‘You’re going to start eating properly in this house,’ he said, unable to keep the anger from his voice.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ whispered John, his throat too thick to speak. His eyes were closed and his head still bowed, and Sherlock wondered if he had even seen the plate Sherlock had prepared.

‘No!’ Sherlock roared. ‘Do not be sorry! Stop being so goddamn sorry!’

‘Enough, Sherlock,’ Mrs Hudson hissed.

He rounded on her. ‘What! Look at him, he’s upset, he’s upset. He’s been eating rubbish all his life. It’s not his fault. I know that. I’m not saying it is! It’s his God-awful hosts, it’s the fucked up CFCA,
not him. I’m just trying to improve his quality of life. I’m letting him eat real food for a change! What’s wrong with that?’

‘He thinks you’re angry at him.’

‘I’m not! I just said I’m not!’ He turned back to the ward. ‘John, look at me.’ Without lifting his head, John opened his eyes; they were wet and fearful. ‘I’m not angry at you. Okay? I want you to eat well. That’s all. And what you’ve been buying—that’s not eating well.’

‘It’s food for wards,’ John said to explain himself.

‘It’s food for dogs. Dogs you hate.’

Mrs Hudson kicked Sherlock under the table.

‘No, listen to me. Listen. What I mean is, you’re better than that. You’re worth more than that. You’re a human being, and you’re in my care now. Whatever your previous hosts made you do, made you eat, that doesn’t apply anymore, okay? What I eat, you eat. Where I wash, you wash. We’re bloody family now, got it? So cheer the fuck up!’

‘All right, that’s enough!’ said Mrs Hudson, practically shouting. Sherlock had never heard her do that before. ‘Sherlock, for once in your life, shut up. You’re not helping matters. John. John, dear. Take a sip of milk. Go on, then. It’ll help.’

Crossing his arms, Sherlock threw himself back into the chair, but he remembered something his mother used to say. A glass of milk to dry your tears. It was just one of her illogicisms, but she swore by it. When Sherlock would get worked up, have a tantrum, bawl his eyes out (he was an emotional child until the age of six, when it no longer seemed prudent), she made him drink a glass of milk. He supposed it was the effect of having to be still enough not to slop it around, and one couldn’t make any noise or sniffle while drinking. Milk soothed a tightened throat and calmed an anxious belly. He supposed the advice wasn’t so bad.

John wasn’t throwing a tantrum or bawling his eyes out, but he was on the edge of distraught. So as John heeded her, sipping conservatively from the glass with his left hand (which was not the one with the tremor and over the past few weeks had regained its gripping strength), Mrs Hudson laid her hand on Sherlock’s arm and, addressing John, continued: ‘What Sherlock is trying say, dear, is that he’s sorry.’

Sherlock opened his mouth, prepared to be indignant, but she dug her nails into his arm to quiet him. John held the milk in one hand and stared at the centre of the table, unable to look at either of them.

‘He’s been inordinately busy with work these past few weeks, so he hasn’t been very attentive. It’s quite unusual for him to be rushing out of the house first thing in the morning, every morning.’ She shot him a censorious look. ‘He’s usually such a homebody. Isn’t that right, Sherlock?’

‘I—’

‘Fortunately, he has all next week absolutely free! So he’ll do a much better job of seeing that you’re settling in okay.’

Despite wanting to growl at her meddling, Sherlock knew she was right. He had to fix this. And that meant staying at home.

Mrs Hudson picked up her fork and knife. ‘Has he told you much at all about what he does, John? Professionally?’ She raised her eyebrow to Sherlock, indicating that he take over.
‘He works with the police, ma’am,’ said John softly.

‘Sometimes,’ said Sherlock. He followed Mrs Hudson’s example and picked up his fork, going first for the green beans. Despite having cooled a little, they were still crisp. ‘When I don’t have my own cases, I lend my expertise to New Scotland Yard as a consultant. I’m a consulting detective.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Do you even know what that is?’

‘Did you not just tell me, sir?’

Sherlock huffed. ‘I’m the only one in the world, John. I invented the job.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘Oh, this pork is just scrumptious, John,’ crooned Mrs Hudson. ‘So tasty. Have you tried it yet?’ She was urging him to eat, Sherlock noticed, with a far defter hand than his. By comparison, he was positively clumsy. As testament to the effectiveness of her tact, John slowly set aside the milk and picked up his fork. He took a small bite of mash.

Seeing that John didn’t understand the importance of his work, or, more disappointing, the brilliance of it, Sherlock continued, ‘I use advanced deductive reasoning as my primary tool for reading a crime scene,’ Sherlock carried on, but John didn’t ask what deductive reasoning was. Sherlock took another mouthful. The mash was quite good. Very creamy, and lightly flavoured with garlic and rosemary. He cut into the pork. ‘My methods are highly efficient, accurate, and effective.’ He didn’t know why he felt compelled to impress. John probably wouldn’t understand anyway. But he had never ignored the urge to give a demonstration, and he wasn’t about to begin now.

‘For instance,’ he said, ‘I can tell by the way you hold your fork that you are left handed but were schooled as a child to use your right, which has actually rendered you fairly ambidextrous. I can also tell from the fake snowflake caught in the collar of your shirt that you were on Glentworth Street earlier today on your way to Mendelsohn’s Butcher Shop where you picked up the pork loin. Not the most direct route, but maybe you enjoy the Christmas lights and spectacle on Glentworth, including the winter scene O’Hannigan’s Hardware has manufactured just inside its automatic doors. Some of it blows out into the street every time a customer passes through, and a bit of that stuck on you. Lastly, I see that you had a spot of trouble in the kitchen. There’s a fresh burn on your right knuckle. A small red circle. Possibly you brushed it against the side of the oven when taking out the roast. It doesn’t appear to be bothering you much, though, so you probably ran it under cool water to take the sting away and have barely given it a thought since.’

Pleased with himself, he took a large bite of pork loin, mixed with mash.

Across from him, John’s eyes, though still a little wet, were rounded and his mouth had fallen open, having at last realised the brilliance of Sherlock’s work. He held his fork frozen over his plate.

‘Am I wrong?’ he pressed, desiring confirmation.

‘No sir. That’s . . . that’s amazing.’

‘You think so?’ Sherlock had rarely heard John offer an opinion or evaluation. Of course he had been hoping to impress, but he wasn’t expecting to delight.

‘Brilliant, Mr Holmes. Everything you said—it was nearly perfectly true.’
‘Nearly perfect?’

‘Yes sir, extraordinary.’

‘No no, what did I get wrong?’

Mrs Hudson shook her head in amused exasperation.

But John shrank a little, clearly not in the habit of correcting his host.

‘I’d like to know,’ Sherlock said, more kindly.

John said, ‘Well. I did take the side street, sir, as you said. But not for the reasons you said.’

‘Motivations are always trickier,’ Sherlock mumbled. He needed to refine the science. ‘Then why? What were your reasons?’

‘The lads on Baker Street, sir. They throw snowballs at wards. So I take the next street over. But you’re right.’ Seeing the look on Sherlock’s face, he hastened to appease. ‘The lights are quite lovely on Glentworth.’

Sherlock didn’t know what to say to that.

‘You can really see all that? Just by looking at me?’

‘I’m a proper genius,’ he said, sans modesty.

‘Then . . .’ John looked uncomfortable. ‘Can you see it all?’

‘What all?’

‘Everything? About me? Everything I’ve ever . . .’

‘My methods have limits,’ Sherlock hastened to say, sparing him. ‘What I do is not mind reading. So if there’s nothing to see, there’s nothing to say.’ Not entirely true. But even he had the good sense to know that John didn’t need any new reasons to be paranoid. He had his secrets, and he intended on keeping them. Then, to distract John from his evidently dark thoughts, Sherlock said casually, ‘I’ll take you out sometime. On my next case. You can see what I do.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Hudson. ‘That’s not what I meant when I . . . That is, that doesn’t seem like such a good . . .’

‘Whataya say, John? Fancy solving a crime with me?’

John looked stunned, halfway between frightened and curious. Mrs Hudson chewed her bread fitfully, shooting him looks that said take it back and offering John sympathetic eyes that gave him permission to say thank you, sir, but no, sir. But Sherlock waited for an answer. This was perfect. He didn’t have to sit and explain his work. He could give John a full-blown demonstration.

At long last, John gave a small nod. ‘Okay.’

Mrs Hudson slumped.

‘Great! That’s settled then. I like company when I go out, and the skull just draws funny looks.’ He smiled to show that he was trying to be droll, but he didn’t know if John got the joke. ‘Now we just have to wait for the right case.’
On Christmas morning, Mycroft Holmes ignored any observances beyond a large breakfast of sausages and sweet buns. It was a holiday indulgence, his one treat to himself. Otherwise he kept to a strict calories-counting, diet-and-exercise regimen. He had been, to put it delicately, a hefty youth. Never again.

In the afternoon, he donned a coat and dark burgundy scarf (it was as festive as he ever got), and had his driver take him to 221B Baker Street. Though Mycroft and Sherlock were not in the habit of spending Christmas together, or even of exchanging gifts, this year he would have to break that tradition. In two more days, Sherlock would be at the end of his thirty-day grace period, and to avoid a stiff governmental fine, he had only seventy-two more hours to register a new ward.

Exemption indeed. Mycroft knew this would happen. Which was why, as his happy Christmas present to his little brother, he was gifting Sherlock a ward: a sixty-five-year-old man most recently called Abraham who was, at this very moment, en route to the Holmes estate to be taken care of with Mycroft’s other elderly wards (currently, he had three). All Sherlock had to do was sign on the dotted line. If Abraham’s health remained steady, Mycroft estimated another twenty years during which Sherlock wouldn’t have to give another thought to hosting, and it would be a merry Christmas for all, though he doubted very much he would get so much as a mumbled thank you for it.

But when he rang the bell, Sherlock was not at home.

Nor was Mrs Hudson.

Mycroft waved the driver away, pulled out his copy of a key, and let himself in.

The first thing he noticed was that Mrs Hudson had overdone it on the pinecones and garland: the entry hall smelt like an Albanian forest. Mycroft stomped his boots clean of the snow that had dared to cling on between kerb and door, hung his hat on the rack, and went upstairs, where he planned to pour himself a whiskey and smoke until Sherlock got home. That was his other gift: second-hand smoke. He was generous indeed.

He was surprised, however, to see just how tidy the sitting room was. Immaculate, even. He’d never seen the place so neat, and it perplexed him that his slob of a brother would—not clean it himself, oh no, that would be entirely out of character—hire someone, or even allow someone, to take an organising hand and disinfectant sponge to his hovel.

And a few other things were off. Aside from the fairy lights Mrs Hudson made Sherlock string every year around the mantle, Mycroft spotted a microscope on the kitchen table. Had his toys finally spilt out of the playhouse, then? Their mother’s tea set (Mycroft was still sore that Sherlock had ended up with it) was out of the cupboard and casually pushed into the corner of the counter, waiting to be hand-washed. Three teacups had been used last night, judging by the withering look of a slice of lemon on one saucer. Three cups. Sherlock, Mrs Hudson, and . . . who else would Sherlock entertain? A client? That detective inspector from the Yard? But with their mother’s tea set! Sherlock should have known better. That was a pre-War antique!
So distracted by the new and perplexing state of the flat was he that he put out of his mind entirely his desire for a whiskey.

Then he heard the door downstairs open and close. Aha. He was back. Seconds passed in silence. Sherlock was evidently taking his time to remove his winter wear, scowl at the presence of Mycroft’s hat, and steel himself for an argument. Meanwhile, Mycroft tugged his waistcoat and turned just so, knowing he cut an impressive figure where he stood by the hearth. Sherlock would sneer, seeing him there, and the diatribes would begin.

But those weren’t Sherlock’s steps ascending the stairs. They were graceless, uneven, and Mycroft felt his imperious posturing slip into something he loathed: disorientation. And when the strange-looking creature appeared in the doorway, he had the altogether bizarre sensation of thinking, however briefly, that he had entered the wrong flat: 223B or something.

The man stopped short upon seeing him. Well, not exactly. Stopped short wasn’t quite the word. Froze, perhaps. Though a small man, he wasn’t exactly young, perhaps just a few years younger than himself. His dark blond hair was cut close to the scalp. His nose and cheeks were ruddy from the cold. At his side, he carried a laundry sack, twisted at the neck. Laundry? On Christmas day?

More to the point, who was he? He couldn’t readily deduce, so he was forced to ask directly:

‘Who the devil are you?’

‘John,’ said the man, though without much conviction, almost like he wasn’t sure.

‘Where the bloody hell is Sherlock? And what are you doing in his flat? And with his laundry?’

The man, John, looked down at the laundry sack, embarrassed. ‘I thought I would finish the laundry, sir, while Mr Holmes was at work, but when I arrived at the launderette, sir, it was closed, sir.’

‘Of course it’s closed! It’s Christmas!’

‘I didn’t realise, sir.’ He seemed incapable of making eye contact.

‘And what do you mean, at work? You mean he has a case?’

‘Police came early this morning, sir, and he left with them.’

He also seemed incapable of lifting his chin more than a few inches of above his neck.

Mycroft resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Leaving with the police could mean one of two things: a case, or arrest. He hoped he didn’t have to spend his Christmas bailing Sherlock out because he had nicked confidential police files again, or been busted for illegal narcotics, or any number of past offences. But that still didn’t answer the question of this John.

And then he spotted the bracelets. They were tucked under the cuffs of John’s coat, but then John shifted, apparently to relieve pressure on a leg, and that’s when Mycroft spotted them. Identifying bracelets. He was a ward. The question, though (and he feared he already knew the answer), remained: who was the ward’s host?

‘What is your connection to Sherlock Holmes?’ he asked.

‘He is my host, sir.’

Damn. Damn damn damn. That fool of a genius brother of his! Selecting a ward without the benefit
of Mycroft’s good opinion? Was he of good stock? Was his history without blemish? His temperament above reproach? His health top rate? Had Sherlock even done his research? Because at one glance, Mycroft was pretty damn sure this ward was none of those things.

‘Come here, ward.’

The ward set the laundry sack aside and obediently crossed the room to him, stopping a few paces short. Mycroft pulled out his phone and brought up the MI5 Ward ID app.

‘Show me.’

The ward began to turn away.

Mycroft grabbed his shoulder and roughly turned him back, ignoring the little cry trapped in the ward’s throat, behind closed lips. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Be still. Left arm. Now.’

The ward’s breathing had turned shallow, but he lifted his left arm, palm up, and Mycroft seized the wrist, bypassed the black bracelet, and pushed the coat and shirt sleeves up to mid-forearm. There, he saw, not the registration tattoo, but a mass of shiny scar tissue where it should have been. He scowled, and pushed the sleeve higher. Sometimes, it was placed in the crook of the arm. But there was nothing on this ward’s skin.

Then he understood. And he was annoyed.

‘Turn around.’

As the ward had intended on doing, he turned, and bent his neck forward. Mycroft yanked down the collar of the coat and shirt, exposing the unusually placed tattoo. He then snapped a photo of it with his app reader, and the file floated up.

He released the ward and reviewed the file. It was true. Sherlock was listed as the present host. But the file didn’t stop there, and Mycroft’s frown deepened with every passing second.

‘Is that how he came by you?’ He stepped closer, knowing his comparable size and comportment would intimidate the already cowed ward. ‘Were you just another of his cases, the maimed ward of an unstable host? Mm? Speak up!’

‘I was placed in a pound, sir. Mr Holmes found me there.’

‘A pound? Bloody hell, you’re a mess. Look at me. Don’t look at your shoes, look at me.’

Mycroft was standing so close the ward had to tilt his head back to comply.

‘What are you, then? A curiosity, a specimen, one of his experiments? Why did he choose you?’

‘I cannot say, sir.’

‘What has he done to you?’

‘Sir?’

‘If you think there is anyone in all of New Britain who understands Sherlock better than I, you are sorely mistaken, so listen well. Sherlock has only one passion, and that is crime. Not rescue wards. He does not do charity. He is not a philanthropist. He does not have a compassionate soul. He wants to use you for something, something to satisfy some greater need, and I’m asking you what.’
The ward could no longer keep his eyes locked onto Mycroft’s. He dropped his head and said again, ‘I cannot say, sir.’

‘Cannot or will not?’

A pause. ‘I suppose either, sir.’

‘Are you being impertinent?’

‘No sir. I mean only, sir, that I am Mr Holmes’ ward. The business of his house is his own, and not mine to tell to a stranger.’

‘Stranger!’

The ward shifted his weight. Mycroft could tell that he wanted to back away, but to his credit, he kept his place. ‘I do not know you, sir, nor why you are in Mr Holmes’ flat.’

Mycroft laughed without amusement. ‘You’re very loyal. Very quickly.’

‘No sir. I’m just a ward.’

Mycroft grabbed the ward under the chin and lifted his head, forcing him to make eye contact. ‘And just what kind of ward would that be?’ The ward swallowed, which was difficult, given the angle at which Mycroft held his head, but he didn’t answer. He was holding his breath, unwilling or unable to answer. ‘All those hosts you’ve had, being shunted from one place to another. You’re trouble, aren’t you?’

The ward tried to shake his head no, but Mycroft held firm at the chin, restricting any movement at all.


‘No sir,’ the ward said, straining to talk. His eyes had begun to burn with pain.

‘Aha. A liar as well.’

Mycroft dropped the ward’s head but seized his left arm, once again jerking the fabric away to reveal the scar tissue.

‘You did this to yourself, didn’t you?’

‘Please, sir . . .’

‘Why did you do it? And do not lie to me.’

The ward was not fighting, but Mycroft was furious, and his fingers dug into the lesser man’s skin. The ward trembled in terror. Good, thought Mycroft. He should be afraid of a man like me. But just as the ward began to accede and nod his head, from the entrance to the flat came a dark voice of anger.

‘Take your damn hands off him.’

Both Mycroft’s and the ward’s heads turned to the door, where Sherlock stood wide-eyed and enraged. At his side, he carried a small box, wrapped in black paper and affixed with a blue ribbon and bow.
But Sherlock had no business being angry with him. Mycroft wasn’t the one who had gone out and bought a problem instead of a ward, and then neglected even to mention it. It was Mycroft who was rightfully incensed.

‘Whatever happened to your exemption?’ Mycroft said before Sherlock could get in another word. He threw the ward’s arm away from him, because to do anything less would be to admit penitence to his little brother, a thing he’d not done since they were children and Mummy had made him say sorry. The ward spun halfway around and caught himself on the edge of the armchair.

‘I changed my mind.’ Sherlock stalked closer. ‘Now get out.’

‘And a happy Christmas to you, too.’

‘John, if you wouldn’t mind heading upstairs for a few minutes while I deal with the intruder.’

Mycroft glowered. ‘Why yes, and John, while you’re at it, why don’t you go ahead and pack yourself a bag. I’ll be taking you with me and assisting in your relocation.’

In that moment, a curious exchange took place between his brother and the ward. It happened so quickly that Mycroft almost missed it: the ward blanched and his frightened eyes sought Sherlock’s before falling away, but otherwise his body was frozen against the armchair. Sherlock’s expression was less readable for someone who didn’t know how to read Sherlock Holmes as well as Mycroft did. It said, I’m in control; you’re not going anywhere. And though they met eyes for only a fraction of a second, the ward seemed to understand the message. It was less certain whether he believed it.

‘The hell you will,’ said Sherlock. ‘This is John’s house, and I am his host, and you are not welcome here. Go on, John. Tell him to get out of your house.’

Mycroft laughed out loud at the look of shock now registering on the ward’s face. ‘He is one of your experiments, isn’t he? Good lord, Sherlock, has your boredom finally driven you mad? What about Mummy’s invaluable tea set, then, eh? You barely trust yourself to touch it, and you’re letting this waif of a ward serve you from the entire spread? He’ll destroy it for sure. Don’t give me that look, it’s a sign of things to come. You really have no idea the bull you’ve released into china shop, do you?’

‘Oh please—’

‘You may have seen his list of past hosts—seventeen, was it?—but only I have access to the details of his past, a key to the confidential gate that keeps lowly hosts like you from knowing the full story. Don’t you want to know his story, Sherlock? Might make you change your mind.’

The ward’s right fist began to shake a little, and he turned his body to try to hide it. But Mycroft had also pricked a nerve with Sherlock. He saw the curiosity in his eyes warring with his deepening frown; historically, he had refused to accept anything from Mycroft. But now, he was tempted.

After a few seconds of silence, Sherlock finally said, ‘John’s past is his own. Let him keep it.’

‘You’re a stubborn idiot,’ said Mycroft.

‘If you’ve come here just to mock me—’

‘I came to tell you that I’ve found a solution to your problem! I found you a ward. A better ward. One more suited to your lifestyle. One you don’t have to even look at.’

This ward, this John, really was a sad-looking creature.
‘Pass,’ said Sherlock.

‘You’re being unreasonable.’

‘You’re being nosey. And unwelcome.’

‘So you’ve made clear.’

Sherlock stepped aside and extended his hand toward the door. His teeth were clenched and his eyes burned with fury. Mycroft knew there was no sense trying to talk with him when he was like this. He had been caught unprepared to defend what he must have known was a bad decision. Now he was being irrationally defensive.

But as he headed for the door, Mycroft couldn’t restrain himself from making one last comment. ‘You have many regrets in your life, little brother. Shall you add yet another to the lot?’

‘Merry Christmas,’ said Sherlock, ‘and let that suffice for the next ten Christmases. Goodbye.’

The moment Mycroft crossed the threshold, Sherlock slammed the door behind him.

The only guilt Mycroft felt was in imagining what Mummy might think, if she saw her sons behaving this way. On Christmas day, of all days.

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‘Well,’ said Sherlock with false cheer, trying to recover the moment, ‘I see you’ve met my nemesis.’

‘He was in the flat when I returned, sir,’ John hastened to explain. ‘I didn’t let him in. I . . . perhaps I forgot to lock the door? Or—’

‘No no, he has a key. He’s always letting himself in, as if he has any right to do so, and if he weren’t such a prominent bigwig, I’d have him arrested for trespassing. I still might. The charges won’t hold, but . . . Wait a minute, what did you say? Returned from where?’

But his scanning eyes had already found the sack of laundry by the sofa.

‘John, were you doing chores?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘On Christmas?’

‘I did not remember the day, sir.’

‘Shit. That’s my fault. Lestrade called before sunrise with a case. There’s always a case on Christmas. That’s the beauty of shoving people who hate each other into the same room and forcing them to share a pudding and pull a cracker. It’s bound to lead to murder somewhere. In this case, Whitechapel. Poison, is my highly educated guess, awaiting confirmation by the lab, and with five prime suspects, all in paper crowns, it was a classic whodunit . . .’

And Sherlock had promised to bring John. On his next case, that’s what he had promised to do. Dammit, he’d forgotten. He’d been so excited, he’d hurried out the door without so much as a good morning, let alone a happy Christmas, to join a disgruntled Lestrade, who for some reason didn’t share in his delight at Christmas morning murders.

It also occurred to Sherlock that his Christmas treat had meant leaving John—who undoubtedly had
not had a proper Christmas in a long, long time—to his own devices. And what did a ward like John do when left alone? Did he sulk, or feel abandoned, or treat himself to any holiday indulgences? No. He worked.

‘Did you find who did it, sir?’ John asked. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his wrist where Mycroft had been holding him.

Oh. A question. The man was curious. Now Sherlock was especially repentant he hadn’t thought to bring him along.

‘It was the family matriarch,’ said Sherlock, now distracted. The excitement of the case was already slipping away. ‘Did he hurt you?’

John pulled his hands apart. ‘No sir.’

‘You can tell me if he did.’

‘I’m not hurt, sir.’

Sherlock sighed. ‘He had no right even to touch you. I’m sorry. That oaf brother of mine works for the British government. He thinks he is the British government, and that he can do just about anything and get away with it. I won’t let it happen again.’

‘He is your brother?’

‘Mycroft. And I wouldn’t claim him if I could find some other way around it. Erm.’

He looked down at his hand, in which he held the small gift he had bought a few days before after seeing it in a shop window and then hid (child-like) on the top shelf in the downstairs cupboard where John (bless his shortness) wouldn’t spot it. He had even had it gift wrapped because, well, because it was Christmas. But he was Sherlock Holmes, and he didn’t give Christmas presents! Not even to Mrs Hudson, unless one counted the wreath now hanging on the outside door and that bottle of strong cider she liked so well. But, well, he had always lived alone, and acknowledging the holiday had seemed pointless before now. Yet here he was, bearing gifts.

‘Sir,’ said John, ‘if I may, I just wanted to say, I’m not . . . that is, I shan’t . . . I mean, the things I’ve done, before, the things Mr Holmes, your brother, said he knows—’

‘Nope. Not a word. It’s not important.’

‘I’ll not use the tea set again.’

‘Please do. Some things aren’t meant to sit behind glass.’

‘I hope I shan’t prove you’ve made . . . a mistake . . . in me.’

‘John, take a seat.’

John sat in the armchair, and Sherlock in the leather chair directly across. There was no point in a preamble, so Sherlock reached across the space dividing them and passed John the small package.

‘I’m not usually one for observing holidays or maintaining traditions, but, as this is your first Christmas here, well . . . happy Christmas.’

John received the gift with astonishment, like he wasn’t sure what it meant, or like he was being tricked, or like he thought the little box might explode or sting him or laugh at him. ‘For me, sir?’
Sherlock almost quipped: what, has no one ever given you a gift before? But he decided he didn’t want to hear that answer. So instead, he just waved a hand and said, ‘Open it.’

Still uncertain, John moved slowly, pulling one end of the ribbon, then popping the tape off the wrapping, waiting for something to go wrong. But Sherlock just waited him out, hoping he had picked out the right thing. Maybe he should have had Mrs Hudson go with him. At last, the paper fell away, revealing a hard, transparent, plastic box, inside which lay a watch.

‘It’s a Tag Heuer, limited edition,’ said Sherlock, pleased with himself. ‘Last in the shop. The display watch, actually, so I got it at a bit of a discount, but it’s in perfect working order. Tells the time and date, naturally, and all features are luminescent. Also, it’s water resistant, the buckle is steel, and the strap is real leather. Top-of-the-line chronograph, that is, so it keeps excellent time. That watch will last you a lifetime.’

Speechless, John just stared.

‘What do you think?’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said John, in a whisper. He swallowed hard. Then he looked up and said, like he still couldn’t comprehend what was going on, ‘This is for me?’

Sherlock laughed. ‘Go on then. Take off those ridiculous bracelets while you’re in the house, and try it on. I’ll put on the kettle. We’ll drink from Mummy’s tea set, with relish.’

By the time he returned, John had set the identifying bracelets on the side table, cracked into the box, and was fitting the strap around his left wrist, admiring the watch face.

‘How’s that then?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Good, sir. Very nice, sir. Thank you.’ He looked up, and it was subtle, and fleeting, but John smiled before dropping his head again. ‘Happy Christmas, sir.’

Sherlock felt like they’d just advanced one giant step, and the unexpected feeling of elation spurred him onwards. He clapped his hands together (John’s flinch at the noise was contained and quickly overcome) and announced, ‘Games!’

‘Games?’

‘That’s what people do at Christmas. They play games. We’ll drink ginger-orange tea, put some Tchaikovsky on in the background, and break out the boards. Do you know chess?’

‘No sir.’

‘Draughts?’

‘No sir.’

‘Gin rummy?’

‘No sir.’

‘Looks like I have a lot to teach you.’

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John was not Sherlock’s experiment. He resented the insinuation.
But that didn’t mean he wasn’t curious about his new charge, nor that he would refrain from learning more about how John’s mind worked. Thinking was an endless fascination for him, and he wouldn’t apologise for that.

He decided to start with draughts.

‘Simple enough,’ said Sherlock as he laid the board. ‘One side yellow, one side brown. Oak and cherry. Now, all the chips—let’s call them men—start out just like this: star-side up, all placed on the dark squares. You can’t ever move to a lighter square; remember that. See this? Stars on this side, crowns on the opposite. Crowns down for now. We take turns, moving one man at a time. Now, you can only move diagonally, and only in a forward direction. Like this, yeah? But what happens if you’re blocked by one of my men?’ He manoeuvred the chips around the board to demonstrate. ‘You jump him, as long as the spot behind him is vacant, like so. Bam. You’ve captured one of my men, and he goes over here. So far so good?’

‘Yes sir, I think so, sir.’

‘Now what you’re trying to do is clear the board of my men before I clear the board of yours. And to do that, you need to promote as many of your men to kings as possible, because kings have more manoeuvrability. They can go forwards and backwards. So how do you make a king? Move a man all the way across the board, past your opponent’s line of defence and to the king’s row, which is this one, and just like that.’ He flipped the chip. ‘Star becomes a crown, and you’ve made a king. Then we chase each other around the board until one of us is wiped off or has no more moves, and the other player wins. Sound easy?’

John nodded, staring at the board, and Sherlock imagined he was reviewing the rules in his head.

‘Questions?’

‘No sir.’

‘Which colour do you want?’

‘I don’t mind. Whichever you don’t.’

Sherlock regarded him critically. ‘I’d like you to choose, John.’

John licked his lips, contemplative, as if the act of deciding meant something significant. But it was just draughts. Then he pointed to the oak chips. The light side. Sherlock turned the board. ‘Light side goes first.’

John was rubbish. To start. He had no sense of strategy, and he kept forgetting the rules. For Sherlock, it was an exercise in patience. ‘You can’t move there, John.’ ‘You can’t go backward, John.’ ‘That’s my chip, John.’ But he was learning, and as Sherlock let him struggle with the game, a style began to develop. What Sherlock had first assessed as lack of strategy was revealing itself as a different sort of tactic. John wasn’t out to win. He wasn’t trying to capture Sherlock’s men. Instead, he was just trying to survive. He ran as quickly as he could to the edges of the board where it was impossible to be jumped, and only when he was out of moves did he sacrifice one of his men to Sherlock’s. Playing this way, he would never outlast Sherlock, but he tried to last all the same.

Six games in, John never once moved a man all the way across the board to be crowned, even when Sherlock deliberately gave him a wide opening. Sherlock decided to force John’s hand.

So on the seventh game—John gave no signs of being bored—Sherlock manoeuvred carefully around the board, accurately predicting John’s movements based on prior observations, to ensure that
for his next move, one of his men would have to capture two of Sherlock’s and land him in the king’s row.

John’s hand hovered. His eyes roved, looking for another option. There wasn’t one. Slowly, he picked up his man from the board and passed it over Sherlock’s. Tapped the square. Then over the second. And he settled the piece in the king’s row, saying softly, ‘King me?’

Sherlock grinned and removed his defeated soldiers. Then he crowned John’s. John didn’t win, but Sherlock decided it was victory enough.

They moved on to a game Sherlock figured John might have a little more success at.

‘Does your person have spectacles?’ Sherlock asked.

‘No sir.’

Sherlock flicked down the cartoon heads wearing glasses.

‘Are you,’ said John, ‘a woman?’

He wished he hadn’t drawn Susan. Too easy to guess. All John needed to do was ask two questions: are you a woman (yes) and do you have white hair (yes), and the game was his! His only hope was that John was more curious about the hats.

John knocked down all the men on his board, and it was Sherlock’s turn. His board was filled with non-spectacles-wearing characters, which were far too many.

_Narrow it down, narrow it down._

‘Are you bald?’

‘No sir.’

_Damn._

‘Do you have . . .’ John reviewed his options, few though they were. ‘White hair?’

Sherlock sighed. ‘Well, that’s me buggered. Yes. I do.’

‘Then you’re Susan?’

‘Indeed I am.’

‘Then . . . I won?’

‘You certainly did.’

John pursed his lips, trying to hide how pleased he was. Then, shyly, he asked, ‘Shall we play again?’

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They munched on sea-salt crisps and drank orange Fanta from their ginger-tea-drained teacups. Mycroft would be appalled.

Sherlock drew a six of clubs and discarded a three of diamonds that was of no use in his run of
hearts.

‘And I can pick up that red three?’ John asked.

‘Absolutely. If you think it might be useful.’

John picked up the three of diamonds.

‘And discard one you don’t need,’ Sherlock reminded.

They played in comfortable silence, but for the occasional crunching of crisps. It was probably the most relaxed Sherlock had ever seen John, even if he did allow himself a crisp only after Sherlock had helped himself, and even if he did still struggle to make full eye contact for more than half a second. It had taken a month, a solid month, but although he was still discernibly damaged, he was vastly improved from the ward he had brought home on that first day. His hair was now long enough to properly cover his scalp, though still too short to be combed, a dusky, dark blonde. He was still quite thin, though Sherlock estimated that he had put on four or five pounds, now that he was eating better. His skin was a healthier hue though quite pale and untouched by sunlight. But then, it was winter, and the man was English. Still, his eyes seemed a brighter blue. He was off the meds, both painkillers and antibiotics, and the gunshot wound was healing as well as one could expect. Range of motion was still restricted, but he no longer had to wear dressings, and as far as Sherlock could observe, he was practising proper hygiene by showering regularly, brushing his teeth, and wearing freshly laundered clothes.

These things were encouraging. John did know how to do these things after all, and Sherlock didn’t find himself in the awkward position of having to buy him a how-to pamphlet or demonstrating how to brush one’s teeth.

But so much about him was still a mystery, and it frustrated Sherlock that he didn’t know more. John was disinclined to speak much of himself. Or to speak much at all, when it came to it. Which made it difficult to know if Sherlock was doing rightly by him now. He didn’t know if John was happy now. He never expressed any wants, and he was clearly content to ignore his own needs. Was he doing okay? Was Sherlock overlooking something?

‘So John,’ said Sherlock, pulling from the draw pile, ‘how does this compare to past Christmases?’ He discarded the offending eight of spades.

John picked it up. (This was something else Sherlock was noticing: John preferred the card he did know, to the card he didn’t, no matter its usefulness.)

There was a long moment before John answered, quietly. ‘It’s good, sir.’ Ever the descriptive one.

‘What did you do . . . last Christmas, for instance?’ He tried to be casual, like he wasn’t trying to prise open the vault, but John’s demeanour reverted back to a man on his guard; he rolled his injured shoulder and sank a little into himself.

‘Erm,’ he said, and Sherlock detected a hint of panic as John cast around for something to say.

‘You know what? Bad question. I ask too many questions. Why don’t you ask me something, for a change? You can ask me anything, and I’ll answer honestly.’

‘I shouldn’t wish to pry, sir.’

‘I’m giving you free and unfettered permission. Ask me anything. A month you’ve been here, and you’ve barely wondered anything aloud. But surely you’ve thought: who is this strange man whose
home I now share? Go on. No holds barred.’

‘Um.’ Again a long pause. John was staring at the cards in his hand, but he wasn’t really examining them. He was trying to think. Sherlock allowed him time to do it, unrushed. ‘I had wondered . . . if it is no concern to me, sir, I shouldn’t need to know.’

‘Ask.’

‘What did your last ward do to displease you, sir?’

‘What?’

‘I only mean to, er, that is, not repeat . . . I mean, make mistakes.’

Sherlock folded his cards in his lap. ‘John. What makes you think he displeased me?’

‘You had need of a ward. Didn’t you? Because you sent the last one away? That’s why I’m here?’

‘No, John.’

Sherlock exhaled slowly. He supposed it was only natural that a new ward would wonder what happened to the last, but his question was more telling than that. Seventeen hosts. How many of those had discarded him because they were displeased with him? It was no wonder he was so afraid of screwing up even the smallest of tasks.

‘My last ward didn’t “displease” me.’ How could he? thought Sherlock. I never saw him. ‘He died.’

‘Died?’

‘Of natural causes,’ Sherlock reassured the man who had so recently been shot. ‘He was a family ward I inherited when I came of age. I’ve never had any other but him. He grew old, got sick, and died at nearly ninety years old.’

‘Oh,’ said John, quietly. ‘So when he expired, you got me?’

Sherlock had often used that word himself: expire. And not too long ago. He’d said it of Barnaby. Now, though, hearing it from John’s lips, it sounded wrong. Cruel, even.

‘He passed. Comfortably. The way most people hope to leave this world.’

Sort of. Most people wanted to leave the world surrounded by family and loved ones. Sherlock, his host, hadn’t given a damn.

John was rubbing a thumb across the face of his new watch. ‘Will your brother replace me, Mr Holmes?’

‘No.’ He set his cards face down on the table. ‘Mycroft had no business being here, and he has no right—legal or otherwise—to remove you. Understand? If he ever comes by again while I’m not here, feel free to tell him to piss off.’

John’s eyes went wide and his jaw went taut, petrified at the very notion of saying such a thing.

‘If you’d feel better about it, I’ll speak to Mrs Hudson about changing the locks. That way he can’t pull a stunt like that again. I want you to feel safe here, John. It is safe here. Do you believe me?’

‘I believe you, sir,’ said John automatically.
Sherlock sighed, having heard that knee-jerk, placating response before. ‘No, you don’t,’ he said under his breath. He wondered how long it would be before John felt comfortable enough to be honest.

‘Baker Street, sir, is much nicer than my last residence.’

The comment was unsolicited, and Sherlock held his breath, wondering if John would continue. Then:

‘I like the windows and sleeping in a bed and having proper meals. Before coming here—’

It was like John had caught himself in a confession he had never meant to make, and his cheeks flushed red.

‘You can say,’ said Sherlock, hoping to sound kind. He meant to be kind.

‘Nothing, sir. Is it my turn or yours, sir?’

Sherlock picked up a card. For a few rounds, they played in silence. Perhaps, Sherlock thought, it would be wiser, kinder, to let it go, but a large part of him wanted to make demands of John. He wanted to say, ‘I can’t help you if I don’t know you!’ And then John, reluctant or not, would follow that dominant ward-impulse and obey his host, and then tell him everything he wanted to know, confirming what he had guessed and filling in the holes to questions he had been dying to ask since December the first. So did he let John shut up, or make him speak up?

Or was there a third choice?

‘John, you know the skull on the mantle?’

Unnecessarily, John turned his head to look at it. ‘Yes sir.’

‘Want to know something funny? I talk to it, sometimes. Well, less so since you arrived. But before then, fairly regularly.’ He grinned a little, hoping John would find this amusing and not bizarre or alarming. Fortunately, though to a much lesser extent, John grinned back—more of a quirk of the lip at the corner of the mouth, but there was no unease in him, which Sherlock counted as a positive. ‘For cases, mostly. When I’m trying to work something out. It helps. Talking, I mean. Talking aloud. I’m able to solve problems more easily that way.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘What I’m getting at is this.’ He adjusted himself forward in his seat a little. ‘I want you to be happy here.’

‘Sir, I—’

‘Now, let me finish. I want you to be happy, and I want to help. But I know you find it... difficult. You find it difficult, talking about things. Things that happened. Before. With other hosts. And I just want you to know, I don’t care what happened. I really don’t. Only insofar as it is affecting you here, if those things continue to make you unhappy now. So should you want to talk, or need to... you can. Maybe it’s too much to talk to someone with flesh and blood. But ol’ Billy over there doesn’t have either.’ He smiled again, teasing. ‘And he’s a good listener.’

‘Talk to the skull?’ said John, sceptical.

‘You can always talk to me,’ said Sherlock. ‘But if it’s too hard to get those first words out, let Billy
They continued again in silence, Sherlock racking up the points, even though he wasn’t playing to win. If it had been Mycroft, he would have been far more ferocious, an eye single to crushing his opponent. But now, he was holding onto gin without declaring it, to see just how long it would take for John to knock or lay down. But now, John seemed distracted. He was thinking, and not about the game. His brow was furrowed and his lips were drawn down. At long last, as he absently drew another card he barely looked at, he said softly, ‘They weren’t all bad.’

‘Pardon?’

‘My past hosts, sir. They weren’t all bad.’

‘I didn’t mean to suggest that they were. Not all of them.’

‘Some of them just got dealt a bad hand.’

‘What bad hand?’

‘Me.’

Sherlock scowled, remembering the list of seventeen. From the time John was born to the time he reached adulthood, he had already known eight different hosts, plus the hospital he lived in for the first fourteen months of his life, a children’s asylum at age seven, and a rehab farm at fourteen. What could a child possibly do that warranted such frequent abandonment? No. Sherlock had seen enough cases, dealt with enough bad hosts to know: it was never the child who was bad. Rather, it was always the host that made a child believe he was.

‘Tell me this, then,’ said Sherlock, feeling suddenly argumentative. ‘Which of all those not-so-bad hosts would you be happy to return to, if extended the invitation?’

John’s mouth closed up.

‘That’s what I thought. John, you are not a bad hand. You weren’t a bad child, and I highly doubt you were a difficult adult. I’m not an idiot. You’ve lived here a month, and if I know anything about you by now, it’s that you’re good. You’re a good man. There are bad hosts out there. Too many of them. But you are a good man.’

‘Then . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘Why did none of them ever want me?’

Sherlock felt something inside of himself wrench in pain. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. He wanted to do something. Stop this. Fix this. He wanted to shake John and tell him to stop thinking such illogical thoughts, or storm out the door, find Mycroft, and demand the name of John’s last host, of his last host of hosts, and teach them all a fistful of lessons. Instead, he followed a strange new impulse and reached across the table, gently laying his hand on John’s arm.

John’s skin jumped and he jerked his hand away as though he’d been touched by fire.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sherlock began.

‘Sir, may I be excused?’ John asked. His cheeks were burning red, and once again his head was
hanging, hiding the shine in his eyes.

Sherlock wanted to say no. He wanted to yell at him for calling him sir. Stop it, just stop it, now. He wanted John to throw down his cards and stomp away like a petulant, self-entitled teenager. Instead, he made his small request, and how could Sherlock say anything but:

‘Of course, John. You don’t need to ask.’

John placed the cards neatly on the table. He stood. Then he slowly made his way out of the room and to the stairs, the slight limp as always hindering any sort of stomping or hasty flight.

God, John, what did they do to you?

***

Christmas was over, and thank God. The day had been salvaged when Mrs Hudson returned to Baker Street from her sister’s (she went every year, though this was the first year Sherlock wished she had stayed in London) and announced they would be having a proper Christmas dinner, puddings and all. Fortunately, she made no insistence upon the leftover crackers she’d brought back with her, not after pulling the first and making John, who wasn’t looking at the time, jump clear out of his skin. But she did insist, as the night wound to its close, that Sherlock pull out his violin and regale them with carols.

Sherlock relented, and it was while twisting the fine tuner of his E string that he realised he hadn’t done this for a while. Play, that is. Not since John had come to 221B, at least, despite the fact that it had been the first item on the list of his own self-description as a host and living companion.

The fire crackled, the lights were dimmed, and the fairy lights and a solitary lamp alone warmed the room. Sherlock began with the light-hearted ‘Sleigh Ride,’ eased into ‘White Christmas,’ and took Mrs Hudson’s request for ‘Rudolph’ while trying not to cringe. But it was while on the second repetition of a sweetly melodised ‘Silent Night’ that he noticed John’s face. Softened in the firelight’s wavering glow, his expression was changed from guarded watchfulness to open, quiet awe. The lines smoothed between his brightened eyes as he watched Sherlock’s fingers move on the strings. His whole body, in fact, from fidgety hands to easily wearied leg, drooped with relaxed posture. The transformation stunned him, and Sherlock regretted having waited until now to pull out the instrument.

At last, he concluded his solo concert and, to the sound of Mrs Hudson’s solo applause, took a bow.

‘Bravo, Sherlock!’ she said happily. ‘Though I do wish you had worn the antlers.’

‘Some things are best left to the imagination, Mrs Hudson,’ he said, smiling, and cast a quick glance to John, who had not clapped, but looked on expectantly, not sure what he should do.

As midnight approached, Mrs Hudson, yawning and rubbing at her eyes like a child, announced herself well done in. She kissed Sherlock goodnight and gave him a peck on the cheek. Then she turned to John and gave him the same. He looked surprised a little astonished even, and stuttered out a clumsy goodnight in response. Then Mrs Hudson took her leave, humming ‘Joy to the World’ as she descended the stairs.

‘If you’re tired, you can go to bed,’ Sherlock said to John. He didn’t enjoy being so directive, but he had noticed John’s habit of waiting for Sherlock to retire first before allowing himself respite for the day, unless otherwise instructed. Now, John was struggling to keep his eyes open, fighting against the yawns, and Sherlock didn’t want to pretend that he himself was the least bit sleepy. So he
bestowed his permission.

‘Thank you, sir.’

John rose from the chair and slowly drifted toward the door Mrs Hudson had left open. For a moment, Sherlock was distracted as he twisted the screw on his bow to readjust the tightness of the horsehairs. But then he realised that John was hesitating at the door. He tried not to stare. Finally, John turned back around, and though his head was as bowed as ever it was, and he seemingly addressed his own toes, he said, shyly:

‘Happy Christmas, Mr Holmes.’

Sherlock grinned, a little sadly. ‘Happy Christmas, John.’

Then, as John ascended to his room, he began to play again, softly: ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.’

He didn’t know that John was sitting on the top step outside his bedroom door, listening still.

Chapter End Notes

A very merry Christmas to all, and I'll see you in the New Year!
On Boxing Day, the launderette was open again, and John headed out first thing in the morning. Sherlock really needed to talk to Mrs Hudson about getting a washer for the flat.

With John gone, Sherlock was bored, so he decided to go out himself: a visit to St Bart’s, where the mortuary attendant there, a woman named Molly Hooper, could always be coerced into providing him with medical waste destined for the bin and crematorium. Sometimes fingers, sometimes toes, sometimes an entire hand or eyeballs. And then there was that time she had given him a collection of tongues. That had been special.

Today, she did not disappoint. Excited, he took his new Christmas toy home to begin an experiment, and after the first stage, thinking nothing of it, he stored the body part in the fridge like he always did—beside the milk—and then straightaway forgot about it.

Then John came home, bearing not only the freshly laundered towels and sheets, but a small carrier bag of groceries as well. He greeted Sherlock politely, then set the groceries on the kitchen table while he disappeared to the back of the flat to return the neatly folded laundry to the bathroom and cupboards for linens. Sherlock continued paging through his old anatomy book. He barely noticed when John returned to the kitchen to put away the food stuffs, not until the refrigerator door slammed shut. Sherlock’s eyes snapped up, and he saw John spin away from the fridge, looking like he’d just seen the bogeyman.

Oh right. The head.

‘I didn’t see anything, sir,’ John squeaked, but the horror on his face defied the claim.

Sherlock shot to his feet, but regretted it instantly as John—though nearly two full rooms away—fell backward against the refrigerator and, quite by reflex, glanced at the block of knives by the sink, then away again.

‘I swear, sir.’ Breathless with fear, John was positively shaking, voice and all. His panic rose with his host’s every step, closer and closer. To spare him, Sherlock stopped on the far side of the kitchen table. ‘Your business is your business, and I’ll not tell a soul, hand to God I won’t.’

‘My business?’ Despite himself, Sherlock was torn between his amusement at John’s misapprehension, and regret at having inspired it. After all, the man was still finding his place in this new life. What he didn’t need was the suspicion that his new host was a consulting detective by day, and a homicidal madman by night.

‘I keep my hosts’ secrets, all of them. I promise, I won’t say a word.’ He might as well have been begging for his life.

‘John,’ Sherlock said gently, trying to rein in the terror by measured steps whilst trying to control his lips, which threatened a smile. It’s not funny, he told himself. But it was a little bit funny. ‘What is it you think you saw?’

‘Nothing, sir, nothing at all.’

Sherlock shook his head and stepped around the table. ‘Come now.’

But John shook his head vigorously. He looked green, like he might be sick. His pulse thrummed wildly in his neck.
‘Was it a human head?’

John couldn’t even move now, and Sherlock took pity; he couldn’t allow the man to persist under the delusion that he was about to be strung up like a stuck pig in the bathroom, or whatever his imagination might dream up. Sherlock could be quite creative when it came to designing ways to murder people; he hoped John’s imagination was not so active.

‘It’s an experiment,’ he said. ‘I’m measuring the coagulation of saliva after death.’ But when that assertion alone failed to bring a sense of ease, he added, ‘Standard research. Textbooks can’t teach you everything about human anatomy, after all. So, I teach myself. I’m on good terms with a pathologist at the morgue in St Bartholomew’s, and she provides me with specimens. Sometimes tissues, sometimes organs, sometimes whole body parts. Sadly, no whole cadavers. Yet.’ He smirked. ‘But seriously, John, it’s for the purposes of scientific inquiry. The donors are already dead.’

John swallowed, though with difficulty. ‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘So you’re not—’ He stopped himself.

‘Not what?’

John licked his dry lips. ‘I dunno, sir.’ A funny light entered his eye. ‘A criminal mastermind?’

Sherlock stared. And it occurred to him that John had just made a joke. He couldn’t stop himself—he threw back his head and laughed. He clapped John on the shoulder, partly to steady himself, and saw that John’s lips were pursed, holding back a small smile born of relief.

‘Oh John.’ Sherlock wiped tears of mirth from his cheeks. ‘I do like you. You’re a keeper, you are.’ He held both John’s shoulders now, debating, but ultimately couldn’t resist the thought.

‘You want to see it?’

John regarded him sombrely a moment, still a little timid, but getting braver.

‘Okay,’ he said.

Sherlock rubbed his hands together in delight, and opened the fridge door.

***

John had no particular interest in touching the head, but he was plenty curious about it. Sherlock himself had always had a kind of morbid fascination with the life and death of organisms, the more mammalian the better, and it was, well, sort of fun to see it reflected in John. Perhaps the whole scene was a bit grotesque, and any outsider peering through the window would have been horrified to watch two grown men leaning over the severed head of a human being resting on the kitchen table. But there was no hypothetical voyeur. It was just him and John sharing a strangely intimate moment with the detached head of a *Homo sapien sapien*.

‘And those are the salivary glands,’ Sherlock was saying as he used a pipette to extract a generous portion of saliva and add it to a vial; John was holding the tongs that lifted the tongue out of the way. ‘Oooh, look at that. See how it’s thickened? Not like the spit of a living organism.’

‘Why does it do that, sir?’
‘Well, like blood in the veins of a dead body, saliva will remain in a liquid form for two to three days if there are no ruptures that cause it to leak out and interact with collagen. When it does, it changes from a liquid to a solid, or semi-solid form. Like this. The time it takes to do this gives us a good indication of how long he’s been dead.’

‘And how long has he been dead, sir?’

‘Thirty-two hours now.’

‘How did he die?’

‘Kidney failure.’

‘Did his host sell his body to the hospital?’

Sherlock froze in the act of scooping out more saliva—this time with a spoon. It had congealed to the point that it was like scraping the last of the ice cream off the bottom of the tub. ‘You think he was a ward?’

‘Was he not, sir?’

‘No.’

‘Oh.’ John looked abashed. He cleared his throat and diverted course. ‘And if the saliva doesn’t solidify, sir, what happens to it?’

Sherlock wasn’t blind to John’s embarrassment, nor to the fact that he was trying to distract Sherlock from it now, so though he himself was disturbed by the presumption, he played along and pretended it hadn’t happened. ‘Along with the rest of the body, it begins to break down. It dries out, decays.’

He proceeded to walk John through the stages of decomposition: initial decay, putrefaction, black putrefaction, fermentation, and last of all, dry decay.

‘. . . which basically just leaves you with bones. But even then, enough clues are left behind for one to discern a host of information about the living man, from diet to cause of death.’

‘You’re very smart, Mr Holmes,’ said John.

‘Genius-level intelligence and extraordinary memory,’ said Sherlock matter-of-factly. ‘But the facts of death are just facts. Anyone can learn this stuff.’

‘Not wards.’

Sherlock set down the pipette and spoon, and straightened. ‘And why not?’

John seemed to sense he had said something wrong. ‘I meant nothing by it, sir. Only that, wards aren’t meant for such learning.’

With a roll of the eyes, Sherlock contradicted him thusly: ‘Your brains are just as fully formed as anyone’s. I’ll show you. What tissue did I tell you gives the nose its shape?’

‘Cartilage, sir.’

‘Yes, and the muscle that runs along here?’ He indicated the cheek.

‘Zy . . . zygomaticus?’
‘Precisely. And the blood vessel in the tongue?’

‘The lingual artery.’

‘That’s settled then. You’ve clearly the intellect. So I’ll teach you.’

John stared, a little befuddled, like he hadn’t expected the conversation to turn this way at all. ‘Me?’

‘Of course. You’re going to need to know this stuff if you’re going to assist me on cases, after all. It wouldn’t do to be accompanied by a dunce.’

***

By Sherlock’s own assessment, things were going well with John. Progress, he called it. Little by little, the ward was peeking out of his shell, asking questions and entering rooms without apology, that sort of thing. It was like watching an alien explore a strange planet and slowly discover it was safe to venture forth.

There were moments, of course, that reminded Sherlock that John wasn’t exactly well. Yes, he was healthy. Well, healthier. The bullet wound was healed and he had regained some eighty percent of his mobility in the left arm and shoulder. And a second visit to the vet’s (one closer to home) had confirmed improvements in dietary wellbeing and general physical wellness, though he’d not gained quite the stone Sherlock had been hoping for. But generally, he was much improved, which pleased Sherlock greatly and made him feel like he was doing something right.

Nevertheless, from time to time, when John didn’t realise he was being watched, he grew melancholy and sank deep inside himself. It was like a spell fell over him, and he became motionless, staring into space, seemingly lost in thought, where he didn’t even respond to his own name, not until it was repeated three or four times. Then he started out of daze, made his apologies, and found himself a chore, to which he dedicated himself with single-minded attentiveness.

As far as Sherlock was concerned, however, they were on the right track. He was growing accustomed to having another human in the flat, almost to the point where, well, he wouldn’t say he preferred it. But he didn’t mind it, either.

Then two things happened that jarred the pair of them off course.

The first: Apparently, John was a thief.

***

‘Now it’s not a big deal, Sherlock, it’s really not . . .’

Mrs Hudson ushered him across her threshold and into 221A. Her voice was so low he almost couldn’t hear her, and he had to exercise restrain lest he shout at her to speak up. But she was the one who had summoned him, discreetly via text:

_Could you pop down for a tick? I need to talk to you about John._

So he left the flat, where John was just starting to pull out pots and pans for dinner, and joined Mrs Hudson downstairs.

‘Wrong.’ He closed the door behind himself. ‘It is a big deal. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be having this
conversation.’

‘I just don’t want you to be upset with him.’

‘Why? What did he do?’

‘Promise you won’t be upset.’

‘I promise nothing. Tell me.’

She pursed her lips, and the worry lines around her mouth deepened. ‘John helped me with the shopping today.’

‘Yes, I know. And?’

‘He carried the bags into the kitchen, as he always does, to help me put them away. But I got a phone call, and I stepped away for a moment, and . . . it does seem such a little thing.’

‘Mrs Hudson, quite quickly, if you please.’

‘He took one of my plates.’

He stared at her, not quite understanding the gravity in her voice.

She nodded to the wall, where Sherlock saw three decorative plates hanging on wire stands, each depicting a nature scene: a field of poppies, a winter cottage, the Thames. One wire stand hung empty.

‘I saw him slip it inside his shirt. He excused himself quickly and went straight upstairs.’

Sherlock groaned. He covered his eyes with a hand and squeezed his temples between thumb and middle finger. He remembered now: when John had come upstairs after returning from the shopping, he hadn’t stopped by the sitting room, as he normally did. Instead, he had gone straight up to his room.

He had taken Mrs Hudson’s plate. Stolen it, in fact. Why would he do something like that? Why?

‘It’s not worth much,’ she said, ‘beyond sentimental value. But—’

‘It’s the behaviour that’s the problem,’ Sherlock finished for her. Then, under his breath, ‘Dammit, I knew something would come out.’

A thieving ward was the number one reason hosts applied for trade or transfer. It was almost never denied, especially when the perpetrator was an adult. The kids could be taught better. A grown man was best got rid of.

‘Anything else missing?’ he asked, a little petulantly, trying to resign himself to the fact that he would have to do something about this. Already he was dreading having to take action at all. What would that even mean? A conversation? A wagging finger? Discipline? He wasn’t prepared for this.

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Hudson, ‘I’m sure of it. Maybe he just saw it and liked it.’

‘And gave himself permission to take it?’

‘Come now, Sherlock, maybe he didn’t realise it was wrong. We know he’s been through something awful.’
‘Mrs Hudson, let’s not kid ourselves. He didn’t want either of us to see him take it. Clearly. He knows it’s wrong. Let me . . . let me handle this.’

He returned to the flat, where John had set water to boil and was opening up a package of dried penne. Immediately, Sherlock’s mouth began to water. John did make a tempting spicy arrabiata. Though he had intended, while climbing the stairs, to confront John about the plate right away and get it over with, he thought that perhaps he should wait until after dinner. He needed time to think about how he was going to approach this. Or legitimately avoid it.

So he sat in his chair, but though he faced the kitchen and ostensibly watched John work, his mind was entirely engaged elsewhere as he reviewed the facts and raised questions concerning his charge.

Had the ward stolen from his hosts or neighbours before? Perhaps this was the reason for his frequent relocations. It might even explain why he had spent time on a rehabilitation ranch. If he had a problem, a compulsion, if he were, say, a kleptomaniac, even as a child, the State would have tried to correct the behaviour. Clearly, he had never stolen something too important—money, meds, weapons—or he would be sitting in a Ward Detention Centre. But stealing little things would still be grounds for getting rid of him, if other disciplinary measures failed to be corrective.

But that begged the question then, didn’t it? What other disciplinary measures had been taken? Should be taken? What ought Sherlock to do? Would it be enough to simply find the plate, return it, and tell John never to do it again? Or might he have to take more . . . inflicting measures?

Slyly, he pulled his computer onto his lap and posed the question to a search engine:

how to discipline a ward

The number of hits was well over a hundred million; his question was too broad. He tried again.

state-sanctioned discipline for adult wards

He quickly filtered through the hits that didn’t apply (‘When your ward seduces your husband’ and ‘Keeping the runaway happy at home’ and ‘when to turn it over to Ward Social Care officers’) and landed on the official WSC site for ward discipline, and he began to read.

A well-behaved ward is a happy ward, which makes for a happy host family. But sometimes, wards can act out. It’s not your fault. You’ve provided everything—a roof, a bed, regular meals, and company to boot! Most wards respond to this outpouring of generosity favourably and with gratitude. So why is your ward misbehaving?

Sherlock skimmed faster through the tripe. He had no use of the first section (You’ve known your ward since he or she was a child, so chances are, you’ll know best what methods of discipline he or she responds to) and onto the Perhaps you’ve acquired a ward in his or her adulthood ...

Then he settled in.

At-home infractions—Misbehaviours requiring at-home discipline may include but are not limited to the following:

-back-talking
-lying
-being disrespectful to host or guests
-refusing to eat
-sneaking food
-neglecting personal hygiene
- purchasing unsanctioned goods
- accessing ward-forbidden online content
- stealing host money or other property
- vandalising or destroying home property
- drinking alcohol
- smoking cigarettes
- taking illicit drugs
- refusing to come when called
- leaving the house without permission
- resisting correction
- striking members of the household, including pets
- violating any of the house rules established by the host

**Public infractions**—Misbehaviours requiring state-mandated discipline include but are not limited to the following:

- being in public without the identifying bracelets
- leaving or attempting to leave the district of registration
- violating curfew (sans host accompaniment)
- operating a vehicle
- disobeying the direct orders of a public servant
- causing a public disturbance
- vandalising public or private property
- stealing from public or private vendors
- assaulting any member of the public or civil servants

If your ward is caught violating any of the public safety and security orders, send a report to your local WSC agency, and the discipline will be handled for you. However, for any at-home infractions, you are legally permitted to enact discipline yourself. Use good judgement in assessing the severity of the violation and meting out an equivalent response. And remember the ultimate goal: that the violation not be repeated. A soft response will not communicate to a ward that a behaviour must be corrected.

Here is a list of recommended disciplinary responses to at-home infractions.

**A. Restrictions**

It may be appropriate to restrict your ward’s access to certain privileges. A ward who is desirous to have those privileges restored is more likely to change the unwanted behaviour.

Examples: Revoke entertainment privileges (television, radio, colouring books, music, etc.); deny breakfast or dinner; deny permission to go on outings; restrict the ward to his or her room; etc.

Remember: It is a violation of the CFCA to cause your ward to fast for a period greater than twenty-four hours, and that water must never be withheld.

**B. Discomforts**

It may be necessary to impose discomfort. A ward who is uncomfortable is more likely to change the unwanted behaviour to restore comfort.

Examples: Turn off the hot water when your ward bathes; remove the mattress from the bedroom; place your ward in time-out; don’t let your ward sit for dinner; have your ward wear uncomfortable clothing (see catalogue for sackcloths, hairshirts, and pinch-shoes); have your ward drink two tablespoons of vinegar; etc.
Remember: It is a violation of the CFCA to physically bind your ward to an immovable object, such as a pipe in the wall or a heavy chair. You may, however, bind your ward to himself (see catalogue for approved straightjackets, soft shackles, and hobbles), as long as there is no danger of the ward hurting himself.

**C. Corporal Punishments**

In more severe cases, it may be necessary to impose physical castigation. A ward who has been physically castigated understands the severity of his wrongdoings and is less likely to repeat them.

Examples: Striking the palms with a flat stick; striking with a soft-soled shoe; spanking: rapping on the head; slapping with an open hand; administering mild electric shocks (see catalogue for approved tasers); applying pinchers; etc.

Remember: It is a violation of the CFCA to abuse your ward, and a closed fist is strictly prohibited. Corporal punishment is approved if the goal is merely to cause manageable pain but not result in wounds. It is used as a means of punishment, the aim being corrective; it is not to be used in a malicious manner. If you have questions or would like a demonstration of the correct use of corporal punishment on your ward, please contact your local WSC agency, and an officer will meet you at your home to provide demonstrations.

‘Dinner is ready, Mr Holmes.’

Sherlock’s head came up with a jolt, and he saw that the table had been set for the pair of them, as John was now in the habit of eating with his host daily. Sometimes Mrs Hudson joined them, but not always, and tonight was not one of those nights. He was glad of it. This would be awkward enough without Mrs Hudson silently judging him on how he managed his ward’s misbehaviour.

But Sherlock had never had less of an appetite. The website had done nothing to ease his concerns about how to do this. If anything, it had only heightened them. He had no experience in this. Barnaby had been mild-mannered and unobtrusive, all the days Sherlock had known him, and an old man besides. And he had never witnessed his mother or father disciplining Redbeard. They had disciplined him, oh yes, but Sherlock had been a child and in need of punishment and correction from time to time, like all children. But it was one thing to correct a child with time outs and taking away the violin for a weekend. It was another thing entirely to slap or strike one. For that matter, it was just as revolting to do such a thing to an adult ward.

He was beginning to see a clearer picture. A host—particularly an angry or resentful host—could escalate any of those disciplinary measures so easily beyond so-called acceptable levels. How many of them had been used against John, and how often, and to what degree?

Suddenly, he saw in his mind’s eye a John—answering to some god-awful, inhuman name—going days without food because his host had imposed a fast; or being forced to swallow a glassful of vinegar until he became ill; or being punched in the face; or being cracked across the back with a wooden board; or God knows what else. As a child, as an adult, what did it matter? It was all reprehensible.

And how could Sherlock be expected to do that? Any of that? Forget the physical beatings. He could barely stand the thought of telling John that he was taking away his telly. It just wasn’t him! It wasn’t John! John didn’t even like telly! There had to be some reason, some logical explanation, for why he had taken that blasted plate. Then all would be fine. Mrs Hudson would get her plate back, John would continue on as he was, and Sherlock would sleep that night, no overreactions necessary.

The water was poured and the plates already filled (Sherlock, as usual, received the greater portion), so they sat together and Sherlock instantly picked up the fork and began to eat. If his mouth was full,
he didn’t have to talk. John waited two bites before joining.

The silence endured. Sherlock was having trouble swallowing. His mouth kept running dry, and after every bite he reached for his glass to help move things along.

‘Is it not to your liking, sir?’ John asked softly.

‘Mm?’ He swallowed hard and reached for his glass again.

‘The food, sir.’

Oh. Oh. John, hyper-attuned to his host’s moods, had noticed that he washed every bite down with water, as if it were too spicy or tasted terrible, when he was really just trying to work past the growing lump in his throat. ‘No no, not at all. It’s quite good.’

Conversation had been breached, and if he didn’t say something now, he might not have the courage later.

‘John.’

John lowered the fork speared with penne to his plate without biting.

He didn’t know how to say it delicately and so didn’t hedge: ‘Mrs Hudson is missing one of the decorative plates from her wall. She believes she saw you take it. Did you?’

Any hopes that Mrs Hudson had been mistaken in what she saw drained away just as surely as the blood from John’s face. His whole body froze, and he looked at Sherlock with unblinking eyes. Sherlock neither pressed nor retracted the question. He just waited for an answer. Dammit, he should have waited, taken the time to think and about what he should do when the answer came back yes.

John nodded.

‘You did?’

Again, a nod.

‘You took Mrs Hudson’s plate?’

‘Yes sir.’ His voice was barely audible.

A few beats passed as they stared at one another. Then Sherlock couldn’t contain himself. ‘Why!’ he exploded.

True to form, John jumped, but he opened his mouth to give answer. Still, it was several seconds before anything came out.

‘I . . . don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I didn’t want to.’

‘You what?’

‘I tried not to.’
‘My God, are you a klepto?’

John blinked. ‘A what?’

‘Tell me this, John. Have you done this before? Stolen something, I mean?’

With a sag of his shoulders and a drooping head, John nodded sorrowfully.

‘Shit. Shit shit shit. All right. Put down that fork. Dinner’s over.’

He was flustered. He was frustrated. And because he was losing his rein, he was borderline furious as well. Why had he been saddled with this at all? Why, when things seemed to be going so well, did John have to come out as a petty thief? Sitting back in his chair and folding his arms tightly, he ordered John up to his room to retrieve the stolen property.

‘You’re going to give back what you stole,’ he said, ‘with your sincerest apologies. And then we’re going to talk about what to do with you.’

God, he sounded just like his father.

The food cooled on the table while he waited for John to return. It took longer than he had estimated, and Sherlock was beginning to think he should have gone upstairs with him to act as monitor. He was on the cusp of shouting upstairs or marching up there himself when he heard John’s uneven footsteps on the stairs. He reappeared carrying, not just the pilfered plate, but an armful of items that threatened to topple from his uncertain hold. Turning his head from Sherlock, he deposited everything on the bare end of the table as a sacrificial offering and stepped back, hands behind his back and head hanging, to await his fate.

Slowly, Sherlock rose to his feet, the chair screeching slowly along the floorboards. There, he saw individually wrapped breakfast bars, two packets of banana chips, an orange, two bottles of water, four packets of crisps, a bottle of Brulidine cream, a small box of plasters, a bottle of paracetamol, a small stack of glossy, coloured papers, and on top of it all, the plate. Food? Medicine? Magazine pages? What was that about?

Speechless, Sherlock sifted through the hoard. The plate was small, round, bevelled porcelain, bearing an oil painting of the White Cliffs of Dover in its centre to match the other nature scenes on the other decorative plates. The torn-out pages from magazines, ten or twelve of them, each depicted the very same cliffs. Some appeared to be tourist adverts, while others used Dover as the backdrop to advertise everything from marmalade to men’s cologne. The pages, he saw, carried bits of torn tape with flecks of blue paint. The wardrobe. The wardrobe was painted blue. John had hung the images up on the inside of his wardrobe, where no one would see. Only John. It was . . . a hiding place?

‘I don’t understand,’ Sherlock said. ‘What is all this? Where does it all come from?’

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ John murmured. ‘I stole it.’

‘From where?’

‘The shops. Here and there. From the magazines, I . . .’ He closed his eyes, as if he could shut out the world.

‘Tore them out.’ Sherlock noted the rough edges, the unceremonious folds and wrinkles resulting from hastily hiding the pages inside one’s coat. Dammit, John had stolen from the shops. Sherlock cared little for such petty crimes and trivial indiscretions. He was guilty of them himself, and then some. But it was different with John. John was a ward, and the consequences if he were caught? A
The shopkeeper could report him to the police. Often, the police would turn an offending ward back over to the hosts, if the infraction was minor enough, to be disciplined in the home. A repeat offender, however, someone with a record . . . Sherlock didn’t know if John had a record. But given his track record of being shunted from host to host, Sherlock would be surprised if he didn’t.

Maybe he could ask Lestrade to look. Or hell, just hack the Yard’s website again and find out for himself. He had told himself he wouldn’t pry. Now he was beginning to wonder whether that were unwise.

Sherlock pointed to the bars, the orange, the water. ‘We have food,’ he said, trying to be reasonable.

‘Yes sir.’

‘So?’

John didn’t answer.

‘You can never, ever do this again, John,’ he said, trying to infuse his voice with gravitas, and he was pleased when the words came out stern. ‘Do you hear me?’

‘Yes sir,’ John said, head bobbing.

‘Take the plate down to Mrs Hudson at once. Apologise. And promise her that this is the last time anything goes missing from her flat. We’ll . . . deal with the rest when you get back.’

Erect in posture—stiff back and upraised chin—Sherlock wore the visage of the school disciplinarians he had once hated while he watched John pick up the plate, hold it close to his chest, and disappear through the door. Then his bearing broke, and he slumped forward. ‘Idiot,’ he murmured, meaning himself. But at that, John’s footsteps halted on the stair, having heard. But he continued on.

Curiosity drove him to follow after John, but lightly. He didn’t want to be seen. He wanted only to stand on the stair and listen to what transpired below. This is what he heard:

John knocked thrice on Mrs Hudson’s door, a timid but resolved rapping. Moments later, her door clicked open. ‘Oh John!’ she said. Her surprise was clearly feigned. She obviously had been expecting him. ‘Come in.’

But contrary to his habit of instant obedience, John stayed where he was, on her threshold, and wasted no time getting to the heart of the matter. ‘Ma’am, apologies, ma’am, but I have stolen your plate, and I am here only to return it, and to say I am sorry, and to assure you that it will never happen again, and—’

‘John, John,’ she said, and Sherlock recognised the tone as one his mother often used when calming down a frantic child. ‘It’s all right, it’s fine. You’ve brought it back, haven’t you? So no harm done!’

‘Yes ma’am, forgive me.’

‘I do! Of course, I do. Only . . . Can you tell me why, John?’

There was silence. And for a moment, Sherlock believed John would tell Mrs Hudson what he couldn’t tell his host. Instead: ‘Sorry, ma’am, it won’t happen again.’

‘Hush. None of this ma’am business. We’re practically family.’
‘No, ma’am, I’m a bad man. I stole it because I am bad. But you needn’t worry. My host will punish me as I deserve.’

At that, Sherlock started, and his foot fell down one stair, just as Mrs Hudson raised her voice, and, in an admonitory tone, called him by his full name.

‘Sherlock Holmes!’

He was tripping down the stairs now, hastening to reach John and make correction.

‘No no no—’

‘What does he mean! What did you say!’

‘Not at all what I said!’

‘As he deserves! Did you say—?’

‘Deal with, I said, that’s all!’

‘Deal with him?’

‘It! It!’

‘And just what does that mean?’

Sherlock threw his hands in the air. ‘I don’t know! I don’t know what the hell I’m doing!’

Hearing them row, John’s nerves kicked into gear, and to both their dismay, interjected with, ‘It’s all right, Mr Holmes, I won’t fuss, I’ll take my licks,’ as if he could think of no way to placate them other than to take a proper thrashing.

‘John, please,’ Sherlock groaned, unable to bear it.

‘It’s just a plate, for Pete’s sake!’ Mrs Hudson cried, getting hysterical. ‘Good lord, you can have it!’ Startled, borderline appalled, John shook his head.

‘Well, I don’t want it! Not anymore!’ And with that, she threw the plate to the ground. It shattered, and the shards of porcelain jumped and scattered.

Sherlock gasped. Mrs Hudson, shocked by her loss of control, clapped a hand across her mouth.

‘I’m sorry!’ John cried. Sherlock gaped at him, dumbfounded. ‘I’m so sorry, Mrs Hudson. I didn’t mean to break it. I swear, I didn’t mean to!’ With the heel of his hand, he smacked himself in the side of the head, hard. ‘I’ll clean it at once, I’ll get the broom!’ He backed away, toward the stairs, but as he did, he hit himself again, twice, and Sherlock heard the impact like a boxer’s mitt against a punch bag, and saw John’s cringe of pain. ‘Please, I’ll work off my debt to buy you another!’

Horrified at this show of unrestrained self-abuse, Sherlock’s hands shot out and grabbed John’s wrists to detain him. ‘Stop! Stop! John!’

John froze, muscles tightening and head shirking Sherlock’s direct gaze, but otherwise prepared for a castigating hand.

Wanting to quail in despair, Sherlock instead lowered his voice, and not just the volume, but the
pitch, to a calming bass. ‘John.’ He slowly released John’s wrists, and took hold of him at the
shoulders instead, but only to calm him, and keep his arms from lifting to strike himself again. With
quick, gentle strokes down the arms, he said, despite his own racing heart, ‘Calm down. Okay? It’s
just a plate. You’re okay, we’re okay, everything is . . . okay.’

‘I’ll work really hard, I promise,’ said John, eyes still averted, still bracing against Sherlock’s touch
as if waiting for it to turn harsh.

‘All I want you to do is take a deep breath. Okay? Just breathe a moment.’

John only held still, completely still; he seemed not to be breathing at all.

Sherlock withdrew his hand. ‘Just. Uh. Go on upstairs. Take it easy. I’ll clean this up. Mrs Hudson
and I will clean this up, hm?’

‘Yes,’ Mrs Hudson said, breathlessly, still not quite recovered from what she had done.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Hudson,’ John said again.

‘Go on,’ Sherlock repeated gently, and he turned John around to point him toward the stairs.

They watched him go, heard his footsteps rise to the first storey, and then quiet.

‘Oh dear,’ Mrs Hudson said. ‘Oh dear, oh lord, oh Sherlock.’

‘All right, let’s talk,’ said Sherlock. ‘What do we do?’

***

Twenty minutes later, with the broken plate disposed of in the rubbish bin and a tense conversation
delivered in hush tones behind them, Sherlock and Mrs Hudson returned to 221B together to find
John waiting anxiously in the centre of the room.

‘Please, John,’ said Sherlock, gesturing, and John obediently sat in the armchair; at the invitation,
Mrs Hudson sat in Sherlock’s. As for himself, Sherlock took a moment, turning his back on them
both to collect his thoughts, and he saw once again the photos torn from the magazines. He picked
them up, dragged a chair, and joined them.

‘You’re not in trouble,’ he started, once again echoing his father, and he knew how hollow the
words sounded. He hadn’t believed them as a boy, and he was reasonably confident John didn’t
believe them now. ‘But you need to tell us the truth. Okay?’

‘Yes sir,’ John said to his knees.

‘All this stuff.’ He gestured to the pile on the table. ‘What’s it for? Why did you take it?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘I think you do.’ He waited a long moment, but John didn’t even part his lips. ‘Go on, John.’

‘We’re not angry,’ Mrs Hudson quickly interjected.

‘We’re not angry,’ Sherlock affirmed. ‘We’re just trying to understand. I’ve put no restrictions on
your shopping. The cupboards are full. You eat well every day. Yes?’

‘Yes sir.’
‘So?’

‘It’s for . . . it’s . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘For just in case.’ John’s voice was very small. If Sherlock hadn’t been watching his lips, he might have missed the answer altogether.

‘Just in case,’ Sherlock repeated. ‘Just in case of what? In case I don’t feed you?’ He looked at the plasters and painkillers. ‘In case I hurt you?’

‘Just in case,’ John repeated. His right hand began again to tremble. He covered it swiftly with his left to still it.

Sherlock looked at Mrs Hudson in dismay. Had he not been good and kind and harmless, all the days John had been there? Had they not been talking together, eating together, enjoying moments of quiet together? What was it going to take to convince John that he was in a good place?

‘And the magazine pages?’ Mrs Hudson asked, most likely to intercede before Sherlock could start railing.

John squeezed the trembling hand and between his knees; with the other, he rubbed the back of his neck.

‘You said you were born in Dover,’ said Sherlock, leafing through the glossy images.

‘Yes sir,’ said John softly.

‘Near the Cliffs?’

‘Very near them, sir.’

‘Do you miss it?’

John didn’t answer. His hands were in his lap again, squeezing one another.

‘I’m trying to understand, John. These images in the magazine ads, on the plate—you’re hiding the White Cliffs of Dover in your room, and I just want to understand why.’

‘Because—’ John seemed to struggle to find the words, or at the very least to say them. He began twisting his fingers together. ‘I don’t—’

After a moment, Mrs Hudson coaxed, ‘You can say. Go on, then, dear.’

John took a big breath. Licked his lips. Blinded rapidly. ‘I just want to remember them. What they looked like. I’m sorry, Mr Holmes.’

Sherlock frowned. ‘Do you not remember?’

‘I remember it was beautiful there. In Dover.’ His voice caught, and he swallowed hard. ‘But I’ve forgotten a lot of things.’

‘Well, you were young when you left, weren’t you? Your records say you were, what, four years old when you left that home? And you haven’t been back since?’
John shook his head.

‘Is that all this is about? You want to see the Cliffs? Well, shit, that’s easy! It’s only, what would you say, Mrs Hudson? Eighty miles?’

‘And wards cannot leave their district of registration,’ Mrs Hudson reminded him in an undertone. John’s eyes closed, but only for a moment, as though there were some pain deep inside his gut and he were waiting for it to pass.

‘Yeah, but come on. What’s one day? We leave the bracelets at home, rent a car or go by train, be home before curfew—’

‘And risk the checkpoints? Sherlock!’

‘Maybe it’ll be worth the fine! What do you say, John?’

Mrs Hudson slapped the arm of the chair. ‘No, Sherlock, no. Dover is a port city. You’ll lose custody altogether if John is found there.’

Sherlock frowned and slumped. ‘It’s unfair.’

‘It’s the law.’ She turned her attention back to John. ‘I’m sorry, love. I truly am. But you understand why you can’t—’

‘I understand, ma’am.’

At the very least, Sherlock realised, John understood better than he did. After all, he’d had, what, thirty-three years to pine for it, and know it was an impossible dream.

So that’s what this was all about then? John was . . . homesick? For the last thirty-three years? Sherlock tried to enter the mind of a man like that, a man who had been longing for a place he had barely known. After all, a child’s memories, the ones he would carry with him throughout his life, were only beginning to take hold around that age. Before then, John would have lacked the strong neural processes necessary to form complex autobiographical memory. Why had he latched on so strongly to Dover?

‘Tell me about it,’ said Sherlock, setting the pages back on the table and crossing an ankle to his knee. He interlocked his fingers and sat back, waiting for a story.

‘Sir?’

‘Your home in Dover. You know, I’ve never been. What do you remember?’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Hudson nervously. This wasn’t the tactic they had discussed downstairs. ‘He doesn’t want to talk about that. John, you don’t have to, if you don’t want.’

‘It’s not that, ma’am,’ said John. ‘But I remember very little.’

‘Still,’ said Sherlock, unwilling to let the matter go, ‘it means something to you. Or you wouldn’t have taken that plate. Or ripped the pages from magazines. So how ’bout it? Just one, solitary moment from your life before Baker Street. I know so little about you. I just want to know this one thing.’

John considered this in his private, thoughtful way. At last, he said, ‘I remember tall grass. I had . . . red shoes, I think. Once, a bee stung Harry.’
What’s this? A name? Another player in the life and times of John the Ward? ‘Harry?’

‘I was Harry’s playmate.’

‘The host’s son? Was he your age?’

At first, John appeared confused. But the perplexity vanished quickly as he shook his head. ‘A couple of years older, I think. Only I called her Harry. I couldn’t say Harriet, back then. I had’—he gestured toward his mouth—‘speech problems. For a while. My host didn’t mind. She was good to me. Kind. Patient. I remember ice lollies in the garden and standing on hot sand, and my host . . .’

Something remarkable was happening. John had drifted off, lost in his memories, and his hand came up to rest on the top of his head, stroking slowly, and Sherlock thought he understood. He was remembering the affectionate touch of a host-mother.

‘What were you called?’ Sherlock asked.

‘I’ve forgotten. I’ve forgotten Harry’s face, and my mu— my host’s face too, and the Cliffs. I know I’ve seen them. I must have done. But—’

‘But all you have are the photos from the magazines.’

‘I just want to remember,’ John said softly. He looked at Mrs Hudson. ‘I’m sorry. When I saw the plate, I wanted to . . .’

‘Go on,’ Sherlock urged. Say what you’re thinking, what you’re feeling, what you’re desiring. I know those things are in you. You think and feel and want, just like any man. Say it.

‘. . . keep it safe. I thought . . .’ He sighed, getting upset. ‘I thought it would slip off the wall and break. But it broke anyway. Because of me. Because of what I did.’

‘Posh,’ Mrs Hudson said with a wave of her hand. ‘It was clearly what I did, John, and I want you to think nothing more of it. Five pounds, that’s what it cost, a street artist practically giving them away! It wasn’t like you’d smashed one of Sherlock’s pretty teacups.’

‘Mother’s teacups,’ Sherlock corrected. ‘And really, John,’ he added, ‘if ever you want something like that, you can have it. Just, you know, pay for it. You want magazines? Throw them in with the shopping. I don’t mind!’

Mrs Hudson’s eyes brightened. ‘A calendar, that’s the better solution, one of those flip-calendars with all the pretty little photos.’

‘Or hell, a bloody poster to plaster all over your bedrooms walls.’

‘Language, Sherlock,’ Mrs Hudson grumped.

‘I’ll give you extra pocket money to do with as you like.’

‘Wards can’t use cash,’ Mrs Hudson reminded.

Sherlock sighed mightily. ‘Fine. Charge it then. Because honestly, John, it makes little difference to me if you tear pages from magazines or hunt down paintings of the White Cliffs of Dover. But if you were caught, if a shopkeeper saw you doing that, do you know what that would mean?’

John nodded.
'You’ve known eighteen hosts in your life. Let’s not make it nineteen, okay?'

'Yes, Mr Holmes.'

Sherlock nodded sharply and started to rise.

'My punishment, sir?'

Wait. Had he really not understood? Sherlock lowered himself again, slowly. He spread his hands.

'No punishment, John.'

'No?'

'Because that’s not what this is. This . . . relationship. Arrangement. Whatever. We—Mrs Hudson and I—are neither disciplinarians nor overseers nor taskmasters. This isn’t a system of debits and credits. You stand in no need of punishment. It seems you’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime, wouldn’t you agree?'

John didn’t move, but his eyes were round with incredulity.

In hushed tones, in the privacy of Mrs Hudson’s flat, Sherlock and Mrs Hudson had agreed: as the recipient of untold and uncountable punishments, what John really needed was quite the opposite: a kinder hand, a gentler tongue. He needed to know that neither one toe out of line nor a whole leg would merit him the kinds of castigation he feared. This home was to be a sanctuary, not only from a world unfriendly to wards, but from the memories of past hosts that continued to haunt him.

'May I ask,’ he began, hoping he wasn’t pushing his luck, ‘why did you leave Dover? What happened?’

John pursed his lips together, like he might refuse to answer, and Sherlock was on the cusp of retracting the question, when he said, ‘She died.’

'Harry?'

'My host. Then Harry became a ward, like me, and they took us both away. Just not together.'

'How did she die, your host?’

John’s grip on his own hand was bloodless. ‘Murdered, sir.’

'Good lord,’ Mrs Hudson said, speaking through the hand now covering her mouth.

'How?’ Sherlock asked.

'A man. Broke into the house. Into the kitchen. They were fighting, yelling. He had a knife. He stabbed her until she stopped moving.’

Mrs Hudson made a little squeak of horror behind her hand.

There was only one way John could have known that last detail. ‘You were in the room?’ As John nodded, Sherlock saw in his mind’s eye a little boy, only four years old, cowering in the corner of a kitchen and watching as his surrogate mother was violently killed in front of him. And the trauma had impressed itself upon his vulnerable young brain. Maybe that was why he couldn’t remember her face: when he tried, all he saw was the blood.

'When the police took Harry, she cried,’ said John. ‘I never saw her again.’
‘I’m . . . sorry,’ said Sherlock. ‘I’m sorry that happened to you.’

John looked surprised at his words, and unsure what to do with them. ‘It was a long time ago, sir,’ he said. ‘And I’ve had many hosts since then.’

‘But that’s the host you miss.’

John looked between his new host and the landlady. ‘Yes.’

She was a host he could never return to, a time that was gone and place that might as well have been on the other side of the world. And a sister. Well, someone like a sister, whose fate was unknown. Sherlock wished he could help. He wished he could take John down to Dover for just one day. Maybe there were allowances to be sought, permissions to apply for, exceptions to be made. And if not? Well, maybe there were a way to bring Dover to *him*. He was a genius. He could figure it out.

And perhaps he would have, if it had not been for the second thing that jarred them off their course toward a more stable household life. It didn’t come in the form of criminal misbehaviour or the reluctant revelation of a childhood trauma. It came in a different form entirely.

Her name was Irene Adler.
A Scandal on Baker Street

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains content that may be upsetting for some readers. Please proceed with caution.

She sidled up alongside him in the gallery and stood a little too close for an ordinary curator. But then, she always had been quite the exhibitionist.

‘See anything you like?’ Her voice was deliberately sultry, and in turning to face her, he took one step back.

‘Ah. Ms Adler.’

‘Mr Holmes. A pleasure.’

She raked him with her eyes; he rolled his. Some things never changed. Back at uni, she had never been shy in conveying her interest in him. As an art subject, that is. It was his physique, she said—the length of his neck, the angle of his shoulders, the slope of his back. The bone structure, muscle forms, and frankly absurd elongations of every limb and sinew, was every sketch artist’s and sculptor’s dream, and she even convinced him to pose nude for a classroom full of drawing students. To prove he cared little for appearing naked in front of complete strangers, he agreed, and he struck each pose—standing, sitting, reclining, and semi-reclining—masterfully. She teased him—and had been teasing him ever since—that if ever she were to break her pattern and sleep with a man, he’d be the one. If she was looking for a return compliment, he never offered it. Theirs was a constant game of one-upmanship and trying to ruffle the other’s feathers. But for all their competitive spirit, each had a special liking for the other.

And besides, given the circles she travelled in, she was terribly useful as an informant. So even though he was aware of her (for lack of a friendlier term) misdeeds, he ensured that he was quite distantly aware of them. So she gave him information, and he declined to mention her more illicit activities to the police. It was a suitable arrangement.

‘And what, pray tell, brings you to my gallery? Is it for a case?’

‘A case? No.’

‘Indeed? And yet, I know you’re no lover of great art. Is it to see me, then? Are we finally going to have dinner?’

It was her favourite euphemism, one he always pretended not to understand.

‘I’m not hungry,’ he said, as he always did. ‘I’m here to buy. That is, if you have what I’m looking for.’

Her eyebrows rose in surprise and she smiled. ‘A patron? Aren’t I the lucky girl. I never expected the great Sherlock Holmes would buy artwork from my gallery.’
‘Try not to get overexcited, Ms Adler. It’s unbecoming on you.’

Irene Adler smirked, and with a come-hither nod, she led him away from the for-display-only Fauvist canvass on loan from a local museum and walked him deeper into the gallery.

‘What’s your flavour, Mr Holmes?’ she asked, half a pace ahead of him and swaying her hips with each step. She wore a white sheath dress, cut at the knee and overlaid with a matching bolero. Her heels, however, were blood red. ‘Impressionism? Cubism? Surrealism?’

‘Landscape,’ he answered succinctly.

She laughed and stopped short. ‘Landscape. Honestly, Sherlock, why are you really here?’

He frowned, eyes narrowing at her mocking. ‘If you don’t have what I’m looking for, I’ll go elsewhere.’

‘I don’t mean to make fun.’

‘Of course you do.’

‘Well, yes. But you’re just so easy to tease. I just want to be clear: I don’t sell kitsch.’

‘I’ve no intention of buying kitsch. But perhaps I should order online.’

‘Don’t be nasty. Very well. Landscapes. Anything more particular?’

‘The White Cliffs of Dover.’ He hoped the game of twenty questions was over.

‘That is more particular. And, as luck would have it, I have just the thing.’

She led him through two smaller rooms, one displaying a series of abstract shapes and assaulting colours, the second a collection of nude men in a variety of imaginative postures. There, she paused. ‘Are you sure this isn’t more to your liking?’

‘You do get distracted so easily,’ he said dryly, and they moved on.

In the back room, among a dozen other paintings, hung the very one he was looking for.

‘“Spring Morning, Dover,” ’ she said. “It’s a Rex Preston, 2025, measuring 20 by 20. Is it quite what you fancy?”

Hands clasped behind him, Sherlock leant forward on his toes to put on a show that he was studying the details of the brushstrokes. Preston’s loose, semi-abstract style transformed the White Cliffs of Dover into something almost mythical, like the perfect daydream.

‘I’ll take it.’

‘It’s £2700,’ she said, a tad smugly, as though she expected him to wince and reconsider.

The wincing was entirely internal. That wasn’t even what he’d paid for John. Nevertheless, he’d expected to pay much more for his new ward, so he had the money to indulge. Besides, the thought of presenting it to John, and seeing the look on his face . . . Well, that thought alone was worth at least £2700.

‘Very well,’ he said smoothly.
She hummed. ‘Redecorating the sitting room, are we? Bringing a little oil-painting tranquillity into the otherwise frantic life of Sherlock Holmes?’

‘It’s not for me,’ he said, sighing at her tireless jabs.

‘A gift?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who’s the special someone?’

‘It’s for my ward.’

He regretted the casual confession instantly. It was not the custom for even the very wealthy to buy extravagant gifts for their wards, and so Irene’s stunned reaction was not misused. What was unexpected was that he had admitted it to her. But the impulse to correct any misapprehension, no matter how small, had always been a weakness for him.

‘John has a certain liking for the Cliffs,’ he muttered, by way of defence. ‘And I have a certain liking for quality décor on my walls.’ Not exactly true—the skull painting had cost him only twenty pounds—but it was a suitable lie for explaining why he wasn’t opting for a ten-pound poster or a postcard worth a measly 50p. The starker truth was, well, he just wanted John to have nice things.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘A certain liking. For décor.’ She smiled at him as if they shared a secret, a smile he promptly ignored. So she pressed harder. ‘He must be quite special.’

‘Do give it a rest, Irene, it’s not like that at all.’

‘To your chagrin? The laws really are so un-indulgent, aren’t they?’

He’d had enough of her for one day. ‘I’ve other business to attend to. Send the bill and painting to Baker Street. I trust you know the address.’

‘I’ll have it gift-wrapped,’ she said, still smiling her conspiratorial smile, but he was already striding away.

***

Sherlock was trying his damnedest not to pout, but it was hard—he felt so pouty.

‘Is it so hard to pick up the damn phone?’ he sulked.

‘Oh don’t give me that,’ Lestrade said with a mighty sigh worthy of only Lestrade. ‘I called you on the last one, and you blew me off.’

‘I told you, I was busy.’

‘Yeah, well.’ Lestrade shrugged and put his feet up on the desk. ‘We didn’t need you on that one after all. Or this one. Toxicology came back. Poison, self-administered. It was suicide, not murder.’

‘And the poison?’

‘Strychnine.’

‘So Sir Jeffery Patterson, James Phillimore, and this latest—’
‘Beth Davenport.’

‘—all killed by the same poison, and you think it’s suicide?’

‘Did you not hear me, Sherlock?’ Lestrade kicked his feet up on the table and leant back in his chair. ‘Clearly self-administered. We know how to spot these things. Suicide is the only explanation for all of the facts.’

‘Wrong. It’s one explanation of some of the facts, and the others you have conveniently decided to ignore.’

Again, the Lestrade-worthy sigh. ‘Such as?’

‘One, no notes. People about to off themselves always leave notes.’

‘Not always.’

‘And two, their bodies were found in places they had no reason to be. Explain that, inspector.’

‘I dunno. Sometimes, people are like cats. They crawl away to die in private.’

‘Oh please, now you’re being an idiot.’

‘You’re just being stroppy.’

Sherlock’s back straightened and his bottom lip stuck out in a pout before he could discipline his mouth to keep a dignified straight line.

‘Don’t give me that look. Like I said, you were the one who was’—Lestrade threw air quotes around his next word—‘busy. Since when are you too busy for a case? It’s been weeks since I’ve even seen you.’

‘There’s been . . .’ How did he put this? ‘. . . a development.’

‘A development.’ Lestrade stared at him, unimpressed by the vagueness.

‘Look, I had to take on a new ward. The last one died, and the new one . . . Let’s just say, we’re both adjusting.’

With a huff of surprise, Lestrade let his feet fall back to the floor. He set his elbows on the table. ‘Shit, Sherlock, you could’ve just said. New wards happen. Is it, that is, is he . . . Erm. It’s a he, right?’

‘Of course, he’s a he.’

‘Right. Is he settled into the estate all right, then?’

‘He is living with me.’ Sherlock waited for a reaction, but Lestrade just blinked at him. ‘On Baker Street.’

The reaction came. ‘Why?’

‘I can take care of a ward!’ Sherlock cried in offence.

‘I never said you couldn’t! But why would you, if you have the estate? Hell, do you know how relieved I was when Angela moved out and took the ward? I’m dragging my feet about this whole
divorce thing just so I don’t have to host on my own, because I don’t have an estate to ship a ward off to. I figured you would hate hosting in your own flat.’

‘It’s fine, he’s fine. I don’t mind. He’s just . . . That is, we’re working through some things right now.’

‘Next time, get one that’s already house-broke,’ Lestrade quipped. But the sharp look on Sherlock’s face shut him right up. ‘Sorry. Erm.’

It was strange to discuss one’s ward, unless to complain about him or her. And because Sherlock had never properly cared for one, he and Lestrade had not commiserated on the subject before. Lestrade clearly didn’t know how to respond, and Sherlock wasn’t sure why he had brought it up in the first place. Only, he kind of wanted to. He needed someone to talk to about John besides Mrs Hudson. Maybe he had miscalculated.

Lestrade cleared his throat apologetically. ‘Is he, I dunno, a teenager?’

‘God no. My age,’ said Sherlock. Then he added, ‘Thereabouts.’

‘I see. Where did he come from?’

‘Right here in London.’ No need to get more specific. It seemed shameful to admit he’d bought John from a pound, let alone the very pound where the ward Westie had hanged himself only the night before. So he wouldn’t talk about what had happened with the last host, or that John had had an unprecedented string of past hosts. Lestrade didn’t need all the wretched details of John’s past. Not that he had many details himself to be going on with.

‘Does he cook?’

‘Does he cook? That’s what you’re asking me?’

Lestrade refused to be embarrassed. ‘If I had to get a new ward, I’d at least want one that could cook me a decent meal. Hopscotch couldn’t put anything on the hob without burning it.’

Hopscotch was the Lestrades’ ward of more than twenty years, so named when she was five years old. Angela had insisted on going young, though not too young, so that when she and Greg finally started having children, Hopscotch would be old enough to take care of them. But the children never came, and that’s when the Lestrades’ marital troubles began.

‘He cooks,’ Sherlock grumbled. Then he waved an irritated hand. He no longer wanted to talk about John. At least, not directly. He changed tracks abruptly, saying, ‘If you don’t have anything on, there’s a case I’m working that you can help me with.’

‘Oh, I get to help you with your cases? What a treat.’

Sherlock sniffed. ‘Look, if you’d rather not—’

‘I’m teasing, Sherlock, teasing! Good lord, stop being so tetchy. How can I help?’

‘I want info on an old case.’

‘What case?’

‘A murder.’

‘Okay . . .’
‘Happened in 1997 in Dover, presumably. Not sure of the month. Now, the papers are shite, their online archives rubbish, I can’t find anything on the web, but you’ll have access to police archives, and—’

‘Dover?’ Lestrade interrupted. ‘What’s this about? Who died?’

‘A woman.’

‘What woman?’

‘I don’t know her name. That’s why I need you!’

Lestrade huffed. ‘You’re going to have to give me something. A reason, for starters. I can’t just go rifling through files in another jurisdiction, you know. I’d need allowance from the chief superintendent, I’d need to file permissions forms with Kent Police, I might even need a warrant, if it’s an open case . . .’

‘You policemen and your paperwork,’ Sherlock said derisively, and he knew he would get nowhere with Lestrade. He turned toward the door, glad he hadn’t bothered to remove his coat. ‘Forget it. Call me when you have something on.’

He opened the door and was stepping through when Lestrade said, ‘Who said I don’t?’

Sherlock twirled back eagerly. Lestrade grinned.

‘Two minutes before you came crashing through my door, I got word. Suspected double homicide in the East End. My jurisdiction, you know. I sent Donovan on ahead.’

‘Well, why didn’t you say something?’ Sherlock scowled. ‘Let’s go!’

For one wild moment, he thought, I should fetch John, take him with me, make it his first case. But Baker Street was north, and the East End was east, and a double homicide, well, maybe it wasn’t the best introduction to crime solving. He’d wait for the next.

***

Irene Adler checked her lipstick in the backseat of the town car, then her teeth. Perfection. She slid the compact back inside her black leather clutch and her clutch into her purse, weighted with the tools of her trade, just as the car slowed in front of 221B.

The driver put the car in park and hopped out to open her door. ‘Fifteen minutes,’ she said, and without a backward glance strolled up to the door and pressed a painted finger to the bell. She waited.

And waited.

She pressed again. At last, a response.

‘Hello?’

It was a male voice, soft and a bit timid. She smiled and put her mouth close to the speaker. ‘Hello. John, is it?’

A pause. ‘Yes, this is John. Mr Holmes is not at home right now.’

‘Oh no, I’m here to see you, John. Mr Holmes sent me. Did he not tell you?’
‘Oh. Um. I must have forgot?’

Yes, he had the subservience of a proper ward. So willing to assume blame. This was going to be easy.

‘John. May I please come up, John?’

‘Sorry, miss, of course, miss.’

The door buzzed open.

She found the ward waiting for her in the sitting room, confused but expectant, though disciplined enough to wait for her to take command of what happened next. He wouldn’t demand answers or pose questions. In fact, he did the only thing a ward could or should do when encountering the guest of his host:

‘Tea, miss?’

‘Thank you, but no,’ she said, tugging at the fingers of her gloves as she looked around the flat. It had been ages since she’d been there, and very little had changed. The furniture kept its original arrangement, and the walls were still covered with that ghastly paper. She really wished Sherlock had accepted her offer, all those years ago, to give the place a modern update. For God’s sake, there was a bison skull on the wall. Wearing headphones! And the skull painting by the door? Not exactly landscape. Maybe she would renew her offer.

But more to the point—the object of her visit. She turned to face the ward more squarely, to take the measure of him. It was a curious thing, after all, and not easily accomplished—winning the heart of Sherlock Holmes. She should know. She had tried.

‘Not what I expected,’ she said, stepping closer. The ward’s muscles tensed as he schooled himself not to step backward in response. ‘Smaller. Fairer. I would have thought him more interested in the mirror than the negative. But there must be something here. Don’t worry. I’ll find it. I’m quite good at that, you know?’

He didn’t. But as she began to circle him, his breath quickened, and when he at last willed his feet to move, he tried to step away. She laid her hand on his shoulder and held him still.

‘Yes, yes, I can see why this particular flower was plucked. Delicate. Soft. Breakable, but alluring. You’re a man, but not much of a man. There’s still so much of a boy still in you.’ She dragged her hand down his sleeve, rubbing his arm along the way until she reached his wrist. Then she lifted his hand and spread his fingers. ‘Even your hands are small.’ She curled the fingers closed, leaving only the forefinger sticking up. ‘But this will do well enough, isn’t that right?’

The ward snatched his hand away and hid it around his back. His face flushed red and he swallowed hard. Perhaps he was cottoning on after all. She had wondered, at first, whether he might be a dunce.

‘Pardon, miss,’ said the ward, though he made no eye contact. ‘Perhaps you would like to come back when Mr Holmes is at home.’

‘Did you not hear me? Mr Holmes sent me. To talk to you. Brilliant he may be, but even a genius sometimes stutters to say aloud what he wants to say.’

The ward had backed himself into the table. She followed and trapped him there. Like a cat playing with her prey, she traced the ward’s lip with her painted nail and tried not to laugh when he braced two hands on the table but otherwise froze and let her touch him. So like a mouse. Emboldened, she
slid a thumb past his lips, between his teeth, and felt the warm wet of his mouth. ‘Oh yes, he’ll like that, too.’

With a violent shudder, the ward fell to the side, catching himself on the table. Oh, the poor thing! she thought, stifling a laugh. She really was so naughty. But this was a game she and Sherlock had been playing for ages. Ages and ages. For his birthday one year, she had sent a stripper. In retaliation, he hacked her Twitter with a string of tweets begging various religious organisations to help her come to Jesus. On another occasion, her sex-toy self-care package was met with a custom cake reading ‘Fuck Off’ in red and black icing.

And this? With the ward? She was just upping the ante.

‘We’re long-time friends, Sherlock and I,’ she explained casually, while the ward recovered himself. ‘Let’s just say, I know what he likes. And he likes you very much, John. You should hear him speak of your soulful blue eyes, your kindly mouth, your capable hands. He admires every . . .’ Her eyes fell to his belt. ‘. . . inch. That does beg the question, though, doesn’t it? Does the cas still have even an inch? When they took the stones, did they also take the pillar?’ She winked. ‘Shall we find out?’ Her hand shot out and seized the waistband of his trousers, and with a deft thumb, she popped the top button near the zip.

The ward’s hips jerked backward as he bent at the waist and tried to move away. He shook his head back and forth ceaselessly in miniscule measurements. ‘Please,’ he mouthed.

‘That’s what Sherlock said, too,’ said Irene, trying not to laugh. ‘Please. For me. Go talk to John for me.’

‘No. No, he wouldn’t. Not Mr Holmes. He said . . . No more punishments. That’s what he said.’

Tutting, Irene placed two hands on his arms and massaged up and down. ‘No punishments? You must have misunderstood. Every host must punish his ward. How else would you learn to behave? But this, sweet John, isn’t a punishment. It’s playtime. Sherlock just wants to play.’

A tear was beading at the corner of the ward’s eye. ‘But he’s been good to me.’

She flicked the tear away with a fingernail. ‘Oh yes, he’ll be very good to you. And that’s exactly what you’ll be to him. Won’t you?’

The ward had no answer but to look disbelieving.

‘To be sure, it is such a delicate matter, where hosts and wards are concerned. But I promised to be discreet. I do have extensive experience in these matters.’ She undid to the topmost button of his shirt—he buttoned all the way up, like a choir boy—then the second, and slipped her hand inside his shirt to trace his neck, shoulder, collarbone. He was shivering. ‘He wants you, John. And he’s rather hoping that you want him, too.’

‘You’re . . . you’re lying.’

She withdrew her hand, and with a flash of movement cracked him across the face. The ward gasped at the sting, but she didn’t give him the chance even to look at her with those shocked eyes before cracking him again with the flat of her hand.

‘Don’t be insolent, John,’ she said, and she retrieved from her clutch a small taser. ‘I have wards of my own. I know how to handle them. Now. Will you behave?’

Head bowed, the ward nodded, blinking rapidly as he tried not to look at the taser.
‘Good. Now don’t pretend you didn’t see this coming. Have you not seen the way he looks at you, smiles at you? Cares for you? It’s prelude. The warmup. A man like Sherlock, living alone? He’s excessively patient, but he has needs. You’re going to meet them. It was only ever a matter of time before he couldn’t bear to stay his hand any longer—or his cock. And he does have such a fine cock, John. Trust me.’

She laughed. She couldn’t help it this time, any more than the ward could stop his eyes from swimming with tears. My, but he was being overdramatic! It wasn’t like she was marching him to the gallows.

‘Now now, don’t act like a child. I’m here to help. To prepare you for him. Because what your host wants, he’ll take. You might as well be ready for it so you can enjoy it together. Do you agree?’

She waited, but the ward seemed incapable of answering.

‘You’re going to make him feel special. Desired. And then you’re going to send him over the moon. It’s your duty. I mean, you owe him, for being so good to you, don’t you think?’

His breath had gone shallow. She gripped his chin and thrust it up, forcing his eyes to meet hers.

‘Answer me.’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, what?’

‘Yes, I owe him.’

‘For what?’

‘For being so good to me, miss.’

‘There. That wasn’t so hard. Not as hard as Mr Holmes will be when he sees you, I promise.’ And she threw her head back and laughed. ‘Very well, let’s get you ready. Who knows when Master will return?’

With that, she grabbed the ward’s wrist and dragged him behind her as she made for the bedroom. She knew exactly where it was, of course. There had been the time when he found her there, beneath his sheets and wearing nothing besides. Later, in retaliation, he had filled her underwear drawer with rats.

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With an exaggerated and condescending sigh, Mycroft leant back in his black chair and interlaced his fingers across his belly. ‘I knew you’d come asking. Granted, I thought you wouldn’t last this long, but really. It was only a matter of time.’

Sherlock was glad he had declined to sit. He hadn’t even opened his coat. He was of half a mind to turn on his heel and storm out through the door whence he came without uttering another syllable, but he had indignation enough to say, ‘I’ve not said a word of why I am here.’

‘You want me to crack open the ward’s file—’

‘John’s file, and no I don’t.’

‘—so you can see the details of his past. Don’t be childish. Of course that’s why you’re here. I never
see you twice in a month, and it’s only two weeks since Christmas.’

To be sure, that was exactly why he had come. He wanted to know the name of John’s first host who had been murdered, and the registration number of the daughter who’d been warded, and where she could be found. But now he stood here, so easily deduced, his pride forbade him from asking. ‘Perhaps I’ve come only to tell you that your presence in my flat on Christmas morning placed undo stress on my floorboards, and I demand replacement.’

‘Do stop with the dramatics, Sherlock. I’ll give it to you.’

‘My new floorboards?’

‘The file, dolt.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘You’re lying.’

Sherlock hmphed and looked away, worrying his tongue between his teeth behind sealed lips.

‘What, precisely, do you wish to know? His list of past names? Past hosts? Medical history? Criminal history? I have it all, you know.’

And oh God, he wanted it all. Primarily, criminal history, given recent events. Had he been caught shoplifting before? What, and from where, and how old had he been? What had been his punishment? But even though he had come for it, and even though Mycroft was dangling the carrot, he knew he couldn’t ask. He shouldn’t have come here in the first place. He had promised John that his past was his own. And John trusted him. Didn’t he? So how could he violate that? John did not trust easily, that was clear, and what little trust he did put in Sherlock was still fragile. Anything could break it apart. So no. He shouldn’t have come.

‘Or perhaps,’ Mycroft continued, ‘you want to know whether he’s a runner. Or rather, how many times he’s attempted it.’

Wait, so John was a runner? ‘Shut up,’ he said. ‘It’s not my business to know.’

‘It’s exactly your business!’ Mycroft suddenly became impassioned. ‘You’re the host! You have a defective ward! You should be on your highest guard! Good lord, Sherlock, look after yourself!’

‘Him, Mycroft, my duty is to look after him. Isn’t that the point?’ He threw his hands in the air and waved them about idiotically. ‘Isn’t that the whooole point of this ridiculous programme?’ He began to quote the catchy propaganda commercials popular during their childhood, but with a heavy dose of mockery. ‘Brother caring for brother, sister caring for sister. Aren’t we aaaaall the children of New Britain?’

Mycroft sniffed. ‘If you don’t want to do it, why on earth did you choose a mutt?’

Sherlock grinded his teeth. ‘John’s not a mutt!’

‘No need for the histrionics, Sherlock, I’ll do it. You don’t even have to ask.’

A little thrown, Sherlock blinked stupidly. ‘Do what?’

‘Send him to the estate, of course.’

‘Piss off.’
‘He’ll be well looked after, you know he will, and you can get back to your little . . . cases.’

Sherlock stepped forward menacingly, as if he had ever had any force of intimidation over his overbearing brother. ‘John stays with me. In my home. That’s the end of it!’

‘Why!’ cried Mycroft. ‘What is with you and this new obsession? What the hell are you getting out of it? Why do you want him in your . . . Oh my God.’

‘What?’

‘Sherlock. Please tell me you haven’t.’

‘What?’

‘It’s illegal. You know it is.’

Sherlock felt his insides rebelling, shrivelling tightly like salted snails at the very thought. It was his turn now to be appalled. ‘Oh my God.’

‘You dress him up, treat him as a prized pet, defend his every breath. Tell me he’s never been in your bed.’

‘Mycrof!’

‘It’s impossible, Sherlock, impossible for a ward to give consent. You do understand that, don’t you? Even if he says he wants it—’

‘Stop! Stop, just shut up. It’s not—I haven’t—I would never—And besides! He can’t! You know that! You and your stupid file!’

‘You’re not the cas. All a ward like your John has to do is get on all fours and hold the ground.’

Sherlock wanted to snatch up the small iron globe on Mycroft’s desk and chuck it at his face.

‘I’m not about to have my little brother be accused of running a Downside, that’s all I’m saying. You make my life difficult enough without my having to worry about you and your ward.’

‘You’re revolting. I don’t know what you get up to with your wards, but I. Don’t. Want. It. Ward or not, cas or not, interested or not, I—he jammed his finger into his own chest to add emphasis—‘would never. How many ways can I say it?’

Mycroft nodded sharply. ‘Good. Fine. I’m just looking.’

Sherlock’s brow furrowed. ‘Looking?’

‘For some explanation as to why you’re keeping him. Hasn’t the game gone on long enough? When do you call it quits and just send him away?’

‘Bugger off, Mycroft,’ said Sherlock angrily, and he did what he should have done two minutes sooner, and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

***

Sherlock returned to Baker Street in a sour mood. The double homicide had been so easy Anderson could have solved it, and no encounter with Mycroft ever left him feeling anything but resentful. But as he walked through the front door, he instantly felt lighter. Why? Baker Street had always served
as an adequate residence. Its homey feel with just a smidge of pretension suited him quite well, and it was very well located. And yes, he did have a fondness for Mrs Hudson. But he couldn’t say he ever felt homesick for 221B when he was away from it. Until recently. As he climbed the steps, he wondered if John would be up for learning chess.

But John wasn’t in the sitting room when he entered. Instead, a large parcel rested on the sofa, flat and square and covered in brown paper. Same-day delivery, was it? He lifted the personalised card lying on top. It hadn’t even been sealed.

*Enjoy your gift. I had it specially wrapped, just for you.*

—Irene

Well. If *that* wasn’t the most harmless gift she’d ever left him. He felt the edges of the canvas through the brown paper. It would need to be framed, but that was easy enough. He could have it done in the morning, and have it hanging in John’s room by afternoon. Speaking of . . .

Where was John?

It was quiet in the kitchen, without evidence that John had begun dinner, which was a bit unusual. For half of half a second, Mycroft’s words returned to him (*He’s a runner*), but he shrugged off the thought and called out, ‘John?’

It wasn’t an answer, but he thought he heard something from the back of the flat. A light thump, though from what, he couldn’t discern.

‘John?’

Sherlock set the painting aside, passed through the kitchen, and made his way down the hall. Curiously, his bedroom door was closed. He wasn’t in the habit of closing that door unless he was inside the room, and he was sure he hadn’t done anything differently when he left that morning. Sometimes John went in to collect laundry or restore fresh clothing and sheets, but beyond that, John had no reason to enter his room, and never did. Sherlock made it very clear that he wasn’t to clean it. It wasn’t his job, and Sherlock could do his own hoovering.

He pushed open the door and stepped into the dark room, but as his hand sought out the light switch, he paused, taking note of several things at once: one, the curtains had been drawn shut; two, the air smelt of perfume; and three, a dark silhouette sat on the edge of his mattress, unmoving. He flicked on the light, and the figure flinched.

Somewhere in his repository of human reactions, Sherlock had stored away something he had read or heard about, describing one’s heart stilling. Until this moment, he had never quite understood what that meant. He had experienced the sensation of adrenaline shooting straight to the stomach and sending the heart racing, like, for instance, when missing a step on the stair. He also knew what it was like to be stunned into silence, like when being told he looked so handsome, just like Mycroft. He’d never been more insulted. But in this moment, perhaps for the first time in his life, Sherlock’s heart stilled. It was as though a clock’s gears has ceased to turn, and his whole world was held in suspension at the sight of John sat upon the edge of the bed.

John wore nothing but his underwear—a pair of white briefs—revealing pale, skinny legs with knees locked together but ankles spread apart, because one of them was shackled to the foot of the bedframe with silver cuffs. Neither foot quite reached the floor.

Not only was a foot restrained, but John’s hands as well. They were pressed together, wrist to fingertip, and wrapped tightly in pink ribbon like a mummy. The muscles in John’s arms strained
with the effort of holding his hands still, but he couldn’t stop their shaking. Worst of all, John’s face was obscured. He was blindfolded with a black, velvety cloth, and below that, his mouth was stretched with a blue ball gag. Its black-leather restraints wrapped around his entire head and indented his cheeks. From both corners of his stretched lips spilt a line of drool from his being unable to swallow. At the sound of the door opening, and when the lights snapped on, every part of him jumped, and a tiny whimper quivered in his dried-out throat.

‘Oh my God, oh my God,’ Sherlock cried out when his heart started beating again. He rushed forward, but before he could remind himself to be gentle, he ripped the blindfold away, and John made another small cry of alarm in the back of his throat, and his teeth clenched around the ball. ‘Hold still, hold still, my God, oh shit, let me get this off you, oh shit, oh shit.’

His own hands trembled now as he fumbled to undo the buckle and catch at the back of John’s head to release the gag. But it was not a simple task. It locked at three points, and each strap was thin, taut, and required more patient fingers than his. He grunted with frustration and continued to murmur his apologies, trying to drown out the sound of John’s harsh nasal breaths—his nose was running, tears mixed with mucus, but given the gag, he was left with no choice but to breathe through his nostrils.

At last, Sherlock unclasped the final buckle and let the straps fall, but the ball was still held in place, locked behind John’s teeth.

‘Spit it out, spit it out,’ Sherlock urged, but John was having trouble. His jaw was locked tight, and he struggled to open his mouth wide enough to release the ball. Sherlock tugged, but John whined behind the stopper, likely sore from keeping his mouth open so long . . . How long? Sherlock had been gone all day. How long had he been like this? ‘I’m pulling on three,’ he said as warning. ‘Okay?’

John nodded miserably.

‘One. Two. Three.’ He tugged on the ball, and it popped out of John’s mouth with a long line of drool. John gagged then gasped, eyes squeezed shut, and Sherlock turned his attention to the bound hands. Anger grew inside of him as he fumbled with the ribbon, which was tied in firm knots at the wrist, knots he couldn’t break with just his fingers. He was on the verge of attacking it with his teeth when he stopped himself, and decided to go hunt down a pair of scissors.

‘Hang tight,’ he said, then bolted from the room. A quick rummage through a drawer proved that the kitchen scissors weren’t where he expected them to be, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d used the paper scissors for cutting out columns in The Guardian. So he rushed back to the bathroom and grabbed the emergency kit, wherein he knew there to be a pair of medical scissors for cutting lengths of bandages. He returned to the bedroom with the kit just in time to see John rubbing his face on his arm, trying to wipe away the tears. But his skin was splotchy and eyes red; there was no hiding it.

‘What happened, John?’ He opened the kit and pulled out the scissors. Trying to be gentle, he lifted John’s hands and slipped the bottom blade beneath the one layer of pink ribbon. ‘Tell me why you’re here, like this.’

John swallowed hard, preparing to speak. ‘I-I . . .’ he stuttered. ‘I’m h-here for y-you, M-mister Holmes.’

Sherlock paused in the act of unravelling the ribbons. ‘For me,’ he repeated.

‘For your p-pleasure.’
If it were possible, Sherlock would have believed his stomach had just dropped into his shoes and his lungs collapsed like a hollow tin in a vacuum. He barely had breath enough to choke out, ‘What did you say?’

With what looked like a man fighting his every instinct for self-preservation, John lifted his eyes to meet his host’s. ‘Your pleasure, s-sir. Should you . . . want me. I—’ His breath shuddered in his chest, but he forced it out: ‘Owe you. For being so g-good to me.’

The ribbon loosened and fell into John’s lap, but his hands remained closed together; he was holding something. Tentatively, Sherlock reached for his hands and turned them palm-up. Resting in the left was a small packet of lubricant, warmed to body temperature.

Now Sherlock knew his stomach was right where it always was, because he felt like he might throw up.

Slowly, unable to make eye contact, John raised his trembling hand to Sherlock, offering the packet to him, offering himself to his host, but his face was breaking, just seconds away from sobbing, and he was bravely trying to hold back.

Sherlock snatched the packet out of John’s hand and hurled it across the room, just to get it away, out of his sight.

‘No no no, oh God, John, no, I would never—do you understand me? never—!’

In his desperation to make John understand, he grabbed his head and forced his face up. But at the touch, a short shout escaped John’s throat, and he quailed.

Sherlock pulled his hands away as if John were made of fire, and jumped backward. Immediately, John hid his face in his hands. But they didn’t stay there. They roved around to the back of his head, down his neck, across his shoulders, until they wrapped around his naked torso, hugging himself, and he started rocking.

‘I swear,’ Sherlock said from his side of the room, trying to sound calmer. ‘This isn’t what I want. Even if it were, I wouldn’t take it. I said it before: I will never, ever, hurt you. And I meant it. Do you believe me?’

John closed his eyes, and a rogue tear slipped through the seam. He nodded, but like before, Sherlock suspected it was only because he believed it was the answer Sherlock wanted to hear.

‘You have to tell me. Who—?’ He already knew the answer. The perfume, the pink ribbon, the bondage-style of John’s restraints. But he had to ask. ‘Who did this to you?’

‘She said she was your friend,’ said John. ‘Your long-time friend.’

His blood began to boil anew. ‘And what did this long-time friend tell you?’

‘M-must I say?’

‘Please, John.’

‘She said’—John took a gasping breath, still trying to calm down—‘that you sent her to talk to me. B-because you . . . I’m sorry, sir, I can’t.’

‘Please, John. I need to know exactly what she told you. Because I what?’
Unable to hold back the tears any longer, John sobbed: ‘Because you want to fuck me. That’s why you chose me, at the pound.’

How dare she! How dare she! Sherlock saw red. Over the years, he’d tolerated so much of Irene and her antics, her jibes about his sexuality and teases and pranks. He was annoyed by them, always annoyed, and never failed to express it and respond in kind, but he had come to see her as a welcome break from monotony, a challenge, a game, and in that he had developed a particular, though perhaps twisted, fondness. Not one of affection, but of well-matched opponents. But there was a line, an unspoken line, and she had just crossed it.

He wanted to murder her.

‘The lying bitch,’ he swore under his breath.

John continued to cry, his eyes again hidden behind a hand; the old tremor was in power mode. Sitting there in the dark, waiting for Sherlock’s return, he must have been scared to death, if he believed Irene’s words, which evidently he did. And it horrified Sherlock to think that so many weeks of trying to build trust between them could be undone so swiftly, that John might look back on it all—the games and the gifts and the promises—and think it all a ruse to woo him into Sherlock’s bed.

Sherlock pulled back the door and grabbed his dressing gown off the hook. As he draped the shoulders of the gown around John and helped him into the sleeves, he said, ‘She should never have come here. She had no right, John, even to knock on the door. I’ll fix this. I promise you, I’ll make it right. That woman will never set foot in this house again. She’ll never touch you again.’

Subconsciously, John touched the side of his face, and Sherlock put two and two together.

‘Did she hit you?’

Swiftly, as though realising what he was doing, John pulled his hand away from his face clutched the gown closed at the neck.

‘Did she?’

‘It was my fault, Mr Holmes.’

‘How!’

‘I was misbehaving. I was being’—he sniffed, combating the running nose—‘noncompliant with a free person’s commands.’

‘No one,’ Sherlock growled, ‘has the right to hit you. Not even me. Do you understand me? Noncompliance, my arse. What could you possibly have done to merit her striking you?’

Turning his face away in shame, John said, ‘I’m sorry, sir. I called her a liar, sir.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes sir. And then, when she . . . took off my trousers, I tried to stop her. She struck me then, too. And again, when I asked her not to use the cuffs. I promised not to run. I just didn’t want to be cuffed.’

Sherlock’s eyes dropped to the floor, to where John’s ankle was bound to the foot of the bed. It was the left ankle, not the malformed one, but upon closer inspection, he saw that the skin was red-raw
and badly scratched, the topmost layers of skin rubbed away from what appeared to be a valiant
effort to pull free. Even the wood of the bedpost was badly scratched. John hadn’t just sat there,
awaiting Sherlock’s return with dread. Like a trapped animal, he’d tried to free himself, and without
success. The cuffs held tight to both ankle and post.

‘How long since she left?’ Sherlock asked, dropping to a crouch. He touched the cuffs—he was
careful not to touch John—and examined the lock, hoping to have a key that fitted it.

‘I . . . I don’t know. She took the watch off me, sir. I don’t know where it is.’

Sherlock cast his eyes around the room. His clothes were missing, too. ‘What time did she come?’

‘It was just after twelve o’clock, sir.’

It was eight o’clock now. Eight hours. John had been naked, bound, and gagged in this room for eight hours.

‘God, I’m so sorry. I should have come home sooner. I’m so, so sorry.’

He didn’t have the exact key, but he could improvise. With a bent paperclip and fingers that knew well how to pick the locks on a pair of cuffs, Sherlock jimmied and prodded, and after only a few seconds, the cuffs snapped open.

‘Can you stand?’

Sherlock really didn’t know what to do, or suggest. Should he offer medicated cream and plasters for the ankle? Would John want a long, hot shower? Could any of this day be salvaged?

John just nodded. He scooted to the end of the bed and, still holding the dressing gown tightly closed at his chest, stood. But he wasn’t well, and he wobbled. Instinctively, Sherlock put out a steadying hand. John froze, but didn’t flinch, and allowed himself to be righted.

‘Do you’—Sherlock was floundering—‘want to dress?’

Again, John nodded.

‘Do you need help upstairs?’

John shook his head.

He let him go. John limped slowly out of the room, and at the end of the hall, Sherlock saw him put out a hand to steady himself against the wall. Then he was out of sight. For a long while, Sherlock just stood there, staring at the empty hallway. His mind was spinning so fast his thoughts may as well have been blank, like the propellers of a helicopter at high speed, and the noise in his ears was just as loud. Then he snapped back into himself. He dug into the pocket of his coat and pulled out his phone.

But he didn’t call her. He didn’t text. He didn’t know what to say, let alone how to say it. He wanted to scream and rant and rage and threaten, and then follow through with fire. Instead, he sank down onto the edge of his mattress, staring at the floor where the pink ribbon had curled and the blue ball had rolled. As much as his brain tried to resist it, he couldn’t help but envision Irene in this room, slapping John and pulling off his trousers, cuffing him against his ardent pleas not to be restrained, binding his hands to render them ineffective in any attempt to use his own two hands, all the while holding the reminder of what was about to happen to him between his palms. He envisioned a half-naked John on the floor, struggling against the metal cuffs for hours, blinded and gagged but still
hoping to free himself. For hours. Until he heard his host’s return, and he returned to the bed to await his fate.

Oh John . . .

Then, above his head, he heard it: the muffled crying of a tortured soul. It was neither loud wailing nor uncontrolled sobbing, but the steady yet restrained crying of a man who had been carrying too much and been pushed too far. The sound was quiet, like he was crying into his pillow or biting down on his fist—or maybe both. But at the sound of it, Sherlock felt his heart breaking.

John had thought his host was going to rape him. He believed it. He believed he couldn’t fight it. How would he ever look at Sherlock the same again? In the back of his mind, there would always be tonight. Some part of him would always believe that Sherlock might become the monster he feared. Sherlock wanted to weep himself.

What was he to do! How could he fix it? Was it even possible? Or was the best solution—for John—that Sherlock . . . give him up? Find him a new home, a better home, a place where he could feel safe always and close this chapter on his life, the one titled Chapter 18: Baker Street, Six Weeks, possibly the shortest in the entire book. Would John want that? Probably. After today, almost definitely. Sherlock had to do the right thing by John. Maybe tonight, he would ask Mrs Hudson to come to the flat and stay the night, and he would leave. Maybe it would be best if he didn’t come back, not until John had been rehomed.

He lay on the bed and thought, while above him, John cried.

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He found John’s clothes folded neatly on the closed toilet seat, the Tag Heuer watch resting on top. He didn’t know what to do, so he left them there for John to collect later. He quickly hid the painting behind the sofa. Now, he stood bouncing his mobile in his hand, debating. If he called Mycroft, John would be relocated to the estate within the hour. It seemed, for all parties involved, the tidiest solution. He would still be John’s host, rather than passing him along to yet another, and he could continue to make sure John was well provided for, but John wouldn’t have to suffer living in Sherlock’s flat.

But still, he hesitated. For one, it wouldn’t take Mycroft long to figure out what had happened. In light of their earlier conversation, the thought was mortifying. Besides, Sherlock knew exactly where the blame would fall. And perhaps that was only right. If he hadn’t gone to Irene’s gallery, if he hadn’t mentioned John to start with . . . Hell, if he hadn’t been so long involved in this petty feud with a woman so relentless in her teasing, their sick game would never have extended to John at all. This was his fault. And he couldn’t bear Mycroft knowing it.

What galled him even more, though, was the thought of sending John away. At the estate, yes, he would be provided for, but would he be cared for? Or would it be Barnaby all over again? That he would live out his days unnoticed, unconsidered, unloved—

His brain halted at the last syllable. It wasn’t a lawful requisite, after all, to love one’s ward.

‘Mr Holmes?’

Sherlock spun at the sound of John’s voice. John stood in the doorway, fully dressed, Sherlock’s dressing gown draped over his arm. The last splotches of red were nearly faded away. All the same, Sherlock had not expected to see him again tonight. The way he was planning things, a part of him had wondered if he would see John ever again.
‘John!’

‘Thank you, sir, for . . .’ He lifted his arm, indicating the dressing gown. ‘I’ll return it at once. And I should have asked. Did you eat while you were out? I didn’t get a chance to cook.’

*Because you were tied up naked for half the day!* But Sherlock willed himself to be calm.

‘I was on a case. I don’t eat when I’m on a case.’ He was speaking just for the sake of saying something, but he was barely aware of what came out of his mouth. He was still stunned, seeing John standing there, perfectly composed. He had believed Irene had broken him.

‘I can fix something hot in just a few minutes,’ John said, edging toward the kitchen.

Sherlock almost said no, please, don’t work, stop *serving* me. But of course. John wouldn’t have eaten anything all day, either. He must have been starving.

‘Let’s order in.’

John stopped at the threshold to the kitchen. ‘Sir?’

‘Throw the gown on the chair, just there. Really, go ahead. No more work, not today. Let’s rest.’

Looking uncertain, John did as ordered and draped the gown over the back of the kitchen chair. He looked like he thought he was being tricked but wasn’t sure how.

‘I just think that, after today,’ Sherlock continued, trying to be kind, ‘we could both use an evening just to . . . rest.’

‘Oh.’ John nodded shyly. ‘Okay.’

‘What do you fancy?’ Eager to appease, Sherlock launched himself at the small stack of take-away menus he’d left in the magazine holder. ‘Anything you’d like.’ He leafed through the pages—Thai, Indian, Chinese, American, French, Korean, Japanese—as he continued, ‘Got a craving? What sounds good?’

‘For both of us?’

‘Of course, both of us.’

‘I’ll eat what you eat, Mr Holmes.’

Sherlock’s hands fell to his side. ‘I want you to choose, John. *I* want you to choose what *you* want. Go on, I want to know. Don’t try to guess what I like. Tell me what *you* like. If you could choose anything for dinner, anything at all, what would it be?’

In his own mind, Sherlock imagined what John would consider indulgences. Steak cooked medium rare, a tray of sushi, linguini and clams, maybe just a large chocolate mousse pie.

John cautiously licked his lips, though it was doubtful he was aware that he had done so. ‘Then,’ he said, testing the waters, ‘perhaps . . .’

‘Yes?’ Sherlock urged.

‘Pizza?’

If John hadn’t look so uncertain, like he might be shouted at or ridiculed, Sherlock would have
laughed at the simplicity of it. He had to remember: this was a man who had chosen to name himself the most common British name of the last six centuries, and yet a man who had known so very few of the basic pleasures and privileges those same common people took for granted. When, for example, was the last time John had been allowed something so humble as a slice of pizza?

‘Toppings?’ he asked instead.

‘Oh, anything . . .’ John began, but trailed off, knowing Sherlock wouldn’t accept such a simple answer. ‘Maybe . . . mushrooms?’

‘And?’

‘And . . . onions?’

‘And?’

‘And . . .’ John looked slightly overwhelmed by the choices. ‘Pineapples.’

Sherlock wanted to giggle like a madman at the unconventional combination. He was nearly hysterical with relief. ‘Sounds tasty,’ he said instead, willing his heart to stop racing. ‘And I know just the place. He doesn’t deliver, but for me he’ll make an exception. Owes me a favour, see?’ And as he lifted the phone to his ear, Sherlock gave John a wink, but fearing it might be misinterpreted (given today’s grave misfortune), he quickly angled his body away. Then he put on one of his cheerier voices. ‘Angelo! This is Sherlock . . . Yes, Sherlock Holmes. What other Sherlocks do you . . .? Thank you, I know. Listen. I’m at home tonight, bit of a cold, can’t come out, but I fancy one of your pizzas. Any chance you’ll deliver?’

Order placed, he turned back to John—who hadn’t moved an inch—and said, ‘While we wait, why not a game?’

John pursed his lips, though not like he was concerned or uncertain, as before. Rather, he appeared to be restraining his pleasure. ‘Draughts?’

Sherlock smiled broadly. He hadn’t even needed to prompt that one. ‘I’ll get the board!’ he declared. They set the board—John played oak, Sherlock cherry—and placed their men. Sherlock tried not to show how delighted he was. Though he never said as much, John enjoyed games, and they had added to their repertoire of draughts, Guess Who?, and gin rummy a short list of others: Battleships, Stratego, backgammon, mancala, and cribbage. But John had a discernible preference for the first game he had learnt on Baker Street, and that was draughts. He was getting noticeably better, too, which made Sherlock proud, though he couldn’t explain why.

It seemed odd to think that, just an hour ago, Sherlock had thought it was over. What Mycroft was wont to call ‘the great experiment’ had failed; he had been on the verge of sending John away. On the very cusp of doing so, in fact. Mere seconds! And now, they were playing draughts and waiting for a pizza to arrive at the door. What had happened? Surely, John hadn’t forgotten. Surely, he hadn’t forgiven Sherlock.

He didn’t want to open a new wound or tread on sores, but Sherlock couldn’t slide past this one, pretending it had never happened. He needed to apologise, yes, but also to assure John that it would never, never, happen again. It was a discomfiting thing to bring up, to be sure. His best tactic, then, was to face it head on, and without the delay he wished to grant it.

John took the first move, Sherlock the second, John the third, and as Sherlock pretended to contemplate the board in preparation for his next move, he sucked in a breath, steeled himself, and
launched straight to it.

‘John, about what happened today,’ he said in a rush. ‘I need to apologise. Profusely.’

John lifted his eyes first, then his head followed. ‘Sir, there’s no need. This is your home.’

John’s leaps of logic were disturbing. Sherlock pressed forward. ‘Which is *exactly* why the fault—and therefore the apology—lies with me. Don’t you see? You suffered harm while under my care, and I mean to rectify it.’

‘I am little harmed,’ John said quietly, underselling the sore cheeks, broken skin, and bruising caused by the cuffs, and discounting the emotional harm entirely.

‘What happened here was *wrong*. And I need to explain. Will you let me explain?’

‘Let you? I mean, sir, of course, sir.’

Sherlock took his turn, just to get it over with. ‘The woman—that vile *snake* of a woman—is called Irene Adler. I’m sorry you ever came across her. I’ve known her for years. Fifteen, I suppose. We met at uni. That’s where we started our, erm, little game. No, sorry, I shouldn’t call it that. I don’t know what it is. A way of tormenting each other, I guess, though I doubt she has suffered any torment. I thought it harmless, really. Pranks, that’s all, just trying to get under each other’s skin. Let me be clear: I didn’t fancy her. Her interest in me was likewise intellectual.’ *If you can call trying to deduce my sexual preferences an intellectual endeavour.* ‘But yes, sometimes, things got out of hand.’

Sherlock took another great breath, realising where he was going with this, and that he was about to speak aloud something he’d not shared with another breathing human and swore he never would. But suddenly, he was telling John.

‘Not unlike many uni students, sexual experimentation was high on Irene’s to-do list, and she assumed the same was true of everyone she met. But I told her I wasn’t interested. She supposed me to be . . . lacking in experimentation of any sort. And she took it on as a personal challenge to discover what would, shall we say, sway my interests. One night, I was awoken when—’ God, could he say it? He had to say it. John had been placed in a situation of terrible embarrassment and fear, and Sherlock had been witness to it. It was only fair that he share this related history. ‘I wasn’t alone in my bed. There was a lad behind me, his arm over me, and he was . . . holding me. That is, holding onto me.’ He sighed. John’s eyes were riveted on him, the board between them forgotten.

‘You understand—his hand was in my underwear. Irene had bribed him to sneak into my room and get me off. I threw him out, and I was furious with Irene, but she thought it was a laugh. That’s the thing with her. She believes any sex is good sex. I pretended not to be humiliated, just annoyed. But for a solid week, I couldn’t sleep. My skin crawled for a month. Even now, it turns my stomach just thinking about that night.

‘It was wrong, what Irene did to me. It was worse, though, what she tried to do to you, John. What she *did* do to you. I know I’ve said it already, but it bears repeating: I swore I would never hurt you. But my association with Irene Adler did hurt you. I’m sorry. I don’t know how to make it right, but I will. For one, she will never set foot in this flat again, I can promise you that. And after I’ve *dealt* with her, there will be no more contact ever again. She’s gone. Out of my life. You never have to worry about her again. Or me. From now on, here, you are absolutely safe. You have Mrs Hudson, and you have me, and I swear, *I* will never lay a finger on you.’ He cleared his throat, knowing he had to go further in his confessions. ‘Irene was right about one thing, and she was very wrong about another. Do you know what she was right about?’

Mute, John shook his head.
‘She surmised I was inexperienced. She was right. Even as a lad, I was much more interested in brainwork than anything else. Because “anything else” just got in the way. It wasn’t that I had any particular distaste for sex—but I had no taste for it, either. Neutral, I considered myself. Until, that is, she pulled her little prank. That swayed me toward aversion. And this is where she went very wrong. Because to this day . . . John, I want you to hear me on this. To this day, I’m still—That is, I haven’t—I don’t want that. Any of that. I’m as apathetic today as I was fifteen years ago, twenty years ago. Men, women, it doesn’t matter. She thought she could tempt me. With you. She can’t. So, in that respect, John, you needn’t worry. You needn’t fear me. I said I won’t touch you, and I meant it. From the bottom of my heart, I meant it.’

John pursed his lips, licked them thoughtfully, and then said, ‘Okay.’

‘Okay? Just like that?’

‘I believe you.’

‘You do?’

‘You’ve been good to me, Mr Holmes. I told Ms Adler you’ve been good to me. That’s why I didn’t believe her, when she said you’d sent her to talk to me. That’s why I called her a liar.’

Sherlock smiled, that unaccountable feeling of pride returning. ‘You were right. She is a liar.’

‘I didn’t know what else to do, sir.’

‘For starters, you are not obligated to open to the door to anyone, her least of all. But I mean that, John. This is your home. You decide who comes in.’ He rubbed the tops of his thighs, thinking, debating. Then, decided, he said, ‘I have something for you. I had thought to wait, but . . .’

He pushed to his feet and, keeping an eye on John, he smiled as he angled for the sofa. John’s eyes tracked him with just a hint of the anticipation that he allowed himself. Sherlock reached behind the sofa to where he had stuffed the painting out of sight, thinking he’d best return it, or destroy it. But John didn’t need to know where it came from. And he was staying. Besides, this was a Rex Preston, not an Irene Adler. He pulled it out, and presented it in its brown wrapping paper.

John gave him a funny look, half curious, half confused.

‘Open it.’

Taking the package, he gently tore through the paper with a finger. When he saw what lay beneath, his whole body stilled.

‘What do you think?’ Sherlock asked.

John was not an expressive man. Rather, he was a man who held tight rein on his actions and reactions, down to the last cheek muscle. But when he saw the painting, with its tooth-white cliffs and misty shoreline, cornflower sky and green-hazy hills, the reins slipped a little from his grasp. It was as though the radio had started playing his favourite song, the way his eyes brightened. It was as though that song hadn’t been heard in half a lifetime, and it almost rocked him back a step. In two blinks, his eyes had gone as misty as the oil-painted sea.

‘It’s yours, John,’ said Sherlock. ‘I got it for you. I thought, this will look nice in John’s bedroom. Maybe on the wall just opposite the bed. When we go out tomorrow, we’ll get it framed, and then . . . it’ll be all yours. You can see it when you wake up every morning, and then again before you go to sleep. What do you reckon?’
John lifted his hand as though to touch it, but he stopped shy of actually placing his fingers against the paint. His hand was trembling. He balled it and retracted it to his side. ‘It’s Dover,’ he whispered. His eyes lifted to Sherlock’s. He was blinking rapidly now. ‘For me, Mr Holmes?’

‘I saw it and I thought you’d like it. Do you?’

John was at a loss for words. He only nodded, fervently.

‘Then yes, it’s for you.’

Sherlock had never seen such joy on John’s face before, and it transformed it. He licked his lips, opened his mouth, about to speak, when the buzzer sounded. John flinched. Sherlock smiled apologetically.

‘Pizza’s here. I’ll go get it.’

As he started down the stairs, he glanced over his shoulder to see John sitting upon the sofa, holding the painting in two hands and on his lap, reverently, as though he were in an act of prayer.

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He punched the doorbell three times before she finally answered it. Pinched lips of irritation became a coy simper at the sight of him, and she began, ‘Well, Sherlock. I trust you enjoyed my little gif—’

He pushed inside the house, grabbed her just under the neck, and shoved her back to the wall. He held her there with the heel of his palm against her sternum, but she did not perform even the pretence of a struggle.

‘Is this foreplay?’ she asked, her voice turning sultry. ‘I do love a domineering partner.’

He growled. ‘Shut it, Irene. No more games.’

‘Ooh. The long foreplay is over. Take me, Sherlock Holmes.’ And she laughed.

His hand transferred from sternum to throat. The laughter stopped. Her eyes went wide.

‘This is finished. We are finished. Don’t you ever come near me again. And don’t you dare come anywhere near John.’

‘My, but you do overreact, don’t you?’

‘What you did to him? What you expected me to do to him? I should burn this house to the ground. Don’t think I don’t know what you really do, who you really are. I could expose this Downside for the whole of New Britain to see.’

‘Try it, Sherlock, and I shall expose you.’

His eyebrows pinched. ‘What?’

‘You and your beloved ward. One accusation, that’s all it will take, and you’ll have yourself a scandal on Baker Street. People will believe it, too. You know they will. The peculiar, unsociable detective. The junkie obsessed with crime. A man of dubious morals with connections on the black market, under the protection of Big Brother. My, my, what nasty little hobbies do you and the twink get up to behind closed doors? Oh yes, people will believe it all.’

He snatched his hand away. ‘I’m clean,’ he spat. ‘And you’re a liar.’
‘Tear down my world, and I’ll tear down yours.’

Sherlock stepped back, glaring.

She tsked. ‘Such rage. Such passion. And all for a twink. You know, I rather think I do believe it.’

He pointed a finger. ‘Stay away from me, woman. And stay away from John.’

Then he spun away and flung wide the door, marching out without bothering to shut it behind him.
It was morning, though not yet daylight, and much of London still slept. John, however, was perfectly awake. The bed was made and the pillow was fluffed, and he was sat on the edge of the mattress with his hands folded in his lap. He was not yet dressed because he had not yet showered, but he had laid out his clothes in a neatly folded pile at the corner of the bed. For today, another cold one, he had chosen a pair of jeans, a black collared shirt, and a grey cable jumper. If he went out, his shoes were ready for him on the shoe rack, but until then, he would wear socks and house slippers.

The Tag Heuer watch—which the woman, when taking it off him, had said was probably worth more than he was; and which, knowing that now, he set carefully in a drawer every night before putting it on again every morning—told him that he still had five minutes. Then, he would quietly go downstairs and shower while Mr Holmes still slept. A quick shower, then a quick scrub-down of the bathroom, and then it would be time to make breakfast (eggs, toast, bacon, tea), which would be ready by the time Mr Holmes appeared in the kitchen. But he still had five minutes.

So he sat on the edge of the mattress, hands folded, perfectly still, facing the painting hanging in its new frame.

It was beautiful, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and it was a wonder to him that he was given allowance to look at it, every day. The cerulean water seemed to roll, the hoary waves to break. The grass appeared to shiver in the wind. John could almost smell the sea-salt air, and feel the warm sun on his face, and hear the call of gulls. Closing his eyes, he returned. Now the wind was in his ears and on his skin and through his hair. He breathed in the subtle scent of the dandelion. Somewhere, off in the distance, he heard a voice on the wind: someone calling his name. But he couldn’t make it out, because he couldn’t remember it after all, what he had been called. Not quite. He strained, listening harder, but all he heard was the wind.

No matter. He opened his eyes, and he was back in the bedroom, but the scene had not disappeared. Displayed in brushstrokes of blue, white, and gold, it remained there during the day, waiting for him to return, and then into the night, watching over him while he dreamt, like a talisman against the nightmares. No more hiding, no more guilt. He could look every day, for as long as he liked.

Well. For four more minutes.

He poured the tea.

‘Why do they die, sir?’ he asked.

Mr Holmes was an endless fascination. John supposed that there was no end to his knowing things, and sometimes he wondered how his host’s brain managed to keep it all in. He had heard once that the bigger the brain, the more intelligent the animal, which was why an elephant was so much cleverer than a mouse. But then, shouldn’t an elephant also be cleverer than a man? Maybe, because elephants couldn’t talk and couldn’t write, people just didn’t know how clever they really were. Then again, John could talk, but he was an idiot, so maybe brain size had little do with cleverness after all. Nevertheless, he fancied that Mr Holmes’ brain was so large that it pushed against the walls of his skull, wishing for a bigger box; and by comparison, John’s own was rattling around like a marble in a tin.
‘Simple,’ said Mr Holmes, for whom the world really was simple. ‘Living organisms depend on a chemical that controls nerves signals delivered from the brain to the muscles. It’s how we do everything from walk to hold a fork to breathe. Our diaphragms—he touched his stomach, just above the belly button—are muscles that facilitate breathing. So it’s important that this chemical works well. But what happens if that chemical is corrupted?’

John thought.

‘The muscles can’t work?’

‘Quite the opposite. They can’t be controlled. Think of the chemical like an off switch.’ Mr Holmes lifted his hand and held it parallel to the table, over his bacon and toast. ‘Right now, my muscles are under control. My control. My brain is telling my hand: Hold still! But take that control away?’ His hand began to tremble. ‘The muscles begin to spasm. Violently, painfully. Eventually, the muscles fatigue and stop working at all.’

John placed a hand on his stomach. Diaphragm. That’s what Mr Holmes had called it. He locked the word away. ‘And then you can’t breathe?’

Mr Holmes smiled. He appeared pleased with John’s reasoning, which made John pleased with himself. ‘Just so. And without urgent medical care, you are most certain to die.’

John was caught between horror and curiosity. ‘Why would they do that to themselves?’

The recent suicides had been the subject of the morning news, which Mr Holmes turned on briefly every day before breakfast, just to see whether Parliament had exploded in the night (so he said). John couldn’t always tell when Mr Holmes was joking—but he thought Mr Holmes was joking. As for the perplexing suicides, a detective on the telly had reassured the concerned public, saying, ‘We are all as safe as we want to be.’ Upon hearing this, Mr Holmes had muttered, ‘Suicides, my arse,’ while typing rapidly into his phone. Thus began their conversation.

John quite liked those. Conversations, that is.

The day proceeded quite as usual. While Sherlock showered, John did the washing up. At eleven, Mrs Hudson came for tea and to complain of her hip. At one, John prepared the vegetables for a stew while Mr Holmes worked on his laptop. At three, he and Mr Holmes played five games of Battleships. At four, John roasted the beef and prepared the bullion. At six, Mrs Hudson returned with the evening paper, and while John set the pot to simmer, hoping for a game of draughts or maybe rummy before the night was through, he listened while she and Mr Holmes argued in the sitting room.

‘See, you have all the apps still open,’ Mr Holmes was saying, a touch impatiently. ‘Look at that! When’s the last time you even bothered to close one? That’s why your battery keeps draining.’

‘I do close them!’ Mrs Hudson protested. ‘See? I go here, touch here . . .’

‘You’ve minimised them. They’re still running.’ He sighed with exasperation. ‘Do you even use half of these? They’re just taking up storage space.’

‘Oh, should I get more storage? A storage app?’

‘That’s not how it works,’ Mr Holmes grumbled.

‘Well, I don’t know about these things.’
‘I should be out solving cases, not acting as your electronics consultant.’

‘What about these suicides then, Sherlock?’ said Mrs Hudson, unperturbed by his perturbedness, and John heard the rustle of a newspaper. ‘I thought that’d be right up your street. Three exactly the same.’

‘Four.’

There was something in his voice that made John turn from the hob. Mr Holmes was by the window, looking out onto the street.

‘The paper says three,’ said Mrs Hudson, holding it close to her face, eyes skimming.

‘There’s been a fourth. And there’s something different this time.’

Something was happening. Something was wrong. From downstairs came the crashing open of a door, followed quickly by the hurried steps of someone racing up the stairs. John set aside the wooden spoon and crept to the edge of the kitchen, hiding himself behind the glass divider. Through a gap, he saw a man jog into the room without so much of a customary *May I come in*, as if he had done it a thousand times. It was the same man from the pound, the copper with grey hair, neatly parted, wearing a long black coat. Worried, John held his breath and kept himself concealed.

Mr Holmes turned from the window, looking as John had never seen him look. His face was stoic and professional, but his eyes gleamed excitedly.

As if they were already in the middle of a conversation, Mr Holmes asked, ‘Where?’

The man answered just as easily, ‘Brixton. Lauriston Gardens.’

‘What’s new about this one? You would have just called if there wasn’t something different.’

‘You know how they never leave notes?’

‘I believe I’m the one who pointed it out.’

‘Yeah, well. This one did.’

Mr Holmes lifted his chin and cocked an eyebrow.

‘Don’t look so smug. Will you come?’

‘Who’s on forensics?’

‘Anderson.’

Mr Holmes scowled. ‘Pass.’

‘Oh, don’t be a child. It’s not like I’m assigning you to be his assistant.’

‘*His* assistant!’

The policeman lifted his hands as though in surrender. ‘Or him to be yours or whatever.’

‘I don’t need him. I’ll bring my own.’

‘Your own what?’
‘Assistant.’

‘Since when do you need—?’

‘Brixton, Lauriston Gardens, I’ll be right behind. Off you go.’

The man sighed and rolled his head like he was rolling his eyes, but he turned around and left the way he came.

For a moment, there was silence in the flat as the footsteps faded away. Then, with the closing of the front door, Mr Holmes’ composure broke. He leapt into the air with an exclamation: ‘Brilliant! Yes!’ He was literally twirling on the spot. ‘Four serial suicides, and now a note. Oh, it’s second Christmas!’

‘Look at you, all excited,’ said Mrs Hudson, but her censure was tinged with amusement. ‘It’s not decent.’

‘Who cares about decent, Mrs Hudson? The game is on! John!’

John jumped at the shout of his name, but recovered himself and stepped cautiously into view. ‘Sir?’

‘This is it, the one I’ve been waiting for.’ He spread his arms. ‘What do you think? Coming?’

‘Me, sir?’

‘Sherlock!’ Mrs Hudson hissed, certainly more censorious this time.

Mr Holmes ignored her. ‘How ’bout it? Want to help me solve a case?’

It had been several weeks since Mr Holmes had first proposed taking John out with him. Nothing had been mentioned since. John was used to hollow promises, so though he had been willing and interested, he had maintained no expectation that Mr Holmes would actually follow through. In fact, he was quite sure the matter had been entirely forgotten. Until now.

‘Okay,’ said John.

‘Then turn off the hob, grab your coat, and let’s go!’

Mr Holmes was ready to fly out the door, but John delayed him, and he felt terrible. Mrs Hudson, though not exactly pleased, told him not to mind the kitchen, she would take care of it. But it still took him time to change into proper shoes, and put on his coat, and secure the identifying bracelets. Mr Holmes was bouncing on the balls of his feet by the time he was at last ready.

‘Great, great! Let’s go!’ He whirled and nearly flung himself down the steps. John did his best to keep up.

They took a taxi. John had never been too sure about taxis. Wards couldn’t take them without their hosts, and in his experience, hosts preferred not to travel with their wards. His last host, on the day of his acquisition, had placed him in the back of a nice black car to take him to the residence, but it hadn’t been a taxi, and he hadn’t ever travelled with his host again. He knew how to take the bus, and the Tube, but he didn’t always have the permission or funds. Normally, John walked.

Mr Holmes let him slide in first and gave the address to the cabbie. John didn’t know where Brixton was, but it must have been part of London, or he wouldn’t be allowed. Surely, Mr Holmes would know that. He kept his concern to himself, but couldn’t help fidgeting with the bracelets, waiting for
them to announce that he was in violation of boundaries.

Mr Holmes spotted him.

‘You’re fine,’ he said. ‘Brixton is nowhere near the borders of Greater London.’

He pulled his hands apart, embarrassed his anxiety was so transparent.

‘Nervous?’

‘No sir,’ he said automatically while his heart was thrumming.

‘But?’

John thought quickly. ‘When we arrive, sir, what would you have me do?’

‘Just stand and observe,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘It’s what I do.’ But he was smiling. ‘Bit of a drive, so let’s play a game.’

‘Here?’

‘Why not? I’m going to test your memory.’

John straightened his back, awaiting the challenge.

‘Bones of the hand.’ Mr Holmes spread his gloved hand and wiggled his fingers. ‘How many?’

‘Twenty-seven, sir.’

‘Good. Each finger is made up of . . .’

‘Three phalanges.’

‘Name them.’

John touched his own finger as he answered: ‘Distal, middle, and proximal.’ Mr Holmes cringed and held it. John corrected himself: ‘Proximal.’

‘How is the thumb different?’

‘No middle phalange.’

‘Wrist bones?’

‘Ulna and radius.’

‘Carpal bones?’

They continued like this until John had named every bone of the human hand, needing prompting only twice (‘hamate’ and ‘capitate’). Then Mr Holmes proceeded to describe intrinsic and extrinsic muscles. At one point, as John was repeating the information back to him, the cabbie, who had until this time been silent, muttered under his breath, ‘Waste of time, mate.’

‘I’ll thank you to shut your mouth,’ Mr Holmes snapped. Then, to John, ‘Ignore him. It’s often best to pretend cabbies don’t exist. One day, robots will do their job.’

But John felt deflated. There was no real point to these exercises, after all. He just . . . liked doing
them. Maybe he shouldn’t. The cabbie was right. It was pointless.

By the time they arrived in Brixton, it was full dark, which both thrilled and terrified him. He was almost never out past curfew, and the last time . . . Well, it was best not to think about last time. The cabbie dropped them off at the end of the street, and Mr Holmes made a point of giving him exact change and not a penny more. Then he bid John follow him.

They approached a barrier of yellow police tape, a place John normally would not set foot near. But to Mr Holmes, it was like a welcome mat. Before they could cross under, however, they were halted.

‘Hello, freak.’

John was startled. He had never heard anyone speak to Mr Holmes like that. He turned his head toward the officer and nearly fainted dead on his feet. A feeling of panic awoke in him, and he cast his eyes to the ground and shuffled nervously to the side, not quite behind Mr Holmes but trying to be absorbed in his shadow all the same.

‘A pleasant evening to you too, Sally. How do you like being the newest addition to Lestrade’s team, eh? Move aside, I was invited specially.’ He lifted the tape and waited, obviously expecting John to pass under it. John didn’t move. Even so, the woman put out a hand to stop him.

‘Whoa, wait. Who’s . . . this?’

And that’s when John knew that she recognised him, too. His alarm spiked, and all he could think was, Don’t tell Mr Holmes!

‘My assistant,’ Mr Holmes said smoothly.

‘Assistant!’ said the officer. ‘Since when do you need assistant?’

She was clearly not amused, perhaps even angry, and John scrambled to temper the oncoming storm. ‘Sir, perhaps I should head back.’ But it was past curfew. How could he go on his own? Maybe no one would notice on a bus if he sat in the back and kept to himself. Maybe Mrs Hudson could come get him. Or maybe the police would just escort him away.

‘Nope.’ Mr Holmes raised the yellow tape higher and gestured sharply with his head. ‘Sally’s new at this. Still learning how things work around here when I get called to the scene.’ John hesitated, then stepped forward tentatively, waiting to be detained, shoved back, or at the very least shouting at.

None of those things happened. However, when he crossed under the tape, the woman took his arm, turned him to the side, and began walking him away, barking at his host, ‘Stay put!’

‘Oi!’ Mr Holmes shouted. ‘The hell you think you’re doing!’

‘I’m having a word with your ward, that’s what,’ the officer snapped. ‘Stay back, or I’ll eject you both.’

John had rarely been forcibly separated from a host before, and when he had, it had been permanent. For a moment, he was terrified as she marched him several paces away. But she came to a stop within comfortable distance to Mr Holmes, if only just out of earshot. A stone’s throw away, Mr Holmes was fuming. The officer didn’t seem to care.

‘All right there?’ she asked.

John’s attention snapped back. ‘Sorry, ma’am, should I go?’
'No, I’m asking: Are you all right? Tiny, is it?'

He shrank a little. ‘John,’ he said. ‘I’m called John now, ma’am.’

She sighed, as though relieved. ‘A hell of a lot better. John then. You remember me? The station? The diner?’

He nodded.

‘You’re not in trouble. I just want you to be honest. Will you be honest with me, John?’

He wasn’t sure what he was really being asked, and he wanted to look to Mr Holmes for help, but he feared to displease her. So he nodded yes.

‘You have a new host. Sherlock Holmes. Is that right?’

‘Yes ma’am.’

‘Have you been with him long?’

‘Some weeks, ma’am.’

‘Okay. And are you all right?’

He was surprised by the persistent question, and she must have seen it in his face.

‘Because your last host . . .’ She seemed to rethink what she was saying. ‘All I’m saying is, I may be new here, but I’ve heard all the stories, and if I could tell you to stay away from Sherlock, I would.’

Stay away? Did she know about the incident in the bedroom? But that hadn’t been Mr Holmes’ fault, and in any case, he had been little harmed by it. Maybe it was the refrigerated head, then. But that was for science; Mr Holmes said so. ‘Pardon, ma’am, but why?’

‘Because he’s a psychopath. All this crime solving stuff? Sticking his nose in our business? He’s not paid or anything. He does it because he gets off on it. The weirder the crime, the more he gets off, and you know what? One day, it won’t be enough. One day . . . Look, I don’t mean to frighten you. But what I told you before . . . Do you remember what I told you before?’

He nodded yes.

‘Good. But let me say it again. If one day it’s not all right, you call me, yeah?’ As she talked, she slipped a small card into the front pocket of his coat. ‘I don’t know how he came by you, but if you ever need to get away from him, you give me a call.’

‘I’m waiting!’ Mr Holmes called in clear irritation.

‘Off you go then,’ she said.

He shuffled away and angled back toward Mr Holmes, who had turned toward the entrance to the building. When John was close enough, he scowled and asked, ‘What was that about? What did she say to you?’

‘She’—should he say?—’she said I shouldn’t be here, sir.’

Mr Holmes scoffed. ‘Cabbies and police constables, John. Ignore them both. Neither is worth listening to.’
But John wasn’t so sure. Already, he felt distinctly uncomfortable, like every officer he walked past was staring at him, glaring at him. He shouldn’t have come out after all. He should have looked to Mrs Hudson for help and she could have found him an excuse, even if it did leave Mr Holmes disappointed. The feeling didn’t go away once they entered the tall stone building because there, they ran into the man with grey hair whom John had seen from his hiding place in the flat. Though he didn’t seem to recognise John from the pound, he did not seem at all pleased.

Mr Holmes, however, acted like the copper wasn’t even standing there. He reached for what looked to be a blue plastic jumpsuit and tossed it to John. ‘You’ll need to wear one of these,’ he said.

‘Now hang on,’ said the policeman. ‘Who’s this?’

‘He’s with me,’ said Mr Holmes.

‘He’s wearing bracelets! Oh, bloody hell, Sherlock, you brought your ward?’

‘Well spotted, Lestrade. I said I’d bring an assistant.’

‘He can’t be here!’ The man called Lestrade looked furious. His face had gone from pale to beet-red in a matter of seconds, and he didn’t bother to lower his voice as he shouted, ‘This is a crime scene!’

‘Just zip it on over your clothes, John,’ said Mr Holmes, unruffled.

‘There’s a dead body upstairs,’ Mr Lestrade continued to protest. ‘You can’t bring him to see a dead body!’

‘Why not? He did well enough with the decapitated head.’

As Mr Lestrade’s jaw fell open, aghast, Mr Holmes turned his back on the policeman to wink at John. They both proceeded to dress in the jumpsuits, Mr Lestrade muttering to himself in the background. Was this not okay after all? He didn’t want to cause Mr Holmes any trouble.

But when they began to ascend the winding staircase, John noticed something curious. No one was looking at him anymore. The suit made him anonymous. He looked like Mr Holmes, and Mr Lestrade, and half a dozen others milling about the abandoned building. The suit hid the bracelets. They were all strangers to him, and that’s what he was to them, and it was fine. One of them even said sorry when bumping into him on the stair. Wasn’t that odd?

‘I can give you two minutes,’ Mr Lestrade was saying as he led the way.

‘You came to get me, and all you can give me is two minutes?’

‘Yeah, well, I didn’t expect you to bring . . . ’ He made a sharp gesture with his head.

‘It takes as long as it takes, Lestrade. But you’re being generous. I need only one.’

Mr Lestrade sighed. They were approaching the top floor. ‘Her name’s Jennifer Wilson, according to her credit cards. We’re running them now for contact details. Hasn’t been here long. Some kids found her.’

The door was open. Both Mr Lestrade and Mr Holmes strode purposefully inside. John entered with a little more hesitation, coming to a complete stop just over the threshold. There, in the centre of a drab, bare room, the body of a woman lay prostrate. Her coat was pink. Her shoes were pink. Her fingernails were pink. If John hadn’t been told differently, he would have guessed she was sleeping, perhaps passed out. But in reality, he knew he was staring at a dead body. It wasn’t the first time. But
it didn’t seem to be any easier to comprehend. Here one minute, gone the next.

‘Do your thing,’ said Mr Lestrade, but with a sarcastic wave of his fingers.

‘Stand back and shut up,’ said Mr Holmes.

And with that, Mr Holmes got to work. John stared, riveted to his every movement. One moment, he was standing erect on the body’s right, staring down at some scratches in the floorboards; next moment, he was crouched on the body’s left, lifting a hand and removing a gold ring from the woman’s finger.

‘Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one . . .’ Mr Lestrade said between gritted teeth.

‘I said shut up.’

‘Do you need your full two minutes after all?’

Mr Holmes clasped his hands behind his back and twirled sharply on the spot to face Mr Lestrade. ‘Finished.’

‘What, already?’

‘Shall I begin?’

‘She’s German.’

John’s head snapped around to see a man leaning against the doorjamb, speaking almost directly over his shoulder.

‘Rache,’ the man said. ‘In German, it means revenge. She could be trying to leave us a clue—’

‘Yes, thank you for your input,’ said Mr Holmes, crossing the room in two long strides and slamming the door closed in the other man’s face. John thought he heard an mmfph! from the other side of the door.

‘Revenge!’ Mr Lestrade said, excitedly.

‘Don’t be daft, she’s not German. She is from out of town though.’ He was pushing buttons rapidly on his phone. ‘Intended to stay in London for one night before returning home to Cardiff. So far, so obvious.’

‘Obvious?’ John said. How was that obvious! He had thought they were still waiting for word on the credit card information. But both men ignored him.

‘Victim was in her late thirties. Professional person, going by her clothes. Something in the media, going by the frankly alarming shade of pink. Travelled from Cardiff today, intending to stay in London for one night, going by the size of her suitcase.’

John looked around, as if it were possible to miss a suitcase in such an empty room. But he didn’t see a suitcase.

Mr Lestrade seemed to have spotted the problem as well. ‘Suitcase?’

‘Suitcase, yes. She’s been married at least ten years, but not happily. She’s had a string of lovers, but none of them knew she was married.’
‘Oh for God’s sake!’ shouted Mr Lestrade. ‘Are you just making this up to get back at me for not taking you along on the last one?’

‘Her wedding ring!’ Mr Holmes shouted back, pointing to the corpse’s left hand. ‘The inside of the ring is shinier than the outside—that means it’s regularly removed. The only polishing it gets is when she works it off her finger. It’s not for work; look at her nails. She doesn’t work with her hands, so what—or rather who—does she remove her rings for? Clearly not one lover. She’d never sustain the fiction of being single over that amount of time. So more likely a string of them. Simple.’

‘Brilliant,’ said John. He couldn’t help himself. It was like magic. Maybe Mr Holmes was really a mind-reader, or psychic!

Mr Holmes smiled at him and winked again.

‘Yeah, brilliant,’ said Lestrade, scathingly, and John thought he must have been mocking him. He felt his face go red and so determined to shut up. ‘What about Cardiff, then, eh?’

‘Her coat,’ continued Mr Holmes, stepping around the corpse and pointing. ‘It’s slightly damp. She’s been in heavy rain in the last few hours. No rain anywhere in London in that time. Under her coat collar is damp, too. She’s turned it up against the wind. She’s got an umbrella in her left-hand pocket, but it’s dry and unused. Not just wind. Strong wind. Too strong to use her umbrella. We know from her suitcase that she was intending to stay overnight, so she must have come a decent distance, but she can’t have travelled more than two or three hours because her coat still hasn’t dried and the body is still fresh. So, where has there been heavy rain and strong wind within the radius of that travel time?’ Triumphantly, he turned his phone around to show the policeman. ‘Cardiff.’

John wanted to applaud. He had never seen or heard anything like this before. It was amazing, fantastic. No wonder Mr Holmes had been so keen to show it off. He belonged on the telly with his own show and everything.

But not all were impressed, it seemed.

‘You keep saying suitcase,’ said Mr Lestrade.

‘Yes, check it for her organiser. Find out who Rachel is.’

‘She was writing Rachel?’

Mr Holmes scoffed. ‘No, she was leaving an angry note in German. Of course she was writing Rachel! Question is, why did she wait until she was dying to write it?’

‘Don’t get off track. How do you know she had a suitcase?’

‘Back of the right leg. Tiny splash marks on the heel and calf, not present on the left.’

John looked. He saw them now, but he hadn’t noticed them before. He wouldn’t have even thought to look.

‘She was dragging a wheeled suitcase behind her with her right hand. Don’t get that splash pattern any other way. Small case, going by the spread. Case that size, woman this clothes-conscious, could only be an overnight bag. So we know she was staying only one night. So where is it? What have you done with it?’

‘No case.’
‘Eh?’

Mr Lestrade looked almost haughty, putting his latex-gloved hands in the pockets of the blue jumpsuit. ‘There wasn’t a case. We’ve swept this building top to bottom and up and down the street. No suitcase. Looks like you’re mistaken on that one, Sherlock.’

‘Mistaken? Of course I’m not! I’m right, I’m always right! This is murder, Lestrade. They take the poison themselves, they chew and swallow the pills themselves. But it’s still murder, all of them. I don’t know how, but they’re not suicides. They’re killings. Serial killings.’ His fingers were twitching excitedly. ‘We’ve got ourselves a serial killer. Oh, I love those. Always something to look forward to.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Her case! Come on, where is it! Did she eat it? Someone else was here, and they took her case.’ Then, as though talking to himself, working it out with himself, he said, ‘So the killer must have driven her here and forgot the case was in the car . . .’

Then silence fell. Mr Holmes’ fingertips were pressed together at his mouth, like John had seen him before, and his eyes were intensely focused on nothing; he was lost in thought. Mr Lestrade stared at him expectantly. John looked between them, wondering what would happen next. But time ticked on, and nothing did.

Finally, Mr Lestrade sighed. ‘All right, that’s your minute allowance, and then some. We’re going to get to work on finding her family and acquaintances in the city, see if anyone knew where she was going—’

‘What do you think, John?’

Mr Holmes turned suddenly to face John with those intense, scrutinising eyes. John started, looked at Mr Lestrade, glanced to the body of Jennifer Wilson, and looked back to Mr Holmes. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes, you’ve been awfully quiet. What do you think? Anything strike you as noteworthy?’

‘Jesus Christ.’ Mr Lestrade turned aside, like he couldn’t bear to watch.

‘Um.’ What was he to say! He was an idiot, there to watch and keep quiet. He didn’t realise there would be questions.

‘Go on. Anything at all?’

‘Um. Only . . .’ John glanced back at the corpse. ‘Well, sir, there’s an awful lot of pink.’

A different kind of silence fell. This one was dreadful. Mr Lestrade was barely containing his laughter at John’s stupidity, and Mr Holmes looked disappointed. John wished for permission to leave, to be alone, to return to the bedroom on the second floor and look at the painting of Dover. But he didn’t dare request it. He stood still while his face burned scarlet and awaited the mockery.

‘Brilliant,’ Mr Holmes whispered.

‘Come again?’ said Mr Lestrade with a half-laugh but incredulity written all over his face.

‘Pink.’ Mr Holmes slowly stepped toward John, talking directly to him now, though surely his words were meant for Mr Lestrade. ‘She never made it to a hotel. The state of her hair says it all. She colour-coordinates her lipstick and her shoes. Pink. She’d never leave the hotel looking like that.
*Pink.* He clapped his hands around John’s upper arms. ‘John, you’re a genius!’

‘I am?’

‘Oh, come on,’ protested Lestrade.

But Mr Holmes seemed to have forgotten the policeman entirely. ‘Serial killers are always hard,’ he said to John. ‘You have to wait for them to make a mistake. Houston, we have a mistake! We’re done waiting. He’s made the mistake! John, you’ve put your finger directly on the mistake! Pink!’

Then he seized John by the hand and pulled him excitedly out of the room. ‘Come, John, we haven’t a moment to lose!’ He started laughing as he skipped his way down the stairs, John labouring to keep up.

It occurred to John, and not for the first time, that his host was quite possibly a little bit mad. But strangely, and certainly for the first time, John decided that he didn’t mind. In fact—and it was daring of him even to think it—he rather liked it.
Sherlock didn’t hesitate to throw open the lid of a large metal skip, grab the rim, and hoist himself up. But before he could tip himself in, John spoke:

‘Sir, should I?’

Sherlock looked over his shoulder, balancing where he was hoisted. ‘Should you what?’

‘Search the skip? You’ll not want to dirty your clothes, sir, I expect.’

They had shed their outer blue jumpsuits at Lauriston Gardens before dashing away, and Sherlock hadn’t explained where to. But John cottoned on soon enough, when he saw the skip and what Sherlock was planning to do. Now, the stink of London rubbish wafted over them, and a lesser detective may very well have sent in an assistant to do the dirty work. But he was too keyed up to let John have all the fun. He flashed John a smile, lifted his leg, and launched himself inside the skip.

Then he turned around and extended a hand to the shorter man.

‘Come join the search party,’ he said. John seemed uncertain as he looked at Sherlock’s proffered hand. Then, deciding, he smiled a restrained sort of smile and gripped the hand, letting Sherlock pull him up and in.

‘You won’t miss it,’ said Sherlock, beginning to sift. ‘As you so rightly pointed out, it will be a rather shocking shade of pink.’

But the dead woman’s suitcase was not in the first skip they searched, nor the second, nor the third.

‘Don’t worry, we won’t be doing this all night,’ said Sherlock, undeterred, as they left the fourth skip and its rotting fish heads, diapers, and spoilt Chinese. He took a quick whiff of himself. A little rank, perhaps, but nothing the night air wouldn’t help disperse. They turned a corner and joined the busy streets of London. ‘We’re working within limits: time and space. The killer will have noticed his mistake quickly, and quickly tried to get rid of it. The suitcase will therefore be within an area a tight radius from the crime scene, and there are a limited number of skips in that area. I base my calculations on three factors. One: the approximate time of death suggests . . .’

But he trailed off when he realised that he was talking to himself, and walking alone.

Sherlock turned, eyes scanning for John. He spotted him fifteen yards back, standing stock-still between the kerb and the buildings while foot traffic flowed around him. His bracelets were alight and flashing green.

It occurred to Sherlock that, since bringing John home, they had never been on the streets together when the bracelets had gone off. In fact, now he thought of it, he’d never had to deal with those damn bracelets at all. When he was a child going on walks with Redbeard, the bracelets had not yet been made digital—they were only leather bands and worn only on the left wrist, inscribed with the registration number for identifying purposes.

But as the laws and technologies evolved, the bracelets had, too. Now, they were black bands of electronic flexiglass embedded with a GPS tracker, shiny and unassuming until activated with cautionary lights. All wards had to wear them when in public spaces, no exceptions, and when they
lit up, all wards, no matter the circumstance, had to come to a standstill. Failure to do so resulted in a mild electric shock to the wrists, a reminder to stop moving. Failure to comply with that yielded a higher level of shock too unpleasant to ignore. Rarely did Sherlock ever see a ward walking with bracelets aglow. They were always standing still. As for himself, he was in the habit of ignoring the lights altogether, like most people did.

Then again, rarely were wards out past curfew, like John was now. At night, lighted bracelets were something of a spectacle.

Sherlock jogged back to him, scowling at the pedestrians who scowled at John, mistakenly judging him for being in public past curfew without his host.

‘Sorry, sir,’ said John sheepishly, clenching his hands into fists while the bracelets continued to flash green.

‘Never mind,’ said Sherlock waving away the apology. He glanced around to see if any other greens lights were flashing, but it seemed John was the only ward on this street. That meant it was only a matter of time . . . And sure enough, the patrol officer had spotted him and was making his way closer, tablet in hand.

‘You the host?’ said the officer, plucking the tablet pen from his pocket.

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock tiredly.

‘Host ID, if you please, sir.’ Then, to John, ‘Registration tattoo.’

John started unzipping his coat.

‘No need,’ said the officer. ‘Just push up your sleeve.’

‘It’s on the back of his neck,’ Sherlock explained as he dug into his wallet for the host ID card. This was ridiculous. Everyone was staring, as if Sherlock had done something wrong, as if they hadn’t—each one of them—been through a spot check before with their own wards. But it was always a scene. When bracelets went green, it was more often than not a routine spot check; but blue meant there had been a report—unruly behaviour, suspected thievery, and the like. When the bracelets flashed red, however, it meant they had a runner, and all innocent wards in the lighted area had to prove it wasn’t them.

The officer helped John pull down the collar of his shirt to access the tattoo and scanned it into his tablet. Then he cross-checked it with Sherlock’s host ID card. All told, it was quick and efficient, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t a pain in the arse. They were in the middle of a case, after all.

‘Looks to be in order,’ the officer said, satisfied. He waved his tablet pen-wand over the bracelets, first the right, then the left, deactivating them, and they returned to black. ‘Don’t let him stay up too late, though, eh?’ And just as quickly as the patrol officer came, he left.

‘Insufferable,’ Sherlock murmured.

‘Sorry, sir,’ John said again.

‘God no, not you, John. Come on. Our night is far from over.’

They fell into step again. This time, Sherlock didn’t let John lag behind: he was more mindful of the limp, more conscientious of John’s tendency to place himself half a step behind, and more determined to keep him at his tight right hand.
‘Does that happen often when you go out?’ Sherlock asked. ‘Your bracelets lighting up and everything?’

‘Regular enough, sir.’

‘Don’t you just hate it?’

John was slow to answer. ‘Just the way of it, I suppose.’

‘Maybe. But you can still hate it.’

When John neither agreed nor disagreed, Sherlock pushed a little further. ‘Doesn’t it make you angry, sometimes?’

‘I don’t know,’ John said, noncommittally, like he didn’t wish to have an opinion on the matter.

‘You know you’re allowed.’

‘Sir?’

‘To get angry. To hate things. Go on then. Tell me one thing—just one—that you hate.’

‘No, no,’ said John, shaking his head with a nervous sort of laugh, like he was being tested and had spotted it before he fell into a trap.

‘Really. One thing you hate, and I’ll drop the matter.’

‘Um.’ It was nearly half a street later before John spoke again. ‘I don’t much fancy apples.’

Sherlock looked at him, startled. Of all the things on the planet for John to despise, that he should despise, and he picked apples? Sherlock threw back his head and laughed. ‘You hate apples!’

‘Well, I don’t much fancy them,’ John amended.

‘No, no. Go on and say it: I hate apples. Say it!’ He smiled broadly, wanting John to know he was in a space free from consequences of taking a stance, and such a mild stance it was.

‘Well then,’ said John, grinning back, shyly, as was his way, ‘I . . . hate apples.’

Sherlock laughed again.

‘I do. I hate them,’ said John, more boldly.

‘Glad to hear it! No more apples on Baker Street!’

‘But if you should like them, sir—’

‘Nope. Don’t care much for them myself. There’s no point to them. Aha! This way, John. End of the car park, I see another skip.’

They had discovered, four skips ago, that it was more efficient if Sherlock helped lift John into the skip first, which he did now. But just as he was grabbing top of the wall to pull himself up and in after him, he heard John cry out, ‘It’s here!’

There was a shuffle and bang and the sound of squishy rubbish in plastic bags, and then John’s head reappeared, followed by an arm bearing a small pink suitcase, like he’d just caught a large fish.
‘Excellent, John! Ha ha! I knew it! I knew we’d find it. Pass it here.’

Face aglow, John heaved the suitcase over the rim of the skip and into Sherlock’s outstretched hands. When he was on the ground again himself, he looked at Sherlock expectantly, wondering what would happen next. ‘Will you call Mr Lestrade?’ he asked.

Sherlock winced. He should call Lestrade, certainly. He knew that. But then their fun would be over. Lestrade might ordinarily permit Sherlock to continue to tag along in pursuit of the killer, but not if he had his ward in tow. The crime scene had been pushing things a bit far, almost too far, and though Lestrade was a tolerant man and often submitted to Sherlock’s bullying, when he put his foot down, he put it down hard.

But John . . . He was having fun. Sherlock knew it. He could see it in the man’s face, and it gutted him to think that they would have to call it quits and return to the quiet flat, to do all those mundane things that people do, like sleep. He wanted to give John something more.

‘Not just yet,’ he said. ‘You and I? We still have work to do.’

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They returned to the flat, but not to sleep.

‘Go ahead and unzip it,’ said Sherlock, letting John get some hands-on experience.

John didn’t question him. Likely, he had never been in a situation before where he had to worry about contaminating or tampering with evidence, and Sherlock frankly didn’t care. He didn’t need forensics, not when he had the science of deduction as his primary tool. Together, they rummaged through the contents of the pink suitcase, turning up nothing more exciting than bras and earplugs. But it wasn’t what was in the suitcase that Sherlock found significant. It was what wasn’t.

‘Notice anything missing?’ he asked. He did so enjoy watching John’s brain at work.

‘Missing, sir?’

‘Everything you’d expect is in this suitcase,’ Sherlock said, digging a hand through. ‘Pyjamas, change of clothes, toiletries case . . .’ Then he added, with emphasis: ‘Charger.’

John stared hard at the contents. ‘You mean . . . her phone?’

‘Precisely! Phone wasn’t on the body! So that means . . .’ He made an encouraging gesture with his hand, eager to see if John would arrive at the obvious conclusion on his own.

‘It means . . .’ John’s eyebrows shot up. ‘The killer has her phone!’

Sherlock leapt out of his chair and turned a circle. ‘Yes! Exactly yes! And we have her number. It’s on the luggage!’ He snapped his mobile up out of his pocket and tossed it to John, who caught it against his chest. ‘Here, I want you to send a text.’

‘Oh. I . . . I . . .’ He looked down at the phone, and when his eyes returned to Sherlock, he looked frightened. ‘I don’t think I should, sir.’

‘Nonsense, it’s fine.’

‘No, I . . .’ That old look of shame was beginning to rise in his face. Sherlock knew it well, so often he had seen it, and it took him back to the early days before Christmas. Not quite understanding (did
the thought of texting a murderer, even from a safe distance, frighten him?) but keen to keep the
good feeling of the evening alive, Sherlock swiftly intervened.

‘Oh wait,’ he said. ‘I have the number here. Let me see that.’

He reclaimed the phone. John, spared the task, visibly relaxed. So Sherlock entered the text himself:

*What happened at
Lauriston Gdns? I must
have blacked out.*

He paused, thinking. Then he added:

*221B Baker Street.*

‘And now we wait.’ He sank into his chair, trying for a patient pose, but his legs were restless and
his whole body needed to fidget. He wouldn’t last.

A modicum of John’s shyness had returned, but not enough to preclude him from asking, ‘For what,
sir?’

Sherlock shot forward. ‘Imagine it, John. You’re the killer. You’ve left your latest victim dying,
presumably dead, on the upper floor of an abandoned complex. But you still have her phone. When
you chucked the luggage, you forgot about the phone. It’s still in your possession. Suddenly, a text!
*What happened to me? I must have blacked out!* Maybe she’s not dead after all! What do you do?
Ignore it? Throw the phone away at the nearest opportunity? Dare you text back? If she really is
alive, she’ll know your face, she’ll identify you to police. But you have to be sure. So you—’

The phone suddenly started ringing. Their heads swivelled as one to stare at it, John in terror,
Sherlock in delight. ‘You panic!’

He was on his feet again, exhilarated, agitated. He flew to the window, needing to look, but he knew
it was pointless. It was too soon for the murderer to have arrived. Still, he could barely contain
himself. He hadn’t had a case this interesting in months.

The phone stopped ringing.

‘That was him!’ said John, infected with Sherlock’s excitement. ‘That was the killer!’

‘Indeed,’ said Sherlock, flashing him a smile from the window.

‘Then . . .?’

‘Go on. Ask.’

‘Why didn’t you answer? Don’t you need to find out who he is?’

‘Oh, I shall. But do you really think he would tell me that over the phone?’

John shook his head. ‘I suppose not.’

‘Of course he wouldn’t. That’s why I’ve invited him here directly.’

His gasp was silent, but John’s face said it all. ‘Here, sir? To Baker Street?’

Sherlock chuckled. John’s reactions were just too precious.
‘Isn’t that . . . dangerous?’

‘Hardly. He may be a murderer, John, but he’s not a violent one. So to speak. Poison is the weapon of choice when one doesn’t want to get his hands dirty.’

‘But sir. Surely, he’ll not want to get caught. He’s got away with it so far, hasn’t he? So he’ll not be foolish enough to come here.’

‘No, he’s just brilliant enough.’

John balked.

‘I do love the brilliant ones,’ Sherlock carried on, rubbing his hands together deliciously as he paced the room. ‘They’re always so desperate to get caught.’

‘Why?’ asked John, incredulous.

‘Appreciation! Applause! At long last, the spotlight. That’s the frailty of genius, John. It needs an audience. Now let’s think.’

He needed to work through the problem, and John was the perfect sounding board. Much better than ol’ Billy, at any rate.

‘We know his victims were abducted. They all disappeared from busy streets, crowded places, but nobody saw them go. Plus, the abductor was a stranger to them. Must have been.’

‘Why’s that, sir?’ asked John.

‘Simple. If not a stranger, then the killer was a familiar face, someone they trusted. But then the killer would have to know them all, wouldn’t he? Yet there is nothing that connects any of the victims.’

‘Might there be more than one, then?’

Sherlock grinned. It really was a clever hypothesis, though a wrong one. ‘Maybe,’ he conceded. ‘But I doubt it. Multiple killers suggests either a gang or a copycat. Gangs are not nearly so organised, and copycats aren’t nearly so consistent. The modus operandi of a serial killer is one of working alone. I am confident we are chasing only one man. So!’ He continued pacing, once in a while eyeing the street, but he suspected that it was still too soon. ‘A stranger to them all. And yet, at the same time, someone they trusted.’

‘Why would they trust a stranger?’

‘Now there’s the question!’ Sherlock pronounced. ‘Think! Who do we trust, even though we don’t know them? Who passes unnoticed wherever they go? Who hunts in the middle of a crowd?’

‘I dunno, sir. Who?’

‘We shall soon find out.’

For the next few minutes, Sherlock retold the story of how he had once tracked down a house burglar who had struck more than a dozen homes in only two nights with nothing to go on but the fact that all the burgled flats had chrome doorknobs. Then, just as he was reaching the climax of his tale, they heard a car door slam shut down on the street. John, who had been riveted to the tale, sprang to his feet, and Sherlock hopped excitedly to the window, at which point his happy bubble burst.
'Oh no,’ he groaned. ‘No no no!’ He whirled back. ‘John, the suitcase! Zip it up, hide it!’ But there was a parade of footsteps on the stair. ‘Shit, too late.’ He leapt over a chair to plant himself squarely in the middle of the room and face the door, hands akimbo and a haughty, indignant expression at the ready.

Lestrade was first through the door. To Sherlock’s disgust, half a dozen officers followed, Donovan and Anderson included.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing!’ he demanded. ‘You can’t just break into my flat! There are laws!’

‘Since when do you care about laws? And besides, I’m not breaking in,’ said Lestrade, squaring off with him, nearly toe to toe. ‘It’s a drugs bust.’

‘Sir,’ said John timidly from behind him. Sherlock glanced back and saw he was standing in front of the suitcase as though to shield it with his body. His eyes questioned him, wondering what he should do. Sherlock sighed, and just shook his head to indicate that the game was up.

‘Search high and low, boys!’ Lestrade shouted. ‘We’re looking for needles, suspicious white powders, pipes, rolled paper, anything at all!’

‘This is absurd,’ Sherlock spat.

‘My yes, nothing more absurd than addiction,’ Lestrade retorted. ‘Leads to all sorts of irrational behaviours.’

‘Pardon, Mr Lestrade.’

To Sherlock’s surprise, John stepped forward to stand at his right hand. Lestrade, too, looked taken aback. Wards didn’t usually talk to law enforcement, unless explicitly directed to.

‘I’ve cleaned this flat top to bottom,’ he said, ‘and you’re most welcome to look, all night if you must, but I can promise you’ll not find anything you could call recreational. Mr Holmes doesn’t even smoke.’

Lestrade gaped at him for a moment before saying, ‘And what would you know about it? Would you even know the difference between heroin and sugar if you came across it?’

‘Yes sir, I would,’ said John humbly, and, having said his piece, took a step back.

Sherlock was both touched by John’s defence of him, and troubled by his final assertion. But given the present company, he turned back to Lestrade and said, ‘Well. There you have it.’

‘I was just about to say the same thing,’ said Lestrade, pushing past him to where the pink suitcase lay on the floor between the two facing chairs. He ran a hand through his hair. ‘Sherlock, how many times do we have to go through this? You can’t just withhold evidence! And you rummaged through it! For the love of . . . This is my case. I’m letting you in, but you have to work with me.’ He shot a glance at John as though to drive home a point. ‘You can’t just go off on your own!’

Annoyed at the implication regarding John, Sherlock waved his fingers in Lestrade’s face. ‘You all just slow me down. Hey, don’t touch those!’ he shouted toward the kitchen.

‘Are these human eyes?’ said Donovan, holding aloft a jar and looking repulsed.

‘Pig, ma’am,’ said John softly.
'They’re for an experiment,’ Sherlock griped.

‘They were in the microwave!’

‘Lestrade, seriously, get your people out of here.’

‘What, because we slow you down? Find out who Rachel is on your own, did you?’

‘Oh.’ Sherlock paused, his curiosity warring with his indignation. ‘Very well. Who is she?’

‘Rachel is Jennifer Wilson’s nine-year-old ward.’

‘The ward?’ A note to the ward? Or a note about the ward? The effort it must have taken, to scratch those letters into the floor before she died, had surely been excruciating, painful. What had she been trying to say?

‘Waste of effort, if you ask me,’ Anderson piped up from the kitchen, gloved hand poised on the shelf behind an open cupboard. ‘If she wanted to do something useful in her last moments, she should have scratched the name of her killer!’

Sherlock turned, eyes blazing. ‘Anderson, don’t talk. You lower the IQ of the whole street.’ To Lestrade, ‘Is the ward safe? Was there any harm done to the child?’

‘Yeah, yeah, she’s fine,’ Lestrade said. ‘At home in Cardiff, with her host. Mr Wilson, that is. So what? Why scratch the name into the floor?’

Sherlock turned again. ‘John?’

John started. ‘Sir?’

‘What do you think? Why might a host scratch a young ward’s name into the floorboards?’

‘I dunno, sir.’ But he answered anyway, proving to Sherlock, once again, that he might have some insight into a world the rest of them would rather not examine. ‘Maybe . . .’

‘Go on.’

But John was hesitant, thoughtful. ‘Mrs Wilson called her Rachel? That is her name?’

Ignoring the impatient sigh from Lestrade and the rolled eyes from other officers and what seemed to them to be a redundant and unnecessary inquiry from an idiot, Sherlock nodded soberly; he could see where John was going with this before he even asked.

‘Is it a good name?’

‘It’s a very good name,’ said Sherlock.

‘Then . . . maybe Mrs Wilson cared for her. Worried for her. Wanted to make sure Rachel was looked after.’

‘Of course she’d be looked after,’ said Lestrade. ‘She’s still got Mr Wilson!’

John’s eyes flicked to Lestrade, then down, a little cowed. But he answered: ‘Sometimes, sir, forgive me, but sometimes a man alone isn’t the best host for little girls. Sir.’

‘Why shouldn’t he be?’ Lestrade snapped. He turned partly away and ran a hand through his hair in
agitation. Sherlock narrowed his eyes at the reaction, but before he could interrogate him, Lestrade continued, ‘Look, that’s . . . not really our division, now, is it? We deal with murders, not ward issues.’

‘Sherlock, is your bell not working?’

Mrs Hudson suddenly appeared in at the door. She looked alarmed to see so many policemen swarming the flat.

‘What?’ said Sherlock, distracted and annoyed.

‘It’s just, your taxi’s here. What’s this? What’s going on?’

‘It’s a drugs bust, Mrs Hudson,’ said Lestrade glibly.

Her eyes went wide, and she crossed the room to Sherlock, taking his hand to pull his ear close to her mouth. ‘They’re just herbal soothers! For my hip!’

Meanwhile, Lestrade had turned to John. ‘I think it’d be best if you stayed in your room the rest of the night. Mm?’

‘Nope!’ Sherlock pulled away from Mrs Hudson and inserted himself between Lestrade and John. ‘Are you quite finished here? You already found what you came for.’ He thrust one finger downward at the pink suitcase.

‘Playtime is over, Sherlock. Send him to bed.’

‘Sherlock, the taxi?’

‘I didn’t order a taxi!’ To Lestrade, ‘I’ll thank you not to boss around my ward, in my flat.’

‘I think these are fingers!’ cried one aghast officer with his head in the open fridge.

‘Is this illicit?’ said another, holding out a plastic baggie to her companion.

‘No, it’s oolong.’

‘Maybe I wouldn’t have to,’ said Lestrade, ‘if you’d look after him properly. I’m mean, Jesus, Sherlock, taking him to a murder scene!’

‘Sir, I can wait upstairs,’ John volunteered.

‘Good idea, very sensible,’ Lestrade said.

‘Or tell the driver you’ve cancelled,’ said John.

‘What’s oolong?’

Laughter from the kitchen.

‘He doesn’t answer to you, you nit,’ Sherlock growled. ‘John, stay with me . . .’

At that very moment, his phone lit up in his hand. An incoming text from Unknown:

Come with me.

The answer came in a rush. Who do we trust, even though we don’t know them? Who passes
He rotated slowly, toward the door, just in time to see a stranger—an old man in a grey cardigan and flat cap—holding a pink mobile. Around his neck hung a lanyard for the London Black Cab company. Then the old man, without even meeting Sherlock’s eye, slid the phone into the pocket of his cardigan and turned back toward the stairs. Amid all the commotion, no one else noticed him.

As though in a trance, Sherlock followed him.

‘Oi, where are you off to?’ Lestrade barked.

‘A minute,’ said Sherlock as he left them all behind.

Was it really so simple? Was the man really so obvious while simultaneously being so completely camouflaged? Sherlock felt like an idiot for not having spotted it sooner. Everyone trusted a cabbie. A cabbie could take a victim anywhere. But why? And how had he got them to get out of the taxi, walk to their deaths in a secluded place, and swallow strychnine? He had to know. If Lestrade interfered now, Sherlock would likely be left out of the interrogation altogether. This would show him.

The taxi lingered at the kerb. Leaning against it, the serial killer sized Sherlock up and said with total nonchalance, ‘Taxi for Sherlock Holmes.’

He carried a thick cockney accent behind yellowing, uneven teeth. But though everything about him spoke *working class*, his eyes were sharp, incisive, even daring behind square-rimmed glasses.

‘I didn’t order a taxi,’ Sherlock said, not sure whether he should let on, yet, that he knew exactly who stood before him.

‘I beg to differ. You sent me your address and everything. Not so clever, Mr Holmes, inviting a serial killer to your front door.’

Sherlock smirked. ‘Is this a confession? Not so clever of you, showing up. I have a flat full of coppers, just upstairs, who would love to make your acquaintance.’

The man was unfazed. ‘Oh sure, go get them. I don’t mind, honest I don’t. And I tell you what. I’ll even come quietly, as they say. But I don’t think you’re going to go do that.’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘I didn’t kill no one. I met some lovely people, we had a nice little chat, and they killed themselves. And if you take me in now, that’s as much as I’ll ever say. You’ll never know exactly what it is I said to any of them. Not one word.’

Sherlock was galled at the thought of not knowing, but he couldn’t show it. Instead, he shrugged. ‘No one else will die though. I believe they call that a result.’

‘But you won’t ever understand how they died. And not knowing? Well, that will just eat away at you, innit? You’re Sherlock Holmes, but even you can’t deduce what it is I said.’

*Dammit,* Sherlock thought. *He’s provoking me, and it’s working.* ‘And if I wanted to understand . . .’

The cabbie opened the back door. ‘I’ll show you. Let me take you for a ride. Both of you.’
Both?

Sherlock whirled and saw John standing behind him, just outside the door.

‘John!’ he cried in dismay. ‘What the hell?!’

John stiffened, looking chastised. Glancing briefly at the cabbie, then back at his host, he asked shyly, ‘Not good?’

‘Bit not good, yeah,’ Sherlock muttered. Bit not good at all. He was face to face with the killer they had been chasing, and he didn’t know what would happen next. Only now did he realise his error (‘John, stay with me . . .’), but it was best that he do this next bit on his own. It wouldn’t do to put John in danger. ‘Go back inside.’

‘I’m afraid not, Mr Holmes,’ said the cabbie. ‘It won’t do to have a witness. Our fun is just beginning. So he comes, too.’ Discreetly, he lifted the grey cardigan just enough above his waistline to reveal the grip of a black pistol tucked into the front of his shirt. Shit.

‘You wouldn’t,’ Sherlock reasoned. ‘I told you, the police are just upstairs.’

‘And four people are already dead. You think I wouldn’t take out two more before they had a chance to get to me?’

Sherlock calculated his chances: the man was old and might not be very quick with the draw. In fact, Sherlock wagered he stood a fairly good chance of disarming him if he lunged unexpectedly. But on the off chance that the cabbie was quick, Sherlock couldn’t risk John getting shot for the second time in his life. He stood a better chance of outwitting the man.

‘John, get in the taxi,’ he said, unable to keep the anger from colouring his tone.

‘Sorry, sir,’ said John as he hastened to obey.

Before following in after him, Sherlock turned his hardest glare on the cabbie. The cabbie returned only a haughty smirk. Then he pulled open the driver’s side door, started up the engine, and they left Baker Street behind.

‘Where are you taking us?’ Sherlock asked. He spoke now in measured tones, mostly for the sake of his ward, who sat very rigidly with his hands on his knees, staring straight ahead, jaw locked and nostrils flaring. Though relatively composed, Sherlock could sense his anxiety.

‘Patience, Mr Holmes,’ said the cabbie. ‘I shouldn’t like to spoil the surprise.’

Sherlock spotted a black pen in the seat pocket in front of him, and a stack of business cards in a tray. Surrupetitiously, he removed both, but given that he was sat directly behind the driver’s seat, the cabbie didn’t notice. He softly clicked the pen as he said, ‘Is this what you do, then? Scout the city for a good place for a murder?’ He flipped the card reading Jeff Hope, London Black Cab Co, and pressed the pen to the blank side, where he began to write.

‘You see, no one thinks about the cabbie,’ said Mr Hope. ‘Invisible, you are. Just the back of a head. Proper advantage for a serial killer. I’m surprised more of us don’t branch out. After all, we all know a nice, quiet place for a murder.’

Sherlock saw rather than heard the hitch in John’s breath. He finished his scribbling and furtively passed the card to John, laying it upon his knee for him to read: Trust me. There’s no danger. I know what I’m doing.
John pinched the card, glanced down, but looked even more alarmed when his head snapped back up. He looked at Sherlock and started shaking his head. Not quite the reaction Sherlock had been going for.

‘How did you choose them, then?’ Sherlock asked, thinking it best to keep a conversation flowing. ‘Sir Patterson and the rest?’

‘Enough chatter. I like it quiet when I drive.’

It was a tense twenty minutes in the back of the taxi. For the most part, John was perfectly still, still holding the business card between pinched fingers, but sometimes touching his identifying bracelets, as though anxious they might suddenly light up and cause them trouble. Sherlock wanted to squeeze his hand and calm him, but his written message hadn’t been well received, so he doubted physically grabbing John would prove any more reassuring. Instead, he focused his attention on Hope, taking note of the smudge of shaving cream behind his left ear and the picture of two children on the dash, the mother cropped away.

At last, to Sherlock’s surprise, the car pulled into the car park of Kerr-Roland Further Education College. He had been expecting, perhaps, a multi-storey or abandoned warehouse, given the location of the other victims, not a building in regular daily use.

‘It’s open. The cleaners are in,’ said Mr Hope as he got out of the taxi. Sherlock and John followed.

‘And what, you just stroll in and hope your victims follow?’

Outside the view of any possible witnesses or police, Hope finally pulled out the gun. When he saw it, Sherlock wanted to laugh. It was a fake! Though he didn’t own one himself, he wasn’t an idiot, and he knew how to spot a fake weapon. It was a fairly good replica, but a fake all the same. Oh, how he would love to shove it in Hope’s face, haha! But with the danger to John or himself removed, he wanted to see this through, so withholding his cat-like grin, Sherlock instead just rolled his eyes and said, ‘Dull.’

‘Don’t worry. It gets better. Off you go, then. The small one in front, there you are.’

Hope marched them both into the building, which was unlocked, just as the cabbie had said. They passed down a long, dark hallway, and finally into a large classroom with long lab tables. Hope waved his pistol and indicated that Sherlock and John take a seat in one of the plastic chairs, while he situated himself on the other side. And it was only then that Hope became properly observant. He started laughing.

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Him!’ said Mr Hope. ‘He’s a ward, innit? I seen the bracelets. You brought your bloody ward!’ And he laughed some more. ‘Don’t think he’ll even count against me. Five murders, then, and one squished cockroach.’

‘Four murders,’ Sherlock snapped, ‘one arrest, and John and I toast the evening with a bottle of red wine.’

The movement was subtle, but John, who sat with his fingers interlaced in his lap, tried to maneuver the fabric of his jacket to hide the bracelets, as though it made any difference anymore.

‘Get on with it, then,’ Sherlock continued. ‘What’s your grand trick?’

Still chuckling, Hope set the gun to the side of the table, far out of reach of Sherlock, and went for
his pocket instead. From there, he extracted a single, clear vial, containing a single white pill, and placed it in the centre of the table.

Sherlock was unimpressed. ‘So? You force them to swallow that pill at point of gun, do you? I thought you were clever.’

‘I’m not finished,’ said the cabbie. And from his other pocket, he pulled a second vial, identical to the first, and also containing a single white pill. This he placed beside the first and gave Sherlock a significant look, eyes flicking only briefly to John, then back again.

‘And?’

‘It’s a game, Mr Holmes. Need I explain you the rules? There’s a good bottle and a bad bottle. Your choice. You pick the pill from the good bottle, you live. You pick the pill from the bad bottle, you die. Shall we play?’

‘Play what?’ Sherlock scoffed. ‘Games require skill, strategy. This is nothing more than roulette: a fifty-fifty chance!’

‘I’ve played four times, and I’m still alive. It’s not chance, Mr Holmes. It’s chess. One move, one survivor. And this—is the move.’ Hope lifted a hand, which twitched once. Then he reached for the bottle on Sherlock’s right and slid it across the table toward John. ‘Did I just give you the good bottle or the bad bottle?’

‘It’s a fifty-fifty chance,’ Sherlock repeated, annoyed.

‘You’re not playing the numbers, you’re playing me! You’re trying to get inside my head, like I’m inside yours. I know how people think. I know how people think I think. And I know how you think, Mr Holmes. The real question is, do you know how I think? Did I give you the poison or the placebo? Is it a bluff? Or a double bluff? Or a triple bluff?’

Sherlock let out a long sigh. He cast a glance to John, whose hands were tightly gripping his own knees now. He wasn’t looking at the pills, but at Hope, his eyebrows pinched with worry, like he was trying to figure it out.

‘What if I don’t choose either?’ He shrugged to show his indifference to this little scenario. ‘John and I could just walk out of here.’

‘You’ll play the game, Mr Holmes,’ said the cabbie, reaching for the pistol, ‘or I’ll just shoot you in the head.’

John’s head snapped to Sherlock, alarm written all over his face.

‘Funnily enough, no one’s ever gone for that option.’

Sherlock smiled blithely. ‘I’ll take the gun, please.’

‘Mr Holmes,’ said John, softly but with great concern.

‘Are you sure?’ said Hope. ‘Your ward seems distressed by the very thought.’

‘The gun,’ said Sherlock confidently, leaning forward with a great smirk.

Hope raised the gun, levelled it between Sherlock’s eyes, and moved his finger to the trigger.

It happened suddenly. Just as the cabbie squeezed the trigger, John shot to his feet and knocked
Sherlock clean out of his chair and onto the floor, leaving himself in the path of a bullet. But with a spring-loaded click, only a small flame burst out of the muzzle. John flinched violently, only to discover, at last, that the gun was fake.

‘John!’ Sherlock cried, aghast. He scrambled back to his feet, but whirled on John, who stood dumbfounded, staring at the flame, then down at his chest, as though he couldn’t believe he was still whole.

Hope burst out laughing.

John looked up from his chest, stunned.

Sherlock grabbed his shoulders and turned him roughly to face him. ‘John, you idiot! What the hell were you thinking!’

‘I thought . . . I thought . . .’

‘I knew the gun was fake. I knew it!’ Adrenaline was shooting like a pinball through his veins. He didn’t mean to shout, didn’t mean to shake John, but now he couldn’t help it. What could have possibly possessed John to do something so reckless, believing the gun was real? For all his brilliance, Sherlock couldn’t make sense of it beyond the apparent fact that John had tried to kill himself. The thought upset him so much he was squeezing John’s biceps painfully and shaking him as he shouted. ‘I’m in control here, do you understand? I told you to trust me. So trust me! I know what I’m doing!’

‘Then prove it,’ said Hope, who had risen to his feet as well, charged by the new energy in the room. ‘You think you’re so clever. Prove it. Prove to your ward that you know which is the good bottle and which is the bad.’

Sherlock’s head snapped back to the table and the bottles set upon the imaginary chess board.

‘Go on,’ Hope whispered. ‘Prove it to him!’

Two bottles. But he wasn’t playing a game of chance. Just like Hope said, it was chess, a battle of minds, and Sherlock had to win it, to prove to John that he was in absolute control. So think. Reason through it. What move had Hope made? Obvious. He was a man living close to death (cancer, maybe?), but he didn’t fear it. He was the sort of man who would walk into a room full of coppers searching for him, casual as all hell, and snag two more victims. He was the kind of man who kept poisonous pills in the pocket closest to his heart. All told, he would happily keep the deadly poison near himself, and offer Sherlock the harmless one. He would believe that Sherlock would distrust the proffered pill and reach for the other. So it stood to reason—simply, logically—that the safe pill was the one pushed toward him from the start.

‘The gun wasn’t real,’ said John softly.

‘I know, John, settle down,’ said Sherlock, at last releasing his bruising grip and turning toward the table, ready to play.

‘No sir, Mr Holmes, sir. The gun wasn’t real.’

Sherlock looked back, puzzled. ‘I know,’ he repeated, a little exasperated.

‘So you don’t have to play.’ Anger flashed in John’s eyes, but briefly, so briefly that Sherlock wasn’t even sure what he saw. He’d never seen John angry before.
Caught off guard by the hardened expression on John’s face, Sherlock blinked and asked stupidly, ‘What?’

‘He’s holding a fake gun. You don’t have to play. He can’t make you. You’re a free man, Mr Holmes. He can’t make you.’

‘Looks like you’ve got yourself a cabbage for a ward,’ said Hope. ‘And a chicken-livered one at that. Or is he right? Are you too stupid to outwit me?’

Sherlock winced. ‘I’ve already figured it out, arsehole.’

‘You know where the poison is?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Then prove it. Let’s take our medicine.’

‘Please, Mr Holmes,’ John pleaded.

‘I can do this, John. I’ll show you.’ And he reached for the bottle nearest him.

But John snatched it up first, and backed away.

‘John!’

‘You’re not stupid, sir, I know you’re not. But taking this? Swallowing this? That’s stupid.’

‘But I’m right!’ He was so keyed up, every nerve on edge, every synapse firing like crazy. If he didn’t do something soon, if he backed away now, he thought he might just explode.

John was breathing hard, looking between the cabbie and his host with trepidation. ‘Really?’

‘Really!’

‘You’re really sure?’ he challenged.

‘Yes! Of course yes.’

‘Then you won’t mind me taking it instead.’ And with that, John twisted the cap off the vial.

A white-hot panic, unlike any he had ever known, fired throughout Sherlock’s body like lit petrol. ‘No!’ Sherlock cried. He lunged for John’s arm to stop him, prepared to wrest it from his grip, slap it out of his hand. But John dodged his lunge and darted away, quicker than Sherlock expected of him, what with the dodgy leg. ‘Goddammit, John!’

‘If you are right, I’ll be fine, won’t I?’ John argued as he tipped the pill into his open palm.

‘Oh ho ho!’ tittered Hope, excitedly. ‘Let’s find out then, roach. You and me.’

‘I— I—’

Sherlock floundered. God, what if he was wrong? What if he had made a critical error in his calculations, and for it, John paid the price? If John swallowed that pill, he wouldn’t wait to find out. He would wrestle the man to the floor and shove a finger down his throat, if it came to it, and force him to throw it up again. Because he wouldn’t watch John die, he just wouldn’t.
'I may be wrong,' he admitted. ‘John, please. I may be wrong.’

John nodded, blinking rapidly. His whole body was trembling. ‘Yeah, I think you may be.’

Once again, almost as if he had to remind himself that the cabbie was still in the room, Sherlock returned his attention to Hope, whose lips were contorted into a line of disapproval, even disgust.

‘You let your ward make your decisions for you? Coward. You’ll never know, then, will you? Whether you would have beat me.’

Sherlock scowled.

‘Sir,’ said John, softly, ‘might we now call Mr Lestrade?’

His heartrate was slowing, and his mental faculties had ceased to whir. The thrill of the chase that had led them there, and threatened both their lives, was melting into cool reason and practicality. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing.

‘John,’ he said mildly, ‘put the pill back in the bottle. Screw the cap tight, and put it in your pocket. Then come help me tie him up. You’re right. Let the police deal with him.’

***

The officers cuffed Jeff Hope and put him in the back of a police car. Sherlock watched him go through the window with a mixture of satisfaction and confusion. It had been a strange night.

‘Good thing he didn’t have a real gun,’ said Lestrade, closing up his notepad. The two bottles of pills had been bagged as evidence (Sherlock made them note which was which so they wouldn’t be confused during analysis), along with the lighter in the shape of a pistol. ‘Might have had a night of multiple homicides, and I really do hate those.’

Sherlock grunted in acknowledgment. John was on the other side of the room in a chair, being seen to by Constable Donovan, who was crouched next to him. Seen to? What was she saying? Why was her hand resting on his knee? John didn’t like being touched. She should get her damn hands off him.

‘Sherlock, are you listening to me?’

‘It’s been a long night, inspector, and we’ve just caught you a murderer. I think John and I would quite like to go home now.’

Lestrade grunted. ‘Fine. There may be follow-on questions, of course. We’ll get Hope’s statement, run analysis, tie him to each of the murders—’

‘Yes, I look forward to the court case,’ he said, stepping away to collect John.

‘But Sherlock, you can’t do this again.’

Sherlock rocked back. ‘Do what?’

‘Bring him.’

‘John? Why the hell not?’

‘At best, it’s grossly inappropriate. He’s a ward, Sherlock, not your playmate. He has no business being involved in police work. You might even be cited for ward endangerment.’
‘Endangerment! He was perfectly safe! And frankly damn useful. He saved my life tonight.’

‘I’m telling you, Sherlock, you can’t. If you insist on it, I’ll stop bringing you on altogether, hear me? This isn’t a bluff.’

Sherlock sneered. ‘Then good luck solving your cases on your own, you pillock.’ And he stormed away, Lestrade calling his name with weary vexation. He approached John and Donovan like the reckoning and said gruffly, ‘We’re leaving.’

John rose quickly, but Donovan was slower, smoother, and when she had reached her full height, she regarded Sherlock with her characteristic look of disdain. ‘Nother one cracked, is it?’ she said.

He anticipated she was about to go further, so, to head off her second scathing remark, he grabbed John by the arm, said a hasty, ‘That’s how I roll,’ and strode away, John in tow.

Once they were finally cleared of the coppers and back on the street, Sherlock realised, again, that he was holding John too tightly. He dropped his arm and slowed his pace, and for a couple streets more, they walked on in silence while Sherlock made a half-hearted effort to look for a free taxi. Which was the last thing he wanted to do. He should have made Lestrade give them a ride home.

‘I’m sorry, John,’ he said, surprising even himself, speaking with half-formed thoughts. ‘Tonight was . . . tonight was . . .’

‘I’m glad you’re okay, sir.’

‘Me?’ Sherlock laughed shortly. ‘What you did, back there. It was . . . good. Very good. John, you may very well have saved my life tonight.’

John looked uncertain how to respond, or even whether he ought to. So after a bit of awkward silence, he simply said, ‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock laughed again, this time with less restraint, more pleasure. ‘I might have got it right, though.’

‘No sir, I don’t think you did.’

Sherlock stopped short, quite taken aback. A few steps later, John noticed and stopped, too. They stood facing each other. ‘Don’t you?’

‘He gave you the bad bottle,’ said John, simply.

‘Might not have done.’

‘But he did, sir.’

‘How do you know?’

John pursed his lips thoughtfully. ‘He looked at me, just before he made his move.’

‘So?’ But he was reviewing the play-by-play in his memory, and yes, there had been a moment, just before Hope had slid the bottle across the table, just a hair of a moment: Hope had glared at John. ‘He hates wards, sir,’ John said as a matter-of-fact.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, equally disturbed and intrigued by what John was saying. What if John was right, and his presence there had compromised Jeff Hope’s ability to think, resulting in
emotional, not logical, reasoning? What if, in another scenario, had it been just the two of them,
Sherlock would have been right in thinking Hope would keep the poison closer to himself, but it was
John—John, the wild card—that had disrupted his streak, had awakened his prejudice, and
subconsciously or otherwise, he had pushed the poison closer to the creature he despised? And
damn, Sherlock had almost fallen victim to it.

‘Why did you jump in front of the gun, John?’

John looked abashed. ‘You said, sir,’ he said slowly, ‘let’s not make it nineteen.’

If nothing else had done it that night, these words at last humbled him. If Sherlock had died, John
would have ended up back in the system. Another pound, maybe another host. Number nineteen.
This wasn’t just about saving Sherlock’s life. In some sad and warped way, it was about saving his
own.

‘That’s a decision I wish you had never had to make.’

‘Sorry, sir. I know you would rather I hadn’t come.’

‘To the contrary.’ He waited until John’s eyes lifted, and they were looking at each other properly.
Sherlock smiled. ‘You proved invaluable. And what’s more, I’ve never had such fun on a case.’

John eyes brightened; the corner of his mouth turned up. ‘Really?’

‘I never lie.’ Nothing—neither finding the pink suitcase, nor watching Jeff Hope get marched away
in handcuffs—gave him more satisfaction than the look on John’s face at this very moment.
‘Dinner?’

‘Starving, sir.’

With a motion of his head, they continued walking, but from time to time, Sherlock cast a sideways
glance at John, who was fighting it, but couldn’t stop himself from smiling.
Early in the morning when he was certain she was already awake, Sherlock knocked on Mrs Hudson’s door.

‘Oh! Morning, dear, everything tickety boo?’

‘Yes yes, tickety boo, all fine. Busy?’

He didn’t wait for an answer but stepped forward, forcing her to step aside so he could get into her flat.

‘No, not busy,’ said Mrs Hudson, following him to the kitchen. ‘Just getting ready to go out. It’s Frugal Friday down at the super.’

‘Fantastic,’ he said without interest. ‘Don’t worry, this won’t take long. John and I are off to buy him his own mobile, but first . . .’ He indicated the small stack of papers in his hand, which he set down on her kitchen table, along with a blue pen.

‘What’s this?’

‘Right, so I’ve been thinking’—he had rehearsed this all night in his head before coming down, and all day yesterday, as he was having the papers drawn up—‘that given the nature of my work, there is a chance, however slim, that something may happen to me somewhere down the line, and recent events have forced me to re-evaluate my estate to the effect that it occurs to me I may need, or rather most definitely need, a contingency in place to see to it that all my affairs are properly managed in such an unlikely event.’

‘What?’

‘John. If I die, I need to ensure that he doesn’t end up passed along to another miserable host or state care. I want to assure him that no matter what, that will never happen.’ He picked up the pen and held it out to her.

She didn’t even lift her hand. ‘Sherlock,’ she said slowly, eyeing the papers, ‘you don’t mean . . .’

‘You’re the natural choice. John knows you, likes you, and more importantly, he trusts you. And he’d get to stay on Baker Street. It’s the perfect solution, should the worst happen.’ He waggled the pen, encouraging her to sign.

She laughed, a little forcibly. ‘This is silly. You’re fit as fiddle! And smart as a whip. You don’t need this.’

‘Likely not, but just in case.’

‘Sherlock, I’m exempt. I’m an old woman! I can’t be taking on a ward at my time of life!’

‘And John and I will almost definitely outlive you, yes, but just in case! Exempt doesn’t mean prohibited. It’s not passing guardianship off to you now. These are merely contingency orders establishing an interim host. Lots of people have them.’

Her lips parted, but it was several breaths before she said, ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t sign that.’
Sherlock stared at her dumbfounded. He had expected a little of the old ‘oh Sherlock, you’ll never die’ routine, but in the end, he was certain she would be happy to sign, ready and willing to step in should the need arise, as she was already doing. What he had not been expecting was flat-out refusal.

‘Of course you can,’ he said.

She shook her head.

‘This is John we’re talking about.’

‘I know.’ She rubbed her hand along the side of her face, covered her mouth, rested it over her breast.

‘Don’t . . . don’t you like him?’

Her expression turned stern. ‘Don’t do that. I love John. He’s as good as family, but I . . . What about Mycroft? He’s young, responsible. Surely he’s the better choice.’

‘Mycroft! I’d sooner see John back at the pound!’

Well no, that wasn’t quite true. But Mycroft! Why was Mrs Hudson being so difficult?

‘I’m sorry, Sherlock, but I, I, I just can’t sign this.’ She picked up the papers and pushed them against his chest. Then she turned him about and nudged him back to the front door. Just as she was closing it behind him, she said, ‘Don’t tell John I said no.’

He was left standing in the hallway, shocked, confused, and not a little hurt on John’s behalf. He had thought he was doing the right thing, a good thing, to ensure John’s happiness, now and for the future, should anything happen. When she died, he’d find someone else. How could Mrs Hudson possibly deny him that?

And who else was he to turn to? Mycroft was definitely not on the list. He clearly disapproved of Sherlock’s choice of ward, and even if he didn’t, Sherlock would never subject John to such an oaf of a host, to be shipped to the estate and never dealt with again. Lestrade? No, the man was being a right bastard these days. Mike? He was a decent chap, and had been good to John. But it was one thing to perform your profession at the beseeching request of a friend you owed a favour to; it was another thing entirely to take on the responsibility of his ward on a permanent basis. Besides, they all had wards of their own. Taking on a second was a lot to ask.

It was a sobering thought, in the end, for Sherlock to realise that he really didn’t have any reliable friends. Glum and embarrassed, he folded the papers and returned to the flat. There would be no good news over breakfast after all, it seemed.

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Solving the case of the serial murders seemed to have produced a subtle change in Sherlock’s ward, he observed. John seemed—how would one put it?—lighter. Like he was more comfortable in his own skin. Sherlock couldn’t exactly quantify it, but it was discernible all the same. Maybe his chin was raised a little higher, maybe his back was a little straighter, maybe his shoulders were more relaxed. Conversation was certainly easier. Not fluid, not exactly a tell-all or gossip session or witty verbal spars, but comfortable, agreeable, enjoyable even. Sometimes, John even initiated them.

‘Where did you get the bison skull, sir?’

It was still sir and Mr Holmes, but one thing at a time.
‘Oh, I’ve had that for years,’ said Sherlock as he reclined in his chair, thumbing through the paper. ‘Spotted it at a pawnbrokers when I was working a burglary case. Thought it would annoy Mycroft, so I just had to have it.’ He looked up over the top of the page to where John sat with an illustrated astronomy encyclopaedia in his lap. He had finally cracked open the bookshelf. ‘It worked.’

John smiled.

Because John was smiling more and more these days. Not great, toothy smiles, or wide, cheek-lifting smiles, and they never quite served as a precursor to laughter. John’s smiles were softer, close-lipped and restrained, but they brightened his eyes. Sherlock loved seeing it, and actively thought of ways to inspire it. It took up quite a lot of his mental energy, in fact.

For one, John liked stories. Sherlock’s stories, as it turned out. Telly and movies could go hang, but he sat riveted and absorbed whenever Sherlock began to spin a yarn. So he told stories about cases he had worked, from crime to solution, and made sport of keeping John guessing at every turn.

Another thing John liked, he had discovered, was Sherlock’s violin. One day, Sherlock noticed that the violin case was moved. Not much. Just set aside, perhaps, in the course of John’s tidying, moved to a place where it was a little more visible. Having his attention drawn to it, and having nothing else on at the moment, Sherlock decided to play. He was in the mood for a little Paganini. He tuned, rosinied the bow, and began with Caprice 24, a light-hearted, rapid tune he had perfected when he was still a boy but which he always enjoyed playing. John, who had been downstairs with Mrs Hudson when he started, soon returned, but lingered just outside the door, listening, like he was afraid to disturb the impromptu concert until Sherlock, holding a note a little longer than Signor Paganini would have deemed appropriate, said, ‘Come sit down and listen, John.’

Since then, something odd had been happening. John began to request performances, though not verbally. It was almost comical: He used signals (or what Sherlock perceived as signals) with the aim of attracting Sherlock’s attention to his instrument. It was like a reminder to play, but without the needling tactics once employed by his mother. Sometimes, John signalled by moving the violin into plainer sight, sometimes it was setting the music stand closer to the table and not tucked away in its corner, or even being so blatant as to open his music upon the stand itself. And Sherlock, ever observant, never failed to pick up on the cue, and happily indulged him. As for himself, he enjoyed having this sort of unspoken communication. If John felt he couldn’t speak freely, at least he had found a way to speak.

‘I like that bit,’ said John at the conclusion of one of Sherlock’s solo recitals. ‘The bit where you do the things with your fingers.’

‘Every bit involves my fingers,’ said Sherlock, grinning.

‘Yeah, but the one with the quick—’ John wiggled his forefinger and middle finger back and forth rapidly.

‘Ah, you mean the trill.’ And Sherlock dragged the bow and trilled on the string.

‘Yes, that.’ John smiled his small smile.

‘You want to try?’

The smile slipped and his eyebrows rose. ‘Oh no, sir. I’d drop it, or something. No, I just like listening.’

‘Nonsense, come here. You’ll find that the violin is a heartier instrument than most people give it
For the next twenty minutes, he taught John to hold the violin with his left arm and the bow with his right, to name the strings, to draw the hairs across them properly, and to trill a note. John was a good sport, but when the instruction was over, he seemed relieved to give the violin back to its master. But Sherlock was just pleased to see him not only express but exercise his curiosity. It was a sign of living a contented life.

But as for Sherlock, things had slowed down in the contented life department. Lestrade, apparently being good on his word, hadn’t called or texted about any new cases on. He had to wheedle for the test results of the poison pills (John had been right), and even then, Lestrade only sent the information via text. He had to read about Jeff Hope’s case in the papers (where Sherlock had been named as a consultant only once and only briefly), as well as another case Lestrade was working involving a car bombing in Surrey, ostensibly by anti-statist radicals, which had killed two people. And yet his phone remained silent.

So he turned to his website, which seemed to be getting even less traffic than usual, despite the fact that his name had been in the papers again and he had just composed a new and fascinating essay on two hundred and forty-seven different kinds of tobacco ash. But nothing. God, how could London be so boring these days?

Salvation came at the end of February, in the form of an email from an old friend. Well. Not exactly a friend. But someone with the audacity to start his email with—

How’re things, buddy? Been a long time since you’ve popped round.

I hear on the grapevine that you’re now a consultant with the Yard. True? Well done. There’s been an ‘incident’ at the bank – something strange and possibly criminal. I’m hoping you can sort it for me.

Please call by. Needless to say, I’ll be relying on your absolute and professional discretion.

Seb

So buddy, was it? And Seb? That was rich, considering their history. At uni, they had lived on the same floor, just two doors apart. Though both young men came from prominent families and public schools and had fathers in public service, they did not get on. Sherlock was intelligent and reclusive and had earned himself something of a reputation as an eccentric. Sebastian was smart but lazy, relying on his family connections and a fair amount of bribery and bullying to get through his classes while he spent weekends drinking champagne out of girls’ belly buttons. That is to say, he had got on with Irene Adler well enough. He had even offered Sherlock quite the carrot to write his chemistry exams for him, but miscalculated—Sherlock had never been enticed by riches of either gold or flesh and found it tedious to even talk about. The last they had seen each other, Sebastian had called him a limp-knobbed freak, if he recalled correctly (and he did).

Unsurprisingly, Wilkes had been recruited into the financial sector straight out of uni, a few rungs up the ladder from normal hires, and was doing very well by all (unsolicited) accounts. They hadn’t crossed paths in twelve years, and he thought it just as well.

But a case was a case, and (sigh) how he needed a case.

‘John.’ He stood and fastened the top button of his suitcoat. ‘Fancy coming out with me on another . . . ?’
He looked around the room. John wasn’t there. Oh! But he had gone down to Mrs Hudson’s an hour ago or so, as she was repapering the bedroom and he had offered to help. How long would that take? Could he just go down and steal him away? Was that not on, somehow?

On his way out the door, he grabbed both his coat and John’s and made his noisy way down the stairs to announce his coming, then let himself into her flat.

‘Oh Sherlock, what do you think?’ she said when he popped his head into the bedroom. ‘Isn’t it lovely? I thought the stripes would be hard to match up, but John’s got such a steady hand.’

‘Yes, lovely,’ he said, conventionally. ‘John, a case has just landed in my lap, could be interesting. Probably no poison or serial murders this time, but fancy joining me?’

John had turned around from his pasting when Sherlock came into the room; now, his head lifted a little and his eyes brightened. Yes, definitely interested. Sherlock had to school himself not to smile too broadly.

‘What about Mrs Hudson?’ John asked politely.

She’s just using you, apparently, Sherlock thought bitterly. ‘I don’t normally take her on cases,’ he quipped instead. ‘But if she wants to come . . .’

‘Oh go on then,’ said Mrs Hudson. ‘We can finish up later. I’ll probably pop out myself, actually. Pay a visit to Mrs Turner and Yoshi.’

Ah yes, Yoshi, the ward next door. Not nearly so interesting as John.

‘Great, good, John, here’s your coat.’ And he ushered him out the door.

****

Sebastian Wilkes was a senior trader at Shad Sanderson Bank in Canary Wharf, possibly Sherlock’s least favourite district in London, and possibly all of England. White collar crimes were terribly dull, and most fit comfortably into one of two categories: fraud and extortion. Unless it led to murder, Sherlock had little involvement and even less interest.

But Wilkes had said strange, and he was hoping it proved to be just that.

He led the way through the rotating glass doors and into the expansive lobby. But the moment John passed through the metal detectors behind him, an alarm sounded, and his bracelets flashed a cautionary orange. He stopped instantly and looked to Sherlock as though for help.

‘Oh, come on,’ Sherlock moaned, turning toward the two security guards jogging their way. ‘What, he’s not allowed in here?’

While one guard deactivated the alarm, the other ignored Sherlock’s question and asked, ‘Sir, is the ward with you?’

‘Yes, he’s with me.’ Angrily, he pulled out his walled to find his host ID. Meanwhile, the other guard was scanning John’s tattoo and de-lighting his bracelets.

‘This one is flagged,’ said the guard, reading his tablet.

‘Flagged?’ Sherlock repeated. ‘What the hell does that mean?’

‘Hold up, it’s an old flag. Expired. Sir, please bear in mind that wards are not permitted inside the
bank unless escorted by their hosts—’

‘Where the hell do you think I am?’

‘—and must be accompanied at all times. If you must access a safety deposit box while on the premises, your ward will have to wait for you on the street or be turned over to a temporary security holding, where you can retrieve him after—’

‘He’s not leaving my sight,’ Sherlock said. ‘I am here by invitation, not on my own business. Now let us pass.’

Having done their duty, the guards stepped aside. With a snap of his head and a significant look, Sherlock told John to ignore them and follow him. Nervously, John obeyed. They took an escalator to reception, where Sherlock announced himself, and then stepped into the lift where he punched the button for the twenty-ninth floor.

‘Take off the bracelets,’ he said as the lift carried them skyward.

‘Should I?’

‘Go on. You’re not out in public. Just give them here.’ He held out an open palm. John pulled them off, gave one more look of uncertainty (the one he wore when he thought he might be being tricked), and placed them in Sherlock’s hand. Sherlock dropped them into the pocket of his coat.

The lift doors dinged and opened, and a woman stood waiting to greet and lead them to Wilkes’ office where Sherlock stood with hands clasped behind his back, determined to look bored (not intrigued) and a little put-upon (not desperate). He readied his eyebrow quirk of disdain, just in case the situation called for it.

But Wilkes entered the room all smiles and a welcoming, if not a little bit smarmy, ‘Sherlock Holmes!’

He was dressed in a dark blue suit, immaculately tailored and worth at least three thousand quid, and his tie was French silk blue-and-white houndstooth over a white seven-hundred-pound shirt chequered with thin blue lines. The haircut was relaxed but still business-like and probably set him back another three hundred. Still waving his money in Sherlock’s face, it seemed, and at the rest of the world.

They shook hands, and Sherlock caught a glimpse of his Piaget watch. Around the world, twice in a month, he thought, and held onto it for the opportune moment to slip it into the conversation as a jab. Wilkes continued jovially, ‘Howdy, buddy, how long has it been? Eight years, I guess, since I last clapped eyes on you?’

Twelve. He wasn’t even trying. Sherlock resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the fabricated familiarity.

‘Hello, Seb.’ Had that come out sarcastically? Who cared. ‘This is my friend, John.’

Wilkes’ eyes slid to the side and down a touch to where John stood at his side and went a bit wide with shock as he practically spluttered, ‘Friend?’

‘Ward!’ John said, and though it left his mouth as an exclamation, there was no force of air to convert it into a shout. Taken aback and a little disappointed by John’s unnecessary assertion of his status, Sherlock turned, only to see John’s head inclined toward the ground and his feet shuffling backward by the smallest measurements, as though to place himself slightly behind Sherlock and out of sight.
Sebastian Wilkes was staring, evidently flabbergasted. ‘Your ward?’ he echoed. ‘This is your ward?’

‘Yes sir,’ John whispered, just as Sherlock said with a note of antagonism, ‘Problem?’

‘Erm.’ Wilkes swallowed, then shook his head like he was clearing the fog. ‘Not at all. So you named him . . . John.’

‘He named himself. Shall we get started?’

For the next ten minutes, they proceeded to talk about why Wilkes had called upon Sherlock to start with. Evidently, there had been a break-in: a bit of vandalism but nothing stolen. But the more concerning aspect was the matter of a hole in their security, and it was this spot of trouble that Sherlock was being commissioned to resolve.

While Sherlock and Wilkes talked, John sat quietly in the adjacent chair. Quietly, but rigidly, and in very much the same posture as he had when Sherlock had first seen him in the pound—hands clasped between his knees, head locked in place, eyes downcast. Was he in pain? That seemed quite unlikely, given that he had been in perfect health only moments before. Was it embarrassment? Sherlock had thought he was doing John a favour, taking the bracelets off him so that he could seem more, well, normal. That is, blend in with the crowd. But John had been reticent, and just now, had asserted himself as a ward. Was he uncomfortable, thinking of himself as anything but? Did it in some way unsettle him to be presented as Sherlock’s friend and equal? Why? What was going on in that funny little head?

‘I’ll show you the security footage,’ said Wilkes, rising from the desk, and Sherlock noted the funny look he gave John before returning his smarmy smile to Sherlock. ‘Shall we?’

‘Yes, and I’d like to take a look around. See what I can see.’

They proceeded to the security desk to review the footage, which hadn’t captured the trespasser but the aftermath of his vandalism: a streak of yellow spray paint across the eyes of one of the bank’s founders. Then they proceeded to the vandalism itself. All the while, John followed at least two steps behind, and as much out of sight as he could manage.

For a few long seconds, Sherlock stared at the spoilt painting and the curious symbol beside it. He snapped a couple of photos with his mobile. Then he turned around and scanned the floor—as much of the floor as he could see. If someone was standing out there, what would he see? How much or how little of this little office and the painting within it?

‘Wait here,’ he said, and went out to investigate.

He left Wilkes and John in the office and found himself among the cubicles. Through the open doorway, from this spot of carpet or that, he endeavoured to find the perfect vantage point for seeing into the room and spotting the painting. Who could see it, who? He kept moving, ignoring the curious looks from the workers around him as he darted back and forth, popped up and down, seeing what he could see, everything he could see. And as it happened, only from one spot on the entire trading floor could he get the perfect view of the painting. He turned his head and spotted the
nameplate on the door: Edward Van Coon. It was a place to start. He slid the nameplate out and pocketed it for himself.

When he returned to the office to announce his findings to Wilkes, he found the man with his hand on John’s shoulder, eyebrows pinched in concern. ‘Holmes, I think your ward might have taken ill,’ he said.

‘John?’

Indeed, John looked terrible. His face was colourless but shiny with sweat, and his right hand was fisted around his left to keep it from shaking.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ said Wilkes. ‘Best get him home. Call me when you’ve cracked it then, eh, Sherlock?’ And with that, he left Sherlock and his ward to themselves.

Alone again, Sherlock stepped closer. ‘All right, John?’ he asked.

John’s head bobbed up and down rapidly, but his jaw was tight, too tight to talk, and he couldn’t make eye contact. He appeared to be holding his breath.

‘Maybe a stop at the loo?’

Again, John nodded, but didn’t move his feet.

‘All right. Let’s . . . let’s go find one.’

He stepped toward the office door, and thankfully John followed. As quickly as he could without drawing unwanted attention, he made a beeline for the hall where he had spotted the men’s on their way in, and when they reached it, he pushed the door open for John, who bolted inside, rushed to a stall, and next Sherlock knew, John was throwing up in the bowl.

Shit, he really was sick! Why hadn’t he said? Sherlock bolted the door behind him. Then he hovered uselessly by the sinks, waiting for the retching to stop. John gasped, groaned, gasped, and gagged, and a little more came up and splattered into the bowl. God, it was pitiful.

‘Sorry, sir!’ John said between gasps. Sherlock could hear the mortification in his voice. ‘Sorry!’

‘Stop saying sorry, you’re vomiting, John, not insulting me.’

There came a rattling at the door of someone trying to get in. ‘Oi! Occupied!’ he shouted.

‘There’s a dozen stalls, mate!’ came the complaint on the other side.

‘Bugger off!’

John coughed, dry heaved, and coughed some more. But the fit seemed to be passing. Was it flu? If so, it had come on rather suddenly. Food poisoning? Probably not. They had eaten the same breakfast, and Sherlock felt fine. Unless he’d had something else at Mrs Hudson’s.

When he heard John hit the flush, Sherlock came closer, a bit wary. John was rising to his feet, still wan and sweaty. ‘All right?’

John nodded miserably and staggered toward the sink, murmuring another ‘sorry.’ Sherlock let it pass. Instead, he twisted the tap for the cold water. Then he watched as John cupped a hand to serve as water dish, rinsing and spitting, then patting his hot face with the cool water. Meanwhile, Sherlock grabbed a fistful of paper roll for him to dry off. But when he moved to hand it to John and ask if he
felt well enough to leave the loo, he stopped short. John was bent over the sink, rubbing his face; his
inclined head exposed the skin of his neck, reddened, as though irritated. But upon closer inspection,
Sherlock saw the half-moon imprints of what could only be . . . fingernails. Four on the right, one on
the left. In his mind’s eye, he recreated the most likely of scenarios: someone hand grabbed the back
of his neck, dug fingernails into the skin, and squeezed. They were fresh markings, and John
couldn’t have done this to himself. They’d not been apart since arriving, except for . . .

John straightened, though he didn’t actually stand tall. ‘Can we go, sir? Please?’

For a few long seconds, Sherlock was at a standstill as John’s request warred with the new
information he was still trying to sort out. What was he to do? The answer was obvious. Take John
home. Deal with this after. ‘Of course. Yes. Let’s go home.’

***

Any thoughts of tracking down Eddie Van Coon went out the window. Or, at the very least, were
placed on the backburner.

They left Shad Sanderson as quickly as possible, and once in the taxi, Sherlock told the cabbie to
step on it. John was still discernibly unwell, though the cooler air seemed to be helping settle his
stomach. He asked for the bracelets back, and even though they were in a private cab, which would
drop them off right at 221’s front doorstep, Sherlock complied. Then John spent the rest of the ride
angled away and staring out the window, while his tightly fisted hand continued to quake in his
 pocket.

Once back in the flat, John didn’t even ask: he continued straight up to his bedroom and softly closed
the door. Sherlock stood at the bottom of the stairs and listened, not sure what he expected to hear,
not sure what he was expected to do. Mrs Hudson was out, but even if she weren’t, he was
disinclined to seek her advice. For fifteen minutes, he paced the flat, dithering. Leave John be and
continue the case? Return to Wilkes and demand to know what had happened to his ward outside of
his presence? The trouble was, he didn’t have enough data, and action taken without proper data was
improper action, every logician knew that.

Another fifteen minutes, and John hadn’t made a peep. It was driving Sherlock mad. He had to do
something. So he filled a pitcher and grabbed a glass, which would serve as his excuse if he ended
up needing one, and carried them up the stairs. He rapped lightly on John’s door with a knuckle.

Diffidently, John cracked open the door, and seeing Sherlock standing there with the water, stepped
back to let him in.

‘I thought you might be thirsty,’ said Sherlock, stupidly. He hoped his ploy wasn’t too transparent.

‘Thank you, sir.’ John rubbed the back of his neck anxiously. ‘I’m good, sir. I am . . . better, sir.
Sorry.’

‘Honestly, John, if you apologise one more time, I may just overturn this whole pitcher on your
head.’ Too much? He smiled to show John he was joking. A little less genuine, John smiled back.
Clearly, he was too disconsolate to find anything humorous.

‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock nodded to the bed. ‘Have a seat.’ Then he proceeded to pour the water into the glass,
passed John the glass, and settled the pitcher on the table. ‘So . . .’

John rushed to speak first. ‘I understand if you need to carry on, Mr Holmes. But, erm, perhaps I’d
best . . . not. This time.’ He shifted on the edge of the mattress and stared down into the glass, but didn’t drink.

‘John, may I sit?’

Lifting his eyes only, John looked hesitant. On the one hand, Sherlock wanted him to say no, get the hell out, and spare him from asking. But John would never do that, and so they were both left with only one possibility, and as much as neither of them wanted it, neither had a choice.

John nodded.

Pulling out the chair from the desk, Sherlock sat. But suddenly, he didn’t know what to do with his body. Leaning back felt too imposing, forward too familiar, straight-backed too formal. And his legs, his damn lanky legs, had never felt more conspicuously long. He first tried spreading his knees casually, then crossing ankles, then crossing knees, and it all just felt wrong. Finally, he planted both feet on the ground, rubbed his thighs with his hands, and cleared his throat.

‘All right, so.’ He sniffed. ‘Something happened at the bank.’

‘Just a bit of upset stomach, sir.’

‘ Came on rather suddenly, John.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘I think it was more than that.’

John looked to be chewing his inner cheek.

‘I know the bracelets going off and having to deal with security was distressing. I felt that myself. But I want you to understand, it wasn’t anything you did. I think it’s ridiculous how they responded. An overreaction, really. Some places can be rather draconian in their rules concerning wards. It doesn’t mean the rule maker is right. You understand that, don’t you? They shouldn’t have treated you that way.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Is that what set you off, then? Did they make you nervous?’

John didn’t seem to know what to say.

‘John, what I saw happen . . . Well, I would say it looked like panic attack. But it didn’t come about because of the security check. That was later, wasn’t it? I . . . need to know what happened later. What with you getting sick. So quickly and violently. That’s not . . . that’s not right. That shouldn’t happen. I just’—God, why was this so difficult?—‘John, when I stepped away, did Sebastian Wilkes . . . hurt you? Somehow?’

He was hoping for an instant denial. It didn’t come. Instead, John scraped his fingernails across the glass, slowly, and his face paled, like he might be sick again. It was as good as a confession.

‘God,’ said Sherlock. ‘He did, didn’t he? I was gone, what, three minutes? What did he do?’

‘Sir, I’m not hurt,’ said John weakly.

Sherlock frowned. John had said those very words before, after Mycroft had seized his arm and after Irene had struck his face. How bad did it have to be before John believed he had been hurt? ‘But he
did *something*. Didn’t he?’

John closed his eyes. His breathing was growing more rapid.

‘Please. Please tell me. I’ll fix this, I’ll make it right.’

What could be bad enough to send John bolting for the loo? Sherlock could think of one thing, but Wilkes? In a busy workplace with an open door? In three minutes? Not even Wilkes would try something so stupid. Surely.

‘Tell me.’

‘I don’t know if I should,’ John whispered, almost as if talking to himself.

‘You can trust me.’

John’s eyes opened slowly. ‘Mr Wilkes . . .’ John licked his lips, blinking like there was something caught under his eyelids.

‘Go on.’

Then it came: The words left his lips in a rush, like ripping off a plaster. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Mr Holmes. You deserved to know. Mr Wilkes was my last host, sir.’

A strange numbness spread quickly through Sherlock’s limbs, first elbow to fingertip, then knee to toe, until his head was buzzing with incredulity.

‘What?’ he said in barely more than a whisper.

He must have misheard. *Surely,* he had misheard. Of all possible responses—and Sherlock had been imagining some very dire ones—he had not fathomed that one.

‘I promise I’ll not speak a word against him, sir. I know he’s your friend.’

But Sherlock was seeing red. He shot to his unstable feet, thrusting an accusatory finger toward the door. ‘*That’s* the man who shot you?’

John’s shoulders jumped and he pulled his arms closer to his torso as he nodded in terror.

‘Oh my God! Wilkes?’ How was that even possible? Wilkes?! That posh, overdressed, two-hundred-quid-for-a-manicure barmpot? It didn’t add up! The man was a tosser, absolutely, but not a gun-toting maniac. A despiser of wards, sure, but the kind that would send a ward off to a family estate to be *well cared for,* even spoiled. Wilkes? Impossible! Had John got it wrong? How could he have done? Even a dunce of a ward could identify the face of a man who had hosted him for a full . . . *five years.*

John was covering his face with one hand. The other was in danger of spilling the glass altogether. Deftly, Sherlock took it away and set it on the table.

He had to dial it back.

‘Okay,’ Sherlock said, breathing loudly. ‘Okay, listen. I want you to listen, John. First.’ First? What was first? Kill Wilkes first, calm John down after? Best not. ‘First, Sebastian Wilkes is *not* my friend. Never was. I wasn’t being friendly, I was being civil. For the case. If I had known he was your’—he struggled not to spit the word—‘*host,* we never would have gone in the first place, yeah? Second, and most important, so I want you to listen to me, that man is *not* your host anymore. Okay? He has
no power over you, he can’t hurt you . . .’ He stopped, catching himself in his own lie. ‘Back at the bank. Did Wilkes put his hands on you?’

Slowly, John moved his hand from his face and curled it around the back of his neck. Very subtly, he nodded.

‘Civility be damned, he’s going to take it in the gut.’

With that, Sherlock whirled away and stormed from the room.

He was halfway down the stairs, halfway through a malformed plan of just how thoroughly he would thrash the blackguard, when John burst out of the room and at the top of the stairs cried out, ‘No, Mr Holmes, please!’

Sherlock spun back, astonished. ‘That miserable skink shot you, John! He tried to kill you! He will not know another moment’s peace, not if I can help it!’

But John was shaking his head; his eyes swam with tears. ‘Oh no, sir, please. Don’t do anything, please.’

‘Why the hell shouldn’t I!’

‘He’ll know I told!’

Sherlock blinked, baffled. ‘So?’

‘I’m not supposed to tell!’ John cried.

He took one step back up the stairs. ‘Says who?’

‘Mr Wilkes, sir!’

‘No one gets to order you around, John. No one. You do not play apple-polisher to that sanctimonious tosspot!’

But John was begging. ‘I swore, I swore! Please, sir, don’t go, or he’ll . . .’

‘He’ll what? What did Mr Wilkes say to you?’

‘He said’—John steeled himself—‘if I breathe one word about him to you, he’ll fuck me up so bad I won’t know my arse from my face, sir.’

Sherlock stared, dumbfounded. Then: ‘The son of a bitch!’

He flew down the rest of the stairs.

‘Please, Mr Holmes!’

He was already in the sitting room, heading straight for his coat, when he heard John’s rushed steps down the staircase. Then suddenly, a cry of pain, immediately followed by a terrific thud-thud-thud. Sherlock whipped back around, abandoning the coat, and hurried back to the landing where he found John crumpled at the foot of the stair.

‘John!’

John lay unmoving on his side, one arm pinned underneath him, his head against the opposing wall
and a foot still on the bottommost step. Aghast, Sherlock hovered over him, not know what to do. ‘Oh my God,’ he said breathlessly, hands roving in the air over him. ‘John? You’re okay. Come on, old boy, don’t be . . . Oh God, oh God.’

He was afraid to touch him, in case something had broken. Lightly, he placed a hand on John’s shoulder and squeezed.

From below, he heard footsteps racing up the stairs. ‘Sherlock! Sherlock!’ cried Mrs Hudson.

John moaned softly in his throat.

‘Don’t move, John, hold still.’

‘Sherlock!’ Mrs Hudson appeared out of breath at the top of the landing. ‘I heard . . . Oh John!’

‘He fell. He’s okay, he’s just a little . . .’ Sherlock trailed off as John rolled his head, and a long line of blood rolled down his cheek from broken skin above his eye.

‘What happened!’ Mrs Hudson’s voice was pitched with panic. ‘I heard angry voices, and then . . .’

Sherlock ignored her. Instead, he scanned John’s body quickly for any twisted limbs or obvious injuries. John’s eyes were squeezed shut and his legs writhed slowly.

‘You two were shouting,’ she said worriedly. Then her voice grew censorious. ‘And then . . . what happened, Sherlock?’

‘He fell, you ninny, can’t you see that?’ he snapped.

Her face hardened. ‘Were you fighting?’ she challenged him, but before he could leap to his own defence, she continued, ‘I heard you! These walls are thinner than you think! Did you—?’ She stopped herself just short of the accusation.

‘Push him? You think I pushed him?’

‘I didn’t say that!’

‘That exactly what you’re thinking.’

John lifted a hand to touch his head, wincing at the pain.

‘Don’t move, John, don’t move,’ Sherlock whispered. Then he turned a hard eye on Mrs Hudson. ‘He’s okay. I’ve got this.’

‘He needs an ambulance! A doctor!’

‘I’ve got this.’

‘Sherlock!’

Sherlock shot to standing in a blink of an eye and bellowed, ‘He’s not your problem! Remember? I will call a doctor. I will take care of him. I am handling this, so just get out!’

Her lips pinched together and her eyes welled with tears. She said not one more word, but turned on her heel, her floral skirt whirling around her knees, and disappeared back down the stairs. Pushing her to the back of his mind, he fumbled for his phone to do exactly as she said, and called a doctor.
How to Keep Your Host Happy

Seb, you cock-muncher, fuck him up twelve ways till Sunday, will you? Not if you don’t want my foot so far up your arse it knocks your teeth into that shit-soaked sponge you call a brain. Cross him again, and I’ll shoot you so full of lead you’ll disrupt the magnetic fields of submarines from where I’ve tossed your bullet-bloated corpse into the middle of goddamn ocean, you mother-fu

‘Sherlock.’

His head snapped up from the laptop screen to see Mike Stamford standing in his kitchen, medical bag at his side, sleeves rolled and still wearing nitrile gloves.

Sherlock snapped the laptop closed. ‘How is he?’ Setting it aside, he rose swiftly to his feet and crossed the room.

‘Good, good. Was a bit worked up, so I gave him something to help him sleep. He’ll be just fine.’

‘No broken bones? No concussion? No, I don’t know, bruising on his spine?’

‘No no, nothing like that.’ Mike set the medical bag on the kitchen table and peeled off the gloves. Then he and pulled back a chair, indicating they should sit. Anxious to hear what he had to say, Sherlock as good as fell into the chair, propped his forearms on the table, and angled forward like a schoolboy ready to learn. Mike continued: ‘His left side is banged up pretty good, so he’ll be black and blue and rather sore for a few days. But the ankle? It’s just a sprain. Landed on it wrong coming down the stairs. Easily done, given its malformation. A misstep. He was very insistent on that point, told it to me over and over again that’s why he fell, like I didn’t believe him. Seemed to be worried I might blame you.’ Mike quirked an eyebrow at Sherlock as though inviting him to elucidate on the matter, but when he didn’t, Mike finished, ‘Keep him off it for a few days, if you can. Standard home care: ice, painkillers, and rest. The swelling will go down, and it will sort itself out.’

‘What about his head?’ Sherlock asked next, unconvinced there was nothing more to say.

‘Oh, he’ll have quite the goose egg, but nothing worse.’

Sherlock didn’t quite trust that. ‘All that blood though.’

To his surprise, Mike chuckled. ‘Listen to you. You’re like a new mother with an infant. It wasn’t as serious as it looked. Headwounds bleed like drama queens, even the little ones, you know that. There are so many blood vessels close to the surface in the face and scalp, that’s just what they do. Besides, the bleeding had already nearly stopped by the time I got here.’

Sherlock nodded slowly, thinking of how he had crouched on that floor for twenty minutes, telling John not to move, while he pressed a wadded flannel to the wound. The whole side of John’s face was sticky with smeared blood, and Sherlock’s fingers were stained red. It sure as hell looked pretty damn serious.

‘A bit deep but not a stitch required,’ Mike continued, ‘just a little glue. Relax, Sherlock. You’re doing fine. You know this stuff. Really, there was little need to call me. I mean, I get it. I do. You were panicking. A fall like that, there could have been serious injury. But there wasn’t.’

‘And you used your bone-scan wand, you waved it over everything?’
‘Yes, I used my bone-scan wand. And I tested for internal bleeding. And I looked for signs of concussion. He’s fine!’ Mike chuckled again. ‘He’s none too happy about being in the master bedroom, though. I mean, seriously unhappy. You may have to convince him it was your idea because he thinks you’ll be upset with him for taking over your bed.’

Sherlock was shaking his head. ‘He shouldn’t be navigating those stairs, not while his ankle is healing up. We’ll swap rooms for a few days, and that’ll be that.’

Mike nodded, conceding. ‘Well then. You’ve got the situation well in hand, it seems. Guess I’ll be off.’

He stood and picked up his bag, and as he went for his coat in the sitting room, Sherlock trailed after him, rubbing the back of his neck. With a casual sort of air, he asked, ‘So, erm, given your profession, you must have some, erm, friends, colleagues, people in the’—he coughed into his fist—‘psychology field who deal with, you know . . . ward issues?’

Mike regarded him with a chary eye. ‘Issues,’ he repeated.

Sherlock had been hoping not to get into it. All he wanted was a list of referrals and some general advice to steer him in the right direction.

‘Like, you know. For dealing with traumatic events?’

Letting out a long breath, Mike draped his coat over an arm rather than put it on. ‘What kind of trauma are we talking?’

‘Near-death experience. He was shot, you know that. And most likely endured a long stretch of violence and abuse before then.’

‘Most likely? You don’t know?’

‘He won’t talk to me, Mike. He needs someone he can talk to.’

Chewing his cheek, Mike seeming to be thinking carefully about what to say next. ‘There are centres,’ he settled on. ‘Treatment centres.’

‘Treatment,’ Sherlock repeated. ‘What kind of treatment?’

‘Correctional, rehabilitation, that sort of thing. Behaviour modification.’

‘No no no,’ Sherlock argued. ‘I mean, like therapy. For traumatised wards. You know, like when soldiers come back from war and need counselling for PTSD, that sort of thing.’

‘That’s . . . not really a thing, Sherlock,’ said Mike.

‘Of course it is!’

‘Not for wards, it isn’t.’

‘Why the hell not!’

‘The costs . . .’

‘I’ll pay for it!’

‘What I mean is, no one practises ward therapy.’
‘Fuck *ward* therapy, he doesn’t need a specialist. I’ll take him to a regular therapist, then. Who cares if he’s a ward?’

‘The therapist will. It’s a liability, treating a ward. The state sees it as an unnecessary expenditure and won’t fund it. Most hosts won’t pay out of pocket. Even activists see it as unethical. They think therapists experiment with treatments that could prove damaging, or else try to brainwash or confuse wards about their role in the home. There have been abuses in the past with the defunded Know Your Place programme, so now . . . it doesn’t really happen at all. No professional will take the risk of a scandal.’

‘*Cowards.*’

‘I’m sorry—’

Sherlock threw up his hands. ‘So what do I do? You’re the one who said it would be difficult, hosting a rescue ward, so you must know what I can do.’

‘I did say that, didn’t I?’

‘Yeah, but what would you know about it.’

Sherlock turned away, rubbing a hand down his face. He felt helpless, trapped, like his hands were tied around his back. Somewhere in the city, Sebastian Wilkes was going about his day as normal, making business deals over sushi, toasting the British pound, shagging the secretary (they both used the same scented hand lotion, it was obvious they were shagging). Meanwhile, John still suffered the mental anguish and physical repercussions of nearly being murdered by the man.

‘Have you,’ Mike said, his voice suddenly pitched in a chiding tone, ‘ever asked me about my own wards? Even once?’

Sherlock turned sharply. His computer of a brain went into automatic search mode, reviewing every conversation they had ever had. Not once had the subject come up. ‘No,’ he answered guiltily. Then, ‘Wards plural?’

‘Don’t know their names? Their ages? Anything about them?’

‘No.’

‘Philippa,’ Mike said. ‘She’s thirty-one now, sweet as they come. Alice’s family had been hosting her from the time she was an infant, and when we married, Alice insisted on bringing her into our new family. Best decision we ever made, besides marrying in the first place. But it’s come with challenges. Philippa has Down syndrome, you see. She needs a lot of care. Whether she became a ward or not, she would always need that, and we are happy to give it. Our kids love her, probably more than they love us.’ He laughed softly. ‘Heidi and Joey. They’re good kids. Fourteen and twelve now, God, they grow up so fast.

‘And then we have Samuel. He’s eight. Loves football. Loves comic books. He makes up these stories about superheroes, and Joey draws them, not because Joey loves to draw, but because Samuel can’t hold a pen. He has muscular dystrophy. Diagnosed as a baby. And his biological mum, when she found out? Left him at the hospital and didn’t come back. When she walked out that door, what happened to that kid? The *moment* she made that decision, what did he become? A ward of the state, that’s what.

‘I heard about it from colleagues working at the maternity unit. Honestly, I didn’t think much of it. We get stories of abandonment all the time. But when I went home, I mentioned it to Alice, and she’s
the one who’—Mike suddenly had to stop to clear his throat—‘who said, let’s give that little boy a chance at a life. And I don’t know what came over me, really. I just said okay. Like the answer was obvious. Sometimes, you just step up. Because what would happen otherwise? The statistics aren’t good. If a child has special needs of any sort, they fall straight to the bottom of the desirables list. Who else would host him? So we paid the registration fee, and just like that, he was ours. Philippa and Samuel. I can’t imagine our lives without them.’

‘You’re a good man,’ said Sherlock. ‘I’ve always known it.’

‘That’s not the point of this story. The point is, both our wards have ongoing medical needs. They need speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, not to mention a host of physicians. That’s what they need. But they don’t get what they need. Because they’re wards.’

Sherlock frowned, and felt his face growing warm with anger.

‘Alice quit work years ago to take care of them. She was a doctor, too, so she had some medical knowledge to work from. But she wasn’t a specialist. She’s self-taught in a lot of ways, and she works miracles with those children. But it’s not enough. We do what we can, all we can. But if one of them gets very sick . . .’ Mike trailed off, and for a moment, Sherlock thought he was going to let the unfinished thought hang in the air like an evil portent, which would come to pass if it was named. But Mike was not superstitious. He was a realist. ‘If they get sick, that’ll be their end. We know they aren’t long for this world. One way or another.’

‘How can the state let that happen?’ Sherlock asked. ‘I mean, just let it happen?’

‘The NHS is going broke, Sherlock. It is broke. The news isn’t reporting it, but it’s true. They’ve been in a spot for decades, and it’s collapsing in on itself. Wards used to receive quality healthcare. Now it’s the vets or nothing at all. And it’s not just wards that are affected. We’re all feeling the pinch. There are cutbacks and redundancies happening up and down the country. Wards are just the canary in the coal mine. Soon enough, it’ll be you and me, too, who are affected.’

‘But why? Why are they going broke?’

Mike shrugged and shuffled his feet a little. ‘You’re a genius. Is it so hard to guess?’

‘Mike . . . what do you really think of the CFCA? The ward programme? Do you . . . do you think it’s right?’

There was a long pause. Then slowly, Mike set the medical bag down at his feet, and he put his arms through the sleeves of his coat. As he zipped up, he asked with a casual air, ‘Your brother. He works for the government, doesn’t he?’

‘So?’

Mike bent to retrieve his bag and smiled at Sherlock, but it did not reach his eyes. He doffed his cap and turned toward the door.

‘See you around, Sherlock.’

***

Sherlock held down the delete key. As much as he really really wanted to, he couldn’t send that email. Not those words. Though his every atom was champing at the bit to tear Sebastian limb from limb, now that he had calmed a bit, he knew that he was only inviting more trouble if he acted rashly. What he needed was more information. Data. What kind of host had Wilkes really been? What had
John endured, and why was he so afraid now? He intended to find out. Then and only then could he design a commensurate response. For now, he couldn’t leave the flat to investigate. John was still asleep, but he could wake at any time, and Sherlock meant to be home when he did. So fighting his desire to fly into action, he clenched and unclenched his hands to stop the rage-induced trembling, cracked his neck, and tried again.

*Sebastian, apologies, but something’s come up. John’s taken rather ill, and I need to see to him. Something was off at the bank. Rats in the walls, maybe. Check it out. So I’ll not be able to carry on with the investigation. You may want to start with Eddie Van Coon, and I’m sure Detective Inspector Dimmock would be happy to*

What the hell was *that*? Making soft excuses and weak insinuations? Giving tips? Being *nice*? Wilkes didn’t deserve to be handled so deferentially. For a few more minutes, he hemmed and hawed, and finally, shot off a fast email:

*Wilkes, won’t continue the case. Too boring. Not worth my time.*

*SH*

Yes. That would do. For now. He hit the *Send* button like he was squashing a spider, and though he normally didn’t mind spiders, this one was particularly revolting, and he wrinkled his nose in satisfaction as he snuffed out its life.

Drumming his fingers on the table in agitation, Sherlock chewed his tongue. It wasn’t enough. Wilkes shouldn’t simply be inconvenienced. He needed to be punished. He had shot a man in cold blood, after all. John could have died. Given the state of ward healthcare, it was a wonder he hadn’t. Someone should have paid for that. His last host had failed him spectacularly, and Sherlock didn’t want to continue that pattern. One way or the other, Wilkes did not deserve to get away with it.

He snatched up his phone and rang the police.

‘What’s the minimum penalty for justifiable homicide?’ he asked with as innocent a tone as he could muster. ‘On an unrelated note,’ he continued, ‘I need to borrow your gun.’

‘Such dramatics,’ said Lestrade.

‘Also, you’ll never find the body, so suspect me all you like, but no evidence means no trial, I’ll deny this conversation ever took place, and I’ll never see the inside of a jail cell, so do your worst, Lestrade. Do your worst.’

On the other end, Lestrade heaved a great sigh. ‘You’re not going to kill anyone. So let’s hear it. What’s got your goat this time?’

‘I know who shot John. I mean to even the score.’

‘Who shot John,’ Lestrade repeated stupidly. ‘What John?’


‘Your ward?’

‘Yes, that’s what I said.’

‘He was shot? When? Is he dead?’

Sherlock wanted to bang the mobile into the table as if it were Lestrade’s head, just to get him
thinking clearly. ‘His last host shot him, you dimwit. That’s how I came by him.’

‘You never told me that!’

Hm. Maybe he hadn’t.

‘Well, that’s what happened. Today, I learnt who did it. A five thousand pound fine, Lestrade. That’s all? That’s all? That’s the going rate to shoot your ward? Say, I fancy a bit of blood sport, and since I’m a rich ol’ bugger and fox hunting is now outlawed, say, why not hunt a bit of ward instead? Come on, chaps, round them up! Five thousand to play, and when we’re done, we can mount their heads on the wall!’

‘Sherlock—’

‘It’s madness! Bloody madness! Tell me there is something you can do to put the lunatic behind bars!’

At last, Lestrade cut across him. ‘What are you talking about? Five thousand pounds? A fine? For shooting someone? Does that sound right to you?’

‘The hell it doesn’t, that’s my problem!’

‘Who told you that?’

‘I . . .’ He didn’t want to confess it had been the warden at the pound. ‘Chap called Rudy,’ he said instead. ‘Knew something of what had happened.’

‘Well, this Rudy—Lestrade spoke the name like thought Sherlock had made it up—’must not have his facts straight. You shoot someone, anyone, ward or not, you go to prison.’

Sherlock ground his teeth. ‘Then why didn’t that happen?’

There was a long pause as Lestrade debated something with himself on the other end. ‘Want me to look into it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay,’ Lestrade said, seemingly relieved that there was something he could do to conciliate a murderous Sherlock Holmes. ‘I’ll do just that. Let me grab a pen, I need your ward’s registration number. Then give me a couple of days, and I’ll see what I can find.’

***

The violent nightmares began that very day. It had gone half five in the evening when John fell out of bed. Sherlock heard it from the sitting room. It was preceded by a shout, a scuffle, and then came the thunk. With a start, Sherlock launched to his feet and down the hallway, and, thrusting open his bedroom door, he found John in a twist of sheets on the floor, face pale and shiny, panting.

He reasoned that John had been trying to get out of bed, had aggravated the twisted ankle, shouted at the pain, and fell. Against John’s protests that he should find his own bed, Sherlock made John get back in bed while he fetched some ice and painkillers.

‘You’re not fit for the stairs,’ Sherlock told him by way of explanation as he held the bag of ice to John’s ankle, elevating it on a pillow. He took a moment to visually examine the deformation, but it was too swollen for him to make much of it. ‘We’ll swap rooms for a few nights, and that will be
that, eh? Now. Shall I get you something to do meanwhile? A book or something?"

John seemed at a loss for words, mouth hanging open but all protests run dry.

‘No? How about some crap telly, then?’

Minutes later, Sherlock had relocated the TV to the bedroom and positioned it on his newly cleared chest of drawers. He gave John the remote and disappeared for an hour, returning with a large bag of crisps, a plastic baggie of fruit gums, a large pizza, and sodas. There was ice cream in the freezer. It seemed the thing to do. In any event, it’s what his mother had done for him, whenever he was laid up in bed. ‘Just because you’re ill doesn’t mean you have to be miserable,’ she always said.

John watched him with wide eyes as he brought it all in and arranged it in the centre of the bed, then propped his own pillows on the other side and settled in. ‘Just because you’re laid up doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy ourselves,’ he said with a smile.

John pursed his lips as though to keep himself from smiling, as though uncertain whether he should.

They spent the evening watching *Crime Watch*, Sherlock solving the crimes within the first five minutes but waiting out the rest of the episode to see if he was right, and pointing out the flaws in the police’s reasoning or procedure. They didn’t talk about John’s fall, because then they’d have to talk about what led up to it, and what had happened at the bank, and Wilkes, and neither was keen. Still trying to figure out the way forward, Sherlock decided it would be best if John rested up. And anyway, he seemed content just now, eating pizza with his favourite odd-combination of toppings and listening to Sherlock narrate the failings of New Britain’s police forces.

That night, he retired to John’s room, leaving John to his. Standing in the centre of it, he revolved slowly, trying to ascertain something of the mystery that was his John. Something, however, felt off. Something about the room itself. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, not at first. It was clean, tidy, orderly. Bare. It had the unlived-in quality of a hotel room, a space that knew nightly occupants, but none that ever stayed, none that settled, building themselves into the room just as surely as the room grew around them into a home. There just weren’t enough things to clutter the surfaces or fill the drawers, beyond the essentials, the clothes Mrs Hudson had bought him, the lamps, the clock. John didn’t have enough things.

Maybe there was something out of sight? Surely something here spoke of a person, a personality, something that would be out of place in a furniture showroom designed for just any Tom, Dick, or Harry. Sherlock felt guilty snooping, but it wasn’t really snooping, just looking, and he didn’t have to go far: lifting the bed skirt, Sherlock saw, beneath John’s bed, a small mound covered by a spare blanket, and when he pulled it away, he discovered a pile of food. An orange. A bag of walnuts. A jar of peanut butter. Half a dozen granola bars. And tins. Tins of chicken, peas, beans, ham, and mushrooms.

He was still doing it. He was still stealing, hoarding, expecting the sky to fall.

‘Shit,’ Sherlock whispered and sat back on his heels. Maybe it really was a compulsion. Maybe he really did believe Sherlock might starve him. Either way, it was a problem. But one for another day.

He let the skirt fall, picked himself up, and lay on the bed to think.

Two hours later, John had another nightmare.

***

Three nights on, Sherlock sat on the edge of his bed, listening. John was back in his own bed, his
sprain still healing up but no longer debilitating, and Sherlock could tell he was eager to return to some sense of normalcy, and that meant giving his host back his bedroom. But what wasn’t normal were the night terrors. He could hear them through the ceiling: long groans as though of pain, like with a stomach ache, or fear, like dreaded anticipation. Then shouting, sometimes crying. It happened every night. It had never happened before. That is, not before Wilkes.

Sherlock slipped out of his room, toed his way to the landing, and glanced up the darkened stairs toward John’s bedroom. A second later, the door was illuminated at the edges, as John, who must have woken in a cold sweat, had turned on his light to dispel the bad dreams. But all was now quiet.

Go upstairs and check on him? Or would that be unwelcome, maybe humiliating, even infantilising? After a few minutes’ deliberation, and in the persisting quiet, he decided against it, and returned to his own bed.

But the next night he was back. And the night after. Sometimes it was just tossing and turning, sometimes moans and muffled shouts. Once, crying. Each time, Sherlock wanted to go upstairs, and each time he talked himself out of it.

You're his host. You have every right.

No, he reasoned. John is always fine come morning. He’s just working through something.

During the day, John made every effort to appear as normal. He went about his daily tasks as mindfully as before, but it was the subtle things that clued Sherlock into the fact that he was not all right. For one, John’s appetite was suffering. Sherlock watched as he forced himself to take even small bites, chew, and swallow during mealtimes, all the while looking fairly green and unhappy. When Sherlock tried to crack jokes, John’s smiles were strained and came slowly. He startled easily, like he had in the beginning, often because he was lost in a daydream, though what dark thoughts he dwelled on Sherlock had no way to suss out.

Additionally, he spent more time checking the street from the windows, but cautiously, like he was afraid of drawing too near the glass, as if it might shatter. For days, even when he was able to move around without complaint, he avoided leaving the flat on his own, and then only at Sherlock’s invitations for company. He was wan, red-eyed, and breathed shallow breaths. It was like the last two months hadn’t happened, like re-encountering Wilkes had flipped a switch and erased all the progress Sherlock and John had made since November. The shadows of his past had risen again, to torment him, and there was a clear referent: John believed he had been discovered, that a man who wanted him dead now knew where to find him, and that sooner or later, Wilkes would come after him. Sherlock didn’t know how to persuade him otherwise.

Then came the morning that John appeared in the kitchen to cook breakfast sporting a red gash on his head at the eyebrow, atop a mound of purple and blue.

‘My God!’ Sherlock exclaimed, rising swiftly from where he was seated at the table, but, having lost another night’s sleep to listening to John banging and shuffling about restlessly above him, he was exhausted, and nearly toppled into the counter. Righting himself, he came around the table, but John was backing up to the wall, embarrassed, and turned his head as though to hide the wound. ‘What happened?’

‘Nothing, sir, sorry, sir, a little mishap, sir.’

‘Let me see.’

John’s jaw clenched tightly, but he obeyed and turned his head. Then, as Sherlock lifted a hand to
turn his head just a little for better light, he winced, thinking his host was aiming to press against the contusion. Having second thoughts, Sherlock let the hand fall to his side.

‘You fall out of bed?’ he asked, already knowing it was true. ‘Hit your head on the side of the night stand?’

The colour rose in John’s cheeks, and he nodded subtly.

‘Should we talk about this? I think we should talk about this.’

John shook his head. ‘I’ll be more careful, sir,’ was all he said.

***

Sherlock was floundering. He didn’t know what to do, how to help, what to say. He had already alienated the one person who could probably help him manage it, but he was still nursing sore feelings toward Mrs Hudson and wasn’t willing to make amends. Not until she apologised for being so selfish. She had tried to pop ’round a time or two, to check on John, but their exchanges were terse and uncomfortable, and she didn’t stay for long. In and out, like a proper landlady.

Thinking John needed something distracting, something fun, Sherlock found himself in the morgue at St Bart’s and in the company of the pathologist, one Molly Hooper, who could usually be counted on to indulge his eccentric requests for body parts. Today, it was for . . .

‘One human heart,’ she said, pulling the small white tub from the fridge, ‘weighing 312 grams.’

‘Splendid,’ he said as he twisted the lid for a little peek.

‘What’s the experiment this time?’ she asked in her characteristically interested-in-his-personal-life way.

‘Not an experiment,’ he replied, eyeballing the plastic-shrouded heart on the bed of ice. ‘It’s . . . instructional.’

‘Oh?’

‘John likes anatomy.’

‘John?’ She suddenly blushed and pursed her lips. Combing her hair behind her ear, she looked away and said with a forced casual air, ‘Your boyfriend?’

Sherlock stared at her, for a moment nonplussed. ‘John is my friend.’ He didn’t know why he didn’t claim John as his ward, but just then, he wanted to assert him as something else.

‘Oh, right,’ she said.

Then, feeling a little defensive, he aggressively switched topics. ‘How are you, then, Molly? Doing well, I see. Put on four pounds since I last saw you.’

She gasped through her nose and put a hand to her stomach, which appeared slightly more padded than last he had seen her. About four pounds worth. ‘Two-and-a-half,’ she corrected, then quickly pulled her hand away. ‘Not that it’s any of your business.’

‘Sorry,’ he murmured. (But it was four pounds.)

He hung around while she put stickers on the tub and marked forms on her clipboard, and though
she had already given him the lecture a dozen times over, she reviewed the hospital policy about medical waste, giving him plastic seal-tight bags, instructions for clean-up, and a deadline for returning the heart. He made his promises, as he always did, and as he went for his coat, he thought about John and how excited he would be to have a new organ to examine. He wouldn’t express it so much in words, but his eyes would say plenty. Sherlock couldn’t wait to see it.

Almost without thinking, he turned to Molly and asked, ‘And how is your ward?’

Molly looked taken aback by the unusual pleasantry. ‘What?’

‘Your ward. You do host, don’t you?’

‘Of course, I do. I just . . . you’ve never asked about Sunny before.’

‘Sunny.’

‘Sunflower. But I call her Sunny.’

‘Right.’ Sherlock chewed his cheek, wondering why he’d begun this conversation. ‘Is Sunny . . . well?’

‘Why are you asking me about Sunny?’ Molly asked cagily.

Sherlock shrugged. ‘Is it wrong, asking after the wellbeing of your ward?’

‘No . . . Just strange.’ Molly appeared to be recovering from her surprise. ‘Fine. She’s fine, good.’ There was a long pause in which Sherlock gave her a chance to elaborate, but mostly the silence was because he had nothing else to say. ‘But . . .’

‘But?’ he repeated.

‘She’s just been . . . well, a little out of sorts lately. It’s nothing.’

‘How do you mean, out of sorts?’

Molly tucked her hair again. ‘A little gloomy, perhaps. A little . . . under the weather. But fine, really. She’s fine. I know how to cheer her. I’ll bring ice cream home after work today.’

‘Gloomy,’ he repeated. ‘You mean depressed?’

Maybe this was a good thing. Well, not good. Not good for Sunny. But maybe this was exactly whom Sherlock needed to talk to, someone going through similar challenges with an unhappy ward, someone floundering and not knowing what to do. Someone who might be sympathetic to the possibility of . . . of what, exactly? Another way?

He tested the waters.

‘Do you think,’ he said slowly, trying out the words in his head before speaking, a thing he didn’t often do, ‘they would be better off not being wards?’

To his great surprise, she instantly, fervently, began to shake her head. ‘Oh no. What do you mean, not being wards? What would they be!’

‘Us?’

‘Sherlock,’ she said, laughing a little, like his proposition was a joke. ‘It wouldn’t work.’
‘Why not?’

‘They need us. What would they do, if there was no Ward Social Care Programme? Become homeless? That’s what Americans do to their wards. What do they call them over there? Fosters, that’s right. I’ve seen it on the news. Once American fosters are eighteen, they’re out of the programme. It’s barbaric. What happens to them then? They end upon the streets. That’s what the news says. They’re all alone.’

‘Not all of them,’ Sherlock countered.

‘If even one of them ended up without a home though? Even one? It wouldn’t be worth it, would it? There’s nothing worse than homelessness. No, what we do, it may not be perfect. But it’s far more altruistic, isn’t it? Best solution in the world. Brother caring for brother, the way it should be. Of course there are challenges, but we’ve come so far with this programme. We can’t go back. No.’ She shook her head adamantly. ‘Sunny needs me. She needs me.’

And John needed Sherlock. He knew that, down to his bones. Still, Molly’s reasoning didn’t sit well with him. John needed him, and that was precisely what was wrong.

***

The heart was a good choice. John was fascinated by it. He sat at the table with his hands tightly clenched in his lap as Sherlock handled the fist-sized muscle and pointed out its features—chambers, valves, ventricles—and explained its function.

‘It starts beating in utero at 22 days from conception,’ he said, ‘and doesn’t stop until the day you die.’

‘In you . . . ?’

‘In utero. It’s Latin, meaning in the womb. In a healthy adult, the heart beats about 100,000 times a day. Stretch that across, say, eighty years, and you’ve got roughly three billion heartbeats in one man’s life, each and every one of them critical in keeping him alive. It’s basically the body’s pump: every minute, your heart pushes five litres of blood through 60,000 miles of blood vessels, carrying oxygen to your muscles, your brain. Your heart is the most important muscle in your body.’

‘Everyone’s heart does that?’

‘Everyone’s. That’s human biology. That’s your biology.’ Sherlock pursed his lips. ‘Want to hear?’

John cocked his head. ‘Hear what?’

‘Your heartbeat. I’ve got a stethoscope around here somewhere.’

He fished it out from a box on a bottom shelf in the sitting room and returned to the kitchen. He instructed John in settling the tips in his ears. He breathed on the diaphragm to warm it. ‘Just slide it between the buttons of your shirt,’ he said, ‘so this bit touches your skin. And hold it against the chest wall, just here.’ He indicated on his own chest.

John followed directions. At first, his brow was furrowed, like he believed he would have to put all his mental energy into listening for it. But then his eyebrows shot up, and his eyes found Sherlock’s. ‘I hear it!’ he declared, astonishment and delight brightening his eyes. ‘That’s . . . that’s my heart!’

They examined the heart the rest of the afternoon. He made John dissect it with a scalpel, and watch a video online of heart transplant, and repeat all his new information back to show he understood.
When the buzzer sounded with their Chinese takeaway, Sherlock went to pay, and when he returned, he found John once again with the tips of the stethoscope in his ears, listening to the sound of his own heart.

Sherlock thought to himself, that’s done it. That’s my John back the way he should be. But the spell lasted only as long as the day was light. Come nightfall, like clockwork, the bad dreams were back.

***

He heard Lestrade trudging up the stairs, and groaned. It was early, barely eight o’clock, and he hadn’t slept. He hadn’t slept because John hadn’t slept. It wasn’t a nightmare this time, though. It was pacing. For some reason, John had spent the night walking from one end of his room to the other, sometimes pausing for ten or fifteen minutes, but inevitably he would pick it up again, and pace his uneven, light on one foot, heavy on the other, pacing. Sherlock has spent the night counting every maddening step.

Before Lestrade’s face appeared at the top of the stairs, he scrubbed his own, trying to wake up. For half a second, he considered rising to greet him. He usually preferred to be standing when people came through his door. But this morning, it just wasn’t happening.

‘Well, whataya know?’ said Lestrade upon stepping into the room. ‘It lives.’

‘Go away,’ said Sherlock.

‘You’ve been awfully quiet lately. Not a single text.’

‘You said I was no longer welcome.’

Lestrade took a closer look at him. ‘You ill?’

‘No.’ Sherlock’s arms fell to the armrests. ‘Why?’

‘Because you look like shite, mate.’

Sherlock didn’t answer, just let his body slink forward and his head fall back. Lestrade chuckled a little as he crossed the room and sat himself in what Sherlock had begun to think of as John’s chair. Not that John would be needing it. He had made only one appearance so far that morning: to piss, wash, and prepare breakfast. He’d returned to his bedroom fifteen minutes ago. Still, Sherlock resented Lestrade sitting in that chair.

‘That bad, eh? Been to a doctor yet?’

‘I’m not ill, Lestrade,’ said Sherlock, bemoaning the lesser detective’s observational skills.

‘No? Then maybe you want to put on some trousers and join me in the field. Dead girl at the National Antiques Museum. One bullet, straight through the temple. She was holding a little origami flower in her hand, so that’s our first clue. Might lead somewhere.’

‘So go solve it.’

‘Seriously, Sherlock, what gives? This is right up your street!’

‘Can’t.’

‘Why not!’
‘I’m a host. I do host things now.’

‘We’re all hosts. What the hell does hosting have to do with it?’

Sherlock lifted his weary head. ‘I’m a brilliant man, Lestrade. Smarter than nearly every other host out there. Smarter than you, for sure.’

‘You want me to leave? This is a good way to get me to leave.’

‘So why is this so hard? Why am I getting it all wrong? Things were going so well, for a time, and then . . . What am I supposed to do about him?’

‘Okay . . .’ Lestrade regarded him with a suspicious eye. ‘You want to tell me what’s going on?’

‘John can’t sleep. So I can’t sleep.’

Lestrade shrugged. ‘So give him a sleeping pill.’

‘He’ll have nightmares.’

Lestrade let out a long breath, clearly not understanding.

‘I mean,’ Sherlock pressed on, ‘why couldn’t he have just been . . . normal?’

A short burst of laughter escaped Lestrade’s mouth, resulting in a sharp look from Sherlock, but Lestrade came to his own defence. ‘You’re not exactly who I’d expect to make a case for normal.’

‘I don’t mean it like that. I mean . . .’ He floundered in search of the word. ‘Unbroken. I don’t know how to fix his kind of broken.’

‘Is this about the shooting thing?’

Sherlock glared. ‘Yes, Greg. This is about the shooting thing. John was shot and left to bleed out on the floor, and for two weeks dealt with the agony of it because no one bothered to give him pain meds. What do they do with him instead? Put him in a cage, leave him to rot, as if he’d done something wrong.’ He looked sharply. ‘You said you’d look into it.’

Lestrade gave a shallow nod, appearing hesitant.

‘Well? Why wasn’t his host prosecuted?’

Lestrade shook his head, pityingly. ‘Because the host, Sebastian Wilkes—’

‘I know who the host was.’

‘—didn’t shoot him.’

Sherlock blinked incredulously. ‘Yes, he did.’

‘No, Sherlock. He didn’t. I read the official police report. Your ward . . .’ He glanced around the room as though looking for John, but even though he didn’t see him, he lowered his voice anyway. ‘. . . shot himself.’

‘What?’ Sherlock said in full voice.

‘That’s why Wilkes was fined: ward endangerment. He’d allowed his ward to get hold of a gun—he
had a permit, by the way—and cause himself harm. He should have been more vigilant, sure. But he didn’t shoot him.’

‘No. No, that can’t be right.’

Could it? Had John ever actually explained what had happened on that day, or just let Sherlock infer? He had said Wilkes was angry, but gave no details. Could it be true? Had John tried to kill himself?

‘I’m sorry. That’s got to be tough to hear,’ Lestrade said.

‘If he shot himself, that bastard drove him to it,’ said Sherlock through gritted teeth. ‘Broke him down enough to want to die. And when it didn’t work? When they find him bleeding out and close to death, what do they do with him? Get him ready for Storage, that’s what. That was the next step for him, you know, if I hadn’t found him.’ He shook his head and closed his eyes. ‘What does that do to a man’s mind? Being hated that much? And no one cared. No one. It’s enough to make anyone’s brain go . . . funny.’

‘Jesus,’ Lestrade whispered. ‘I didn’t realise . . .’

‘Realise what?’

‘That you’d got him from a pound.’

‘So what if I that’s where I got him? He didn’t deserve to be there in the first place.’

‘I’m not saying he did! It’s just . . .’

When Lestrade’s mouth closed and he looked away, Sherlock knew there was something he was thinking but second-guessing whether he should say. Sherlock had no patience for it.

‘What?’

‘Nothing, it’s nothing.’

‘What, Lestrade?’

Lestrade shrugged and turned up his hands. ‘It’s just, a rescue ward? Jesus, Sherlock, why’d you go with a rescue ward?’

‘Don’t think I can handle it?’

‘From the looks of things?’

Sherlock’s teeth clicked shut and his nostrils flared.

‘Now now, don’t take this the wrong way,’ said Lestrade, obviously going for damage control. ‘But I might have thought you’d have clearer judgement on a thing like that. Seriously. A bit in over your head, eh? I hate to say it, I do, but just look at yourself. You’re drowning. Even I can see that. You’re losing sleep, losing weight, if you’re not ill already you’re heading there fast. Please tell me you’re not . . .’

‘Not what?’

‘Using again.’
If looks could kill, Sherlock would have murdered Lestrade then and there.

‘Okay, okay.’ Lestrade raised his hands as though in surrender. ‘I had to ask. It’s good that you want to do right by Jim—’

‘John.’

‘John, sorry. And I get it, he needs help. But you have to be honest with yourself, hm? You’re not exactly equipped to give it. No one would blame you if you, you know . . .’

Sherlock leant forward in his chair, piercing Lestrade with a daring glare. ‘If I what?’

But Lestrade was not cowed. ‘If you found him a more suitable home.’

He gaped, deeply offended. ‘Don’t think of it as failing him! Think of it as doing what’s best for him. This?’ He gestured to all of Baker Street. ‘Your lifestyle? Might not be best for a broken-down ward like John.’

Sherlock pushed to his feet and faced away, only to find himself staring at the mirror. He angled toward the skull instead. ‘I can think of no better solution.’

‘That’s because you’re not thinking clearly. There are hundreds of hosts better suited to dealing with that kind of challenge. I can put you in touch with the right people.’

‘No. Those people out there, they just shuffle him along like a trading card. I won’t be one of them. I won’t.’

Lestrade tried again. ‘There are special facilities, rehab centres, care units . . .’

‘No. Miserable hovels, you’ve seen them. He’ll end up dead if he’s sent there.’

‘That can’t possibly be on you.’

Fighting against the burning behind his eyes and in his throat, Sherlock sniffed loudly and raked a clawed hand through his tangled curls. He hadn’t had a proper shower in three days. ‘He’s hurting, Lestrade. You don’t even understand how badly. I don’t understand. He’s been hurt in so many ways, I don’t even know where to start to help him. But . . .’

Lestrade stood, too, and dug his hands deep into his pockets. ‘I guess that’s why they call them incurables.’

Incurable. He knew the term well. It’s what they called the chronically criminal, excessively violent, mentally handicapped, and physically debilitated among the ward class. Like Mike’s wards. The incurables were those for whom a lifetime of special and specialised care was requisite, and no host was under any obligation, legal or ethical, to accept the duties of caring for one. But Sherlock refused to apply the label to John.

‘I think you’ve a case to be getting on with, inspector,’ he said softly.

‘Right.’ Lestrade took a few steps toward the door. ‘You give it some thought though, eh? He’s a lot to handle, and you’re only one man. I know it’s unpleasant. And I know you’ve invested a lot of time and energy into him. It’s commendable. It really is. But once he’s, you know, out of your hands, you’ll be feeling like your old self again.’ He allowed for a long pause, but when he didn’t get any response, he said, ‘Cheers, Sherlock,’ and left the room.
At the very top of the stairs, dressed for the day in a blue-and-white chequered shirt buttoned to the chin, John sat with his hands across his mouth, listening. Two men’s voices, in the sitting room, punched through the air and rose to meet him, arguing. One of them, Mr Holmes. The other, the policeman from the case with the pink lady.

‘It’s just a rescue ward. Jesus, Sherlock, why’d you go with a rescue ward?’

He shouldn’t have been eavesdropping. He knew it. It was wrong, and he would get in trouble. But he couldn’t bring himself to move from that step. He should go back into his room and close the door and wait for Mr Lestrade to leave, but it was as though he were frozen. His breath was stuck in his chest, his eyes ceased to blink, and even his heart seemed to have forgotten to beat. He wondered, if he listened to it through the stethoscope now, whether he would hear anything at all.

‘I guess that’s why they call them incurables.’

Their discussion was about him, and what to do with him, a broken and incurable ward. He had done it wrong, then. All wrong. He had been unable to act normally at the bank after the unexpected encounter with Mr Wilkes, and in the wake of that event hadn’t been able to quash the nightmares, where he found himself back there, surrounded in darkness, waiting in fear of his hosts’ return. He woke in cold sweats and sheer panic, and the shadows in his room were men coming to get him and drag him away. And Mr Holmes, who already knew too much about the sort of ward he had once been, had now seen a little more, and he didn’t like it.

‘Why couldn’t he have just been normal?’

It was happening. Again. His host was tiring of him. Was annoyed by him. A short while on, and Mr Holmes would hate him. John knew how this worked. It was never the same, of course. Sometimes it was because of a lie. Sometimes it was a fight. Sometimes it was an accident. The reasons may have been different, but one thing remained the same. Sooner or later, he messed up. Then they sent him away.

As Mr Lestrade took his leave and the door banged closed, John gasped and shot up to standing. He didn’t want to be caught eavesdropping on his host. Mr Holmes didn’t appear to be one for punishing every infraction, but every host had a tipping point. John just hadn’t discovered Mr Holmes’ button yet. He’d come close, a few times. He’d seen the fire in his host’s eyes. But as yet, he’d been spared anything more than shouting and scoffs. He didn’t want to find out if spying was the straw that broke the camel’s back. So quickly, he retreated to the bedroom and softly closed the door behind him, hoping not to attract notice.

He had known from the start it would be no different with Mr Holmes. Only, he had been hoping to last a little longer. A lot longer. Three months wasn’t very long at all. Even at his worst, he’d usually stayed on at least a year. He had promised himself, long ago, that it was foolish to hope for things, like staying, like kindliness. And mostly, it had been easy. Then why did the thought—just the thought!—of leaving Baker Street make his stomach hurt?

John began to pace. His ankle ached but held him up. He rubbed the back of his neck. He held his stomach and breathed. He clenched his fists. Then, with the heel of his hand, he whacked himself in the side of the head, three times, as hard as he could. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Why did he have to be so stupid! He knew it was too good to be true! The soft bed, the warm duvet, the pillow; his own clothes and a change of socks and shoes that fit; hot showers and hot tea and regular meals; Mrs Hudson with her cakes and pies, her cheery smile, the way she called him dear and love, like she meant it. And Mr Holmes . . .
John had been trying so hard to please him, as he tried to please any host. But with Mr Holmes, it was different. He’d never had a host quite like him, someone who would spend time with him, eat with him, play games with him, teach him new things, and just talk with him, like it was the most normal thing in the world for a host to sit and talk with his ward. And the cases! He’d even been allowed to accompany Mr Holmes in his work! But just as before, like all those times before, in the end, he had proved himself only a burden. A nuisance. A thing best used, abused, and got rid of.

He hit himself again, three times.

Why couldn’t he be the good kind of ward? He didn’t understand how they did it, the good ones. How did they manage never to mess up and stay in the same home, with the same family, all their lives? It was a mystery he had never solved.

Maybe there was still time, though. As he continued to pace and rub his neck and hit himself in the chest and against the skull, he thought, maybe he could fix this. No more mistakes. No more bothering Mr Holmes with his shortcomings. No more troubling him with the nightmares. He would just sleep less, and make up for it when Mr Holmes went out on his cases. Easy enough. He would keep a cleaner house, too, and cook nicer meals, and smile more, and be more pleasant, and be more grateful, the way a good ward ought to be. Whatever Mr Holmes asked him to do, he would do it, and do it well. He could make Mr Holmes happy with him again, if he tried hard enough. And oh, how he would try!

And then, maybe, Mr Holmes wouldn’t feel the need to send him away. Not yet.

***

After recovering himself, John went downstairs with renewed resolve. The first thing he did was smile at Mr Holmes and wish him a good morning.

‘Good morning, John,’ replied Mr Holmes tiredly, watching him with a sort of strange expression that John couldn’t decipher.

John. He did like that. Every time he heard it, he liked it, and Mr Holmes used it frequently. God, he hoped he got to keep it. It would be so nice to take just one thing with him to the next place. No! No next place. He wanted to stay on Baker Street. So come along, John, he told himself, and keep Mr Holmes happy.

‘How’d you sleep?’ asked Mr Holmes, fixing him with a steady blue eye.

He knew he shouldn’t lie. After all, he’d overheard Mr Holmes telling Mr Lestrade that neither of them had slept the night before, and he felt badly about that. Mr Holmes shouldn’t suffer a sleepless night because of him. But nor could he confess why he hadn’t slept.

‘I didn’t, sir,’ he admitted. But he forced another smile. ‘I wasn’t so tired.’ To head off any follow-up questions, John decided to divert. ‘I’ll do the washing up now, Mr Holmes, if you don’t need the kitchen. Then a quick pop around to the corner market. My ankle’s rested up, and I noticed we’re out of ginger nuts.’ He knew Mr Holmes preferred them. ‘Then tea, if you fancy it. And maybe, after, if you’re not too busy . . . a game?’

Mr Holmes stared at him, open-mouthed, and John feared he had pushed things too far or said something wrong. What had he said wrong? He would be a good and happy worker to show his utility. He would make a nice tea spread to please his host with the niceties of a British life done right, making no demands on his host’s time or energy. Was it the suggestion of a game? Maybe he should have requested a recital instead. Or maybe that was precisely the problem, and he should have
made no request at all—that was Mr Holmes’ purview, not his, to decide what to do with his time. Stupid, stupid—

‘What game?’ said Mr Holmes.

John breathed again. ‘Chess? If you’d like, sir. I’d be happy to learn.’

Slowly, Mr Holmes nodded. ‘All right. Chess it is.’

Smiling again, John bobbed his head and set about his self-assigned tasks for the day. First, the washing up from breakfast, which didn’t take long at all. But he thoroughly scrubbed, rinsed, and dried each dish and utensil before carefully setting them back in their cupboards while Mr Holmes settled himself with his laptop and yawned widely every few minutes.

Afterwards, he dressed warmly, but with greater care to wrap the scarf around his mouth and pull his hat down over his ears to obscure his face, lest he be spotted on the streets by unfriendly eyes. Mr Holmes watched him but said nothing. Then he double-checked that he had his ward permit bank card in his pocket and secured the identifying bracelets on his wrists, and headed out. He tried to appear unperturbed, but he couldn’t stop his eyes from jumping, or from glancing back over his shoulder every few paces. Just in case.

Once back in the flat, he greeted Mr Holmes again with every ounce of agreeableness he possessed, earning him another returned hello, but a hesitant one with lowered eyebrows. Right. Tea. Best get on with it. Best not annoy. He set the kettle to boil and opened the package of ginger nuts, arranging them neatly on a plate. Then he pulled a tray and began to set the heirloom teacups and saucers, the teapot and sugar bowl and milk. Maybe Mr Holmes would like some cucumber sandwiches. So as the water began to hiss, he made those, too.

But though he attempted a single-minded devotion to the task at hand, his thoughts began to do what they always did, and slide. As he pulled the knife through the cucumber, slicing thinly, he remembered the half-eaten pickles he’d once pulled from the bin on the edge of Southwark Park, part of somebody’s tossed sausage roll and chips in a foil envelope. They’d been mushy, but that didn’t matter, because he’d eaten them so fast he’d almost choked. He still got those urges, sometimes even now. On his way to or from the shops, he’d spy a bin fit to bursting and wonder whether there was anything left of a burger, or the remains of a gyro, or the crumbs at the bottom of a bag of crisps.

Mr Wilkes will be angry, he thought, if he finds out. So on Sundays, he hurried home and washed his mouth out at the sink, and scrubbed his hands, and checked himself over for grease stains or crumbs, or any evidence at all that he’d been sneaking food.

‘Everything all right, John?’ Mr Holmes called from his armchair.

Only then did John realise that he was standing at the sink, scrubbing his hands fiercely together under a running tap while the kettle burbled behind him. His heart was racing, and he’d broken out in a sudden sweat. He gasped and twisted off the tap.

‘Fine, sir,’ he said breathlessly, but he didn’t turn around. He didn’t want Mr Holmes to see his face. Be good. Be pleasant. Be normal.

When he judged it safe to move, he scooted along the counter to the kettle and continued to prepare the tea.

He walked the tea tray into the sitting room, mindful of the rug so he didn’t trip, careful to not jostle the tray or set the lid on the pot tinkling. Setting it on the table, he cast at quick glance at Mr Holmes,
He lifted the saucer with the steaming cuppa and turned to serve it to his host.

As Sherlock reached for the cup, his eyes lifted and met John’s. John saw something there, something new, something he didn’t understand and couldn’t name, and it frightened him.

That’s when it all went wrong. Beyond his control, John’s right hand on the saucer flinched violently. The cup tipped from its precipice, and Mr Holmes, in swift reaction, pulled his laptop out of its path with one hand. But neither of them could stop the scalding tea from spilling, and it spilt directly into Mr Holmes’ lap. With a yelp, he dropped the laptop to the floor and shot to his feet, but a flailing arm knocked the cup and saucer out of John’s hands entirely, and John watched in horror as they smashed against the tile lining the fireplace. The saucer split, and the teacup cracked, and John, losing his balance in the grand upset, stepped backward, his foot coming straight down on the screen of the laptop with a sickening crunch as a shock of pain zinged through his healing ankle.

‘Shit!’ Mr Holmes screamed. ‘Ow shit!’ He was pulling his soaked trousers away from his body, but steam was still rising. ‘Dammit!’

In reflex, John froze, squeezed his eyes shut, and hunched his shoulders, awaiting the blow. But a few seconds passed, and he dared to open his eyes, and found Mr Holmes’ eyes smouldering as he stared at John in dismay, chest heaving and lips contorting, but unable to speak.

‘I—’ John squeaked, not knowing whether he should grovel and beg forgiveness, or shut up and wait for Mr Holmes to wail on him. But at the same moment, Mr Holmes said gruffly, ‘I’ll go change.’

Then he pushed past John and hurriedly left the room.

In the ensuing silence, John crashed to his knees beside the laptop. Its dark screen was like shattered crystal. Just an arm’s reach away lay the broken teacup and saucer. His right hand trembled like mad, so he balled it and pressed it against his stomach. But with his left, he reached for the handle of the white teacup, and lifted it from the puddle. A long crack ran straight through one of the bluebells, lip to base.

What had he done! He’d damaged the tea set! Mr Holmes’ mother’s tea set! He’d done exactly what the other Mr Holmes had said he would, and gone and destroyed something precious to his host. And in the same moment, he’d ruined an expensive computer as well! But what was worse, he’d hurt him. He’d caused pain and injury to his host and, oh God, what had he done! Such behaviour was of the highest depravity, utterly unforgiveable!

He wanted to cry. He hadn’t even lasted the day. Now it was over. Mr Holmes would beat him, as he deserved. Maybe starve him and take away the bed and all the clothes while he went in search of another buyer. Number nineteen. He trembled from fear. Please God, let me die.

Instead, he cleaned up. Biting his tongue to stave off the tears, John took the delicate pieces of porcelain and collected them into a tea towel, which he set reverently, penitently, upon the table beside the rest of the set. Then he sopped up the cold tea from the tiles, floorboards, and rug. He would scrub it with a shampoo, too, once he’d managed the rest. He also lifted the broken laptop from the floor and placed it on the other side of the table. Then there was nothing for it. As much as he wanted to flee—to the upstairs bedroom or out onto the street—he knew it would be worse for him if Mr Holmes had to go looking. So he waited. But his hand wouldn’t stop shaking.
It felt like an eternity, but at last, Mr Holmes’ bedroom door opened, and his footsteps started down the hall. John’s mouth ran dry, and for half a second his vision darkened, and he thought he might faint from terror. But he kept his feet, and held his clenched fists at his side.

Mr Holmes appeared in fresh trousers and a dark-blue shirt, sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows. But he wasn’t carrying anything. John had expected something, like a cricket bat, or maybe his riding crop, but it looked like it would be just the fists.

Mr Holmes’ eyes grazed the table where sat his ruined possessions. ‘Sofa, I think,’ he said, gesturing, just before he himself took a seat there.

John didn’t understand. What about the sofa? Would he wallop him on the sofa? Paralysed, he didn’t move.

‘Sit down, John,’ Mr Holmes said, more directly, and nodded at the place beside him.

Obediently, John crossed to the sofa, feeling the floorboards groan ominously beneath his feet as he walked.

‘How’s the hand?’

He was gripping the one with the other now, trying to still it. Swallowing hard, willing his voice not to thicken with emotion or expose his trepidation, he said softly, ‘I’m s-sorry, sir. I try to control it. But s-sometimes . . .’ He couldn’t even finish. He couldn’t lift his head. He stared at the rug between his feet.

Then, even more curiously, Mr Holmes extended toward him an open palm. ‘May I see?’

His imagination was running wild. Would Mr Holmes strike his hand with a rod? Stab it with a pen? Break his fingers? Burn his palms? Tremulously, he delivered his own right hand into his host’s. There, it continued to quiver irrepressibly, and flinched twice, and if he could, he would have pulled back, but his body was not his own. He knew that. He had always known that.

Mr Holmes raised his other hand and rested it on top of John’s. Then he pressed, gently. He pressed until John’s hand was flattened between both of Mr Holmes’. John stiffened and stopped breathing, waiting for the sudden wrench that would twist the bones in his wrist and snap them like toothpicks.

‘I was thinking,’ said Mr Holmes, ‘in light of . . . well, in light of what just happened . . .’

It was coming, now, right now, and he couldn’t stop it, nothing he did could stop it. He bit down on his bottom lip to keep himself from crying out, and drew blood.

‘. . . that we could start some in-house exercises. Therapies, if you will, for the mind and body both. Calming techniques. Things to help you sleep, help with the tremors, that sort of thing.’

It was as if Mr Holmes had begun speaking in a different tongue altogether for all John understood him. He didn’t respond. He couldn’t. He couldn’t make sense of it.

‘This morning I started researching,’ Mr Holmes continued. ‘We may not be able to employ a professional, but there’s enough information online to cobble together a kind of therapeutic regimen to stick to, right here at home. We’ll both do it. I think it would be good to have daily practices in developing strength and dexterity, similar to what you’ve been doing for your shoulder, but applying that more broadly, which they say can help manage mental anxieties. As for the bad dreams, we may have to experiment a bit, but some websites recommend certain teas or calming music or even writing exercises and imagery rehearsals that keep the mind tranquil and help prevent nightmares.'
It’ll take some work, I imagine, but it might benefit us both to have some long-term goals, something to look forward to, so that the future isn’t so . . . scary, I guess. What do you think?’

He released John’s hand, now quite still, back to him.

The trembling seemed to have transferred itself to John’s bottom lip, and he couldn’t stop blinking. He’d not been hurt. Mr Holmes only wanted to talk to him. Talk? But John couldn’t trust what he was hearing, he just couldn’t. He had been ready for the rebuke: You’re a bad man, John. A bad ward. He had been expecting dismissal: I can’t keep you anymore. But these were words neither of reproof nor rejection, but . . . preparation. Preparation for a future, his future, right there on Baker Street.

‘John?’

‘You mean,’ he asked, hoarsely, daring to speak the words he feared he’d misunderstood, ‘I can stay?’

It was Mr Holmes’ turn to look confused. His mouth fell open, but several seconds passed before he managed to say anything at all. ‘That was never in question.’

‘But . . .’ John’s chest ached from lack of breath. ‘But I broke your mum’s teacup . . . I injured you . . .’

‘And?’ But when John, perplexed, could say nothing more, Mr Holmes, continued, ‘Neither of those things matter. You do.’ Mr Holmes sighed and shook his head, not quite exasperated, but a weary version of it. ‘Listen to me, John, and trust me when I say this: There’s nothing you can do—nothing at all—that will make me send you away. I meant what I said. This is your home. Your home. Today and tomorrow and for as long as you want it to be. So of course. Of course you can stay. This is where you belong!’

Home? The word filled his head with a strange sort of ringing and lightness. Then the reverberations spread through his skin like a blush that sank into his heart, his beating heart, beats he could hear loudly in his ears, and if he pressed his hands to his chest, he was sure he could feel that strange muscle the size of a fist as if it would tear free of his body altogether. Was he dying? John couldn’t fight it anymore. Something was welling up from deep inside of him, and at the conclusion of Mr Holmes’ words, it pushed to the surface and broke through. He dropped his face into his hands and began to cry.

‘John!’ cried Mr Holmes.

A hand fell on his back, but not a harsh hand; and a body slid closer, but not an angry body. Suddenly, Mr Holmes was holding him like he might fall over if he did not, one arm around his back and squeezing his arm, laughing, but not unkindly. ‘You didn’t think . . . ! Well, clearly you did. And all over a broken teacup! Oh, my dear man. My dear, dear man!’

Mr Holmes pulled him even closer, and the other arm came up around his head. Something strange was going on in his funny little head. While part of him wished to recoil from the touch, to name it a trick or a ruse or an omen of something bad to come, another part began to warm. He craved the feel of the gentle pressure against his skin, the soft hand stroking his head. He couldn’t stop crying, so overwhelmed, so confused, but Mr Holmes was not laughing at him. He wasn’t laughing at all anymore.

‘I suppose I should ask, though, shouldn’t I?’ Mr Holmes continued to rub his arm gently; a thumb continued to stroke his hair. ‘You do want to stay, don’t you?’
Tears were filling John’s hands where he hid his face, and his throat was too choked to speak. But he could nod, and he nodded vigorously.

‘Good, good. ’Cause I’m rather fond of you, John. You know that by now, I hope.’

It was all too unreal. He could do nothing but sit and cry. Mr Holmes could do nothing but let him, and hold him.

‘Yes, yes, you belong right here,’ Mr Holmes said, his deep voice rumbling so close John could feel it in his aching chest. ‘I want you to know that. I want you to believe it.’ His grip on John’s arm lightened, rubbed it smooth, and transferred to his back where he continued to rub wide, soothing circles. ‘Look at this place. Go on, John. Take a look where you’re sat.’

Slowly, John lowered his hands and lifted his head. Mr Holmes reached for a box on the coffee table and plucked a tissue, handing it to him to dry his face.

‘This is your flat,’ he said. ‘Go on and say it: This is my flat.’

John swallowed, but the lump in his throat didn’t go away. ‘This . . .’ He couldn’t stop shaking. But his eyes looked around at the space that not long ago had seemed so strange and frightening and now was familiar and warm. ‘This is my flat?’ he repeated.

Mr Holmes pointed. ‘That is my chair. Say it.’

He looked at the red armchair by the fire, overlaid with a grey-and-red folded blanket, which had been there from the day he had arrived, but he’d never seen anyone else sit there, not even Mrs Hudson. ‘That’s my chair.’

‘That’s my front door,’ Mr Holmes said next. ‘And I’m in charge of who walks through it.’

‘That’s my front door,’ said John, hugging himself at the elbows. The tears kept flowing, so overwhelmed was he by what was happening. He couldn’t keep up with them with a single tissue.

‘That’s my mug,’ Mr Holmes said next, ‘and I make a damn fine tea.’

‘That’s my mug,’ John said.

‘Those are my curtains. That’s my table. This is my sofa. Say it, John, all of it is yours. All of it.’

He repeated these things, and more, claiming the whole of the flat as his own, the place he belonged, and that belonged to him. Mr Holmes would let him stay, because he wanted him to. Because John wanted to. He thought he was dreaming. He feared to awake.

‘And I’m your friend,’ said Mr Holmes.

John turned his head to look at Mr Holmes, his mouth opening to repeat. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t say those words. It was too much. All he wanted to do was cry.

‘It’s okay,’ said Mr Holmes. One more time, his hand stroked the back of John’s head. He smiled sadly. ‘You don’t have to say that one. Not until you believe it.’

***

In the quiet of his room that night, John practised the words, softly, but out loud.

‘This is my home.’
It was beginning to feel real. He tried another one.

‘This is my bed.’

That first night, after the moving men had brought it up the stairs and he and Mr Holmes had fitted it with sheets and the puffy duvet, he was afraid to touch it. It had been so long since had slept in a real bed all his own that he couldn’t even remember where or when that had been. He had grown accustomed to hard floors, beds of newspaper, and cots with bars through the middle so he had to scrunch up on one end or the other with a blanket too thin and too small, even in winter.

That first night in this room, feeling like he was doing something wrong, he pulled down the covers. He sat, and the mattress dipped beneath his weight, soft but firm. At last, he lay down and drew the warm covers up around his shoulders. But he couldn’t abide it. The guilt was overpowering. That first night, he had slept on the floor, in the corner, without even a blanket or pillow, leaving the bed otherwise untouched. It was several more nights, following several more days that Mr Holmes had not got rid of him, before he worked up the courage to tempt fate and stay the night in the bed. Then he slept, deeply, in perfect comfort.

He knew it for sure now: this was his bed.

‘This is my watch,’ he tried next. He touched the Tag Heuer watch he had set on the nightstand. He walked to the wardrobe, and named each shirt and each pair of trousers and each pair of socks and each pair of shoes his own. Then he revolved and saw the painting of Dover on the wall. He stood in front of it. ‘This is my memory, and my memory is not bad. I get to keep it, here, in this room. My room.’

‘And Mr Holmes is my . . .’ He floundered. He wanted to say it, but he was afraid, and he couldn’t say why.

Because Mr Holmes had given him a home, not a residence, and he wasn’t going to take that away. He said he wasn’t. No matter John’s errors, no matter his flaws, and no matter what he had been with other hosts in other places, John was there to stay. Mr Holmes had also said, more than once, that John’s past was his own, to keep and hide away, if he chose. He would never be made to share it. And he never wanted to. It was too hideous, and before today, John believed that, should ever Mr Holmes learn of it, he would never be able to look the same way at him again. It wasn’t safe. So why, now, did he feel the need to speak it, share it? What would Mr Holmes really think?

‘I want to help you, John,’ he had said. ‘I can’t help you if I don’t understand what happened to you.’

Help? What did that mean? Help him how? One couldn’t erase what had happened, the terrible things he had done, the awful thing he had been. But, he supposed, if anyone could help him be a good ward now, it was Mr Holmes.

Closing his eyes, and with what little courage resided in his feeble heart, he tried again, whispering the dangerous words, lest some dark, haunting force overhear him and rip him away from this place as punishment. ‘Mr Holmes is my . . . friend.’
The Two-Faced Banker

Morning came quietly, as though shod with slippers. Sherlock blinked sluggishly into consciousness. Sunlight peeked through the sliver of his curtains, but he had missed the before-dawn stirrings he had grown accustomed to: the light footsteps pacing the floor above him, the white noise of the shower, the flush of the toilet. Had John already risen? Or had he, for the first time since his arrival, allowed himself to sleep into daylight?

He reached for his phone: 09.49. Sherlock rubbed his eyes to clear them, sure he’d read the numbers wrong. Before John, he’d slept late all the time. But since December, he had been awake by no later than eight o’clock. At first, it had been to get out of the flat as quickly as possible and not have to deal with . . . things. These days, there were reasons for staying in. Besides, John always had breakfast ready by a quarter past.

Clearly, they were both exhausted. Obviously, they both needed the sleep. And so, not wanting to disturb a still-slumbering John, Sherlock remained in bed and scrolled through the news on his phone, idly looking for something that might look like a case. But his eyes kept skipping the headlines about crime, landing instead on other matters of interest, which he had long been accustomed to glazing over:

*Microchipping programme set to roll out in 2033: Will identifying bracelets become a thing of the past?*

*Auto-Warding, the new trend among 18-to-23-year-olds, reaches all-time high: Why are so many young people relinquishing independent status in favour of life-time care?*

*Following New Britain’s lead, Australia becomes 13th country to launch ward pilot programme*

No, he didn’t want to read it, any of it. Not this morning. He rubbed his face and flexed his toes and pulled himself groggily out of bed. Yawning, he padded to the door, pulled on his midnight-blue dressing gown, and opened the door. There, he nearly crushed Billy the Skull underfoot.

For a stretch of uncounted seconds, he stared at the floor, perfectly bemused. Why was Billy sitting outside his door? How had he got there? John was the only other person at home, and since ol’ Billy lacked in either legs or autonomy, the only explanation was that John had moved him, which was perfectly bizarre. Why would John—?

‘I know you find it . . . difficult. You find it difficult, talking about things. Things that happened. Before.’

Sherlock slowly reached down and picked the skull up with both hands.

‘If it’s too hard to get those first words out, let Billy help.’

Oh. Oh! It was a sign, a signal, John’s own special brand of asking for something. When he moved the violin, he was asking for music. When he moved the skull . . .

So he was awake after all. He must have been up for hours already, and Sherlock, so dog-tired, had slept right through his morning ablutions. Now, with his understanding sharpened, any lingering haze of sleep vaporised in an instant. Skull in hand, Sherlock headed straight for the sitting room. This was . . . momentous. John wanted to talk. He was too shy to approach Sherlock directly, but to
set Billy right outside Sherlock’s door as a sign was a boldness he had never seen in John. Well. Besides jumping in front of an aiming pistol and threatening to take a poisonous pill to spare Sherlock from certain death. (The lab results had come back: John had been right.)

When he reached the sitting room, he found John standing in the centre of it, waiting for him. There was something curiously contradictory about his stance. He held his arms at his sides, fists squeezed tight, accompanied as ever by the slightly dipped head. Still, his feet were planted and his back was straight, which suggested something more assertive, or at least determined.

But more than his stance recommended to Sherlock his purposefulness. He was fully dressed in his nicest shirt—a black button-up, tucked neatly into belted jeans—and seemed to have taken a little extra care in his presentation, including combing his hair flat with water. It was just long enough to have a little bit of style to it, and John had parted it neatly on the side. He had been more careful with the razor, too. Owing to the castration, John didn’t have very heavy facial hair, but he did have to shave, and he habitually missed the curve just under his jaw on the left-hand side. Today, he’d shaved it smooth. He was a handsome man, Sherlock noted, and probably didn’t even know it. What did he think when he faced a mirror?

‘Morning, John.’ Sherlock lifted the skull a little. ‘I, erm, got your message.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said John. His voice, too, held a contradiction. He spoke with a manner that intended confidence, but the words came out weakly. He was scared, yet resolute.

Sherlock walked to the mantle and set the skull back in its place. ‘Something on your mind?’

John must have rehearsed it in his head, because his words came swiftly and sounded well practised.

‘If you please, Mr Holmes, you are my host, and there are things you need to know. About who I was before coming to Baker Street, and the things I have done.’

Sherlock frowned. ‘Anything you have to tell me, I will hear,’ he said. ‘But I’ll say it again: you don’t have to tell me anything. Not if you don’t want to.’ But his heart had begun to beat in earnest, for all his wanting to know.

‘Thank you, sir. But . . .’ This part was evidently not rehearsed. His head dipped a little more to the side, and he licked his lips nervously. He looked sheepishly, but maintained eye contact, something Sherlock knew was hard for him to do. ‘You said you would . . . help me?’

The words cut Sherlock to the quick. ‘Of course.’

‘To become a good ward?’

‘John, you’re too hard on yourself. You are a good ward. Man, I mean. There’s nothing you’ve ever done—’

‘Forgive me, sir. You do not know the things I have done.’

The interruption humbled him, and he closed his mouth. Whatever plagued John, he had to say it. Confession, compulsion, catharsis, whatever drove him, he had to say it. So who was Sherlock to stop him?

Sherlock gestured. ‘Shall we sit?’

John nodded anxiously and moved at once to his chair. Sherlock was a little slower. He went instead to the sofa where he picked up a small pillow with the old Union Jack design from before the Great
War.

As a young and mischievous child, Sherlock had often got in trouble. For back-talking and insulting adults, for getting into skirmishes with the other stupid children, for turning his room into a veritable disaster area. And when he did, his long-suffering mother sat him down, put a stuffed bunny in his lap, and made him tell her exactly what he had done, no lies. It was easier to talk about unpleasant things, she often said, if you had a bunny to hug.

Returning to the fireplace, he handed the pillow to John. ‘If you need to hold something,’ he said simply, and sat.

At first, John looked surprised and confused. Then, without any fuss, he nodded and held the pillow against his stomach, two hands overlaid on top of it.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Sherlock thought John was trying to rally his thoughts, but as the unbearable silence dragged on and John, blinking rapidly, made two false starts before his voice caught, Sherlock knew he would have to help things along.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘I might ask questions. Would that help?’

John nodded. But he looked terrified.

All right, then. John wanted to talk, but he didn’t know how, so he had ceded control to Sherlock. He would have to be careful, then, with what he asked.

So where to begin? From the beginning? He had so many questions, questions inside of and on top of and linking hands with questions, but otherwise he had come to this interview unprepared. Start with host number one and work all the way through to Sebastian Wilkes? Ask him about the tattoo, or the leg, or the tremor in his right hand? He decided, no. The most pressing matter at hand, what had upset John’s progress, what had landed him on Baker Street in the first place, had been his last host, so that was where he would start: from the end.

‘Your last host. Sebastian Wilkes.’

A shiver through John’s whole body, and he nodded.

‘The day you were shot . . .’ Should he ask it outright? Did Wilkes shoot you, or did you try to take your own life? In that moment, he lost courage, and asked it a different way. ‘Something bad happened that day. Do you want to tell me what?’

John’s answer came haltingly. ‘Mr Wilkes . . . was . . . angry.’

Sherlock already knew that much, and John wasn’t elaborating. For a man who was ready to talk, he really didn’t know how. This would be like pulling teeth.

‘Why was he angry?’

John’s fists were balled. As before, he was having difficulty looking at Sherlock directly. ‘He caught me doing something bad.’

‘What were you doing?’

John closed his eyes. Breathed. ‘Sneaking out of the flat, sir.’

‘Were you running?’
'No, sir.' Gravely, he shook his head, then opened his eyes to stare at his hands, folded over the pillow. ‘Not running.’

Perhaps it had been past curfew, then. He asked, ‘What time of day?’

‘Around two o’clock. On a Sunday.’

‘Were you—?’

‘I wasn’t to leave the flat on Sundays.’

Sherlock cocked his head, enquiring. ‘Why not?’

‘It wasn’t a Monday.’

Eyes narrowing with displeasure, Sherlock scoffed. ‘Are you saying you were given permission to leave the flat only once a week? On a Monday?’

‘Yes, sir, from ten to two, to do the week’s shopping.’

Sherlock controlled his reaction, but inside he was screaming: Four hours a week! He had been a veritable prisoner in his own home! ‘You mean he kept you locked up? Why would he do that to you?’

For the first time, John squeezed the pillow into his stomach. ‘As you learnt yourself, Mr Holmes. I’m a thief.’

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The WSC officers dragged him into the building by the scruff his shirt, gripped his arms between them on the lift ride up to the fifteenth floor, and frog-marched him to the door reading 1405, where they pounded three times. Mr Wilkes answered, looking cross.

‘Ward registration number JW6462-11, time served, seven days. Please sign here.’

Mr Wilkes pressed his thumb to the reader on the tablet, but he was glaring hard at his ward, who dropped his eyes in shame.

‘Give him here,’ Mr Wilkes said, yanking him across the threshold by the front of his jacket.

‘That’s three infractions now,’ said one of them. ‘Be advised: He is restricted to a half-mile radius for the next twenty-one days. And Mr Wilkes, you’ll remember: the fines only get steeper from here.’

‘That’s what you said after the first one,’ Mr Wilkes snipped. Then he slammed the door. He made an about face, grabbed his ward’s arm, and pushed him down the hall. ‘Kitchen. Now.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Wilkes!’

‘Shut up.’ When they reached the kitchen, Mr Wilkes stopped him and pushed him into the wall, his six feet towering over him, and he tried to make himself appear even smaller, like if he shrank any more he might just disappear.

Mr Wilkes slapped his face.

‘Why’d you do it, eh?’ Slapped him again. ‘Thief. Why’d you do it?’
His fingers pressed flat against the wall behind him, a reminder not to lift his hands. ‘Forgive me. I was h-hungry.’

Mr Wilkes balked. ‘Hungry?’ Slap. ‘Do I not feed you?’ Slap. ‘Do I not take care of you?’ Slap. ‘Ungrateful, that’s what you are.’

His face stung, but he knew better than to touch it or protect it. ‘I am grateful, sir. Very grateful. It’s just . . .’

‘What? Come on, Tiny, tell me. You say you were hungry, so that must be my fault. Is that what you’re saying? That your stealing is my fault?’

Tiny saw Mr Wilkes’ hand begin to rise again in his periphery, and he hastened to placate his host. ‘No, sir, no. You take very, very good care of me. You’re a good host, the very best.’

Mr Wilkes’ open hand turned into a pointing finger. ‘I catch you lying to me, or stealing from me, or from anyone, just one more time, I will make you regret it for a year. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes sir, yes.’

‘One more biscuit under your pillow, a bag of crisps from an outdoor stand, anything at all.’

Tiny nodded compulsively.

‘Because that ham sandwich you stole? Three pounds fifty, is that what it cost? No. It cost me hundreds in fines and hundreds more to have them lock you up and teach you a lesson, not to mention thousands in lost wages. You get me?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘You better. Now go. Clean up. Then keep to the ward room. I don’t want to see your face again the rest of the night.’

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Sherlock stared, aghast. ‘You stole a ham sandwich?’ Sherlock said. ‘That’s all?’

Looking bashful, John shook his head. ‘I stole a lot of things, Mr Holmes. I only got caught for the ham sandwich. Another time, an orange.’

‘Always food?’

‘Yes sir, mostly. And . . . pages from magazines, sometimes.’

‘Dover.’

He nodded sadly. ‘Yes sir. But it was mostly . . . just the food.’

Something twisted in Sherlock’s gut, a sympathetic pain, as if he himself hadn’t eaten in days. ‘Why?’ he prompted. ‘Did Wilkes not feed you?’

‘Yes sir, he did. Only.’ John licked his lips, slowly, guiltily. He couldn’t make eye contact at all anymore, but he did squeeze the pillow more tightly. ‘I don’t know. I was still always hungry.’

‘Tell me.’
He picked at a loose thread sticking out of the pillow. ‘I did the shopping for the week on a Monday. At a nearby Happy Mart. Mr Wilkes had a list of what I could buy, every week the same. A loaf of bread, a half dozen eggs, five hundred grammes of cheese, six apples, and six tins of whatever I chose. Maybe tuna, or pears, or beans. Whatever I chose.’

Sherlock waited for the list to continue. When it didn’t, he said in a choked voice, ‘Is that all?’

‘Yes sir, that’s what Mr Wilkes allowed me. Nothing more, not even tea or a stick of gum.’

‘You said for the week.’

‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock’s heart was pounding in his ears. That wasn’t enough. That wasn’t nearly enough for a grown man, for a full week. Hell, it wasn’t enough for a child! Six apples, six eggs, six tins. Bread and cheese. And seven days. Oh my God, he thought. He knew John had been underweight and malnourished when he got him, but the reality of his diet sharpened the horror of his state of body.

‘How long?’ he asked. ‘How long did you live like that?’

‘A long time, sir.’

‘Five years?’

‘Nearly, sir.’

‘How could you possibly endure it?’

John shrugged, his face colouring like he was ashamed. ‘I’m sorry to say, I didn’t endure it very well at all.’

***

He didn’t eat Monday morning; there wasn’t a morsel left in the flat. Instead, he filled his belly with water from the tap and waited for the hour to turn ten o’clock, when the automatic security system on timer unlocked the door. Then he put on his second-hand trainers (split along the arch of the soles) and threadbare jacket with the broken zipper, checked his pocket for the transaction card, affixed the bracelets, and left the flat.

The Happy Mart nearest was too dangerous to return to: the manager was suspicious of him, and with good reason. In months past, he had popped grapes in his mouth while shopping and sneaked out of the store with peanut bars in his pockets. Though never caught, he felt the eyes on him. So these days, he walked half a mile further to a different Happy Mart, and bought his weekly rations there.

Back in the flat, with his stomach rumbling in pain, he tore into the bread first, an uncut, day-old French bread that would start to mould by day four, if he wasn’t careful to toast it all first. But he did allow himself two swallows, to ease the ache just enough for him to plan out his week. That afternoon, he ate the first egg, the first apple, and green beans, cold and straight from the tin. He saved the cheese for later, storing it in an empty fridge.

On Tuesday, for breakfast, he ate a fried egg on toast. For lunch, an apple and some cubed cheese. For dinner, tuna from the tin.

On Wednesday, for breakfast, he ate an apple, slicing each wedge very thin to make it appear as if
there were more than there were. For lunch, tinned tomatoes on toast. For dinner, a scrambled egg with cheese.

On Thursday, for breakfast, he ate a hard-boiled egg. For lunch, a cheese sandwich. For dinner, a tin of corn. And, as a special treat, a baked apple for dessert.

On Friday, he began to repeat his menu.

On Saturday, he ate the last egg, the last tin of beans, and the rest of the bread and cheese. He had only one apple left, and stored it away in the fridge—out of sight, out of mind. Only, it didn’t work. By nine o’clock that night, he was so desperately hungry, he ate the whole apple, core and all, and drank water until he felt sick.

On Sunday, when he awoke and stood up from the cot in the ward room, he fainted. He woke again on his back, aching from the collapse, then crawled to the bathroom and drank water from the sink. An hour later, he left the flat, even though he knew he wasn’t supposed to. He had cracked the security code weeks ago, after months and months of trying, in secret, various five-digit combinations on the number pad. The guilt was nearly overwhelming, but the hunger drove him to leave the flat and pray that Mr Wilkes didn’t show up unexpectedly.

He went to the park, watched, and waited for someone to throw away the remains of a snack. Today, it was a half-eaten hot dog. The well-fed young man tossed it in a bin and walked away without a second thought, and he made his move. Double checking his left side and his right and determining it was safe, he made a bee-line for the bin, dug his hand down into the rubbish, and came up with the last of the hot dog. If someone spotted him, Ward Patrol, or even a disapproving free citizen, he would get in trouble. At every moment, he expected his bracelets to flash orange and announce his violation. So, hot dog in hand, he spun on his heel and walked away from the bin as quickly as his dodgy leg would allow, shoving the food in his face so fast he didn’t even taste it, which was just as well. Bite, chew, swallow. Bite, chew, swallow. Then it was gone. He went in search of another bin.

Once he found a sleeve of saltine crackers and hid them strategically around the flat. Another time it was half a bag of popcorn. Another time still, it was a fistful of walnuts. It humiliated him, eating food that had been discarded among the rubbish. No one did that anymore. But hunger drove him on.

He nicked small items—chocolate bars, fruit pouches, marmite jars—from corner shops and ate them in dark corners of putrid alleyways. When he got bolder, and more desperate, he took to walking down streets lined with restaurants, pubs, and cafes, and stole food from the tables. He discovered that there was a small window of opportunity—between when a party left the table and the busboy came to clear it—that he could slip in, snatch uneaten chips or leftover bread, and be out again before anyone made a fuss. It took only seconds. And, he learnt, if he moved quickly enough and made no eye contact and pretended that he belonged (and hid the bracelets under his sleeves), even those who saw him wouldn’t think twice about what he was doing there.

Then Monday rolled around, and the great game of eating began again.

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‘One week,’ said John, ‘I thought I’d try something new. On a Monday, I ate double portions of everything. And I thought, maybe if I’m full today, I won’t need to eat tomorrow. So that’s what I did. It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t so bad because I still had water. Then I thought, that’s it, I’ll eat every other day. But it was a bad idea. I couldn’t take it, and on a Friday I went a bit mad and ate everything up in the flat, absolutely everything. Come Saturday and Sunday, I had nothing at all.’
Sherlock wished he had known all of this in the beginning. With mounting guilt, he reviewed how John had come to him. He’d not been eating at the pound—pain and depression, presumably. Once at Baker Street, the first thing Sherlock should have done—the very first thing—was get some food in him. Instead, he’d been distracted by a case, and so John hadn’t eaten that day either. Then with the mouth, it was porridge and yoghurts for days. And weeks on, it was food from the Happy Mart. Under his own roof, John hadn’t been eating much better than he had under Wilkes’. And Sherlock had taken too long to notice.

‘Where was Wilkes in all of this?’ asked Sherlock, doing a fair job—he reckoned—of managing his distress at the sorry tale. ‘Was he not witness to this slow starvation, or your sneaking away on a Sunday afternoon? What about his cupboards? When did he take his meals?’

‘The cupboards were bare,’ said John. ‘I had a fork, a spoon, a knife, a bowl, a plate, a pan, and a pot. I could purchase Fairy liquid once a month, for cleaning up after myself. But I saw very little of Mr Wilkes. He did not live in the flat.’

It seemed John could say nothing that didn’t surprise him. ‘He didn’t?’

‘No sir. I don’t know where his own flat was. I never saw it.’

That, perhaps, made sense. A rich, affluent man like Sebastian Wilkes was not likely to play host to a ward in any direct sense. Like him, he had an estate, and if pressed to assume, Sherlock would have supposed that he kept a ward there. But the way John was talking, he’d been kept in a flat in the city, not at a countryside manor.

‘Were there others? Living with you, I mean. Other wards, maybe?’

‘Just me.’

‘Were you lonely?’ Not long ago, Sherlock had lived alone, and liked it just fine. But something about John’s existence in that flat seemed far from one of peace in solitude.

John seemed troubled by the question, uncertain how to answer. At last, he nodded, slowly.

‘Did Wilkes not realise how little you had to eat? What if you had phoned him and said you were out of food?’

‘I had no means of doing so, sir. There was no phone in the flat.’

‘But had there been an emergency . . .’

‘I managed all right,’ John said in a small voice, because it was obvious he had not.

‘Was there no one at all to help you?’ For all the genius that he was, he was having difficulty imagining such an isolated life. That was a different kind of hunger. ‘A housekeeper, or a landlord who popped round?’ He thought of a Mrs Hudson.

‘Just me.’ It seemed an innocuous sort of statement, but upon speaking it, John’s hand came up to cover his eyes, just for a few breaths, like he was struggling to maintain his composure. ‘It was all right, at first. I thought it would be . . . good. Better. But I should have known, when he first brought me there. But I’ve never been a smart man.’

***

He followed Mr Wilkes into the flat while he was still wearing the grey jumpsuit and identifying
collar from the Sale. It was a modest flat on an affluent street in South London, and by far the nicest
he had ever stepped into. Coming through the door, he was instantly struck by how clean it was, that
is, the scent of a recent paint job and the disinfectants from a thorough scrubbing washed over him.
From the front door was a long hall leading to a sitting room with large windows overlooking the
city and in view of the Thames, and built-in but bare white shelves. Two wooden chairs and a metal
folding table stood in the centre of the room, but otherwise it was empty space. On the other side
was a door leading to the kitchen, where Mr Wilkes gave a quick tour of a nearly empty fridge,
perfectly empty cupboards and drawers, and a washing machine. It seemed Mr Wilkes had just
moved house; the place didn’t appear to be lived in at all.

‘We’ll outfit the place soon enough,’ he said, ‘with dishes and towels, that sort of thing. You think it
will suit you?’

He nodded.

‘Oh right, you can’t talk with this damn thing on, can you?’ Mr Wilkes reached around his neck to
release the catch and remove the collar. ‘There you go. Better?’

He swallowed and tested his voice with a little hum first. ‘Yes sir, it’s very nice, sir,’ he answered
meekly. His answer seemed to please his new host, who smiled at him with a neat row of very white
teeth.

They continued down the hall. ‘This is the master bedroom,’ said Mr Wilkes, laying a hand on a
closed door. ‘You’re not to go in there, not unless I say you can. There’s an en suite, but you’re not
to use it, ever. It’s the host toilet, understand? Not yours.’

‘I understand.’

‘Good. Your job is just to keep it clean. Now, there’—he pointed further down the hall to a door that
stood ajar—‘is the ward bath, which you will also keep clean. And in here is the ward room.’

Mr Wilkes opened the door to a small, square, windowless room. Pushed against one wall was a
military-style fold-away cot, sans pillow or blanket. That was all.

‘Like I said, not properly outfitted yet. I only recently acquired the flat. Give me a few days, and I’ll
get you a bed and wardrobe and so forth. Oh, and lamps. There’s no overhead light in here, so it
has to be lamps. But this will be okay for a couple of days, eh?’

‘Of course, sir, I don’t mind.’ He’d slept on worse.

‘Good. Well then. Make yourself at home, Tiny.’

It was the name Mr Wilkes had chosen for him at the Sale. He passed no judgement on that either.
He’d known worse there, too.

A couple of days passed, and Mr Wilkes did not return. But he had left his new ward with
instructions. First, he was free to come and go as he pleased (he taught him the key code for
entering and exiting the flat securely), just as long as he was back before dark and never neglected
the bracelets. As Tiny had already learnt his lessons with respect to Ward Patrol, he was not
tempted. Second, he was given a transaction card and told to outfit himself from the Second-Hand
Ward Emporium up to 100 pounds. It had been a very long while since he had bought his own
clothes, and he was nervous. But a kind shop girl took pity on him, and he made out with jeans and
t-shirts and a jacket, half a dozen socks and a pair of trainers. Though kind of worn and a little
smelly—nothing a good wash wouldn’t take care of—the clothes were good and made him feel a
little more normal, which was something he’d not felt in a long while.

Given permission to roam, that was precisely what he did. The flat, empty as it was, offered nothing for him to do. So he passed the daylight hours quite contentedly on the streets, walking. If he walked very far, the ankle ached and he rested, but he walked on, exploring the streets around his building, then branching out further, enjoying the feel of the sun on his face and the wind in his hair. He didn’t much fancy noise or crowds, and he actively avoided groups of children or gatherings of men, as well as officers of every sort. But he was doing nothing wrong, walking in daylight. When his bracelets lit up, he stopped, and he didn’t fuss when inspected. He never made eye contact with other wards, and if ever one tried to talk to him, he mumbled his apologies and continued on. He’d never got on with other wards.

Slowly, daringly, he began to imagine a different sort of life. Maybe this was it, at last. A good host, a forever home. No more Ward Sport, no more drug dens, no more hard labour at the plant. This was his fresh start. Maybe he could learn things. Nothing special or intensive, like proper schooling, but things other people knew that he did not. Though he wasn’t allowed in even the public museums without a host, he enjoyed the street performers—the guitarists and painters and magicians. He liked magic tricks. Maybe one of them would let him be an assistant. Not for money. Wards weren’t allowed real money. And he would never ask, never put himself forward. But he enjoyed fantasising that one of them would spot him in a crowd and invite him forward and ask him to be the one to hold the hat while the magician pulled a ferret out of it. The crowd would applaud, and part of that applause would be for him. But that never happened. Strolling through a park, he fantasised that some of the footballers in the park would find themselves a man short and beg him to join, and even though he had a gimp leg and had never played before, he’d be good, and they’d be impressed, and they’d ask him back for the next day, and they wouldn’t care that he wore bracelets because he could still score a lot of points. But no one ever called to him. And he fantasised that an old man sitting alone at a chess table would see him walking by and call him over and ask if he knew the game, and when he said no, the old man would teach him, and they’d play and talk, and it would be the thing that he did every day at noon, reliable as clockwork. But that never happened either.

After a week had gone by, Tiny returned to the flat one day to find Mr Wilkes waiting for him. Something was different. The sitting room had been furnished with a sofa and chairs, a flat-screen television, a row of books on the shelves, standing lamps, vases, and figurines. It was looking like a real home. Was this really his new life? It seemed too wonderful.

‘I see you’re settling in,’ said Mr Wilkes. He held up his phone and gave it a little shake. ‘I’ve been monitoring your expenditures.’

‘Ex... spend-sures?’

‘What you’ve been spending my money on. Sit.’

Tiny sat on the sofa. The cushions were deceptively harder than they looked.

‘The clothes and things from the Emporium are fine. I told you to get them. And the food is not unreasonable. That is, you need to eat. Though we’ll need to talk about how to budget more carefully, eh?’

Tiny felt the familiar trackings of shame beginning to rally in his stomach and spread to his fingertips. He didn’t know what he had done wrong yet, but there was no mistaking the tone in Mr Wilkes’ voice: he’d done wrong.

‘I mean, seven bananas?’ said Wilkes. ‘You know how quickly those turn? You’ll be tossing half of them before the week is out.’
Tiny said nothing. He liked bananas. He bought them green and ate one a day, and none of them spoilt. But he nodded. He could do with one every other day.

‘I don’t like waste,’ continued his host. ‘I didn’t get to be the man I am today by abiding waste. So we’ll figure out a better shopping plan, won’t we?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘The thing is, Tiny, your past hosts may not have told you, but it is expensive, keeping a ward. Very expensive. Yes, we all have to do it, but we all have different circumstances, don’t we? And the money they give us for your support? Let’s just say it: it doesn’t go very far.’

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Sherlock shot up from the chair, startling John, but he had a point to prove. ‘Bullshit, bullshit,’ he mumbled as he rifled through the papers on the desk, throwing the irrelevant pages aside, over his shoulder, to the floor, until he found the proper envelope. ‘There!’ he declared as he tore the contents out of the envelope and thrust the pay stub at John. ‘The CFCA monthly stipend granted to every household in Britain for assisting in the care of a single ward. £65 a week for an adult male, which is £260 for the month and £3,640 for the year. I think he could have afforded you bananas.’

John swallowed. ‘Perhaps, but—’

‘And waste? He’s never had to scrimp and save a day in his life. His family is rich! He has an estate! That cock and bull story he fed you is exactly that, cock and bull, the greedy little miser.’

‘But sir—’

‘If he was feeling so strapped, maybe he should have sold the flat he’d furnished for you and move you in with him. And care for you properly. Like a decent human being!’

John’s mouth closed, his lips pinched. He looked away, brow furrowed in distress.

‘What?’ Sherlock asked, with an attempt to lower his volume. ‘What did I say?’

‘He wasn’t a . . . decent human being.’ Then he clamped his hand over his mouth, as if shocked by the words that had just come out of it.

Sherlock rushed to reassure him. ‘It’s fine, John. You can say it. Because you’re right. You’re absolutely right. He’s a lousy human being.’

John’s eyes squeezed shut. He breathed deeply behind his hand, self-calming.

‘You all right? Do you want to take a break?’ Perhaps he could use one, too. To go punch a wall.

John shook his head. Removed his hand. His look transformed into steely resolve. ‘Please. Can we just . . .’

‘Continue?’

‘Yes sir. Please.’

‘Of course.’ Sherlock took a deep breath himself. He rather wished he, too, had something to squeeze. ‘Let’s go back to where we started, I think. We never did tackle that first question. Though I think I maybe understand a little better. The day you were caught sneaking out of the flat, you were driven out by hunger. You were escaping to get more food. Is that right?’
John winced. His expression had never looked more abashed. ‘Not that time.’

Delicately, Sherlock pursued: ‘But neither were you running?’

‘No sir.’

‘Then what?’

‘It is very bad, sir.’

‘You can tell me, John.’

‘I was . . . I was . . .’ His breath stuttered like a faltering engine. ‘. . . going to phone the police.’

Sombre, and with all delicacy of feeling, Sherlock asked, ‘And what were you going to tell them? That he was starving you?’

‘Please, Mr Holmes, I hope you understand. I keep my hosts’ secrets. I’ve kept all of them, even after I’ve been got rid of. But I didn’t know what else to do.’

‘You can tell me. You won’t get into trouble, I promise.’

‘And you won’t tell Mr Wilkes I told?’

He wanted to sneer. How a man such as Wilkes could inspire such fear, even from afar? The psychological hold he still had on John was incredible. ‘I’ll keep your secrets, too.’

It was a long moment before John spoke again. It appeared he was preparing himself. His head tipped backward a bit and his eyes raised to the ceiling, like he was thinking of what to say, and how to say it. Meanwhile, he worked to control his inhalations, and his balled fists hugged the pillow even tighter to his stomach.

‘I had a card,’ he began, ‘with a phone number on. An officer gave it to me. From Ward Patrol. To call if I ever needed help. I hid it in my shoe, beneath the padding. I knew I should throw it away, it would only get me into trouble. But I didn’t. But I didn’t do anything with it, either. Not until . . . that day.’

He stopped talking, beginning to lose courage.

‘Why? What happened that day?’

‘It just . . .’ He shrugged helplessly. ‘. . . got to be too much.’

‘What were you going to tell the police, John?’ Sherlock asked patiently.

‘I was going to . . . show them something.’

‘Show them what?’

He licked his lips. ‘Photographs.’

‘Photographs of what?’

John seemed unable to answer. His mouth opened a couple of times, but silence followed. In the end, he pointed at himself.
Treading even more carefully now, dread blossoming in the pit of his stomach, Sherlock asked, ‘Where did they come from?”

‘I took them. Lots of them. Over time. And hid them. They were Polaroids.’

‘Why did you take pictures of yourself?’

‘I thought I would need proof.’

‘What of?’

‘The kinds of things they were doing to me.’

Sherlock’s blood ran cold. ‘They?’

John’s hand began to quiver. ‘Mr Wilkes’ guests.’

‘Guests.’ Sherlock’s mouth had run dry. ‘Are you saying . . . ?’

‘I wasn’t Mr Wilkes’ only ward, sir. I learnt as much, early on. He had another, at his estate, just as you say. One people knew of. But I . . . I was a secret.’

At that, Sherlock clenched his fist so hard his knuckles cracked. ‘What kind of secret?’ he asked, dangerously.

‘Mr Wilkes, he wasn’t as rich as you say. He made mistakes. He had’—John’s breathing was getting shallow; he paused to take a large breath—‘debts. That’s why he needed me.’

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‘These last few years, I’ve fallen on hard financial times,’ continued Mr Wilkes. ‘I won’t bore you with the details. It was hardly my fault. But sometimes Lady Luck turns her back on you and, well, rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, wouldn’t you agree?’

With a measure of doubt, Tiny nodded. He looked around the new room with its lavish furnishings, trying to decipher what felt so wrong.

‘I’m working hard, Tiny, very hard to get back on top. But I need your help. You can help me do that.’ Mr Wilkes sat forward earnestly in the chair and smiled at him. ‘You’d do that for me, wouldn’t you? Help out your host?’

‘Of course, Mr Wilkes.’ What was it? Did the furniture not fit right? Were the books on the shelf the wrong colour? He couldn’t put his finger on it.

‘That’s what I like to hear!’ He slapped Tiny’s knee, and with a short laugh, Mr Wilkes sat back and sighed. ‘Good lad.’

‘What can I do, sir?’

Mr Wilkes cricked his neck to the side, smiling through his very white teeth. He dug under his thumbnail, and his left leg began to bounce. ‘Nothing taxing. Nothing like long division or digging ditches!’

He laughed again, a short, barking laugh, but even Tiny could see the joviality was false. Tiny didn’t laugh. He didn’t know how to do long division, but he knew about digging. The nervousness was contagious.
'Easiest thing in the world.' Mr Wilkes sniffed and rubbed a hand beneath his nose. ‘You see, Tiny, there are certain . . . services . . . in this world one can purchase. Like, oh, shall we say, housecleaning, or dog walking. Or caretaking, yeah? For instance, a family might hire someone on to sit and talk with their elderly mother for a few hours during the day. Company, you know. One sometimes pays for company.’

Yes, Tiny did know. He’d done that, too.

‘Company can be a valuable commodity, see. Well, there are some people who like a very particular kind of company. That is, a very particularly kind of companion. And in both temperament and, erm, physique, you, Tiny . . .’ Mr Wilkes pursed his lips, hesitating, maybe trying to figure out exactly how to say what came next. ‘You are a very rare and very prized sort of companion.’

It was then he noticed what was so wrong in the room. The light. There was no more natural light. The large, expansive windows looking out over the street were now covered by curtains that hung all the way to the floor, but behind them, the windows were boarded black. He knew it, then, as surely as he knew anything: another trick, another ruse, a false hope that proved him in the end to be a fool. All at once, his hopes for a new kind of existence turned to smoke, untouchable and vanishing, no more substantive than memory. It had happened again; he was back; he had never left. He was in a Downside.
Caution: This chapter contains disturbing content of a sexual and violent nature. I have made every effort to treat the subject with respect and honesty. While there are no graphic depictions of sexual assault, there is no attempt to sugar-coat the abuses or leave ambiguous what the character suffers. Please proceed with caution.

‘Stop.’

The wind seemed to have been sucked from the room and, for a moment, Sherlock couldn’t breathe. It was as though he had been stumbling through the desert blindfolded, and someone had just stripped him of the blinder, exposing him to a bright yellow sun, and it burned. But in reality, the ugly truth of it had been before Sherlock’s eyes all along. He had seen and not observed, and in fact, refused to. But it was obvious: a skittish new ward who shirked from touch yet stood unflinchingly naked to be examined, who never complained when hurt, who feared his host’s bed but made no attempt to refuse him when he believed himself at Sherlock’s mercy. He knew what it meant, exactly what. The option to ignore or deny was now stripped from him. Suddenly, he didn’t think he could handle it.

But across from him, it was John who sat ashamed. ‘I’m so sorry, Mr Holmes,’ he whispered.

‘God no, John, no, I just. . .’

He just what? Needed a moment? He needed a moment? There John was, three feet away, sharing some of what must have been the most distressing memories of his life, and Sherlock needed a time out? It was so unfair as to be downright cruel. John didn’t get to back away from this, and Sherlock didn’t deserve to either. Rally, Holmes, don’t be a numbskull, he instructed himself. So he shoved his revulsion down hard and pushed forward like a disinterested interviewer, though struggling to control the waver in his voice.

‘What you’re telling me is, Sebastian Wilkes ran a Topside-Downside,’ Sherlock said. John nodded slowly, painfully, like his confession was the worst sort of betrayal against his former host conceivable. He couldn’t even speak. ‘That’s what you’re telling me. His career in the financial sector, that’s his Topside. And his Downside was. . .’

‘Me!’ John gasped. Then he covered his face again, the shame so deep he was compelled to hide himself from view.

Sherlock was numbing with horror. Over the span of his career, Sherlock had had many dealings with Topside-Downsides, wherein seemingly upright citizens with decent jobs and positive public images engaged their wards in unlawful activities. The most common—and arguably most benign, especially among the middle and lower classes—were hiring their wards out as illegal labourers. To increase the income of the household, a man who already worked one job got hired on at another, but sent his ward in his stead, to construction sites and factories and plants, unskilled labour, grunt work, the kind no self-respecting citizen would claim. Ward hires, they were called, and because ward labour laws prohibited them, the earned wages went directly to the host.
Other Downsides included soliciting wards to hock wares on the Underground or in parks or under bridges; to run schemes on the black market; or deal in narcotics and other illegal substances. Just last year, Sherlock had been involved in uncovering a medical lab testing new anxiety medications on wards, paying their families upwards of three thousand pounds for volunteering the wards in their care. Scientists and hosts had, on that occasion, all been indicted in contravening the laws against Downsides, and the wards had been removed from their care. Sherlock hadn’t paid any attention to what happened to them after that.

But there were also those involved in more nefarious practices. Sherlock knew about them. With Lestrade, he’d been involved in busting up not a few bordellos disguised as massage parlours, tanning salons, and pub fronts where murders had taken place. The classier variety came in the form of high-end tailor shops, jewellery stores, and art galleries. Sherlock didn’t concern himself with that sort, not unless a case took him there, and seldom ever did. The wards in a bordello Downside were primarily female, selected to appeal to a range of interests and fetishes. But, he supposed, tastes did tend to vary.

And now, sitting right before him, was John, a victim of that squalid, black-hearted world. Of course, there was a market for male wards, too.

John was bent over his knees, his face buried in both hands. How much was this confession hurting him? Sherlock wanted to reach out and gather him into his arms. He didn’t. He couldn’t. Not knowing, now, what he knew. The man was averse to touch, and now Sherlock understood why.

‘John,’ he said softly, and John’s fingers went from straight to clawed and wrapped around the back of his head as he rocked subtly back and forth. ‘It’s okay. It’s okay now. You’re safe here, and he can’t hurt you anymore.’ He scooted forward to the edge of the seat cushion in earnest. ‘God, I’m so, so sorry. That such a thing ever happened to you. It wasn’t your fault. I can’t imagine— That is, this never should have— I mean, I wish I could—’ He didn’t know what he was saying. ‘Do you . . . You don’t have to continue. We can stop, if you want.’

Slowly, John stopped rocking, lowered his hands, and lifted his head. His eyes were wet, and he seemed unable to raise them. So instead, he looked into his own lap and let a tear or two fall. ‘If you shouldn’t wish to hear it, sir. . .’

He did not want to hear it, but only because he didn’t want any of it to be true. But it was true. It wasn’t fair, then, that only John suffered its reality. It was a burden Sherlock wished to relieve him of, and if sharing the yoke was the only way, then so be it.

‘I think,’ he said delicately, ‘that maybe you need to talk about it. And I need to listen.’

John said nothing, did nothing, just waited for permission to continue.

Sherlock’s heart was pounding erratically, his blood heating. He needed to calm down, for John’s sake. ‘Okay. We’re okay. Let me . . . let me put on the kettle. Hm? Are you in the mood for tea?’

At last, John lifted his eyes. ‘Thank you, Mr Holmes.’

So Sherlock left the sitting room to set the kettle to boil. He moved slowly, giving John time to recuperate his courage. As he pulled out his mother’s tea set and prepared the spread, he kept one eye glued to the back of John’s head. He was rocking again, just a little, clutching the pillow to his stomach and making miniscule gestures of self-comfort. When this was over, Sherlock thought, they needed to do something to take their minds off it all. Maybe leave the flat, go for a walk. He wished he could take John to the sea, just for the day. The calming, restorative seaside John yearned for seemed just the thing. But it was impossible.
When he returned, John’s eyes were dry again, but his face was a pale as the moon. He set a hot mug at his elbow, the string from a tea packet draped over the rim. ‘Okay?’

John nodded unconvincingly. For nearly a minute, neither spoke, just held steaming mugs in their hands waiting for it to cool just enough to finally drink.

Sherlock took a deep breath. ‘I want to make sure I understand. That all right?’

Again, John nodded.

‘Wilkes already had a ward, but he had debts. Do you know how great? Did he ever give you a figure?’

‘No sir. But they must have been really bad.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘It was five years, sir, and I never paid them off.’

But Sherlock had a keen sense for when something was off. If it didn’t make sense, it likely wasn’t true. If Wilkes were intent on paying down his debts, why rent a second costly flat in the city and pay additional monthly bills? Surely a single ward couldn’t bring in that much dirty money. Then again, Sherlock had no idea the going rates for such a thing, and he was afraid to ask. He tried another angle.

‘Did he say how long you would have to . . . ?’

But John was already shaking his head. ‘He only said, not long. It wouldn’t be forever. I believed him.’

***

‘I know, I know, it sounds like I’m asking a lot,’ said Mr Wilkes, rising to his feet to pace. Laughing nervously, he went straight to the shelves and grabbed four books standing together, lifting them easily. They were hollow underneath, revealing a pack of cigarettes and a small matchbox. As he struck a match, he said around the cigarette between his lips, ‘But trust me. It won’t be so bad. And the day I’m out of the hole’—he brought the cigarette to the flame, and breathed out smoke—‘we’ll call the whole thing quits. What do you say, Tiny? Sound like a plan?’

At first, he was unable to utter a single syllable. The books were hollow, fake. He noticed, too, that the wide-screen TV was made of plastic, just for show. The figurines were plastic and painted to look like marble. Nothing in this room was real.

‘H-how long?’ he asked.

‘Not long, not long. The debt isn’t unreasonable. I’m just one man, not the State of New Britain!’ He laughed. Again, he said, ‘Trust me. It won’t be forever.’

‘W-what do I have to do?’

Wilkes pulled the cigarette from his mouth. His hand fell to his side. Then, with a gesture of his head, he said, ‘Let me show you the master bedroom.’

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'Did he . . .?' Sherlock closed his eyes, shaking his head. ‘Sorry.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Did Wilkes, himself, ever . . .’

‘He never touched me, sir.’

‘So it was all for . . . the money. Not his own . . . enjoyment.’

God, these words were hard to get out. For the first time since their meeting, it was John who had the words.

‘For Mr Wilkes, I was business, not pleasure. Everything he brought into the flat, it was for the business. The master bedroom was . . . nice. The nicest I’d ever seen. Large bed, silk sheets, huge mirrors, chairs, and a fireplace, even. But he couldn’t afford other nice things. In the ward room, I slept on a cot, and my blanket was one Mr Wilkes had taken off an aeroplane because he didn’t have time to get me a real one, he said. I didn’t have much by way of clothes, just what I bought that first week at the Emporium. And the master bath had a Jacuzzi and fancy shower and many nice smelling things, but the ward bath had just the one towel and a very tiny shower that didn’t always work right, and if I wanted soap, or shampoo or toothpaste, I had to give up an apple for the week, or a tin of beans, so I could buy it, and I was supposed to always be clean and smell nice. Mr Wilkes said that when people came, they were to stay in the master bedroom and never see any of the ward spaces. I wasn’t to stay with them unless told, and that anything that happened in that room, no matter what it was, I wasn’t to say. Only to him, because he needed to know they’d paid right.

‘But I was scared. I’d never . . . before. And I didn’t know what to do, or if it would be bad. Painful, I mean. But Mr Wilkes, he just said, they won’t hurt you, be good, and they won’t hurt you. But. The very first time I had to . . . I mean, the very first client was . . . It was a bad night, sir.’

***

Mr Wilkes had gone. Someone else was in the flat. Tiny was so nervous, he was sweating.

‘I don’t mind,’ said his guest.

That’s what Mr Wilkes wanted him to call them. Guests.

Stepping closer, the man continued, ‘It’s what I pay for, actually. There’s something truthful about fear. Something honest. Wouldn’t you agree? That’s why I like the untouched. I like to be the first. And when you show your fear, I know I am. In time, you’ll learn to hide it. As for myself, I don’t like the liars. But tonight, you’ll tell me the truth. Won’t you?’

The man was tall, much taller than he. So much so that he had to bend a little at the waist as he reached for Tiny’s face, stroked a finger down one cheek, and cupped his chin to raise it.

‘Apologies for the damp. I have a condition. The whole world is wet to my touch.’ But he didn’t remove his hand for several seconds more. Tiny’s eyes burnt with the effort of maintaining steady contact. He tried to smile, like he’d been told. The tall man did not smile back.

At last, his guest lowered his hand and stepped back. He walked to the sofa facing the fireplace and sat, stretching both arms across the backrest. ‘Stand there. In front of the fire.’

Tiny repositioned himself, as commanded.
‘Honesty. Nakedness. They’re one in the same. So I want to see you. All of you. Undress for me.’

Heart thrumming wildly, Tiny obeyed. First, he removed his shoes, then his socks, but when he went to pull the shirt over his head, his guest made further instruction.

‘Slowly.’

He did not like being watched. He did not like it when others stared, when their eyes raked his skin, when they made funny faces when they noticed his scarred genitals. His guest was looking, too, but without expression, which was somehow worse.

‘Turn around. Slowly.’

Tiny made a full revolution.

‘Come here.’

He stepped forward, resisting the need to cover himself. The man leant forward, elbows on knees, and cocked his head. ‘Bend closer to me.’

He did.

Then the man lifted a hand, and flicked him in the face.

Tiny flinched.

‘Don’t move. Don’t even wince.’

A second flick, sharp and stinging.

‘I said don’t move.’

Tiny didn’t understand. Several times more, he was flicked in the face, and each time, he flinched, and each time the man told him not to, but he began to smile. It was a horrible thing, that man’s smile, because there was laughter behind it, laughter at Tiny, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Another flick, another flinch. This time in the eye.

The man chuckled.

‘I love doing this. I could it all day! Fascinating, really. You try so hard not to flinch, but you can’t help it, can you? The body can’t help’—flick—‘but’—flick—‘recoil.’

Flick-flinch.

‘But it’s fun to watch you try. To resist. In the end, though, what choice do you have? I say take it. So you do. Let’s see how long that lasts. Shall we?’

***

‘He had sex with me,’ said John, staring down at his hands. His voice was so low it was barely audible, but Sherlock was riveted to every devastating word. ‘In the morning, when he left, Mr Wilkes came back, and I told him—’

John swallowed hard. Squeezing the pillow to his stomach, he reached for the teacup and sipped carefully. His hand was shaking just slightly, and Sherlock had to quell the urge to get up and help him. Setting the cup back to the table, John continued.
‘I told Mr Wilkes that I didn’t think I could do it again. It was too much.’

‘What did he say?’ Sherlock asked softly. He was careful not to move; his stomach was queasy enough as it was.

‘He told me again that it wouldn’t be forever. Just until the debts were paid. But I said I didn’t think I would last even one more night. It hurt worse than I thought it would. I begged him to let me do something else. To hire me out as ward labour. I’d do anything, anything at all, just not that, and I’d never complain.’

‘But he didn’t go for it.’

John shook his head miserably. ‘He said I could work all month and not make even half as much as I would one night as a companion.’

Inwardly, Sherlock scowled at the euphemism. But he maintained a carefully neutral outward expression for John’s sake. And he wondered again what Wilkes charged the seedy clientele who made perversion of the already corrupt Ward Programme. It must have been thousands.

‘He said it wouldn’t be so bad, next time. And that the day would come that I wouldn’t mind at all. That I might even . . .’ His eyes flicked up and away again very quickly, embarrassed. ‘Want it.’

Sherlock couldn’t bite down on his tongue fast enough. ‘Bastard,’ he seethed.

John cringed. ‘But I . . . learnt to pretend.’

The horrendous story continued to unfold. John told Sherlock of guests both young and old, coming alone or in groups, from perversely rich or affluent families, or poor men who had had a lucky gambling streak or who were thoughtlessly blowing their family savings. There were young men, barely more than boys, whose fathers bought them a night at a Downside as a special treat or a reward for high marks in school. There were lonely men from the tech industry whose utter lack of social skills precluded any relationships but those money could buy. There were married men who wanted to escape the monotony of their own bedrooms for something secretive and scandalous. There were experimental men who wanted to try something new but didn’t dare ask their partners, closeted homosexuals who wanted to test out their desires, and foreign businessmen partaking in the local pleasure. There were violent men with money to burn and frustrations to expend. There were the occasional women nursing fantasies of their own. There were women who had heard stories about what it would take to arouse a cas, and wanted to see if they were true.

In the beginning, there were complaints: the ward was inexperienced; his performance lacked skill; he didn’t smile; he made funny noises; his belly was not flat enough; he didn’t understand basic requests. So Mr Wilkes dedicated time and money to his re-education—money, he said, that would be added to his debt. He was put on a low-calorie diet and instructed in comportment, dress, and expression, told when to smile and how to laugh and to offer compliments. He learnt to give massages, perform a strip tease, undress his guests, and provide an overall sensual experience. One night, Mr Wilkes brought a group of friends, men to practise on, who would provide guidance and feedback. One by one, they joined him in the master bedroom. One by one, he pleased them. All night, it lasted, they lasted, until he had learnt to suppress the need to retch, until he had memorised the pleasure centres, until each was satisfied with his performance. Only Mr Wilkes did not participate. He trusted the words of his friends. When they were happy, he was happy, and he determined that his ward could return to work.

Some he saw once and never again. Others were repeat guests, like his first, who, despite his initial claims of wanting them fresh, seemed in fact more interested in wanting them scared. Some were
rough and fast and done and out the door. Others were painstaking and slow because they couldn’t get it up to begin with. Some came prepared with toys and tools of their own. Others made special requests for costumes or toys or aromas, and Mr Wilkes obliged. Some couldn’t even look at him while they fucked him. Others wouldn’t stop staring. Some laughed because of their own nervousness. Others cried and apologised for what they did to him. Some encouraged and praised him as they came. Others shouted and berated him for what he was making them do. Some gave him their own special nicknames. Others called him nothing at all.

And through it all, he never grew numb to it. The fear never went away. The pain never subsided. Still, he had faith that the day would come when the debt was paid, and Mr Wilkes would say it was all over.

‘He didn’t like it when I asked questions,’ said John. ‘I was irritating to him, he said. So I had to be delicate. I said to him, I hope you are satisfied with me and my work, sir. And he said he was. I said, I hope things are going well for you, sir. And he said, yes, very well. I said, some time later, Are we much closer to paying off the debt, sir? But he punished me for asking.’

***

Mr Wilkes was a proud man, and though stern, he was not often violent. But two years had passed since the start, and Tiny, who in his fear and shame had uttered very few words of protest or complaint, for the first time ventured to ask his host if, after all this time, he might be close to paying off Mr Wilkes’ debts.

‘We’re not out of the hole yet, Tiny,’ said Mr Wilkes as he slipped an envelope stuffed with banknotes into an inner pocket of his coat and began to button it. ‘See that you scrub that jacuzzi a little harder tonight, eh, boy? Last guest said he saw a ring around the tub. That just won’t do.’

‘Yes sir,’ Tiny said. Then daringly, he continued to ask, ‘Is it a very big hole, sir?’

‘Tiny.’ Mr Wilkes' tone was censorious. ‘I don’t want to talk about my personal affairs. Understand?’

‘Yes sir,’ he said meekly. ‘It’s just, it would help, sir, if I knew how near or far we were to the end.’

They didn’t talk much, not really, not like this, and Mr Wilkes seemed distracted as he pulled out his gloves? ‘Mm? End of what?’

‘The end of my work as a companion, sir. I should hope one day, sir, to stop.’

Mr Wilkes froze. Then his head came around slowly. His eyes were darker than Tiny had ever seen them. ‘Stop?’

‘Yes sir, like you said, sir, when you first brought me on, sir. You said—’

‘Don’t,’ he warned, holding up a finger.

‘—that it wouldn’t be forever. Is your debt very bad, sir? Do you still need so much money?’

Mr Wilkes’ lip suddenly contorted into a snarl, and in the second before he lunged, Tiny knew he had pushed things too far. Mr Wilkes grabbed him up by the front of his shirt and shook him viciously.

‘Do not speak to me of money! Never, ever again! Your debts are cleared when I say they are cleared!’
Tiny had not known the debts were his.

Mr Wilkes didn’t let him find his feet properly before dragging him off to the ward room and throwing him in. The door slammed. Tiny thought that was the end of it, and resolved to stay in the room until he heard Mr Wilkes leave the flat and the front door lock behind him. But after only a couple of minutes, Mr Wilkes returned, and in one hand he held a ward collar. In the other, a leather belt.

Afterwards, Tiny couldn’t work. He had to wait for the welts to shrink and the bruising to disappear, because no one wanted a twink with marred skin and a split lip.

‘That just cost you an additional two weeks,’ said Mr Wilkes, still panting from the exertion and wiping his knuckles on the side of his trousers. ‘When you don’t work, the sands pile higher. Understand?’

Unable to talk, to vocalise even a murmur of assent, Tiny nodded. Yes, he understood.

‘Don’t you ever ask me about my business. That’s none of your affair, got me? And don’t talk to me of stopping, either. You agreed to this, and don’t you forget it. You don’t like it? Tough. This was your choice. You said yes.’

It was the last time he asked about money. But it was far from the last time he was beaten. Sometimes it was because he had displeased a guest, other times because he was caught in a lie, or had been found with stolen goods hidden in the flat. But Tiny didn’t always know what he had done. Mr Wilkes’ moods were unpredictable. One day, he was all smiles and praise, and a couple of days would go by and the tiniest thing would set him off, like when Tiny sneezed without a tissue or hadn’t cleaned the glasses right, leaving water spots. Beatings weren’t always bad, but when they were, he couldn’t work. And each day he took to recover, he knew would have to work to pay off a debt he couldn’t see. Was it the size of a house, or the size of a mountain? Was he close at all to seeing the end of it? Was he weeks away, or years? And were those years many or few?

Despite it all, in the face of what he was being made to do, he believed Mr Wilkes was on his side, in his own way. If a guest paid for jacks but took aces, Tiny was instructed to tell, and Mr Wilkes would accordingly berate the guest and adjust the charge. ‘I don’t tolerate liars and cheaters,’ he would say. If a guest left visible wounds and marks, Mr Wilkes grew irate and doubled the fee, and in rare cases forbade a guest from ever using his services again. And he made everyone, no matter how frequent a visitor, no matter how wealthy or powerful, submit to a blood screening and to peeing into an analyser cup, because he didn’t want Tiny to get sick. Well, sometimes he did get sick. But not with the things Mr Wilkes feared. In these ways, Mr Wilkes showed he cared.

But one guest was particularly, what was Mr Wilkes’ word? Egregious. The man paid upfront, kings and aces, but when Mr Wilkes left for the night, he let in four of his friends, who had not paid at all. When Tiny nervously tried to explain that his host would not be pleased, because they hadn’t paid, they bound his mouth and hands with duct tape and had their way with him anyway. By chance, Mr Wilkes returned early, and upon discovering the interlopers began to scream and demand compensation for the deceit. From the bed, unable to move, Tiny watched in horror as the men surrounded Mr Wilkes and pushed him against the wall. He had never seen Mr Wilkes so terrified, and he wished there was something he could do to make them stop, to keep them from threatening or hurting his host. But he was helpless, bound as he was on the bed. Shockingly, Mr Wilkes stuttered his apologies. ‘On the house, on the house,’ he said, his voice quavering in fear.

The men left, laughing as if it had all been a game. Mr Wilkes took a moment to compose himself, slicking back his hair, adjusting his tie, tugging on his suit jacket. Then he walked over to Tiny and yanked the tape from his mouth. His voice still shook as he asked, ‘You very hurt?’
He was. The muscles in his arms were strained and his neck was raw from chafing. But nothing was broken, and he wasn’t bleeding. He shook his head.

‘This won’t happen again,’ said Mr Wilkes. He helped Tiny rise from the bed and walked him to the shower in the en suite, which he’d never been allowed to use before. It was a rare kindness.

Next day, Mr Wilkes returned with a solution.

‘It’s a Smith and Wesson, thirty-eight special calibre.’ He stood in front of his ward like he was giving a speech. Hands pressed between his knees where he sat on the hard sofa, Tiny stared at the black, shiny handgun Mr Wilkes had just pulled from the pocket of his trousers. ‘Small, discreet, lightweight. The perfect weapon for self-defence. And for showing buggers like the ones last night that I’m not to be intimidated.’ His eye gleamed, and his lips crooked into a smile. ‘You want to hold it?’

‘Oh no, sir, I’d best not,’ said Tiny, who had never been so close to a gun before.

‘It’s not loaded. Here.’

He flipped the gun so he was holding it by the barrel, and extended the grip to Tiny. Cautiously, watching Mr Wilkes for signs of disapproval, he took it. Maybe it was lightweight, like Mr Wilkes said, but it felt plenty heavy to him.

‘That’s right, Tiny. We’ll not have a repeat of last night, I can guarantee you that. I take care of my own.’

***

‘How long was this,’ Sherlock asked, ‘before . . . ?’

‘Two years. Maybe three. He had that gun a long time.’

‘Did he ever use it as he said he would? Getting people to pay?’

John nodded. ‘A few times.’

‘And it worked?’

‘It worked. No one ever stiffed him again, after that. If someone took aces, they paid for aces, no more lying about jacks and kings.’

Sherlock licked his lips, troubled, suspecting, and despite not wanting confirmation, he had to ask. ‘I’m afraid I’m unfamiliar with the lingo,’ he said carefully.

‘It’s, erm,’ said John, colouring a little. ‘The guests chose their own pleasure, sir. Forms of stimulation.’ He lifted a hand. ‘Jacks.’ Touched his mouth. ‘Kings.’ His body went still. ‘And aces.’ Lifting his eyes sombrely, he added, ‘Only females can offer queens.’

‘Oh.’ Sherlock felt his own face heating with discomfort. It was little wonder such coded language would arise. Men like Wilkes, they weren’t likely to speak in more vulgar terms, not during business deals, at least. Not when the bare truth would remind them that they were subjecting human beings to something decidedly inhuman.

‘In the beginning,’ John continued, ‘Mr Wilkes didn’t pay much attention to what they took, only what they paid. Then he did. He made me tell, and he made them pay. Not just for services. If I was
left very damaged, he sometimes used the gun to make them pay compensation for days I couldn’t work. Sometimes.’

‘Only sometimes?’

John rubbed his nose and pursed his lips, looking troubled. ‘Sometimes . . . he allowed it. He let them because I had messed up. I tried never to mess up, but sometimes . . . it was like I was tricked.’

***

A new guest arrived on a hot summer night. He peed in the cup and was stuck with the needle before Tiny ever saw him, and Mr Wilkes, satisfied, let him into the master bedroom and took his leave for the night. As requested, Tiny was waiting for him in silk pyjamas and a dressing gown, standing by the fireplace with a glass of wine in his hand from the bar Mr Wilkes kept well stocked. He was not allowed to drink. This was for the guest.

The man was older, perhaps fifty-five or sixty, with grey-white hair and a chest like a barrel. He called himself Bob-you-can-call-me-Bobby. His smile was friendly and his eyes were kind, and if Tiny ever felt any sort of relief, it was that this man didn’t appear to be the sort who would mock him, slap or spank him, or ask him to wear embarrassing costumes. As far as these nights went, he imagined it might be more run of the mill, maybe just once, and that would be that.

Bob drained his glass in one go and invited Tiny to sit opposite him on the sofa by the fireplace.

‘I don’t normally do this kind of thing,’ he said.

It was not an unfamiliar line. Tiny had heard it in dozens of iterations before: I’ve never been to a Downside before, and I’m not the kind of guy who does this sort of thing, and I hope you don’t get the wrong idea about me. He was well trained to respond to it by now.

‘Please don’t feel embarrassed,’ he said kindly. ‘I’m here to make you feel good, and it will be our secret. No one need know.’

Tiny had long stopped wondering if anyone outside of the flat would even care.

He sat and listened while Bob talked out his nerves. Tiny was a good listener. He nodded and smiled and hummed in all the right places. Over the years, he had heard all sorts of stories from the guests, secrets and scandals he knew never to repeat. Bob, it turned out, was a scientist working on top secret military-grade projects in a place called Baskerville, which Tiny had never heard of. ‘New science to change the world,’ Bob said excitedly, lost in his own musings, but happy to have a captive audience in Tiny, who understood less than half of what he heard.

He talked for nearly an hour. Then his voice faded away. He smiled at Tiny, cocked his head.

‘You’re special, aren’t you?’

It was an unexpected comment, to which Tiny had no ready response. ‘I shouldn’t think so, sir,’ he said.

‘No, you are. I can tell. I can tell these sorts of things.’ Bob slid closer on the sofa and reached for Tiny’s face. His large fingers were surprisingly gentle as they stroked his cheek. ‘You’re beautiful. Precious. I’m not deserving of you.’

To this, Tiny had no response at all. Fingers combed deftly through his hair, along his neck, long, slow, soothing gestures. Just his face and head. There was no attempt to go further, not even to slip
a finger under the collar or lay a hand on his thigh. Tiny didn’t understand what was happening.

‘I don’t know all you’ve been through,’ said the man. ‘It must not be easy. But I’m not like those other men. I know how they are, how they use you for their own ends. That’s not fair. Not fair at all, Tiny. I don’t want to hurt you. Just the thought . . .’ He shook his head morosely. ‘You’re part of this, too. You need to know that. You deserve as much pleasure as I do. No matter what they’ve taken from you.’

This was new. Tiny had heard many things in this room, many preludes, but not this one. Was it true? Did his guest really not want to hurt him?


Dumbstruck, Tiny almost choked. ‘Really, sir?’

The hand kept petting his hair. ‘Really.’

‘Um.’

‘Think. What is it you want from me tonight?’

‘I . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘If it would please you, sir . . .’

‘What pleases you pleases me.’

‘Perhaps . . .’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘For tonight, sir, if I may not undress?’

The hand paused on the side of his head, cupping his skull at the back.

‘Maybe we could just . . . lie together, hold each other, and . . . be at peace.’

Bob blinked. The warmth in his eyes seemed to harden. ‘Just lie together,’ he repeated.

‘If it pleases you, sir. It might be, erm, nice?’

‘You don’t want to touch me.’

Too late, Tiny realised his error. ‘No sir, that’s not—’

‘You don’t want to be touched by me?’

‘No, no, forget what I said! I . . . May I try again?’

But Bob suddenly withdrew his hand, shot to his feet, and headed straight for the door, snatching his jacket up from the rack.

‘Fucking little tease,’ he spat as he threw open the door, and slammed it behind himself.
For two hours, Tiny fitfully paced the flat. He knew he’d done wrong, and the guilt weighed in his stomach like rocks. He dressed in his own clothes and straightened the bedroom and put away the wine, and when that was all accomplished, he cleaned, and cleaned, and repeated the conversation again and again in his mind. Tell me what you want, his guest had said. Tell me what would make you happy. Had it just been a trick? A trap? What would happen when Mr Wilkes found out?

As midnight approached, he got an answer to his question.

Mr Wilkes stormed into the flat, looking angrier than Tiny had ever seen him. He was so frightened that he backed himself into a corner and put up his hands in defence, saying, ‘Please, sir, I can explain!’

Mr Wilkes punched him in the stomach to get him to lower his hands, then cracked him across the face. ‘You imbecilic twink! What were you thinking!’

‘I’m sorry, sir!’ He tasted blood on his teeth.

Grabbing Tiny by the hair of his head, Mr Wilkes wrenched him at the neck and threw him to the ground. ‘He said you refused! You don’t get to refuse!’

Tiny cowered on the floor and lifted his hands in surrender. ‘Forgive me, Mr Wilkes, he said— He said I could choose. He said whatever I want—’

Mr Wilkes seized the underside of his jaw and thrust his head up so their eyes met. ‘What you want? What you want? I’ll tell you what you want. You want a hard, dirty buggering, that’s what you want. You want to suck them off all night. You want their fingers so far up your arse it tickles in your throat. You want them to come all over your face until you’re drowning in spunk. Do you hear me? You always want it. That’s what they pay for, little fucker, so you damn well better deliver.’

Tiny’s eyes watered in pain.

‘I said, do you hear me!’

‘Yes, sir, yes!’

‘Then tell me what you want.’

‘I want . . . I want . . .’

‘Say it!’

‘A hard and dirty b-buggering, sir. All n-night.’

‘Damn right you do. Because Dr Frankland is coming back. He demanded a full refund because of what you did, but I can’t afford a sullied reputation. So he’ll be back tomorrow, at a discount, and you’—Mr Wilkes squeezed his face with enraged and trembling fingers—‘are going to give him one hell of a night. Aren’t you?’

The guest returned, and it was one of the worst nights of Tiny’s life, under any name. When it was over, he was left naked on the floor, blindfolded, ball-gagged, and wrists shackled behind his back with leather ropes from the props chest. His neck felt bruised from throttling, and he thought he might be bleeding from his backside. But he didn’t move. All night, he lay there, listening to Bob-call-me-Bobby snoring in the bed. The kindness he had first mistaken in the man had gone entirely. Vindictiveness, and a kind of savagery, had been unveiled. Silently, he wept.
The days and weeks and months passed, and there was no end in sight to Tiny’s labours. Days were spent on a quest for food. Nights alone, he passed out exhausted on his cot and woke in the dark shivering in a poorly heated room under a too-thin blanket, too hungry and miserable and afraid to fall back asleep. So he turned on the solitary lamp, pulled a folded glossy page from inside his pillow, and stared at the White Cliffs of Dover, hoping it still existed, wondering if it ever had. Nights in company, he barely slept at all. His body cried out for relief—relief from hunger, from pain, from enervation. His mind became muddied with dark thoughts of being forever caged, from which the only escape was a violent one.

He thought about running. He thought about falling off bridges. More than once, he almost stepped in front of a moving bus. He had stopped fantasising that a kindly soul on the street would take pity on him and befriend him, even for just an hour. He no longer hoped to be a magician’s assistant or a footballer on a team or an apprentice to a chess player. He wanted to turn into smoke and blow away on the breeze.

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His story ground to a sudden halt as John’s voice caught, and a sweep of panic crossed his face. ‘I —’ He faltered, tried again, the narrative taking an unexpected turn. ‘I lied to you, Mr Holmes. I’m sorry.’

‘Lied to me?’ Sherlock sat forward anxiously. ‘When?’

‘You asked if I saw anything, heard anything.’ He seemed frightened, but unlike the timid ward who had first come to him, John held Sherlock’s gaze. ‘The night the ward in the pound killed himself.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows knit together. ‘Westie.’ He sighed out slowly and closed his eyes. ‘You did see it, didn’t you? You saw the whole thing.’

‘I heard it. We all did. Every ward on that floor.’ John covered his mouth with a hand while he thought. The gesture spoke volumes to Sherlock, who understood that this was another of John’s secrets, which he was about to release like a bird from its cage. Swallowing hard, he lowered his hand back to the pillow. ‘Dying is never soft. It roars. Even when it’s quiet, it roars. We heard it coming for hours. Westie, was that his final name? Westie cried. All that day and into the night, he cried, and we knew he would do it. And then, when it happened, the cage rattled like thunder. He was kicking and struggling, not to live but to die, but to me it sounded like the cage was eating him. Maybe it didn’t last long, but it felt like it would never stop. And all we could do was listen, until finally . . . he just stopped.’

Sherlock could almost hear it himself, the rattling of the cage, the roar of impending death. ‘You all heard it. Every one of you.’

‘Yes.’

‘But no one called for help?’

John frowned. ‘What help?’ But there was something other than sadness in him, something in his eyes, a kind of hardness and anger that flashed and vanished so quickly as to give Sherlock doubt he had even seen it. But he knew he had—he had seen it once before, when John had stopped him from taking that poisonous pill. ‘No, we didn’t call out,’ John said. ‘Westie knew what we knew: it was that, or Storage. We wouldn’t take that choice from him. Not when he had the courage to do what we could not.’

What they did instead, Sherlock realised, was stand silent vigil, before the act, and afterwards, an
unspoken form of camaraderie among strangers who had all known the same despair. Now, they all shared the same secret.

‘You’re telling me you didn’t notice a man strangling himself to death?’

‘No sir.’

‘And if you had, would you have stopped him?’

The ward said in a small but certain voice, ‘No sir.’

‘Westie did not want us to stop him,’ John continued, softer now. ‘I know because . . . I would not have wanted it either. With Mr Wilkes, you see, I thought about it a lot. But I was afraid. Afraid I’d do it wrong. Afraid it wouldn’t take. I wasn’t brave, like Westie. So I stayed. I stayed, even though . . . every hour, every day and every night, I . . .’ John swallowed hard, licked his lips, and Sherlock could see he was working himself up to uttering the next word. ‘. . . hated it.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said emphatically. Oh God yes, John. You can hate it. You can be angry. You can be human, because that is exactly what you are.

Emboldened, John continued. ‘All of it. But I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to make it stop. It was getting worse, sir. My thoughts were getting blacker and blacker, like they weren’t proper thoughts anymore. Just tar. It filled my head. Made it heavy. Made me stupid, because it was like my thinking got stuck. I don’t know how to explain it.’

Depression, thought Sherlock. Major depression, or persistent depressive disorder. He didn’t know, he wasn’t a doctor. He wondered, though, how much of it lingered with John even now. How much tar still stuck to the inner walls of his skull, or seeped between the folds in his brain?

‘John,’ he asked, trying to word this delicately, ‘did you provoke Wilkes into shooting you? Is that what you wanted?’

‘That wasn’t how it happened, sir.’

‘Will you tell me?’

John nodded. Both men took a long drink of tea.

‘It began, Mr Holmes, with a guest who was not a guest.’

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His guest arrived at ten o’clock sharp. He was like so many others. Middle aged, tall, strong.
Thinning hair, receding hairline. A ruddy complexion and deep frown lines.

Tiny greeted him and reached for an arm to begin undoing the man’s cuffs; he’d already taken off his jacket and laid it across the back of the sofa. It was, after all, rather warm in the room. But the man withdrew his arm and even stepped back.

‘Shall I then . . . ?’ Tiny began, reaching for the topmost button of his own shirt.

‘No, no.’ The man backed up a couple of more steps, came around the sofa, and sat. ‘Sit with me. Tiny, yes?’

‘As you wish, sir.’
‘Don’t call me that.’

Tiny bit his tongue. Sometimes they wanted him to call them by certain pet names. Even when they didn’t, no one ever minded being called ‘sir’.

He had been told that the man had requested two hours, street clothes from the start, and no props. He wasn’t quite sure what would be asked of him beyond that, but he would report, and Mr Wilkes would make sure he had not been cheated.

Tiny sat, and waited, heart already racing, and fighting the urge to keep his eyes off the clock or begin the mental countdown till dawn. The man held his eyes without blinking, and began talking in earnest.

‘I want you to listen to me very carefully, and not say a word, not until I ask you to. Can you do that?’

Tiny had done much more difficult things, and he was good at following instructions. So he nodded.

‘My name is James. I am one of the DULUGE. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of it.’

He shook his head no. He thought a deluge had something to do with heavy rains or floods, but he didn’t know how one was part of that.

‘The Downside-to-Upside London Under-Ground Emancipators. We’re a back-channel, under-the-radar organisation specialising in the removal of wards from unfavourable circumstances and relocating them to places of safety. Often . . . overseas.’

Something seemed to have stuck in Tiny’s brain. He heard the words spoken to him, but it was as if his head wouldn’t let him understand. Nevertheless, a cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck.

‘Tell me, son—what do you know about Norway?’

Whatever had stuck now jostled loose. A peculiar panic surged through Tiny’s body. Something was wrong. This conversation was wrong. He shouldn’t be listening to this, he’d get into trouble. Oh! Mr Wilkes would be so angry!

‘Now now, please, hear me out,’ said the man, James, who must have seen in him the flaring of fear. ‘Don’t say anything, just listen. I am here to help. Only to help. Okay? My people, those I work with—we are specially skilled at recognising wards in peril, and getting them out. Don’t be scared, but we’ve noticed you, Tiny, out in the city. We’ve been keeping an eye on you for a while now, and . . . and we know you’re hungry. Here.’ He reached into a satchel he’d brought with him and withdrew three wrapped sandwiches. ‘I know it’s not much. But I didn’t want to rouse your hosts’ suspicions.’

He placed the sandwiches on the sofa between them. Instantly, Tiny’s mouth began to water and his stomach growled, but he didn’t move. He was afraid to move.

‘When we uncovered this Downside, we knew we had to act fast. That’s why I’m here.’

Tiny’s eyes were darting around the room, trying not to look at the man or the sandwiches. If he didn’t give the man what he’d paid for, he’d be in trouble. He’d wondered, before, whether Mr Wilkes hid cameras or microphones in the ceiling or walls, to make sure he was doing his job. Oh! What if he was listening! What if he was angry Tiny was listening to this man? Should he throw him out? No, no, because then he wouldn’t get his money. Make sure the man fucked him? Yes, that seemed the only way to save himself. Hands trembling, he started unbuttoning his shirt, saying, ‘I think, sir, we’d best get on with it.’
‘Hey, hey, stop.’ The man seized his hands to still him. Tiny ducked his head, thinking he’d be struck. But the man merely held on. ‘I promise you, no one is listening, no one is watching.’ Letting go of Tiny’s wrists, he reached into the pocket of his jacket on the back of the sofa and pulled out a small device. ‘This little gadget detects and interferes with all radio signals and recording devices, rendering them inert. But look—no signals. There’s nothing to interfere with. Please. I know this is startling, and a little scary. Just listen to what I have to say. We’ve collected thousands of pounds to pay for me to be here tonight, and talk with you. I don’t want to have sex with you. I just want you to hear me. Because I’m here to help you.’

Tremulously, Tiny nodded. What could he do but concede? But he’d heard about people like this. In school, they had taught all the wards: Some day, they said, men would come around speaking such words. Words like ‘help’ and ‘relocate’ and, the worst of them all, ‘Norway’. These were men who promised things they couldn’t deliver, to woo wards into doing stupid things, like running. The truth was, they said, such men were liars. They were men who tried to use wards, hurt them, kidnap them, murder them, and sell their bones for making jewellery and their hair for making wigs and their skin for lampshades, to be sold to free people in far-off countries. There was a market for that, and foolish was the ward who fell for it. That’s what he’d been told, what he’d always believed.

Though he’d grown up with the stories, Tiny had never met a man like this one before. But he never doubted they were out there. He’d seen enough of the evils of the world to know that they existed.

‘Go on,’ James urged. ‘Eat. You eat, I’ll talk. Okay?’

He kept coaxing until Tiny picked up one of the sandwiches. He was slow to unwrap the cellophane at first, but once his fingers depressed the soft bread and the aroma of sliced ham and cheese wafted up to him, he couldn’t stop himself. He took a large bite, half expecting the sandwich to be torn out of his hands or to be ordered to spit it out onto the floor. When neither of those things happened, he swallowed and took another greedy bite. The guest continued.

So it was with fear that Tiny sat and ate and listened, hoping Mr Wilkes would return early and make him go away, or that they could just fuck and be done. But the man, James, kept on. He talked about others, like Tiny, who had been trapped in bad circumstances but longed for a better life. He talked about how he and his people had assisted hundreds like him. He used words like ‘safe haven’ and ‘liberation’ and ‘freedom’ and, again, that unsavoury word that twisted in Tiny’s stomach like a serpent: ‘Norway.’

‘It’s a lie, Tiny, the biggest lie our government has ever told. You have no idea how big.’ James laid a hand on Tiny’s shoulder. He fought the urge to recoil; it was a reflex he had very nearly mastered. ‘I’ll explain everything, I promise. When you’re safe, I’ll tell you the truth, all of it. But time for us is not a luxury. So listen carefully. Finsbury Park Station in Islington. Do you know it?’

Tiny shook his head.

‘Take the Victoria or Piccadilly line north. Get off at Finsbury Park. This Friday, 20.10, there’s a bus, number 511, departing for Dover that will take you via ferry to Dunkirk. From there, my people will help you reach Norway. But you must be there by eight sharp. I’ll meet you and have your papers ready. Do not board the bus until I have given you new papers, that is very important. Bring only what you can carry on your back—a change of clothes and toothbrush, for instance—but don’t take anything that doesn’t belong to you. Not even if you feel you deserve it. And leave the flat with your bracelets, but toss them in a bin before you get to Finsbury Park. Your tattoo. Where is it?’

Tiny lied and touched his inner left arm.

‘Long sleeves, then. Do whatever you must to keep it concealed. If you do all that, and if you are
absolutely in place by eight sharp on Friday night, I promise you, you'll never find yourself in a place like this ever again. You'll be free, Tiny. For the rest of your life, you'll be a free man.'

James repeated the information. He made Tiny repeat it until he got every direction perfect. It didn’t take long. Tiny had always had a very good memory.

‘Can you slip away?’

Tiny nodded.

‘Without being seen?’

Tiny nodded.

‘Will you come?’

Slower this time, to please the man, Tiny nodded.

‘Good lad. Good lad.’ The man reached into his pocket and pulled out an Oyster Card. ‘This will get you on the Tube, enough to get you there. One trip, yeah? So remember. Victoria or Piccadilly. Keep the card well hidden until you leave, and give yourself at least two hours, just to be safe.’

He readied himself to go, slipping back into his suit jacket and buttoning it like he was a very important person.

‘Friday at eight. I’ll be waiting with everything you need, including a new name. Then, my good man, your new life will begin.’
Sherlock had longed believed they were the stuff of urban legend.

He had first heard of Highwaymen when still a boy. Probably at school. It wasn’t the sort of thing that would appear on the telly, nor the material of conversation in the Holmes household, and he did little by way of socialising outside of the house. So school it must have been, and he brought the question home.

‘Are Highwaymen real?’

The forks and knives took momentary pause. Then Father answered, ‘They’re just stories, son.’

‘Honestly, Sherlock,’ added Mycroft, who never missed a chance to piggyback on Father’s assertions, ‘stop being so gullible. And learn your history. Highwaymen were robbers of the early Elizabethan era and were hanged for their crimes. There is no modern equivalent, and the term has been misapplied. Runners are runners. That is all.’

Sherlock scowled and poked at his chicken. That wasn’t a satisfactory explanation at all, not when the stories so often had a supernatural element to them. Highwaymen, they said, were spirits of dead wards, or at least the ancestors of dead wards, killed in the Great War, that had come to lead their orphaned children to free lands. Or in some versions, Highwaymen were spirits of dead German soldiers who had died before the Surge and never got the memo that the War was over. These came to trick wards, luring them to the shore and then drowning them in the sea. In one version, the wards became dog food; in another, they were abducted by aliens and used for strange experiments; in another, they were turned into trees, and some became firewood, and others houses, and others boats.

Children’s tales were stupid. But something had to account for disappeared wards.

‘Ever heard of them?’

It was well after dinner, and Sherlock was supposed to be readying for bed. Instead, he stood in Barnaby’s doorway, speaking in a whisper, lest Mycroft or his parents should hear.

Barnaby chuckled. ‘Don’t know much about much, one way or the other,’ he said, cleaning his spectacles with the edge of his nightshirt. ‘All’s I know is, if there be Highwaymen, there ought to be a highway. And I ain’t never see one of those neither.’

As he entered adulthood, Sherlock began to wonder if the whispers of Highwaymen had their roots in something real. He knew the prevailing wisdom—that such underground networks were the fantasies of disgruntled wards—and he knew that, what with the State surveillance and security being what it was, it was unlikely that such liberation machines could exist. But what if they did? What if there were secret operators, subversive agents, in short, Highwaymen?
But it was a summer distraction, not a genuine pursuit, and it had ended with his discovery of a drug
den and a very unhappy older brother. He’d not gone looking again.

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He sat stunned. These were not words he had expected to come out of John’s mouth. Not John’s. He
spoke simply, with simple words, but to hear him speak of escape at the urging of this mysterious
pseudo-patron sent a thrill up his spine, one part fear, two parts anticipation, and he couldn’t stop
himself from exclaiming, ‘You met a Highwayman!’

‘He didn’t call himself that, sir,’ said John. ‘But yes. That is what he was. What I believed he was.’

Sherlock sat forward in his chair, fingertips dancing excidedly on his knees. ‘And he wasn’t a lone
operative? He had people? An organisation? A whole system?’

‘He said he did.’

‘What was it called? Who are they?’

‘I . . . don’t remember. I’m sorry,’ said John. ‘He said so much and I remember so little. I was
nervous and thought I shouldn’t be listening, but I . . . I think it had to do with water?’

‘Water?’

‘Like . . . rain? I’m sorry, I don’t remember.’

Pricked with disappointment, but seeing John was ashamed of himself, Sherlock waved aside his
questions. ‘Never mind, it’s not important. Go on. This man who called himself James. He said he
could get you out of New Britain.’ His mind was trying to race ahead, connecting this moment in
John’s history to what led to Wilkes shooting him, but he had to be patient. He couldn’t yet see the
chain of events for himself.

John’s brow furrowed, like he was doubting. ‘That’s what he said.’

Already, Sherlock knew John must not have gone to the bus station in Islington. After all, he was
still here. His heart broke a little at the thought. He’d had a chance for escape, and didn’t take it. ‘But
you didn’t go.’

One arm curled around John’s waist; the other hand gripped the opposite bicep, holding himself
tightly. ‘When he left that night, I meant not to,’ John said, slowly. ‘If I got caught trying to run again
. . . Or if Mr Wilkes found out I was meaning to . . . But either way, I thought, surely, it was a trick.
But.’ He sighed, and Sherlock studied John’s face as he tried to think through things. ‘He hadn’t
touched me. Like he’d paid to do. He could have. But he didn’t. And as he was leaving, Mr Wilkes
came back. It was the end of two hours, so he came back, and the man said he was very satisfied and
gave Mr Wilkes an extra fifty pounds, to treat me special, he said. Of course, Mr Wilkes just put the
money in his pocket, and the man left, but why had he done that? Given more money for nothing?
And, well, he said the bus was going to Dover. So I thought . . .’

‘You thought it worth the risk.’

‘Yes sir. I didn’t believe I’d ever get as far as a ferry, but if there was a chance of seeing Dover again
. . .’ He closed his eyes, squeezed them shut, and Sherlock imagined he was seeing it even now, the
White Cliffs. ‘I couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about things. Thought about it all Wednesday, and
Thursday, too. One hour, I was sure I would do nothing. Then I thought about Mr Wilkes and the
guests and how I was always thinking about food, like there was nothing else to think about. I
wondered, how could it be worse? Then I thought again—maybe it could be. I didn’t know what to do. But then.’ John paused, looking very sad. ‘Thursday night was another bad one. Really bad. So when it was over, I told myself, you don’t have to do this anymore. Go. Just go. So I went.’

***

Friday morning, Tiny was so nervous he wasn’t even hungry, which was fine because all he had left was one more apple and a little bit of cheese. The clock was moving too slow and too fast at the same time, which he knew didn’t make sense, but that was how it felt. Like he was stuck and running toward the edge of a cliff, all at once.

He promised himself to leave the flat at six, to ensure that he made it by eight o’clock sharp, just like the man had said. But when the hour struck, he felt paralysed with fear. How could he do this? It could only end badly, like everything always did. But then, he was already living in badness. But then, bad could always get worse. But then . . .

He nearly hesitated too long, and when he looked at the clock again, it was just past seven. If he didn’t leave now, it would surely be too late. He was afraid to go, but more afraid to stay, and it was that fear that decided him. Suddenly, he moving. He rushed to the ward room where he had hidden the Oyster Card behind an unaffixed section of skirting board, and looked around wildly for anything he might need to bring. There was nothing. Thin blanket, spare clothes, toothbrush, these things weren’t important to him. But he felt foolish bringing nothing at all when he was told to bring something. So he pulled off the pillowcase, hurried to the kitchen to grab the apple and bit of cheese wrapped in paper, and dropped them into the pillowcase. The Oyster Card he kept in his right pocket, and the identifying bracelets he kept in his left. He’d never left the flat before without wearing them. It felt wrong. Holding his breath, he lifted the security plate by the door and punched in the secret code. With a merry ding, the door unlocked. This was it. There was no turning back. Dover lay on the other side of the door—he just had to walk through. Wiping his eyes, he left the flat.

It had been years since he’d used the London Underground, and back then, he’d been with a host and hadn’t had to navigate it himself. He didn’t remember it being too complicated. Step onto the train, ride, and step off. But when he entered the Canary Wharf Station a short distance from the flat, his already wavering confidence fell to its knees. The press of people was overwhelming. He followed the flow of traffic for a time, heart in his throat, and watched with unblinking eyes as others tapped their cards to a reader and walked through the gates. Nervously, he fished inside his pocket for his own card with sweat-slick fingers. Then he fell in line, and when he imitated what he had seen others do, he thought for sure the machine would detect him as a fraud, and Ward Patrol officers would be on him within seconds.

It didn’t happen. The machine dinged, and the gates parted. Tiny pocketed his card and carried on.

But he didn’t know what to do next, where to go. Some people were going left, others right. What happened if he went the wrong way? He found himself standing in front of a giant map of the Underground, its tangle of coloured lines criss-crossing this way and that like a bowl of spaghetti. He didn’t know where he was, let alone where he was going. This was a mistake. A big mistake. He should return to the flat while he still had a chance, before Mr Wilkes discovered he was missing. But he couldn’t move. He didn’t know what to do, beyond stare at the indecipherable map, eyes burning and fists clenched around the twisted neck of his pillowcase while a hundred people passed him by.

‘Pardon me, young man.’

A stranger laid a hand on his arm, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. But when he turned, he saw, not Ward Patrol, but a little old woman leaning on a cane, looking up at him kindly.
‘Didn’t mean to give you a fright,’ she said with a kindly laugh. ‘But I saw you and I thought, poor thing looks a bit lost. First time in London?’

Tiny didn’t know what to say or do. People didn’t talk to him on the streets. That just didn’t happen. Stupidly, he found himself nodding.

‘I thought as much. Where are you trying to go?’

He mumbled the name of the station.

‘Eh?’ She leant in. ‘Sorry, son, my hearing’s not what it used to be.’

He inclined his mouth to her ear. ‘Finsbury Park, ma’am.’

‘Well then, let’s take a look.’ She pointed to a spot on the map. ‘We’re here, yes? So you’ll want to take the Jubilee line toward Stanmore. See there where it says Stanmore?’ She pointed to a sign in the distance. ‘You get on the next train, and get off at Green Park Station, just here.’ Her finger traced a path on the map. ‘Then you switch trains and get on the Victoria line toward Walthamstow Central, and get off at Finsbury Park. See? Not so hard.’

He stared at the map, trying desperately to understand it.

‘Jubilee is grey,’ she added. ‘Victoria is light blue.’

‘Thank you kindly, ma’am, that’s most helpful, ma’am.’

She smiled at him, but her eyes flicked down to his wrists; he only then remembered he wasn’t wearing the bracelets. Would she call him out?

‘Best of luck to you, then, young man.’

He followed her instructions and soon found himself on the train, ears straining to hear the conductor announce the next station, and then the next, until he reached Green Park Station. A couple nearby he overheard talking about transferring to the Victoria line, and he followed them. He felt he had been traveling for hours. But he spied on people’s watches, and it had not yet gone eight o’clock.

Even though he couldn’t see it for himself, for fear of looking anyone in the eye, he felt that he was being watched. People stared. They knew he was a ward. They knew he was being disobedient. He had the look of a runner. Any minute now, he thought, it would be over. They’d catch him, chain him, drag him away. Then what would Mr Wilkes think? What would he do? How much greater would his debt be after this? Tiny clutched the pillowcase close to his body, as though to protect it. The hardness of the apple pressed into his empty stomach.

‘This is the Victoria Line, service to Walthamstow Central. Next stop, Finsbury Park. Mind the gap.’

This was it. He rose to shaky feet.

When he stepped outside, the sun was nearing the horizon, casting long shadows. Before him, four buses lingered on a long drive. One more was pulling away. The clock read 19.59. He’d made it.

He dared to look around at the faces of those coming and going, but as yet, he did not see the man called James. But he said he’d come.

Tiny sat on a bench, held his pillowcase in his lap, and waited.

Still, he waited.

The bench was warm beneath him, but he felt cold. He often felt cold, even in direct sunlight.

He wondered what his new name would be. He wondered how long it would take to reach Dover. Would he be able to see it in the dark?

Because the world was darkening, and no one was coming.

And still, he waited. Even after the church bells chimed nine o’clock, and then ten o’clock, Tiny didn’t move from the bench. He didn’t unclench his fingers from the pillowcase. There were no more buses. There were no more people. He couldn’t return to Canary Wharf because he didn’t know how. He didn’t know where he was, and he had no means of getting there, and if he walked, he did not know in which direction to point his feet. He had been tricked. The kind man had lied to him, like he’d been lied to before. Fooled him into leaving the flat on a day that wasn’t Monday. Now it was past curfew, and he was stranded.

He waited still.

A red-and-white chequered car slowly rolled down the drive the buses had deserted an hour ago. When Tiny noticed the patrol vehicle, panic roiled in his stomach like water in a hot pot. He thought he might try to run. Instead, he froze.

A car window rolled down, and the officer set her elbow on the door. ‘Oi there, mate. You all right?’

Tiny didn’t answer.

‘Last bus rolled out of here more than an hour ago.’

Terrified, he nodded. It was a warning. Just stand, he thought, and walk away. He stood.

But the officer parked the car and stepped out of it. As she drew closer, she set her thumbs to her belt and said, ‘You’re looking a little out of sorts. Can I see some ID, please?’

He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t run from the police. He couldn’t lie to one either. It was futile, thinking there was any way out of it. He was caught, one way or another. So he reached into his left pocket and withdrew the bracelets he hadn’t been able to throw away. ‘Sorry, ma’am,’ he said as he slipped them back on.

The officer frowned at him.

She reached for the wand at her side, but paused. Then she lifted her hand to the com on her jacket, but again, she stalled, thinking, taking the measure of him. Tiny shrank from her gaze. He didn’t like being looked at like that.

‘Come on, then,’ she said with a sigh. ‘I’ll take you home.’

She put him in the back of the patrol vehicle and started the car.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked a few minutes later, watching him through the rear-view mirror.

‘Tiny,’ he answered dejectedly. He was being marched back to the flat yet again by another officer.
Not for stealing this time. For breaking curfew. For trying to run. It would be ten times worse than normal, and he knew it.

There was a long stretch of silence following his answer, and he wasn’t sure she had heard him. Then she replied, ‘I’m Sally.’

She hadn’t scanned his tattoo or activated the bracelets. Nor had she asked where his host lived, not even his host’s name. Was she going to take him straight to Storage, then? He should have never left the flat. He stared at his knees then closed his eyes, hating himself and fighting back the tears. He didn’t want her to see him cry.

It wasn’t until the car slowed and stopped and the engine turned off that he lifted his head again and saw that they were in a small car park. She was opening his door.

‘Leave the bracelets in the car,’ she said, ‘and let’s go eat.’

Startled, he looked out the window. The neon lights of an all-night diner blinked back.

‘Sally Donovan?’

But besides spluttering out the name, Sherlock was speechless. The policewoman, John said, was the same officer who had pulled him aside in Brixton on their first case together. Constable Sally Donovan, Sherlock’s long-time verbal-sparring-and-general-insults opponent. Donovan?

‘Yes, sir.’

Donovan! That sour, pickled, prickly, wannabe detective? Picking up stray wards and taking them to dinner? This story had turns enough to make him dizzy.

‘She ordered me food,’ John continued. ‘A turkey sandwich and chips, and when I’d finished that, a chocolate shake. It was good. I’d never had one before. The copper, though, she had only soup. She didn’t say much, just watched me eat, asked if it was good. I said yes, very good. I ate until I was full. It had been a long time since . . . since I’d been able to do that.’

‘Just watched you eat,’ Sherlock repeated pensively, trying to make sense of it all. Apparently, before joining Lestrade’s team, she had been a Ward Patrol officer, which surprised him. He didn’t know one could make a lateral move from Ward Patrol services to a proper police officer of the Met, not in the time Donovan had evidently done it. She was still so new at it, yet so smug, that it had felt almost necessary to goad her about her green horns. From what he knew of her, she was plainly no-nonsense and rigidly by-the-book. So it struck him as odd that she should come across a ward in a place and time he is not meant to be, not wearing the bracelets, and choose to take him to dinner.

‘Did she not talk to you at all?’

‘A little.’ John shook his head, almost remorsefully. ‘I wish I had known, then, what to say.’

‘Are you still hungry?’ the officer asked. ‘More chips, maybe? Soup? Coffee?’

Tiny’s eyes grazed the edges of the cleaned plate, wanting to press his fingertips to the crumbs and salt and suck on them, just to taste it all a little longer. He’d never eaten anything as delicious in all his life, he reckoned, as that turkey sandwich and hot chips, made fresh, just for him. But he’d eaten
too much, too fast. His jaw ached, a pain deep in his gums, which had been growing for weeks now, and his stomach was fit to bursting. He wasn’t used to so much. If he had even one more bite, he might be sick. Already, he was feeling like he might throw it all up.

He shook his head.

‘What happened here?’ she asked, and touched her own neck to indicate his.

Self-consciously, covered the bruise with a hand. It wasn’t so bad. He just bruised easily these days. ‘Nothing, ma’am,’ he murmured.

‘Doesn’t look like nothing.’

‘An accident, ma’am.’

‘Whose accident?’

‘Mine.’

‘Really?’

He didn’t know what to say to that.

‘You seemed awfully hungry tonight. Not eating so well at home these days? Anything you want to tell me about that?’

He shook his head.

‘No, you’re not eating well? Or no, you don’t want to tell me?’

The room was feeling warmer; he felt sicker.

‘Or maybe you can tell me why you were at the bus station.’

‘I . . . got lost.’

‘Tiny.’

He chanced a glance upward and saw the officer leaning into the table, her hand stretched halfway across toward him. ‘If something is wrong, at home, with your host, you need help. I can help. But you have to talk to me. I have to hear you say it.’

Tiny wished he had never left the flat. He wished he had never believed the man called James. Everything was a trick. Everyone was a liar. Ward Patrol took wards away and put them in Storage, and that was that. That was that.

She kept talking, asking questions, but he couldn’t utter a word for fear she would use it against him, somehow. At long last, when their table had been cleared and the wait staff began sweeping pointedly nearby, she reached inside her pocket and pulled out a small card. She held it out to him, text forward.

‘Look, I can’t force you to say anything. But if things are bad, or if they get very bad, you can call me. See this? My phone number. It’s a way out.’

He stared at her, uncomprehending, like the idiot he was.
‘Some hosts are bad news,’ she said, but he didn’t understand how she could know anything about that. ‘So please. Take it.’

*He had no choice. To please her, he took the card.*

Then, when all was said and done, she took him back.

***

‘Why didn’t you tell her?’

John cocked his head. ‘Tell her what?’

‘What he was doing to you.’

He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. ‘It didn’t occur to me.’

‘What didn’t?’

‘That anyone would be bothered. I didn’t know what was happening, Mr Holmes. She was Ward Patrol. She scared me. She wanted me to say things I couldn’t say. And it didn’t make sense to me.’

John twisted a stray thread on the arm of the chair. ‘I wanted to be a good ward. And a good ward keeps his host’s secrets.’

‘Not when they’re criminal,’ Sherlock said through clenched teeth.

‘Yes sir,’ said John, as though chastened, but not like he believed it.

To any man or woman of sound reasoning, John’s world made little sense. That he should feel any sense of allegiance to a someone who had hurt him so badly, even in the hour he was trying to escape him, seemed a paradox. That he should shirk from an extended helping hand when he had, that very evening, been seeking it, baffled and dismayed. But Sherlock was making every effort to see the world through John’s eyes, and follow the reasoning of a troubled mind. In a way, he understood it. But he could not shut down his own intellectual faculties, and he knew it was all wrong-headed. It was a problem that could not be fixed in a day.

‘So she took you back,’ he said, encouraging John to continue.

John nodded. ‘I hoped Mr Wilkes would not be in that night. If there are no guests, he is not likely to come. I thought I might just slip on in and everything would be fine. He would never know I had tried to run.’

‘But?’

John looked crestfallen, remembering. ‘He was there.’

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As they neared the building in Tower Hamlets, the officer leant over the steering wheel to peer through the windscreen, giving a low whistle. ‘Your host must be pretty well off,’ she muttered.

Tiny occupied the passenger’s seat, rather than the back, but leant his body into the door, all but resting his head on the window, looking up at the tall building and its lighted windows, but for one square at the top, where the light could get neither in nor out. He hated that he was here. He had almost believed he would never again have to walk through those front doors. In any case, she was
wrong. Mr Wilkes wasn’t well off at all. But he didn’t tell her about the debts.

They went up together to the fourteenth floor. Tiny wished she would not follow.

At the door marked 1405, she knocked sharply. Tiny held his breath, listening. For a moment, all was quiet, and he thought, he’d done it, Mr Wilkes would never know. Then, footsteps, and the click of a lock, and his vision blackened for a moment while he stood in abject fear, waiting for the door to open.

‘Sorry to bother you so late, sir,’ said the officer. She showed her badge to the crack in the door.

Mr Wilkes swung the door wide, his mouth an oval and eyebrows lifted high. ‘There you are!’ he exclaimed. ‘My God, I was worried sick! Thank you, officer, I was about to call and report. I hope he wasn’t any trouble . . .’ He reached forward to grab Tiny’s wrist and pull him inside.

But the officer squeezed Tiny’s arm to keep him at her side. ‘No trouble at all, sir. Your ward’s behaviour is above reproach. I apologise for his lateness, but he was a witness to a traffic accident earlier tonight, and we kept him around to give us a report. Just took longer than expected, and I offered to escort him home.’

Mr Wilkes’ eyes were narrowed, his mouth small. ‘Is that so? Huh. I’m sure you’ve got quite a story to tell.’

‘I just wanted you to know,’ she continued, ‘he was immensely helpful. We were lucky he was there.’

‘I’m sure you were. Come on then, in you get.’ He smiled cheek to cheek and held the door wide for Tiny to pass through.

‘He seems pretty tired,’ she persisted. ‘Probably want to send him straight to bed—’

‘I can manage my own ward. Thank you.’ And without further word, he closed the door in the officer’s face. But he waited, watching through the peephole until he was certain she was gone. Just then, Tiny realised he’d left the apple and cheese in the back of the car.

Mr Wilkes turned slowly around. ‘An accident, was it?’

‘Yes sir,’ Tiny mumbled.

‘Pretty bad, eh?’

‘Pretty bad, sir.’

‘Where was it?’

‘Not far, sir.’

‘Anyone hurt?’

‘Man was hit by a bus, sir,’ said Tiny, turning his oft-considered fantasy into an easy lie.

‘Did he die?’

‘I don’t know. Ambulance took him away, sir.’

‘I see. So,’ Mr Wilkes folded his arms and raised his chin. ‘What the hell were you doing out of the flat? Just how the fuck did you get out?’
He had prepared this lie months ago. ‘I think, sir, the door didn’t close properly last time you left. It was open, and I . . . I was out of food, sir, so I . . .’

Mr Wilkes advanced on him, and without touching him, backed him into a wall. ‘You’d better thank your lucky stars tonight, Tiny. Know why?’

He shook his head, staring at the floor.

‘Because you’re fucking lying to me.’ Mr Wilkes wrapped his fingers around Tiny’s throat and squeezed, not with force, but nor was he gentle. ‘And I’d beat you senseless for that—if it weren’t for the fact you have guests tonight.’

Tiny wished he’d just get a sound beating. ‘Yes sir,’ he murmured.

‘Three lads just off their gap year. They’ve paid for jacks and kings, but if they stick you with an ace, so help me god—’

‘I’ll tell you, sir.’

‘Half an hour. Go shower, and get the room ready. We’ll talk about this later.’

In another life, maybe, at this very moment, Tiny might have been sitting on a bus, outside of London, on his way to Dover. If the man James had come, like he’d promised. If there were a God who cared just as much about wards as he did about men like Mr Wilkes, who had debts to pay. Instead, nothing had changed. Tiny was back in the flat, and another night would see him on his back or on his knees. Nothing had changed.

But as he undressed, in his pocket he found the card the officer had given him. It was a dangerous thing to have, like the Oyster Card. Maybe more dangerous. It was a thing best got rid of and never thought about again. Hopes were foolish. Men were liars. For that matter, women were too.

But behind the skirting board, he hid it. Just in case one wasn’t.

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‘It hadn’t been real, the Highwayman’s promise. I guess, he hadn’t either. But it wouldn’t leave my head that maybe . . .’ John looked up at the ceiling, like he was trying to think how to say it. ‘Maybe there was a way out. I didn’t want to live like that anymore. I wasn’t going to last. I didn’t want to last. Not like that.’

‘So you kept Donovan’s card,’ said Sherlock, in awe. It was a little thing, but he was proud of John and even his smallest acts of bravery.

‘I looked at it every night. Held it, just to know I hadn’t imagined it, just to know it was real. When I went out on Mondays to do the shopping, I took it with me. I would see Ward Patrol or other police officers and imagined myself going up to them and handing them the card, and then . . . well, they’d know what to do, maybe. Or maybe, I could give it to someone on the street and ask them to call for me. But I was just a ward. Who would do anything for a ward not their own? What if the police called Mr Wilkes instead? Or, what if they did call her, but she didn’t remember me, or maybe no one would believe me after all about the Downside. Not if I said one thing and Mr Wilkes said another. I thought I would need proof.’

Sherlock wondered if that were true. A mere accusation, surely, would be enough to remove John from that flat and launch an investigation, and the flat alone would yield more than enough evidence to substantiate John’s claims. Surely. But he did wonder. A rich man like Sebastian Wilkes—who
knows what backs he’d scratched in the past among the Metropolitan Police.

‘So you gathered proof yourself.’

John looked to be steeling himself. He was coming to it at last, the crux of it all, and it was not going to be easy for him to speak. ‘There was a Polaroid camera in a chest in the master bedroom, with the other sex toys. Some guests liked to keep mementos, photos, and Mr Wilkes allowed it, as long as they didn’t show my face. He checked them over before they left, always, to make sure. He kept spare film in the bookcase—that is, inside the hollow books—so the guests wouldn’t use up all the rolls. But I knew they were there.’

Of course. John would have known every inch of that flat.

He proceeded to explain how he did it. He saved a paper bag from a shopping trip to start, folding it flat and storing it in a drawer in the kitchen. There was nothing suspicious about a brown paper bag in a drawer. But he was waiting for his opportunity. The master bedroom was locked throughout the day, and only Mr Wilkes had the key. The only time he opened it was when a guest was imminent and things had to be prepared. Afterward, he was allowed to clean, and the door was locked again. That meant his only chance to use the Polaroid camera was while Mr Wilkes was in the flat, and likely a guest as well.

It took a series of nights for him to get what he needed. In the middle of the night, after a round of fucking and while a guest was in the en suite, he made his move. He hurried to the chest, extracted the camera, and snapped shots of bed and soiled sheets, to start, then hid the Polaroids between the mattress and the box spring. Another night, while the guest lay sleeping, he took photos of himself, holding the camera at bad angles or in front of a mirror to show the bruises, swollen skin, welts, bites, fingernail scratches, and hand impressions left on his naked body. Over the course of weeks, his collection grew, as did his paranoia. There was little chance of Mr Wilkes looking beneath the mattress, but what if a guest caught him in the act of taking a photograph, or hiding them? What if they told? What if Mr Wilkes counted the rolls of film and compared them to the number of Polaroids guests left the flat with? It was only a matter of time before he began to wonder what had happened to the rest.

As John told his story, Sherlock’s heart began to race. A response to mounting anxiety, it seemed. Curious. He knew what would happen next. John had already told him. And even if he hadn’t, what he knew of John’s final hours as ward to Sebastian Wilkes already presaged a bad ending. But he couldn’t help but feel the fear rising in him, as if he, too, were about to get caught defying a cruel master.

‘I decided I couldn’t risk using up any more film. Mr Wilkes hadn’t checked the bookcases for while, which meant that every time he came to the flat, it was more and more likely he would. I had to get the photos out of the flat. I had to use the officer’s card. It was a Saturday night, and the guest got drunk. Really drunk. When he passed out, I knew he wouldn’t wake. So carefully, I pulled the paper bag out from under the mattress. It wasn’t flat anymore, because of all the Polaroids. I took it to the ward room. I hid it with the laundry. Then I went back to the master bedroom and pretended to sleep until morning. Mr Wilkes came then, saw the guest out, and left himself. I thought I wouldn’t see him again that day.’

‘This was Sunday morning?’ Sherlock asked.

John nodded. ‘Yes sir. It was the day I got shot.’
Tiny had spent weeks talking himself up, thinking it through, every step of it, so that when the moment came, he wouldn’t hesitate.

Walk out of the flat. Look for a kindly face, perhaps that of an older woman. Hand her the card. Ask her to phone the Ward Patrol officer. Wait. If she comes, hand her the bag. No need to speak or explain. Just hand over the bag, and return to the flat. If she does not come . . . Destroy the bag.

He dug the paper bag out of the laundry. He pulled the card out from behind the skirting board.

Walk out of the flat, he recited to himself. Look for a kindly face. Hand her the card . . .

Stomach clenched with hunger, he waited out the morning. There were never enough people on the streets on a Sunday morning, and as much a they made him nervous, he needed the cover of crowds. He stood by the blackened windows, wishing he could look out. Was it a rainy day, or did the sun shine? No matter. He had only the one jacket.

Walk out of the flat. Look for a kindly face . . .

He double checked the contents of the bag, then triple checked. It felt heavier today. He touched the card through the fabric of his pocket. Then, as a last-minute change, he dropped it into the paper bag instead.

Walk out of the flat. No longer a reminder, but a command to move his feet.

Fear detained him. What if it went wrong? What if the officer hadn’t meant what he thought she’d meant, because Mr Wilkes was the host and was allowed to do what he wanted with his ward? What if she told Mr Wilkes what he had done?

He almost abandoned the scheme. He almost convinced himself to destroy the photographs. But then he thought about his life, and what it looked like, had looked like for five years, and would look like for years and years more, if nothing changed. He couldn’t stand it. If he didn’t act now, nothing would change. And oh, how he yearned for relief from this hellish existence.

Walk out of the flat. Go.

He gathered his courage, put on his bracelets, unlocked the door with the cracked passcode, and stepped into the hall, paper bag tucked under an arm. Go. Go. Go. He turned left, walking straight for the lift. He hit the call button and waited with clenching and unclenching fists. Step two, he thought, look for a kindly face. Look for a kindly face, perhaps that of an older woman . . .

The doors dinged, opened, and Tiny found himself face to face with his host.

He froze. Mr Wilkes stared. Astonishment widened his eyes, like he was looking at a ghost, a thing of impossibility, the prisoner outside of his cage. But the shock was fast evaporating, leaving behind only fury.

Without a word, Mr Wilkes seized Tiny by the back of the neck, dug fingernails into his skin, and marched him back toward the flat. Gripped by panic, Tiny looked around wildly for a place to discard the paper bag. He thought to stuff it inside his jacket, or throw it into a corner, or in some way destroy it, but there was nothing he could do. Mr Wilkes unlocked the door and thrust him inside. He lost his balance and landed on his knees, clutching the paper bag to his chest, unable to breathe.

The door slammed behind him.
“The fuck you think you’re doing?” Mr Wilkes shouted. He kicked Tiny’s backside, laying him out flat over the paper bag.

Tiny’s hands splayed against the floor and every muscle tensed. His mind was in white-out panic.

‘Answer me, you little fucker!’ Mr Wilkes kicked him in the side, hard against his ribs. Reactively, Tiny curled into himself, exposing the bag on the floor. ‘What’s this?’

‘N-nothing!’ he gasped, but Mr Wilkes had already snatched the half-hidden paper bag out from under his body and opened wide its mouth. ‘It’s nothing, sir! Something a guest left, and I—I—I was getting rid of it, sir, that’s all!’

With a huff, Mr Wilkes dug a hand inside the bag and extracted the photographs. They numbered forty-three, and as he sifted through them, his face went from fury red to palest white. Tiny wanted to scramble to his feet and rush out the door, and run, and run, and never stop running. But there was nowhere to go. Slowly, Mr Wilkes pulled, from the very bottom of the bag, the card from the police officer.

‘I was g-going to b-bin it, sir. I swear, I swear.’

‘You . . .’ Mr Wilkes looked down at him, mouth agape. His voice was barely more than a whisper. ‘You were . . . going to . . . expose me?’

‘No!’

But something had snapped. Nothing Tiny could say, no plea he could make, would stop what happened next. Mr Wilkes was enraged. He screamed incoherent obscenities as he kicked Tiny repeatedly in the stomach and ribs and jaw. He dragged him across the floor, toward the ward room, stopping halfway there to fall upon him, straddling his waist to thrash his head and strangle his neck until his face purpled and eyes bulged. Only then did he get stop and haul him the remainder of the way. He as good as threw him into the ward room, panting and spitting.

‘Stay there, little sneak,’ he seethed. ‘Stay the fuck right there, and don’t you move.’ Then Mr Wilkes slammed the door, leaving Tiny in the dark.

As he waited in terror for Mr Wilkes to return, he tried to tend to his wounds, but he couldn’t touch his face without sending a shock of pain along his jaw, or his side without gasping at the tenderness of his ribs. He should have waited one more day. No, he should never have taken those photos to begin with, and destroyed the card. He should never have entertained thoughts of leaving, or listened to the Patrol officer, or believed the man called James. So many mistakes, so many.

Just as he began to hope that Mr Wilkes wouldn’t return, at least not that day, Tiny heard him at the door. He pushed himself to his knees and assumed a penitent position: head hanging, palms planted on the floor. All he could see was Mr Wilkes’ shiny black shoes.

Suddenly, a lash cracked down on him, striking him across the neck. A stiff, leather belt, his host’s own. He recoiled against the blow, but another fell, and another, smarting like a whip, until he was curled on his side, arms around his head and face tucked.

‘Say you’re sorry!’

‘I am, sir, I am!’

‘That was very bad. Very bad, Tiny. You’re a bad’—crack!—‘bad’—crack!—‘ward.’ Two more lashes. ‘Say it!’
‘I’m a bad ward!’

‘You do bad things, you have bad thoughts. It’s a wonder I haven’t thrown you out with the rubbish before now. You’re rubbish. Say it.’

‘I’m rubbish.’

Mr Wilkes turned the belt in his hand, and when he swung his arm again, the buckle smarted against Tiny’s back and knuckles and head. Three metallic lashes.

‘I don’t know how the guests can stand to touch you. I can barely stand to look at you. Filth. Say it.’

‘I’m filth, sir, I know it,’ he sobbed.

Mr Wilkes stepped forward, lifted the belt again, and Tiny cowered, trembling.

‘Pathetic. You don’t even know how good you have it here, do you? I mean, God, Tiny, you ungrateful moron! You think I would have made you do this for the rest of your life? What, am I some sort of monster? The debt is nearly paid! A month! Did you know? One more month, and it would have been over. The debt would have been paid in full, plus interest. All this? It would be over.’

Tiny lowered his hands slowly from his face and looked up at Mr Wilkes in horror.

‘And you just had to go and ruin it.’

‘I didn’t know, sir. S-swear to God, I didn’t.’

‘But your little stunt? That’s worth at least a year to me.’

‘Oh please, sir, no. Please.’

‘Maybe two.’

‘Please, Mr Wilkes.’ Tiny couldn’t help himself but began to cry. ‘I can’t do it another year, I can’t!’

‘Shut up. I don’t want to hear you. You’re going to stay in here and be quiet while I think what to do with you.’

He let fall one more lash, then slammed the door closed, leaving Tiny alone.

An hour later he returned, calmer now, and smiling a pitying sort of smile.

‘I’m not a bad guy, Tiny,’ he said, crouching down to where Tiny sat in the corner. He laid a hand on Tiny’s thigh and rubbed consolingly. ‘I’ve done so much for you over the years, haven’t I? You live in the best part of London, in a beautiful building. How many wards can say that? You don’t have to work at all during the day. How many hosts would let their wards be so lazy? I only ever tried to treat you right, given our arrangement. So why would you want to hurt me like this?’

Tiny’s left eye was swelling. He couldn’t see too well. All he could see were the circles Mr Wilkes traced on his thigh with the flat of his hand. He tried not to flinch.

‘So I have to decide what to do with you, eh? After what you pulled? I just . . .’ He gave a great sigh. ‘I just can’t trust you. You’ve lost my trust, Tiny. So you’ve brought this upon yourself. Firstly, there will be no more going out. Ever. You’ll keep to this room. I’ll have to fit it with a lock, just to be safe, because I can’t trust you to keep your word. See what it’s come to? So you’ll stay locked in until
you’re needed. I’ll have to hire someone to bring you your food now, and take you to piss. I don’t know how much it will cost, but you’ll have to pay that debt, too. I’m sorry, but . . . I don’t know how long it will take you to get out of this one. The hole will just keep growing. That’s the nature of debts. I wish you’d thought of that.’

Tiny moved to speak, though it hurt to move his jaw. ‘If the debt is so great, sir, perhaps . . . you could sell me to another host to pay it.’

Mr Wilkes’ hand stopped but didn’t retreat. Then he began to laugh. ‘You really think you’re worth something?’ He laughed louder. ‘Tiny, you should have considered your resale value before you agreed to become a whore. You have no resale value. I wouldn’t be able to get even fifty pounds for you. Your only value is as a piece of meat one can fuck.’

He cracked his neck, then rose to his feet, agitated. Tiny thought he might leave. Instead he began to pace.

‘You have to think these things through, Tiny! So what if you had gone to the police. So what? What were you thinking would happen next? Not to me, forget about me. But to you? Did you think you’d be put with a nice family, somewhere in the country, somewhere they’ll let you stay up late watching telly and feed you ice cream and take you on picnics? Is that what you pictured in that stupid head of yours? Get real. You’re a dirty, ruined, nasty little ward who’s spent the last five years with a cock up his arse. No one will want you around their children, their friends. Good quality people, taking on someone like you? A menace who can’t be trusted to keep the affairs of his host confident? No host will take you on after a stunt like that! You’ve ruined yourself, Tiny! Utterly and irrevocably.’

Mr Wilkes reached behind him and pulled something from the back of his trousers. A wave of cold passed through him when he saw what it was: the shiny black gun. Mr Wilkes stopped pacing and looked down at the weapon in his hand, thinking.

‘Hell, after what you’ve tried to pull? I’d be a fool to keep you myself, wouldn’t I?’

‘Oh please, sir, please,’ said Tiny, his voice as small as his name.

‘Please what?’ He turned slowly, his arm lifting. Taking aim. ‘Please shoot you, or please let you live?’

Tiny gasped silently. He pushed himself further into the corner. ‘I’m s-so sorry, M-Mr Wilkes. I just c-can’t do this anymore. I’m so—’

‘Sorry? You tried to ruin my life!’ His eyes flashed manically, and he charged at Tiny, grabbing his throat, and pressing his head into the wall. He shoved the gun between Tiny’s teeth, and it rattled in his shaking hand. Tiny whimpered as tears tracked down his cheeks. ‘You thought you could send me to prison! What would happen to you then, you little shit? I feed you. I house you.’ The gun withdrew and pressed instead to the centre of his forehead. ‘I give your wretched excuse of a life purpose! And you have the gall to tell me you can’t lie there and take it like the shit piece of whore that you are? I should blow a hole through your sodding head right now, that’s what I should do. Give men something new to fuck.’

Tiny squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the blast—first, the click of a trigger, then a deafening rendering as an ungodly pain tore through his stupid little head, and then maybe, at last, the blessed release of nothingness. He wanted to be nothing.

Nothing happened.
‘You disgusting, double-crossing slag.’ Mr Wilkes dug the gun into his skin, then suddenly withdrew it, grabbed Tiny by the front of his shirt, and yanked him away from the wall and into centre of the room.

Tiny lay on his side and let out a ragged sob.

‘Say it. Say you’re a slag.’

But all he could do was cry.

‘Say it, bitch!’ He kicked Tiny again in the stomach. ‘On your knees, let’s go. Look up at me and tell me what a revolting, cock-sucking slag you are.’

With a groan, Tiny rolled himself to his stomach, then with quivering muscles pushed to his knees. He felt like he might vomit, or faint.

‘Well?’

The gun was shaking in Mr Wilkes’ hand at his side.

‘I’m a slag,’ Tiny mouthed.

‘Louder.’

‘I’m a slag,’ he repeated, tears rolling down his face and unable to pull his eyes away from the gun.

‘Say you’ll never disobey me again.’

‘I won’t, sir, I promise.’

‘Say you’re mine forever.’

‘I’m . . . I’m . . .’

‘Damn you, say it!’

Tiny trembled. The words wouldn’t come. Not those words. ‘I . . . can’t, sir. I can’t.’

‘What? What did you say?’

‘Sir, please. I can’t. . . live like this anymore! I can’t, I can’t, I—’

Mr Wilkes seized a fistful of his shirt and shook him roughly. He cracked the side of his head with the gun and dropped him again to the floor. Then he let out an infuriated shout, paced from one end of the room to the other, the gun at one moment hanging at his side, the next, punching through the air. Then he swung around and aimed again at Tiny’s chest, where he lay supine on the floor.

‘You have one choice, and it’s your last. Live or die. You keep doing what you’re told, and with a smile on your fucking face, or I have no more use of you. Got me? So what will it be, you slag. Live or die?’

Tiny’s eyes were streaming as he looked from his host’s maddened face, to the round barrel of the gun, wherein resided his last hope for escape. In the end, it wasn’t really a choice at all.

‘Please,’ he whispered. ‘Kill me.’
Mr Wilkes stared in disbelief. Perfect quiet filled the ward room. Tiny had stopped breathing. Mr Wilkes stood as still as a statue. Then a frightening madness brightened his eyes, and it was the last thing Tiny remembered seeing before the deafening blast. With a searing, indescribable pain, he was torn out of that life forever.

***

Silently but earnestly, John began to cry. He covered his mouth, then his eyes. Then, whether in embarrassment or abject misery, he once again bent over his knees, wrapped his hands around the back of his head, and started rocking back and forth. But he was inconsolable, and despising himself, he began to beat himself with the heel of his hand, hitting himself again and again with a solid thwack.

Sherlock could stay himself no longer. He jolted out of his chair and found himself on his knees in front of John. For a moment, he floundered, not knowing what to do, where to touch, or if he even should. But he couldn’t let this abide. He reached forward and covered John’s head with his hands so that the striking palm fell on the backs of his own hand instead.

‘John, John,’ he wept.

Was it the memory of the pain of being shot that beset him? The fear of dying? The desire to? Or was it the culmination of all the horror he had passed through, and a hatred strong enough to attempt to end his life? For so long, he had kept it inside, never speaking a word to any soul. How could Sherlock possibly let him continue to stand alone?

He didn’t know where it came from, or why now, but rising to the forefront of his mind was a memory from when he was a child, just twelve years old. The school year had just ended, and it was the weekend, and all his classmates were gathering for an end-of-term celebration at a house not far from his. Sherlock alone had not received an invitation. He told no one, and pretended even to himself that he didn’t care to be so singled out and so excluded. It wasn’t dumb. They were dumb. He didn’t mind being alone. Alone was what he knew best, alone protected him. But that evening, while he worked on his model planetarium in his bedroom, his father came to his room and asked if he should like to go to the party. When Sherlock answered angrily that parties were stupid, that his peers were stupid, each and every one of them, his father had sat on his bed and asked, ‘Sherlock, lad. Have you any friends at school?’ And Sherlock couldn’t speak. He couldn’t tell his father about the jeering and spitting, about being laughed at in gym and ignored at lunch, or being beaten up in the loo. But at his father’s probing, he had burst into angry and mortified tears, for so long had he been friendless and unhappy, and not told a soul. He had thought his father would be ashamed of having such a backward son. Instead, Mr Holmes stood and closed the bedroom door. Then he returned and gathered the boy into his arms. ‘There now,’ he said. ‘Let it out. Go on then, lad. It’s okay to cry. Some days, we all need a good, long, loud cry.’

Sherlock had admired his father in many respects, not least of all because he had not been a soft man, and once upon a time, Sherlock, like all Holmes men, had had little patience for softness. But this memory, which stuck out among all the others as an anomaly of character, was one he had never forgotten. Neither ever mentioned it again, but Sherlock regretted that they had not. Now, his father was dead, and he would never get the chance.

Sherlock pushed himself nearer. ‘It’s okay.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Holmes!’

‘No, no, it’s okay to cry. You can cry. This is good, it’s fine. It’s all fine.’
But despairing, it was as though John didn’t hear him. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ he repeated as he sobbed.

Sherlock took John’s face in his hands and held it close. ‘Why? Why, John? You have nothing to be sorry about.’

John’s eyes were lined with red and shone like water. ‘You didn’t know,’ he said, voice choked.

‘I—’

‘You bought me, and you didn’t know the things I have done. I didn’t tell you. I couldn’t. I’m the kind of broken you can’t fix.’

Sherlock recoiled at the words. John must have overheard his conversation with Lestrade. He hated that he had ever spoken such awful words.

He brushed a thumb under John’s eye to wipe away the tears but they were so copious that all he did was smear them. ‘I chose you,’ he said. ‘And I’m so happy I did. Know why? Because if I hadn’t, I would have missed out on something wonderful. The best decision I ever made.’

John’s eyes were incredulous. ‘You don’t hate me? Even knowing—?’

‘No. God no, never, not in the slightest. Just a few months on, and I can’t imagine Baker Street without you. I wish . . .’ He smiled, wishing he had the right words. ‘I wish I had found you years and years sooner.’

John made a soft exclamation of surprise, swallowed up in a half-sob. ‘Really? Me, sir?’

‘You are strong, and brave, and good, John, so good. Nothing Wilkes did to you changes that. Nothing. There’s something inside of you, something he could never get to, and that’s your good heart. I’ve never seen a heart so good and pure as yours.’ He smiled again, this time sadly, for John’s expression was nothing but perplexed. He could not see himself the way Sherlock saw him. But he cupped his hand and touched it to his left breast in wonder, as though holding a stethoscope to his heart and listening to see if what Sherlock was saying was true. ‘You asked me for my help, right?’

John nodded. ‘To become a good ward, sir, yes.’

The kind you don’t throw away, Sherlock realised he meant.

‘I’ll do you one better. I’m going to help you see the amazing person you already are. And I’m going to help you heal. You’ll see. Life can be good. Your life. It’s far from over, and you have so much living to do. I don’t hate you, John. I never could. I love you.’

Another sob tore from John’s throat, but really, it was from a place so much deeper than that. He was a man who had known only hate and disparagement, all the days of his life. To be loved was an unknown, a heat that burned more than it warmed, and he didn’t know whether to shirk away or draw nearer the fire. He weakened, and fell forward onto his own knees, joining Sherlock on the floor. Sherlock gathered him into his arms like a child and held him tightly, stroking the back of his head. He knew he would never let go.

‘It’s okay. It’s okay,’ he soothed. ‘Some days, we all need a good, long, loud cry.’

End of Part I
How It All Began

It was nearly midnight, and he was tipsy. Maybe a little more than tipsy. The lift dinged happily when it reached the twenty-ninth floor, and he used the wall to guide himself down the hall. When he reached his door, he placed his thumb on the reader and let himself in. His bed was calling to him, and he was hoping to take the pleasures of the evening—the dancing women and throbbing music and a few drags on a fag—into his dreams and sleep late into the morning, reveling in his own drunken revelry. Rivalry? Rivivalry? Riviviv . . . He chuckled to himself and hit the light.

He froze.

There, in his own sitting room, in his £3200 high-backed black leather armchair, wearing a dark suit, one leg crossed over, stiff as a statue, placid as a summer’s breeze, was Sherlock Holmes. Holding a gun. And he was pointing it directly as Sebastian Wilkes.

‘Close the door,’ Holmes said.

Wilkes gaped. But, as if of its own accord, his toe nudged the door closed.

‘How’joo . . .’ He swallowed, his throat suddenly burning and itchy. Slowing down, he tried again. ‘How’d you get in?’

‘Please,’ Holmes said with an air of condescension, as if the answer were the most obvious thing in the world.

‘I mean’—he laughed nervously—‘a little forewarning, mate? I wasn’t ssspecting . . .’ He was having trouble forming words through the slush of alcohol. For that matter, he was having trouble forming coherent thoughts. ‘You, er . . .’ He licked his parched lips. ‘You thinkin’ of taking that case ’gain?’ It had been a little over a week, and the police were nowhere near figuring out who had vandalised the bank’s property, let alone who the perpetrator had got in.

‘No.’

‘Oh.’

The gun didn’t waver. Wait, was that his gun? No, it couldn’t have been. He locked his in a safe in the bedroom.

‘I’m here on account of John.’

He felt a little more blood drain from his face. He didn’t mean . . . ? No, that little nit wouldn’t have dared. ‘Oh, your, um, your ward, is it?’ God, his head hurt. This was not the conversation he needed to be having, not tonight. He could barely think clear for two seconds together. ‘Feeling any better? Dunno, Sherlock, seemed a bit dodgy, that one. Not quite right in the head. Know what I mean? I’d, er, watch him. Might be trouble.’

‘Is that why you tried to murder him?’

Sebastian’s eyes snapped to the gun, and then back at Holmes’ face. Suddenly, he was feeling a hell of a lot soberer.

‘I didn’t.’
Sweat trickled down his back.

‘You’re a liar.’

‘Look,’ said Sebastian, trying to be stern, ‘don’t believe a word he says. He was trouble, right from the start. More trouble than he looks! He— he provoked me. He was basically asking for it!’

Holmes shot up from the chair and charged him. He startled backward and his already pounding skull struck the door, but next he knew, Holmes’ had him by the throat, and the pistol found a home square in the middle of his forehead.

‘Any reason I shouldn’t blow your goddam head off?’

‘Sherlock!’ he squeaked. ‘I can e’sssplain!’

‘I’m sure it’s one hell of an explanation, the things you did to him.’

Holmes seized the back of his collar and as good as dragged him across the room and down the hall, through his bedroom—he gawped when he saw the door to his safe hanging open—then into his own master bathroom. There, Holmes dropped him on the tiles inside his expansive walk-in shower. Then, at the violent twist of the knob, cold water erupted from the shower head and poured down upon him. He screamed as the shock of it fired every nerve.

‘Sober up,’ said Holmes. He gasped and let out high-pitched whimpers, twisting under the water. After a few seconds, Holmes killed the shower. Then, like he was king of the castle, he sat himself upon the closed lid of the toilet. Sebastian gulped for air and blink rapidly, clearing his eyes, and he noticed two things: one, there was a carrier bag at Holmes’ feet; and two, a pair of cuffs was dangling from a metal support bar in the wall inside the shower.

‘Tell me about your *debts*, Seb.’

‘Please, Sherlock, this is insane. Insane.’

‘Tell me about the going rate for one night with a male ward.’

Sebastian sighed, his dripping head falling back into the tiled corner of the shower. ‘That little fucker.’

Holmes was instantly on his feet, looming overhead; Sebastian cowered.

‘Watch who you’re calling a fucker, you dumb fuck.’

‘Holmes!’ He was shaking, from cold, from fear. His hands stretched before him as a protective measure from being struck. ‘You can’t hurt me! You’ll never get away with it! I have friends, powerful friends! And the police—!’

‘You think *I* can’t fool the police. *Me?*’ He seized Wilkes’ wrist and with the speed of a sleight-of-hand-trick magician, locked it in the handcuffs attached to the pole.

‘Oh God, what are you going to do to me? What are you going to—!’

But Holmes wasn’t answering his questions. Instead, he reached into the carrier bag and pulled out an identifying collar.

‘No no, please. Please! Holmes!’
But that was the last he could speak. Holmes fitted the collar around his neck, pressed his fingerprint to the activation button, and stepped back. Wilkes’ words turned into nothing but air. Every time he went to speak, an electric pulse relaxed the vocal cords, rendering them useless.

‘Can’t have you screaming for help once I’ve gone.’

This was not happening. He’d drunk more than he thought and was trapped in some sort of garish nightmare. This was not happening.

‘You and I are going to deal with this. But not tonight. I want you good and sober when I come back. And don’t think anyone will wonder where you are. Your PA thinks you’re in Hong Kong on business and won’t be back for another a week. You’ve told her not to bother you while you’re away.’

A week! Wilkes mouthed in alarm.

‘Meanwhile’—Holmes leant forward and lifted Wilkes’ phone from the inner pocket of his jacket—‘you’re going to stay right here, with nothing but your thoughts to condemn you. And this.’

Still holding Wilkes at gunpoint, Holmes pinched the bottom of the carrier bag to overturn it. Out spilt apples, a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, six tins of beans, and a carton of eggs.

‘I hard-boiled them myself,’ said Holmes, like it was a joke between friends. ‘All that should see you through for seven days, till I come back. I suggest you ration it well.’

All Wilkes could do was jangle his silver bracelets in protest. His eyes searched wildly for a means of escape. Not happening, not happening. He had no phone, no voice, nothing to call for help. Seven days, right here? Drinking shower water, eating cold beans straight from a tin? He couldn’t be serious! And what about the toilet? He couldn’t even reach the toilet!

Seeing his panicked gaze, Holmes followed it. ‘Oh, you probably want some toilet paper, eh?’ He pulled a roll off the wall and held it out to Wilkes. In disbelief, and with wet hands, Wilkes reached for it.

‘But it’ll cost you an apple.’

He snatched up one of the apples, winked at Wilkes, and took a large bite. Then, without further ado, promise, or threat, he took his leave.

***

When Sally Donovan opened her front door to find Sherlock Holmes standing with hands folded behind him and an imperiously raised chin, she jutted out her jaw and put a hand on her hip; the other gripped the door, ready to throw it back in its frame. Sherlock ignored the cold greeting.

‘I saw the wall calendar,’ he said quickly.

She blinked stupidly. ‘Excuse me?’

Good lord, was everyone a simpleton? He did weary of having to draw the lines of reasoning for even the most obvious statements.

‘At the Yard. I saw you had the day off.’

‘What the hell are you talking about? You haven’t been to the Yard in weeks. Lestrade’s made a
point of being pissy about it.’

‘Yes, but you see, Sally,’ he said, condescendingly, ‘calendars often display the full month, not the week. I was there at the start of the month. May I come in?’

‘I’m taking a personal day, Holmes.’

‘And I’m here on a personal matter.’

Her confusion and curiosity warred with her impulse to slam the door. Sherlock waited her out. Things would go far more smoothly if she actually invited him in.

‘What matter?’ she finally asked, though dully, like she didn’t really care.

‘John.’

She blinked. ‘Your ward?’

Yes, her interest was most certainly piqued. Interesting. Her expression had softened, and strangely, Sherlock felt himself softening, for the simple fact that she had remembered the name attached to his ward was John, and not Jim.

‘Yes, my ward.’

‘What about him?’

Sherlock reached inside his pocket and pulled out a business card with Sgt Donovan’s name on and handed it back to her. ‘I understand this isn’t the first time you’ve given him your card.’

He had meant only to open the door to the purpose of his visit: to find out more about the night Donovan had found John at the bus station in Islington. So he was surprised when Donovan drew herself up and became defensive.

‘If you’re expecting an apology—’ she began.

‘What for?’

She scoffed. ‘You’re having me on.’

It occurred to him that now he was being the simpleton. Donovan thought he was upset with her for suggesting to John that he might need to call her if Sherlock mistreated him. Aha. So she had assumed Sherlock capable of abusing his own ward. Forty-eight hours ago, this would have riled him. Today, however, knowing now what he did about John’s last host, he felt only—but strangely—gratitude.

‘You did what you thought best. I ask again: May I come in?’

A little dumbfounded now, she stepped back. Sherlock entered her flat and saw she had company. On the sofa, putting a final gloss coat on recently painted nails, was a beautiful woman with dark brown eyes, long, raven locks, and light brown skin. She raised an eyebrow when Sherlock came into the room.

‘Sherlock, Janine, Janine, Sherlock Holmes.’

The woman called Janine made an aborted laugh. ‘The consulting detective, is it?’
Sherlock furrowed his brow. ‘Yes, in fact.’

‘Oh, I’ve heard a lot about you.’ She rose to her feet, blowing on her fingernails. ‘Forgive me if I don’t shake hands. Wet nails, you know.’

‘He’s not staying long,’ Donovan said, ‘but if we could have the room . . .’

‘Fine, it’s fine,’ said Janine, strolling by him and giving him the once-over, as if searching for his rumoured third appendage. ‘I was going to pop off to the shops anyway. Pleasure to meet you at last, Mr Holmes.’

He grunted but paid her little mind. The moment she was out of the room and the front door closed behind her, he returned to the matter that had brought him there: ‘You confuse me, Sally,’ he said conversationally.

‘An achievement, I reckon,’ she answered drily.

They stood in the middle of the sitting room facing one another. Neither moved to sit.

‘The night you met John, what exactly did you see? A lone ward out past curfew, clearly, but what else? As a Ward Patrol officer, your duty dictates that you should have scanned his tattoo, cited him for violation, and escorted him straight home, if not to a holding cell. Instead, you took him to a diner, watched him eat, declined to cite him at all, and even made excuses for him to his host. Why? What did you see that compelled you to show such compassion on him?’

‘I—’

‘Was it the sallow skin and bony cheeks? Was he, perhaps, sporting bruises or scratches? Or was it simply that he seemed so alone, and afraid?’

Donovan folded her arms, but it was not a posture of defiance, as he was used to seeing in her. Rather, she seemed to be holding herself together, and her eyes looked pained.

‘You did suspect, then,’ Sherlock continued, ‘that his host was a bastard. John didn’t have to say a word for you to know that. So why did you return him? Why not take him to a ward sanctuary? There’s the rub, Sally. You didn’t report him. A kindness, yes, but a small one. What kindness was there, really, in returning him to an abusive host? As I say, you confuse me.’

Donovan closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. When she opened them again, she stepped back toward the sofa and slowly sat. Sherlock found a chair and, without an invitation, sat with her.

‘How bad?’ she asked. ‘His last host. How bad was he?’

‘Bad.’ But Sherlock would not elaborate except to say, ‘Tried to kill him, in the end. Bullet to the shoulder. It’s a wonder he survived.’

‘My God,’ Donovan murmured, covering her mouth.

‘He wasn’t even fully recovered when they placed him in a pound and set the countdown for his expiration,’ Sherlock said bitterly. ‘That’s where I found him.’

‘I knew it,’ she sighed. ‘I knew something was off with his host. Walking away from that door after it slammed in my face, knowing he was in for it—’

‘Why didn’t you do something?’ He gesticulated frantically toward the door, as if they were right
outside of Wilkes’ flat and had just handed John over to him. ‘If you knew it was bad, if you had even just suspected, why didn’t you do something to stop it?’

‘Like what?’ Donovan’s head snapped up and her eyes flashed angrily. ‘For a ward like John? It would have been Storage, not sanctuary.’

‘What do you mean, a ward like John?’

‘Don’t be obtuse, Holmes. There are sanctuaries for child wards, sanctuaries for female wards, even sanctuaries for elderly wards. There are no sanctuaries for the adult males. It’s a brief stint at a pound as a token gesture of good faith, then it’s off to Storage, end of story.’ She held her cheeks and looked heavenward, it seemed, but Sherlock could see it was only to keep her tears from falling. When she had regained her composure, she said, ‘It’s why I wanted off Ward Patrol. I fought for years to get reassigned. I couldn’t take it anymore. Wards like your John, I saw too many of them. It was such a relief to be put on Lestrade’s team, you have no idea.’

‘You prefer dead bodies to living ones?’

She glared. ‘I prefer the dead to the dying, yeah, that’s about it. Jesus.’ She ran her hands over her head, flattening her frizzy hair. ‘We send them to Storage, and not one of them comes back. Not that I’ve ever heard. I’m responsible for that. Me. For dozens, maybe hundreds of them. I can’t even stand to look at myself in the mirror anymore.’

‘Sally.’ Sherlock sat forward, circumspectly casting his eyes to the windows and doorway. They were alone, but he lowered his voice all the same. ‘What is Storage, exactly?’

Although part and parcel of the common parlance, it was a word he used without much thought of the true nature of the thing. He supposed that Storage was something dull, stifling, like a bad care home, from which one never left. But he didn’t know. She looked at him like he was a dunce.

‘Permanent Shelter for Unplaced Wards, obviously,’ he hastened to say. ‘But the title says little of what it really is.’

She continued to stare at him, not in challenge, but as though contemplating whether to even answer. ‘We’re not to talk of it,’ she said, though softly, like a reminder to herself, a warning. Then, a little louder, ‘Not that I know anything. Not really. I’ve never been. But I signed a goddamn-nondisclosure agreement when I took the job, so there’s really nothing I can—’

‘I’ll not get you sacked,’ he promised. ‘I won’t get you into trouble at all. No one even has to know I came today. Your friend—Janine, was it? Make something up. Say you threw me out. But Sally. Please. I . . . I have to know more.’

‘What for? Thinking of storming the castle?’

‘Is it a castle then?’ he said with a smile, trying his damnedest to be friendly.

She sniffed and shook her head. ‘Hell if I know. I don’t know if it’s one place or many, or a place at all. Permanent Shelter for Unplaced Wards is a kind way of putting it.’ She glanced at the windows and the parted curtain. ‘It’s an acronym.’

‘What is?’

‘Storage. Thought it was a nickname, didn’t you? Everyone does. Permanent Shelter for Unplaced Wards is the PR term, but on official documents kept from the public, it goes by a different name. Governments, they love acronyms, don’t they? Handy tools to manage not only their wordy,
unwieldy terms, but to hide them. But one way or the other, a euphemism is a euphemism. Using words to disguise and obscure the truth. They’re good at it, eh?’

‘Go on, then, what does it stand for?’

‘State Terminus for Orphans and Refugees for Asylum Guardianship until Expiration.’ He stared at her, and she laughed without humour. ‘Told you it was a mouthful of nonsense.’

‘Terminus,’ he repeated.

‘End of the line. Appropriate, don’t you think?’

Sherlock frowned. ‘What happens to them there?’

‘That,’ she sighed, resting back into the sofa, ‘was far above my pay grade. But let’s be honest. Nothing good.’

Whatever it was, one thing was for certain: John had been heading there. And all those male wards that had been on the floor with him, ones Sherlock had barely glanced at, chances were, they had ended up there in the end.

‘Some days,’ he said, ‘I wonder what came over me that day, when I saw John in the pound. I barely even thought about it. Me! And I think about everything. If I had known everything he’d been through, and how much he would struggle because of it . . .’

Donovan narrowed her eyes. ‘You regret taking him on?’

‘No.’ It was a truth that needed no interrogation: He didn’t regret John. ‘But it chills me.’

‘What does?’

He cringed against the confession. ‘If I had known just how damaged he was, or how much of myself I would need to give to help him . . . I would have been too afraid to take him on. I would have left him there.’ And if he had done, Sherlock, none the wiser, wouldn’t even know, or care, and just the thought of it made his chest ache, like there was an unfathomable hole carved out of him. ‘He’d be dead because of me.’

‘Because of the system, Holmes.’ Then, under her breath, she murmured, ‘We need more people to fight it.’

Her vitriolic tone surprised him, and before he could even consider what he was asking, and whom, he blurted out, ‘Are you a Highwayman?’

She blanched. ‘What?’

‘Or do you know any? Or where I can find them?’

‘Holmes! I’m a police officer!’

‘And a ward sympathiser! Never mind, forget I asked.’

‘I’d lose my job if I ever even uttered those syllables together. You do realise that, don’t you?’

‘And I told you, I’m not here to get you sacked. I’m here because you’re an ally!’ There was a beat. ‘Aren’t you?’
She glanced at the windows in the back of the flat; the curtains were open. Abruptly, she was on her feet, pulling Sherlock to his, and turning him to the door. ‘It’s my personal day, Holmes, and you’ve outworn your welcome.’

‘Sally—’

She yanked the door open and ushered him through it. But before she slammed it in his face, her heard his hiss, ‘Damn right, I am.’

The door closed with a bang.

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John scrambled for the switch on the lamp, nearly knocking it over in the process. But as the bulb burst into light, he caught it at the base and kept it standing.

Shooting upright, he clutched the blanket to his chest while his eyes wildly traced the edges of illumination. *My bed, my room, my flat*, he thought. *This is home, this is home.* His chest ached from such sharp and rapid breaths, and his shirt stuck to hot skin. Despite his overheated body, he was shaking all over. He balled his fists, flung off the covers, and sat on the edge of the mattress, facing Dover. A terrified whimper escaped his mouth, and he covered it quickly with a hand. It wouldn’t do to make noise. Not at such an hour.

The bad dreams weren’t going away. They never did, entirely, but there were times in his life when they were worse than others. And since seeing Mr Wilkes at the bank, they had been very bad.

In the aftermath of the shooting, he had blocked much of it from his mind. It wasn’t that he didn’t remember what happened—he just found it easier not to think about that day at all, how awful it had been, how frightening, how painful. The worst day in his life? Possibly. There were contenders. Like the day the woman who let him call her ‘Mum’ had been murdered, or the day those men had come for him, held him down, and cut him up. Or even that day at the crossroads when he realised, the first time, that he wasn’t wanted in this world. But being shot by a host who hated him as much as Mr Wilkes had hated him had been, certainly, the greatest physical pain he had ever known.

It amazed him, sometimes, thinking of it, that he was still breathing at all. He should have died that day. Mr Wilkes clearly believed he would. He remembered lying on the floor of the ward room, his whole chest feeling like it was on fire. He could barely breathe with the pain. Blood saturated his whole front, so much of it that he could scarcely believe it was his own. This was dying, and he should have known it would be an anguishing ordeal.

Mr Wilkes stood over him, looking down, but that madness that had seized him and made him pull that trigger had vanished. Instead, his mouth gaped at what he’d done. He looked down at the gun in his hand, back at his dying ward, and he came to a decision. First, he scrubbed the gun with the front of his own shirt, like he was polishing it, and then forced the weapon into Tiny’s own hand, curling his senseless fingers around the grip while muttering, ‘He did this to himself, he wanted this. Shot himself, shot himself.’

Then, with startling decisiveness, Mr Wilkes fled the room and slammed the door closed behind him, leaving Tiny to die.

He didn’t. With what little sense remained through the blinding, bewildering pain, he obeyed whatever instinct was in him that fought to live, even after he had so long wished to die. So he dropped the gun from already loose fingers, dragged himself across the floor, creating a smear of blood behind him, and grabbed his sorry excuse for a blanket, which he bunched into a ball. Then he
rolled over, pressing his body weight on top of it to stave off the steady bleeding, not realizing he was bleeding from his back as well, where the bullet had left his body. Beyond that, he didn’t know what to do. There was no more help for him, and he knew he would most surely die. So why did he linger? Time dragged on, and he grew weaker, colder. The corners of his vision were darkening. The last thing he recalled was a distant crash, a voice calling out, ‘Hello? Is there anyone at home?’, and the wavy thought that he had entered a different place where there was no more pain, no more hate, and the presence of someone who had once loved him, welcoming him home. Yes, he thought, but could not speak, I’m here.

It was funny, though. He didn’t dream of being shot. He dreamt more often of waiting to be shot. His dreams were filled with dark rooms and cold spaces, and sometimes there were others in the room, hurting or tormenting him, but he was always waiting for a door to burst open and a man with a gun to come shoot him dead.

‘You know what nightmares really are, Twitch?’ asked Mrs Hastings, sitting beside him on the mattress where he lay curled and crying. She patted his shoulder a bit gruffly. ‘Penance for the bad things little boys have done, to warn them off from doing them again. Good boys have good dreams, understand? There now. You start being good, and the nightmares will go away. I won’t have to come in here at midnight to calm you down anymore. Won’t that be a blessing to us both?’

John let out a shaky sigh. He pulled his eyes away from Dover and dropped his head into his hands. Be a good ward, he thought, and the dreams will go away.

A light knocking sounded at the door, and his head snapped up. Half a second later, he heard Mr Holmes’ voice on the other side. ‘John?’

He sniffed and rubbed his hands under his eyes, trying to dry them. Before he could trust his voice to answer, the door creaked open and Mr Holmes poked his head in. His curls were all askew and he had pillow creases denting the side of his face.

‘Mind if I come in?’

John tensed. All he wore was a sweat-soaked t-shirt and pyjamas, quite improper for being in the presence of one’s host, not matter the host’s own state of undress. Yes, Mr Holmes had seen him in worse condition, completely bare, but that couldn’t have been helped. He had needed to see the condition of the ward he was purchasing (and it was still a wonder to John why, after seeing all he saw, he had taken him on anyway) and know if there were any defects to worry about. Since then, though, John had taken care to always be fully dressed and presentable, and never show bare feet. Bare feet in another person’s home, he had learnt long ago, was the height of rudeness.

His toes curled, embarrassed. But Mr Holmes was waiting for permission, and though he had no business either to grant or deny, he knew Mr Holmes was waiting for an answer. So he nodded shyly, and his host stepped into the room.

Mr Holmes bore a bowl in one hand, his arm draped with a flannel, and a litre bottle of water in the other, a mug dangling off his forefinger. He gave John a close-lipped smile and set these things on the desk, then went to the wardrobe and pulled out a fresh shirt for him to change into. John was nonplussed. It had been only two nights since his horrible confession, and Mr Holmes was nothing but kind. John hardly knew what to do with that.

Mr Holmes turned his back to give John some privacy, and while John undressed and redressed, he poured some of the water from the bottle into the bowl, then dipped the flannel. By the time he turned back around, John was in dry clothes but still sat uncertainly on the edge of the mattress, wondering why Mr Holmes had come to his room at this time of night, and what would happen next.
'Thought you might be thirsty,' said Mr Holmes, pouring water into the mug.

He was thirsty. How did Mr Holmes know? How did he even know John was awake? Then realised he must have been noisy after all.

‘Sorry to have disturbed you, Mr Holmes,’ he said.

‘Tosh,’ said Mr Holmes, casting him another smile. He took the balled dirty shirt from John’s hands and passed him the mug, then tossed the shirt into the clothes hamper. John was mortified that his host was handling his dirty laundry. But Mr Holmes didn’t mention it, didn’t even wipe his fingers on his dressing gown.

*He’s not like other hosts*, John reminded himself.

John sipped from the mug. The cool water relieved the dryness of his mouth, and he drank more greedily. Mr Holmes wrung out the flannel and indicated he should press it to his overwarm face too cool off. It was just the thing he needed.

‘Want to know what my mother always said about bad dreams?’ said Mr Holmes, pulling out the desk chair and settling in. It seemed he would stay a while, and that he wasn’t the least bit bothered by John’s night-time dress. John felt himself relaxing, and his curiosity piqued. Was it the same thing Mrs Hastings had said?

‘A dream is the stuff of shadows, she said. It has the form of something real and recognisable, but upon waking, we see it has no substance. It’s immaterial.’ There was a beat as Mr Holmes smiled sadly, looking unconvinced himself. ‘Not very helpful, is it? But then, she was a poet and philosopher, and a student of Shakespeare. So take it for what it’s worth.’

The stuff of shadows, John pondered. He supposed it made sense. Then again . . . something real had to block out the light to make the shadow. Right? Something material? But this was a stupid thing to think, and so he kept his doubts to himself.

‘I do miss her, sometimes,’ said Mr Holmes softly, as though to himself. He was looking at the interlaced fingers in his lap, his smile less bright.

‘Has she passed, sir?’

‘Almost ten years ago, now.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You would have liked her, John.’ His eyes lifted, and the brightness of his smile returned. ‘She would have liked you. She would have fussed over you more than even Mrs Hudson, if you can believe it.’

‘What happened to her?’ The moment he spoke, he gasped, stunned he had even dared to ask such a question. But before he could hasten to apologise, Mr Holmes was already answering.

‘Millennium Bridge.’

John gasped again, but for an entirely different reason now.

‘Awful, wasn’t it? Mum and Dad were in the city for New Years, and of course they wanted to go out, see the fireworks. They wanted Mycroft and me to go with them, but I was going through an especially surly phase, and Mycroft used work as an excuse, as he always does, and so, well, they
went out on their own, and chose the bridge as their vantage point. They sent me a photo of the two of them, three minutes before midnight. Four minutes before the bridge blew up.’ Mr Holmes cleared his throat. ‘That was my first case with the Yard, you know. Tracking down the radicals who had sent the suicide bombers. Only time Mycroft and I ever worked together on something. Even now, all these years later . . . I tell myself: you should have gone out with them that night. Why didn’t you go! I knew of better vantage points. I would have taken them to the rooftops, away from the crowds. Of course, they would target crowds, and on a holiday, well, I should have been able to predict . . . Never mind. They’ve all been executed now, haven’t they? And Mum and Dad were just two of not quite two thousand who perished that night.’

John remembered hearing about the collapse. He had been living in Battersea at the time, some five miles from where the explosions had happened. Though he had been lying down and trying to sleep in what the other labourers called ‘the nest’, he thought he could hear the fireworks going off over the Thames. But that might have been his imagination. It wasn’t easy to hear much of anything above the noise of the machinery. But next morning, it was all anyone could talk about. Some blamed German terrorists, others homegrown radicals, others the Irish. All John could remember thinking, though, was that it wouldn’t be such a shame—would it?—if Mr Wellerstein had happened to be on that bridge. No one knew where he was. Was it possible he’d blown up with the rest of them? But then Mr Wellerstein returned. He’d only been to Wales for the New Year, he said, visiting family, and John, then called Boone, felt guilty he had ever allowed himself to think such nasty things. He’d been such a bad ward.

‘What were they like?’ John asked.

‘Who, my parents?’ Sherlock stretched his legs out and flexed his toes. He wasn’t wearing socks, either. ‘Ah, well. Good people. Ordinary, maybe. But good. A hard man, my old dad, but not unkind, and he had Mum to balance him out. But she was hard in her own right. No-nonsense, stern, but . . . well, she’d have to be, raising an imp like me. The stuff I got up to, she said I turned her hair grey by thirty.’

He winked at John to show he was joking, and it was all affection.

‘There was this one day—I was very young, mind you—I got into the pantry and stole half a dozen raw eggs because I wanted to hatch chicks. And I didn’t know what it would take, so I put one in my sock drawer, and one under a lamp in the study, and . . . one under Mum’s pillow.’

Seeing where this story was going, John pinched his lips together as a smile began to break across his face.

‘I can still hear her voice,’ Mr Holmes continued, getting animated. ‘Eleven at night, me tucked away in bed, the whole house is quiet. Then suddenly: Sherlock, you scallywag!’ He chuckled. ‘She had egg yolk dripping from her hair when she came stomping into my room to have a shout at me.’

‘Did you get into much trouble, sir?’ John asked, wondering if little free children were punished for misbehaviour the way little ward children were.

‘Oh heavens, yes.’

‘Often?’

‘The real question, John, is when did I not?’ He laughed. ‘Mother suffered no fools. I could outsmart the lot of them, but never her. She had a sixth sense for when I was up to no good.’

‘I . . .’ John had a sudden impulse to reciprocate; it was a strange sensation. ‘I was once warded to a
woman who kept chickens,’ he said. ‘It was my job to gather their eggs.’

‘Indeed?’ Mr Holmes seemed genuinely interested, and he was encouraged to continue.

‘I was pretty young, too. The chickens lived in a wire coop, and I thought it wasn’t right, to trap them like that. So, one day, I set them all free. I didn’t know chickens were such bad flyers.’

Mr Holmes threw back his head and laughed, and John, feeling a warmth quite separate from the dream begin to swell within him, felt the laughter as a contagion, and he laughed, too, though without sound. It felt good. Whatever fear had gripped him just five minutes ago he could now barely recall.

Mr Holmes stayed for a bit, telling him stories from his childhood, mischievous antics he’d got himself mixed up in or at the head of. At his host’s insistence, he settled back into the bed to listen, and before long, his eyelids grew heavy again. He wouldn’t realise it until next morning, when he awoke, but he fell asleep to that voice and its deep, soothing tones reciting tales from a happy childhood, which John had always hoped was real, if not for him, then for someone.

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It occurred to Sherlock, after seeing the longing in John’s eyes as he listened to Sherlock talk about his family, that he had done exactly the wrong thing in alienating the one person who was as close to a mother as John had in his life.

So next evening, for John’s sake, he swallowed his pride like it was a whole lemon, and knocked on the door of 221A.

She answered in her dressing gown, house slippers, and the specs she wore at night to help her read. Clearly, she was readying for bed and hadn’t expected visitors, least of all her upstairs tenant who had been so cold to her for so many days. All right, weeks. So the first words out of her mouth shouldn’t have been a surprise.

‘Is there trouble with the hot water again?’ she asked. ‘I swear, that boiler is just giving me fits!’

‘Not the hot water, no,’ said Sherlock. He felt stung that she thought it was his only reason for visiting, and surly that it was entirely his own fault. ‘I came by to invite you to dinner tomorrow night.’

To her credit, she controlled the shock and replied simply, ‘Oh. Thank you.’

He sighed. ‘And to say . . .’ Why was the word sorry so difficult to utter? ‘John misses you.’

‘I see.’ She smoothed down the front of her dressing gown, if only for something to do. ‘Well. I’ve missed him, too.’

‘Fine. I’ve missed you. I was wrong to get upset. I was wrong to ask anything of you, especially something as big as taking on the care of another human being. So. I’m . . . sorry.’

‘Oh Sherlock,’ she said sadly. ‘Please understand. I would gladly take care of John, if I could. But . . .’

‘It’s fine, Mrs Hudson. He’s my responsibility, and one I am happy to have. Besides, I could use the extra incentive not to render myself incapacitated.’ He smiled to show he was joking. But he was quite serious.
‘What I mean is—’ Her eyes glanced past him to the foyer, checking whether it was empty. ‘Is he upstairs?’

‘Crime Watch just started. It’s now part of our nightly routine. He likes guessing whodunnit. You want to . . . ?’

He was thinking to invite her up, but she took his wrist to draw him nearer, and when she spoke next, it was in a low tone. ‘I have something to tell you. Something I should have told you. It’s just . . . not easy to talk about.’

Something twisted inside him, like a once-straight rod suddenly struck and forced to coil. The gravity in her voice, her misting eyes, the fear that made her bottom lip tremble. All at once, he thought he knew what she was about to say, and he felt a part of himself shrivelling in objection.

‘You’re dying,’ he said, stunned.

Her eyes went wide. Then, to his astonishment, she laughed, as though relieved. ‘Gracious me, no! Well, at least not yet. A few years left in these old bones, I reckon.’

Relief washed over him, but left him perplexed. ‘Then . . . ?’

‘Come in, love. Please. I don’t want John to overhear.’

He followed her inside and closed the door, wondering vaguely whether John was missing him.

They sat at her table, where Mrs Hudson proceeded to open and close her mouth several times, as though unable to speak despite her best efforts.

‘Are you quite all right?’ He wasn’t altogether convinced she wasn’t dying.

‘I’m fine, dear,’ she said, halfway to exasperated. ‘It’s just . . . That is . . . Sherlock, I want you to understand . . .’

‘Whatever it is, just say it,’ he said abruptly.

She began: ‘I love John, I really do. And, oh, Sherlock, you’re so good to him. He’s transformed. I’m sure you see it. And not only John, but you, as well. Lord knows I had my doubts, in the beginning, but you’ve truly made him your family, just as he deserves. I mean, that’s the way it should be, isn’t it? Frankly, I’ve never seen you happier.’

Sherlock hadn’t been expecting the evaluation. He was strangely pleased she approved of how he hadn’t absolutely cocked things up, but he knew this was all preamble, because she hadn’t yet arrived at her point. Tamping down his impatience at the hedging, he waited her out.

‘It’s something I’m . . . so happy to be part of, even if just from the touchline.’

‘I don’t think of you as standing at the touchline,’ Sherlock argued. ‘I couldn’t have done any of this on my own. You said you wanted to help.’

‘Yes, and I do, Sherlock, I really do. In every way,’

‘Then why—?’

‘Please just listen.’ Her fingers interlocked nervously. ‘Hosting is the duty of all Britons, yes? One of the most important duties. But not all adults are hosts. There are exemptions. And others of us are prohibited.’
She had arrived, but as far as Sherlock was concerned, she hadn’t said anything yet at all.

‘Prohibited,’ he repeated dumbly.

She shook her head, casting her eyes down at her interlaced fingers. The posture of shame was familiar, in that he had seen it in John more times than he could count. But in Mrs Hudson?

‘You are prohibited.’

‘Yes.’

‘Since when! You’ve hosted before.’

She shook her head.

‘Yes, you have, you told me—’

‘I never did, Sherlock. Not really. I just . . . let you assume.’

Was that true? He could have sworn she’d hosted before, probably a female, but searching his memory, no, he could unearth no specifics about any ward that had ever lived at Baker Street before, or any particulars from Mrs Hudson’s past at all. Given her age, he just assumed she had hosted until reaching the age of exemption and . . . stopped.

‘Never?’

‘Never.’

‘Because . . .’ He leapt to another conclusion: ‘You’re an ex-convict?’

She sighed. ‘No.’

‘A firebrand?’

‘No . . .’

‘German?’

‘No.’

‘You’re sure you’re not dying?’

‘Sherlock, please.’

‘Then out with it, Mrs Hudson!’

She covered her face with her hands, which Sherlocked observed were older and more spotted than he remembered. He wanted to hold them, calm her down, and reassure her that whatever it was, whatever she had done or been, it didn’t matter. When she removed them, her face was red, her eyes already misted. ‘I was thirty-five, as old as you are now . . .’

‘Yes,’ he urged.

‘When I was emancipated.’

It was like she had poured ice water down his back. A chill raced through him. ‘You . . .’ he whispered.
'Yes.'
'. . . were a . . .'
'Yes.
'. . . ward?'
She nodded.
'You! A ward!'
'I never wanted you to know,' she said miserably. 'You or anyone. It’s such a horrible thing to be!'
Then, to his horror, she broke down and cried.

His chair screeched as he started to his feet. He’d had some practice at it now, this comforting lark, and was no longer shy about embracing those he loved. He did so now. But unlike John, she was entirely receptive and reciprocal, putting her arms around his neck and squeezing him back. ‘Oh Sherlock!’ she sobbed. ‘For you to see me like this!’

He had no words, just held her in stunned silence until she had recovered herself enough for him to go make tea while she dried her eyes and calmed herself. But even when he returned with the tea, he was reeling on the inside, bursting with a thousand question, and trying to fit together the puzzle of her past with what he knew, supposed, and what had just been revealed. But it didn’t fit.

He sat and passed her the tea, though it was still too hot to drink. He laid a hand on her arm. ‘Better?’
She nodded glumly.

Squeezing his hand gently around her arm, he said, ‘I want you to know something, too. You’ve nothing, nothing at all, to be ashamed of.’

‘It can’t be helped. Until you’ve lived it, you can’t know the shame of it. The way most others look at you, treat you. You can’t really know.’

‘Nothing changes. I adore you, you know that.’ He spoke matter-of-factly and so was surprised to see her appear so taken aback. Surely, it had always been obvious? (Disregarding his most recent behaviour.)

‘I have questions,’ he continued, ‘but if you’d rather not talk . . .’

‘It’s difficult for me,’ she said. ‘But I want you to understand. Not for my sake. For John’s.’

He squeezed her arm again. She set her hand atop his. ‘Then help me understand. Why did you never say? All this time, I just assumed . . . But why shouldn’t I? You have a family! A sister, a niece and nephew. I didn’t think wards had families.’

‘We’re not blood,’ said Mrs Hudson sadly. ‘The woman I call my sister, she was my host’s daughter. We’ve always been close, Mona and I. She invites me to Christmas with her family every year. The children, they believe . . . they think I’m just a dear family friend. They don’t know what I once was.’

‘Then,’ he said, ‘your host family was good to you?’

‘They were. Very good to me.’ She looked at him very seriously. ‘But it was still the life of a ward.’
'So you never hosted yourself. When you told me you had found your last ward a good home, and that she was happier for it . . . you were lying.'

She sighed. ‘I was talking about myself. I couldn’t tell you, Sherlock, that I’d never hosted before. You would ask why, and, well. I couldn’t face your knowing that your landlady was once a ward of the state.’

She spoke the word with such derision that he winced at the word. ‘Mrs Hudson,’ he began in censure.

‘Don’t mind me. Now you know.’

‘Yes, but if you think I would have been bothered, that my opinion of would have been in any way lessened—’

‘Before John?’ She patted his arm again, but could not look him in the face. ‘I don’t know about that. You’ve always been uncomfortable with the very subject. Until lately. You don’t see how greatly that man has changed you.’

Sherlock supposed there was some truth in this—but he rejected the notion that he would have thought poorly of Mrs Hudson, had he known she had once been warded. For thirty-five years? A non-actor in her own life, having no rights to property, lacking any power of decision-making on her own behalf, unable to wander outside the boundaries of her own district of registration. How had she escaped it?

‘I’ve never heard of anyone being emancipated before.’

‘It was never common.’

‘Then how—?’

‘The Department for Ward Social Care has their provisions whereby wards can gain citizenship status, as dictated by the CFCA. But they discourage it at every turn. In my day, it was difficult enough. Then Lord Magnussen took over, and since then . . .’

‘But how did you manage it? What did you have to do? Why would they make it so difficult? It’s completely counter-intuitive! Emancipating them means one less ward to support, one more citizen to pay taxes to finance the programme—’

‘What do you know,’ she interrupted, ‘of the history of the CFCA?’

‘I know the broad brushstrokes. What they teach us in school, I guess. I made little study of it beyond that.’

‘Then you know little of anything.’

The Compulsory Foster Care Act had come about as a result of the Surge of 1956. Even primary school children knew that. But, as was commonly taught, the Surge wouldn’t have been necessary if Old Britain hadn’t lost the Great War.

Following the 1914 assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in former Sarajevo, the once-stable world powers had been thrown into war. Britain joined the Allies in the fight against the Central Powers, a war that lasted eleven years. Many military historians believed that if America, with all its military power, had not remained neutral and entered the fray as an ally, the War could have been over far sooner, and not ended in such devastation. Others blamed the sovereign states closer to home that
refused to take sides, like the so-called Neutral Ally, Norway, the Traitor Nation.

But such was speculative history, and had no bearing on what had, in fact, transpired. Russia surrendered first, in 1919, and both France and Italy were summarily defeated and absorbed into the German Empire in 1921. Meanwhile, the United States had its own troubles: it was at war with Mexico to recover Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, which had been annexed by Mexico, not realising that Germany was financing Mexico’s war efforts. For four more devastating years, Britain fought alone to keep itself free, but they were a sinking ship, and gaining water fast. Children were sent away for their own safety to foreign lands across vast seas, never to return; defectors and cowards declared their loyalty to the Empire even before the official surrender; and then, in 1925, then-Prime Minister David Lloyd George issued what history would call the most ignominious surrender in British history, and Old Britain officially died. Its monarchy scattered and fled, some to Canada, some to India and Australia. Those who remained were summarily assassinated, right down to the last duke and earl.

For the next thirty-one years, the British Isles were just another outpost of the German Empire, and Britons lived under the German flag, learnt German in school, sang German songs, and honoured their new Emperor, Wilhlem II, until his death in 1941, followed by his son, Wilhelm, German Crown Prince, until his death in 1951, and last of all, his grandson, Louis Ferdinand, who reigned only five years. That’s when Britons’ underground coalitions, calling themselves Highwaymen, took action. This time, they were supported by new allies in the United States, led by a general named Eisenhower, who initiated the Surge that would drive German invaders out of all its conquered territories, establish new countries and new borders, and restore to Britons their homeland.

But the Surge, though successful, wasn’t without great cost. Families had been decimated. Cities lay in ruins, from Aberdeen to Plymouth. Ireland had suffered the greatest, when the fission bombs had been dropped on Belfast and Cork, the headquarters of the rumoured insurgents. The monarchy lay in ruins. Elizabeth II remained abroad and in hiding and wouldn’t return for another twenty years. Parliament had to be started from scratch by the few who remembered how to do it. And one of their first courses of action was to care for the tens of thousands—by some estimates, nearly a million—of orphaned children. Initial recommendations for large orphanages were rejected by the House of Commons under pressure from the Americans, whose scientists proclaimed the harmful effects of institutionalised care on childhood development. Instead, a system of foster care was proposed, modelled after the one operating in the United States, ensuring that every child belong to a British family for his or her support until the age of eighteen. With the passing of the Compulsory Foster Care Act, it became the duty of every ‘family unit’ (so defined as a married couple) to foster at least one orphan child, called a ‘ward of the state’, inasmuch as there were wards needing care. A lottery system was instituted, and in its first year, approximately one in every twelve families served as hosts to ward children.

But the CFCA was a work in progress. It needed oversight, management, and a veritable army of labourers to keep it operating, and in 1965, the Department for Ward Social Care was established. The public responded, but not in a way that anyone predicted. Unwed mothers abandoned newborn babies in hospitals; unruly boys from the country were driven into London and left there, confident that the system would look after them; first-born daughters were discarded into the system in favour of maintaining first-born sons. Within two years, nearly double the number of families were serving as hosts. Soon, ‘family units’ were expanded to include voluntary ‘adult caregivers’, and four years after that, ‘adult caregivers’ was redefined as ‘every adult of means’, excluding only the poor or those with an excess of children (four or more). There just weren’t enough families to meet the needs of all wards. And the need was growing.

Due to high rates of unemployment, homelessness, and suicide among wards emancipated at eighteen, the Ministry of Wards changed the age of emancipation to twenty years in 1972 to give
them an extra two years to mature and become self-sufficient; in 1975, the age was raised again to twenty-five; and in 1980, again to thirty-one. By then, the proposal had been made, argued, and accepted: that any and all Britons unable to provide for their own care should be partakers in the Ward Social Care Programme. The homeless, the unemployed, the handicapped, and the mentally ill all became warded.

‘This is a proud day for our country,’ said then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in an address to the House of Commons, ‘for today is the day we ensure that every man, woman, and child has a place to call home, and a people to call family. Never again will a child go hungry. Never again will a woman cry herself to sleep because she cannot find work to care for herself. Never again will a man wonder where he will lay his head at the end of the day. We are a nation of people concerned for the welfare of our neighbours. Brother caring for brother. Sister caring for sister. And are we not all children of New Britain?’

In the year 1989, a ‘ward’ was officially redefined as a lifetime designation to ensure ‘provision and care for the lifespan of the ward’. At that, wards were relieved of citizenship rights and responsibilities, including voting, holding a job, having a bank account, owning property, marrying, procreating, or emigrating. As recompense, wards were assured an education, health care, and protections from hardship and abuses. Time would erode those promises, until the education requirement was minimal because it was unnecessary, the health care substandard because it was expensive, and all the promised protections were poorly enforced.

Sherlock had been born in 1995, after all the deteriorations to the programme and subsequent unequal status of wards had yielded what activists described as a near master-slave-like relationship between hosts and wards, a characterisation Sherlock had always scoffed at as hyperbole. That is, until very, very recently. Had he been paying better attention, he would have taken note of the signs of disparity. They were everywhere: Wards were not permitted in places like public libraries or fine restaurants or high-end shops, or any place else with a sign barring them entrance. They had their own buses and cars on trains, when not traveling with a host. They had to identify themselves on the street via light-visible bracelets, and they were marked, branded, with a tattoo that linked to their registration file.

The justification was this: ‘No ward will ever have to worry about falling through the cracks. Your hosts will watch over you. Ward Social Care will watch over you. At all times, we’ll know where you are. You are safe.’

Which begged the question: where was Mrs Hudson’s tattoo? Sherlock glanced down at her arm and saw she wore long sleeves. Had she always worn long sleeves? He suddenly wondered if he had ever seen her bare arms.

‘I was born in ’58,’ she said, ‘just two years after the Surge. That meant I was born British, not German, which was a glorious thing. It was also the same year the CFCA was passed. I don’t know what happened to my parents. Many things made an orphan back then, but I never was an orphan. I was a ward from the day of my birth. And they placed me with a family almost right away. The Sissons family, from Leicestershire. There was a waiting list for new babies. No one wanted older children, if they could help it. Nice people, Mr and Mrs Sissons. They already had two children, both girls: Mona and Hannah, who were just older than me.

‘They treated me well, and I was always safe and welcome. And happy, for the most part. But I grew up knowing I was a ward. Mona took piano lessons, and Hannah played the cello, but there was no money for me to learn these things. They said, You can sing with us, Martha! Your voice is your instrument! But I knew it wasn’t the same. We went to different schools and wore different clothes. They received pocket money, but I wasn’t allowed, and when they brought home sweets,
they were kind and shared, but it just wasn’t the same, because I wasn’t allowed to buy sweets for myself, or go on outings by myself, or be loved like those little girls were loved.

‘When I was a child, I looked forward to the day I would be emancipated. But at fourteen—I remember this very well—the age of emancipation was raised from eighteen to twenty. Oh, how I cried. My host mother consoled me and said it was for the best, but I could see she was discouraged as well. It wasn’t that she wanted rid of me, exactly. I was a mild-mannered girl, never a problem. But I was an expense, and one she and Mr Sissons had not planned to support for an extra two years. The stipend wasn’t much back then, just eight pounds a week, if I recall. Then I was seventeen, and the age went up again, this time to twenty-five. I felt like I was chasing after Alice’s white rabbit, and when I was twenty-two, and should have been emancipated four years ago, the age went up yet again, this time to thirty-one.

‘The year I turned thirty-one, just two months before my birthday, being a ward became a lifelong designation. When that happened, the registration tattoo was introduced. Every ward eight and older was required to have one. They branded it as a mark of honour, like we were prized children of the state. But for me, it was the mark of a prisoner.’

Mrs Hudson reached for the sleeve on her left arm and slowly pushed it up to her elbow. There it was, not a circular tattoo like it would later become, but an alphanumeric registration code: RM5693-91. Sherlock touched it carefully with the pad of his thumb.

‘I was devastated. I can’t even tell you how devastated I was. Inconsolable, crying day and night, and my poor host parents, they didn’t know what to do with me. They talked to everyone they could think of, searching for answers or options, and when they couldn’t find any, they tried to convince me that my life with them was a good one, and that others like me had it worse. It didn’t help.

‘I had had such dreams, Sherlock. In so many ways, I was still a girl, with a girl’s hopes for the future. I wanted to work, and fall in love, and have a family of my own, and yes, even to host, just like everyone else. And then, overnight, just like that, all those dreams were stolen. Like I had no right to them. I became . . . despondent, I suppose is the word. Looking back, I know I was depressed, but we didn’t have a word for it at the time, not for anyone, especially not for wards, like me. I thought very seriously about . . . taking my own life.’

Sherlock rubbed her arm. He could practically feel the old ache of her former life emanating from her. He could almost see the young woman she had once been, trapped in the life of a ward. But it was such a distant life to the one she lived now as a free, independent woman of such strength and tenacity and humour.

‘Then, in 1992, when I was thirty-four years old, under pressure from certain activist groups that no longer exist, Parliament passed the Emancipation Provision. At last, I had my way out. But it wasn’t easy. They don’t mean for it to be easy, do they? In fact, it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. All those tests! All that paperwork! And finding sponsors, and sitting interviews, and being assessed by every sort of doctor there is. There was a time I thought I should just give it up, and live out the rest of my days as a ward of the state, forever fostered. Most did, you know. Those who began the process, they never finished. But my host family—God bless them—they never let me quit. They knew I wanted it more than anything in the world. So they saw me through to the end.

‘I was granted emancipation status on July 16, 1993. I moved out of the Sissons’ home, and on my own. For the first time in my life, I was responsible for me, and it wasn’t exhilarating. It was terrifying. I was so vulnerable, Sherlock, you don’t understand. I had a job but an unskilled one cleaning houses, and I couldn’t manage money. I had a flatshare but I was afraid of the landlord, and afraid my flatmates would find out I’d spent my whole life as a ward. I was drowning. It wasn’t at all
like I thought it would be. So, the first person to show me any kindness, who said he would take care
of me . . . I married him. Only after the wedding, when he found out who I really was, did I find out
what kind of man he really was.’

Sherlock frowned. He knew something of this history. It was Mr Hudson, after all, who had been the
reason he had met Mrs Hudson, when she hired him to uncover evidence that would ensure his
conviction for a double murder in Florida. Though, he was only now realising how little of it he
really understood.

‘He hurt you,’ said Sherlock softly.

She nodded sombrely and blinked rapidly, but the tears fell anyway. ‘I had only traded one oppressor
for another. When he found out who I was, what I’d been, he hated me. He was embarrassed, didn’t
want his family to know. We fled to Florida. He got involved in . . . things I didn’t understand. He
turned mean. There was liquor, drugs, women. And even though he was bringing in money—more
money than I could even wrap my mind around—he wasn’t satisfied. He wanted me to work, too,
and I did. I was happy to. I found a job as a server down at a cantina, working for tips, but it wasn’t
enough, he said. So, he found me a job as a dancer.’ Her eyes lifted briefly, before falling away,
ashamed. ‘Exotic,’ she mouthed.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Sherlock, who wanted to say something useful but could think of nothing at all.

‘I was so unhappy. I had thought that being a free person would be so wonderful! I’d finally discover
who I really was and all I could be! But with Frank, it was worse than being a ward. At least my
hosts never beat me, or terrified me. And I felt trapped, all over again and thought I had made the
worst mistake of my life. Maybe I should have stayed a ward. But what was I to do? I didn’t dare
leave him; I wouldn’t have known how, even if I’d been able to muster the courage. So things went
on like that, for years and years. I was friendless and helpless, and growing more and more
desperate.’ She sighed out a great breath. ‘When he shot those two prostitutes in the head and was
arrested . . . I should have been upset. For those two girls, at least But the reality was, I’d never been
more relieved.’

‘And then he tried to implicate you in his crimes, as an accomplice’ said Sherlock. This was where
he came in. He had been in Florida by mere chance. An international smuggling case had taken him
to North Texas, where ‘professionals’ said the trail had gone cold. He proved otherwise. His return
flight had a layover in Miami before continuing to London, but an impending storm delayed the
flight, before cancelling it outright. So he had gone out into the city, looking for a distraction. He
wasn’t expecting to be hired on for another case, but his reputation, it seemed had preceded him.

She reached for his arm and gave it a squeeze. ‘I mark the day I met you as the day that changed my
life forever. It was the day I truly started living.’

He placed his hand over hers and squeezed back.

‘I imagine,’ she added, ‘that one day, John will say the same of the day you brought him home to
Baker Street.’

‘It’s not enough, though, is it?’

‘What isn’t?’

‘Living on Baker Street. I mean to do right by him, but . . . you understand better than anyone. You
just said your hosts were good hosts. But it wasn’t the life you wanted. You weren’t free, and neither
is John.’
She sighed. ‘I don’t know the answer, love. It’s been years since I heard of any ward being emancipated. It just isn’t done anymore.’

‘There has to be a way.’

Mrs Hudson shook her head pityingly. ‘Forgive me, I think the world of John, but . . . you know him better than anyone. Do you think he could make it out there, all on his own?’

‘It’s not like I would wash my hands of him! He could say on with me, just, you know. Free.’

‘That’s not how it works. Not how it used to, at least. To prove myself worthy of citizenship, I had to be able to support myself. I was required to find and hold a job, move out of my hosts’ residence and find my own, never fall into arrears, live entirely independently. The only thing that I was not expected to do was host. In fact, I wasn’t allowed at all. And if I couldn’t manage all of that? I went straight back into the programme, this time without any hope of being emancipated again. It’s a one-shot deal. I saw it happen to a lot of us. In fact, it was one of the reasons I was so keen to marry. I don’t think I could have made it on my own, not in those first few years. There now.’ She must have seen the look of discouragement on Sherlock’s face. ‘Mine is just one story. John’s is another. Whatever he’s been through, he’s happy now. I can tell. And you’re a big part of that.’

‘You are, too.’

‘The two of us, we’ll make it right by him. Go on, then. He’s probably wondering where you are. I’ve seen how he looks for you in a room.’

Sherlock pulled back in surprise.

‘You make him feel safe. So tomorrow—shall I bring something for dinner?’

They rose together, Sherlock helping Mrs Hudson to her feet. ‘A pudding, if you’d like. But really, there’s no need. John likes to cook. He’s taken to watching cooking shows and replicating recipes in the kitchen.’

She laughed lightly, fondly. ‘Clever of him. He does a fine job of compensating, doesn’t he?’

Sherlock’s mind was a bit of a blur, one portion considering all he had learnt of Mrs Hudson’s past life, and another ruminating on his fondness of John’s emerging personality, so he had nearly stopped listening as they walked to Mrs Hudson’s front door. He was nodding absently to her comment when it settled in his brain and made him think. ‘Compensating?’

‘You know what I mean. Adapting the tools in his toolbox, as it were, the ways he gets around his disadvantage and makes do.’

Now he turned to face her fully, puzzled by her remarks. ‘Disadvantage?’

‘Oh, I’m not being critical! I think it’s wonderful! He watches, he listens, learns, no need to open a cookbook.’

‘Why shouldn’t he open a cookbook? Should I get him a cookbook? What are you driving at?’

She stared at him unblinking, and for a moment he wondered whether he’d suddenly and mysteriously spoken German for the look of confusion and wariness on her face. Then she said, ‘Come now, Sherlock, be kind.’

‘Kind?’ She may has well have been speaking in riddles. ‘Am I being unkind?’
‘He’s lived with you since the start of December!’

‘What are you on about?’

‘Sherlock, love, you are teasing me. I mean, surely you’ve noticed!’ When he continued to look perplexed, she sighed and shook her head, exasperated. ‘John—he can’t read!’
Before letting himself inside the flat, Sherlock prepared his accoutrements. First, latex gloves. Second, a surgical mask, lightly scented. Third, a shiny, black Glock 26 handgun.

He passed through the penthouse as silent as a ghost. Not because he was afraid of being heard. He just liked the element of surprise.

Seven days ago, he’d left Sebastian Wilkes chained to the shower with the light on. Nothing had changed in that respect: The man was on the floor of the shower, one arm shackled to a metal support bar. His wrist was red-raw, his beard full and prickly. At some point, he’d pushed off his shoes and socks and his trousers, which were all in a pile outside of the shower, leaving him in boxer shorts and an unbuttoned £500 shirt. There were six empty tins in another pile, with apple cores and egg shells lining the wall.

As Sherlock had anticipated, the toilet situation was not pretty. The room smelt of a bog. Wilkes had urinated in the shower drain, but he had had other needs. Somehow, he had managed to stretch far enough to kick open the lid of the toilet, and it seemed he had been collecting his excrements into toilet tissue and tossing them into the toilet bowl from a distance. Not every shot made it, and he was too far to flush. Hence, Sherlock’s scented mask. Lilacs had always been Mummy’s favourite.

Wilkes’ eyes were filled with equal measures of hope and trepidation. His tormentor had returned! But then again, his tormentor had returned. The question hung as thick as other unpleasant aromas: what would happen next?

‘Don’t fight,’ said Sherlock, using the gun like a wagging finger. He pulled out a key and unlocked the cuffs. ’You have ten minutes to clean this place up, and that includes you. I want you to be clean and smell nice. Got me?’

Wilkes’ eyes went round, and Sherlock let the supposition abide.

‘The collar stays on. I’ll be waiting in the sitting room. Try anything funny, and let’s see just how creative I can get with retribution, eh? Now get moving.’

Sherlock left him to it.

Over the next twelve minutes and twenty seconds, he listened as Wilkes worked in a panic. The toilet flushed seven times. The shower ran for four minutes. He was back and forth between the bedroom and bathroom. At last, he appeared in the sitting room in fresh clothing and wet hair combed back, though he’d not had time to shave. His expression had not changed. Part of it was hunger.

‘Sit.’

Wilkes fell onto the sofa.

Sherlock arose and came closer. He gave one more warning glare, daring Wilkes to try something stupid. Then he pressed his fingerprint to the collar, and removed it. He passed him a bottle of water from the fridge.

‘Drink. Hum a little. Get those vocal cords singing. Tonight, you’re going to answer my questions. Every last one. Understand?’
‘Yes,’ said Wilkes hoarsely. He twisted the cap off the water and took three large gulps.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

Sherlock sat in the leather wing-back, rested the gun on a side table like it was a glass of whisky, and interlaced his fingers in front of him. He said nothing.

The bottle was all but drained when Wilkes decided he needed to start talking. ‘I get it, Sherlock. I do. What I did was . . . wrong. You’ve made your point. But be sensible! Leaving me chained up like that? Like an animal? For a week? What if I had died? Not even prisoners are treated so badly. We have laws against it! I was almost out of food days ago! And, and, and I know what you’re thinking, but let’s be honest, yeah? I’m six foot, a full-grown man, I need the calories! Tiny was, well, you’ve seen him! He ate like a mouse!’

‘Is this how you spent the last seven days, Seb? Thinking up excuses?’

‘All I’m saying is, whatever he told you, he’s exaggerating!’ He laughed, like remembering an old joke and expecting Sherlock to join in. ‘Maybe I wasn’t the best host, but he wasn’t exactly the best ward. Did he tell you about the stealing? Hm? The lying? I gave that ward everything. He lived in luxury. I mean, come on! A flat on Blackwall Way? All to himself? You don’t get posher living than that!’

‘A flat on Blackwall Way, you say? How classy. And tell me, in this upscale flat he had to call his own, what was the view like? That high up, must’ve been a pretty impressive view of the city, right?’

Seb’s protesting mouth slowly closed.

‘What about his bedroom? Sleeping on Egyptian silk, was he? Maybe a top-of-the-line surround sound with game system, telly, books to keep him occupied? Gosh, a place like that, must have cost you a pretty penny.’

Wilkes licked his lips; his fingers nervously indented the plastic of the nearly empty water bottle.

‘You probably needed to find a way to bring in a little extra dosh, am I right? Just to afford it.’

‘I was in debt, okay? I owed money, lots of it, and if I didn’t pay up . . . Look, it was a desperate situation, one I had to make right—’

‘How much debt? Where did it come from?’

‘It doesn’t matter now.’

‘Like hell it doesn’t. You’re going to tell me everything I want to know, or I’ll have no problem putting you right back in that shower with another week’s worth of apples. One more time: How much debt?’

After a spell, Wilkes answered miserably. ‘One-point-six million pounds.’

Sherlock whistled. ‘My my. How’d you get into that big a hole, bruv? Buy a yacht you couldn’t afford? Splurge on a personal jet?’
‘I had a bit of a’—he coughed into his fist—‘gambling problem.’

‘Is that right? Who’d you owe money to?’

‘It’s not really pertinent—’

‘You want back in the shower?’

‘Business tycoons. All right? From all over the planet. We’d get together wherever there was business to be had—Milan, Dubai, Las Vegas, Rio—and play cards, big stakes. I’m a shark, you see. I always came away with other men’s money. But one night in Hong Kong, at the Landmark Hotel . . . I don’t know. Luck wasn’t on my side. I should have walked away, I know it, but I thought, I’m good, I can win it back. But the pit I kept digging for myself got deeper and deeper. Next I knew . . . ’

‘Over one-and-a-half million, down the crapper.’

‘The rule is,’ Wilkes continued, ‘you have twenty-four hours to pay out. And I didn’t have it. You have to understand, Holmes, you have to pay out, or they come after you. Get me? I didn’t have a choice! I was desperate, so I . . . borrowed it.’

‘From whom?’ But he saw the answer even as he asked the question. ‘Oh. You siphoned money from Shad Sanderson.’

Wilkes nodded guiltily. ‘From the foreign accounts.’

‘What happened to the bank of Daddy?’

‘My father? Ha. He would never loan me that kind of money. He would have let them break my legs before offering me a penny!’

‘How tragic.’

‘You would have done it, too, if you knew you could. Look, I was panicked, and, and, and I did what I could to, you know, hide the missing money. Divert attention from it. I paid off one of our accountants to ignore the deficit until the end of the fiscal year, and by then, I was sure I would be able to recover and replace, and no one would ever know.’

‘But?’

‘But . . . I needed a plan. God, it was a lot of money. If it came out, I would lose my job. I would go to jail for business fraud! I was so scared I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. Sometimes, I would just sit here in the dark, thinking.’

‘When a neat little idea popped into your head,’ Sherlock said with a sneer.

‘All I wanted was a loan. I knew there was money in that business, but I swear to God, when I went to her, all I was looking for was a loan.’

‘Her?’

‘You remember her. From uni. Irene Adler.’

Sherlock felt like his insides were made of snakes, and it was all he could do not to coil into himself. Instead, spine rigid and hands curling into claws so that his nails dug into his own skin, he said, ‘What about her?’
‘She has experience in . . . certain trades. Runs a Topside-Downside, most prominent in London. I knew about it, of course. Word gets around in circles like mine. From what I heard, she brings in a shit-load of money with those girls. I thought, we go way back, she and I, she’ll lend me the money, and know I’m good for it. So, I went to see her.’

‘I’m a business woman, Seb. I don’t loan money. I invest it. I exchange goods and services for it. You’re a businessman, too. So make me a proposal.’

‘What kind of proposal?’ he asked, trying not to be overheard.

They were standing side by side in the centre of her gallery, admiring a large Kandinsky, or at least pretending to. He was aghast at how plainly she spoke, not even bothering to lower her voice.

‘Of the fiduciary type, obviously. You need money, I have capital. I will help you establish your own venture, a subsidiary of mine, and you’ll pay me a percentage share.’

‘A subsidiary? You want me to—?’

‘In this business, ROI is guaranteed within a matter of months, not years. But you’ll need to find your own niche market. I’ll not have you competing with mine.’

She said little more to him than that, but before they parted, she gave him the business card for a man she called her Acquisitions Specialist.

‘Call him or not, it’s your choice,’ she said. ‘If you find a suitable niche, we’ll talk again about how I can, shall we say, advance you the money. As an investment. I will expect a return.’

Wilkes thought about it only a few hours before calling the number.

He met the Acquisitions Specialist, a Mr Stephen Ewart, at a rental car business where he worked as the manager. A Topside, Wilkes realised.

‘First thing’s first, you need a client base.’

The shop was empty, and thank God, because unlike Irene, Mr Ewart did not speak in euphemisms and his voice boomed.

‘Female market is in highest demand, but pretty well tapped. Don’t matter the shape, size, or colour, Irene has it covered, all kinks satisfied. You don’t want to cross her on that front, so I suggest you go male. Harder to come by ’cause males are used in so many of the labour Downsides, ain’t they? And end up in Storage earlier than most. Fewer clients, maybe, but also fewer options for those clients. But I think I know a niche just right for you: twinks. Small, boyish, smooth where it counts. You get a cas, they stay small, even as they age. Get a lot more mileage out of them,’ he added, spinning the wheel of a model Mazda on his desk.

‘Where do I find one?’ asked Wilkes, who could scarcely believe he was even having this conversation.

‘My best bet? An Underground Arena.’

‘What’s that?’ Sherlock asked.

‘The arenas?’ Wilkes shifted uncomfortably. ‘You know, for Ward Sport.’

Sherlock forestalled a groan and grimace. Ward Sport. It was a despicable form of Downside, where
wards were used as sports entertainment. He’d never been to one, had really only heard about them from Lestrade, who had visited quite a few that had become homicide scenes. Some were more benign than others: racing wards against each other through ridiculous obstacle courses, creating teams for football matches, making wards chase pigs in a pit. Others were more dangerous, like wrestling and boxing matches. Sherlock had even heard of knife fights, which may have been a rumour. But then again, maybe not.

‘John was an athlete? A fighter?’ he asked, astounded.

Wilkes laughed without humour. ‘God, no, you’ve seen him. Men go there to place bets, they want their wards athletic. They want real competition, you know? No, Tiny was—’

‘His name is John.’

‘Wasn’t his name when I found him. It was something like Marbles or Pickles or Toodles. Do those sound like athletes’ names to you? Your John was a clown.’

_Mr Ewart pointed him out. ‘That one. Little guy on the right with the sign.’_

_While the crowd waited for the next event to begin, the ward in question had just paraded into the centre of the arena with four others like him, but he was the one holding up the sign: Will Work for Laughs. They had dressed him up in yellow and red stripes and painted his face black and white with a garish smile extending literally from ear to ear. While the others began to perform cartwheels and somersaults and play to the enthusiastic audience, the ward with the sign kept to the perimeter, walking a little funny and bouncing the sign above his head. He seemed exuberant. But when he drew closer, Wilkes could see that though his face-paint was smiling, he was not._

‘Here it comes, this is what I wanted you to see,’ said _Mr Ewart._

_Seconds later, a member of the audience hurled a tomato at the ward’s head. He took it in the shoulder. At that, he turned the sign around: Please Sir May I Have Another. The audience roared with laughter, and as he continued to walk and bear the sign above his head, he was pelted with rotten fruits, vegetables, and rubbish._

‘Why did you want me to see this? Why do I want to purchase a clown?’ Wilkes asked in dismay.

‘Because you’re not just buying his body. You’re buying his temperament. That, _Mr Wilkes_, is a docile ward. Submissive, enduring, uncomplaining. May not look like much, that one, but you can push him and push him and push him and he’ll never break. Trust me. He’s the sort that will never give you trouble.’

_They stayed for the games, wards thrown in a ring to beat each other bloody and lock each other in a pen. It wasn’t Wilkes’ cup of tea, but the audience was screaming and laughing and cheering. When a ward stopped moving, it was the clowns who dragged him off. Two stayed behind to perform more tricks. The one he had his eye on stayed with the defeated ward on the side of the arena, giving him water and sopping up the blood._

_After the games was the Sale, an unsanctioned auction where deals were brokered, trades proposed, and transactions finalised. It was just part of Ward Sport, really. Winners and losers of the games were all up for sale or trade, by hosts who were disappointed in their wards, and others who wanted to get their hands on a better prize. Also part of the Sale were the clowns._

_The ward he was after came out in a grey jumpsuit and wearing a different sign around his neck: Lot No. 49. His face was cleaned of paint, and he looked even smaller than when he had been in the_
arena dodging eggs and tomatoes in an oversized yellow and red costume. He learnt little of the ward, only that he was in his early thirties and could easily pass for his twenties, that he’d been with his current host for just about one year, and that the funny walk was actually a limp, a dodgy leg with the foot turned inward. Mr Ewart stood by him as he asked the ward to disrobe so he could verify that he was, indeed, a cas.

‘What do you think?’ he asked Mr Ewart, stepping away to have a word in confidence.

‘He’s perfect,’ said Mr Ewart. ‘A bit stupid, maybe, but that’s good, that will read as innocent and naïve to your guests, a good thing to have in a twink. And that limp just adds to his charm, yeah? They like ’em vulnerable in some identifiable way. Pretty sure this one’s a virgin, too. Even if he’s not, you can promote him as one. First night you sell him, charge double or triple for deflowering. Believe me, there’s a bloke out there who’ll pay it. Telling you, Wilkes, this is the one.’

That night, he wrote a check for JW6462-11 in the amount of £3,000. The Acquisitions Specialist Stephen Ewart promised to complete all the needed paperwork on his behalf and spare him the fuss. In a matter of minutes, the ward became his.

‘Why Tiny?’

‘Hm?’ Wilkes had sunk into a pensive state as his narrative trailed off. But Sherlock wasn’t done with him.

‘Why such a degrading name? Tiny.’

Wilkes shrugged. ‘It was all about branding. Promotions. The clients I was advertising to, they were looking for someone small and boyish. His name was a promise to his guests.’

‘Branding,’ Sherlock said in disgust.

‘It was a business, Holmes, and not cheaply run. I also had to rent the flat, and furnish it, and give the guests an experience. Wines and whiskeys, velvets and silks, these things cost money! You have to spend money to make money, you know. Irene had paid off my debt to Shad Sanderson. Now I had to make good on her investment. I had to pay her back, plus interest, plus keep a luxurious household, I mean, I was strapped! I pinched every penny and pound and—’

‘And how much, pray tell, is the going rate for one night with a ward. With a twink? Just what kind of money were you pulling in?’

‘Um . . . You know, it depended on the week, the month. It wasn’t a consistent, reliable income.’

‘How much, Sebastian?’

He sucked in a deep breath. ‘You have to understand,’ he said quickly, letting all the air out in a rush. ‘You know as well as I that the services Tiny provided—’

‘John. You call him Tiny one more time, I’ll kick your teeth in.’

‘Sorry! It’s habit! God! What I mean is, what he did was illegal, so—’

‘What he did?’

‘What I did! What I bought him for! It was illegal, and I couldn’t run the risk of being found out! High risk, high cost. I couldn’t have just any Tom, Dick, or Harry in there. Higher price points make for more trustworthy clientele. They don’t want to be found out, either.’
'Stop dodging, stop justifying your perversity, just answer my goddam questions!'

‘Jacks started at £1,500 and a two-hour window,’ Wilkes rattled off, ‘and prices went up from there. The more time, the more services, and the more clients at a time, the higher the bill. Some nights, he brought in no more than the £1,500. But usually it was more. Some nights, it was more like three or four thousand. On his very best nights, ten grand. But don’t misunderstand, he didn’t work every night. Three, four times a week, maybe. Rarely all seven. The most he ever made me was for the deflowering at . . . £20,000.’

‘Good God,’ Sherlock whispered in horror.

‘But look, Irene, she took eighty percent of everything until her investment was repaid with interest. Eighty percent! And then it reversed, and she took twenty percent of all profits going forward. I wasn’t being greedy. I had to pay her, I had the monthly rent on a very expensive flat, I had to support the ward—’

‘How long was it?’

‘How long was what?’

‘How long before you paid back the £1.6 million?’

Wilkes blinked rapidly, his mouth opening and closing like a codfish.

‘Answer me.’

‘I don’t know.’ A buzzing silence filled the room. ‘A little over eighteen months.’

Sherlock’s heart was beating erratically, but as he schooled himself not to attack with flying fists, he calculated rapidly. ‘Over three thousand pounds,’ he said, breathless with rage.

‘What’s that?’

‘That’s £3,174 a day. A day! Over £22,000 a week! My God!’

‘I know, I know . . .’

‘How much for aces? Eh? Tell me how much!’

Wilkes flinched but answered. ‘£7,000 for one round.’ He winced a little more. ‘£10,000 for the night.’

Sherlock fist ed his hands in his hair, feeling a bizarre urge to follow John’s example and start striking himself in the head. He needed to hit something.

‘You sick son of a bitch,’ he breathed hotly. ‘You charged men . . .’

‘Women, too, sometimes.’

‘. . . to rape him. And they paid to do it!’

Wilkes was looking very pale. ‘That’s a . . . mischaracterisation. It wasn’t like that.’

‘Tell that to John!’

‘He never complained! No no, listen to me, hear me out. You think it was bad, really bad. It wasn’t.
People fuck. It’s what they do. Putting a price tag on it is immoral—he threw air quotes around the word—‘only because people say it is. That doesn’t make it so. Besides, Tiny knew he was special, adored, even. And he was good! Really good. Repeat-business good. I mean, shit, you don’t get really good at something unless you enjoy it!’

Sherlock shot to his feet. ‘Bullshit!’ Wilkes flung himself back into the sofa to distance himself from Sherlock’s wrath and a potential thrashing, but it wasn’t far enough. Sherlock seized the front of his shirt and lifted him off the sofa, shaking him like rag doll. ‘You terrified him! Terrorised him! For five years! How dare you say he enjoyed. Because he never complained? When he did, you beat the living daylights out of him!’

He threw him back to the sofa and spun around. He’d never felt so close to murdering someone in his life. Oh, it would be so easy, so easy! The gun—it was right there.

‘That’s not true!’ Wilkes quailed, righting himself on the sofa. He scrambled to his feet and backed away, landing against a wall and putting his hand out. ‘I’m not a violent person! Sure, I struck him sometimes, but that was discipline, Holmes! I’m sure you do the same! Wards need it! That one especially. For the stealing and lying and the backtalking and disobeying the house rules. Hosts are supposed to discipline their wards! When I didn’t, they locked him up, at my expense! It was my duty to train him to be civil, to not be a burden to society! If I ever hit him, if I ever had to, I was doing him a favour!’

Sherlock whirled. ‘By shooting him?’

‘That was him! That was all him, no matter what he tells you. He lies, Sherlock, he lies and lies! He wants you to feel sorry for him. It’s just his way of getting soft treatment, you should know that.’

‘You snake! I always knew you were a slimy little scuzzball, but this, this! You’re a monster. You think you can fool me? You think I don’t know the truth of what you did to him? I’ve seen the fruits of your discipline with my own eyes. I don’t know how he survived your tyranny, your relentless brutality . . . But if you think you broke him, you’re dead wrong. He is extraordinary—resilient, brave, uncorrupted. He came through hell living with you. And he deserves justice.’

Sherlock snatched up the gun.

‘God! Oh God! Wh-what are you going to do to me?’ Wilkes was pushing himself further down the wall, but there was no escape; the front door was behind Sherlock.

‘I know what I want to do to you,’ Sherlock answered darkly. ‘I want to make you suffer, the way he suffered. I want you to know exactly what that was like for him. But I can’t. And I can’t disappear you. And I can’t kill you. But you should know this: I want to do all those things. I would gladly spend the rest of my life in prison if it meant your sorry arse was six feet under concrete. But I won’t leave John to the devices of the system that gave him you. So the good news, Sebastian, is that you live.’

He pocketed the gun in his trousers and reached inside the inner pocket of his jacket. Wilkes braced. But if he thought Sherlock might produce a second gun and shoot him between the eyes, he was quickly disabused of that notion. Sherlock had only one thing in hand: Wilkes’ mobile phone.

‘Don’t think I didn’t do my homework,’ said Sherlock. ‘I hacked your phone, accessed your accounts, looked at your deposit history. I trust you know how much you’ve socked away from your illicit business.’

‘Whoa, wait just a—’
‘You love money, Seb, not people. It was love of money that got you into trouble in the first place, and made you do horrendous things to a fellow human so you could get more of it. It wasn’t about debt at all. If it was, you would have quit once Irene was paid back. But you didn’t quit. After eighteen months, you kept right on going. Didn’t you. Because it was good business. So. How much was it worth to you? How much money is in your account right now, Seb?’

‘That’s not— that’s my salary, that’s Shad Sanderson income, not—’

‘How much?’ When Wilkes did not speak, he opened the phone and hacked the appropriate banking app, reading the figure aloud: ‘£5,402,108.35.’ He whistled like he was impressed. ‘Dang, boy. That’s a hell of a lot of aces.’

Wilkes began to shake. ‘Please, Sherlock . . . I know I did wrong. P-put me back in the shower for another week. It’s a punishment I deserve. But I’m a changed man. I . . . I would never . . . not again.’

‘I already filled it out,’ Sherlock continued, Wilkes’ pleas having no effect on him whatsoever. He switched screens on the phone. ‘It’s just awaiting your thumbprint.’

He stepped closer to the trembling Wilkes to show him the screen: a transfer-of-money order.

From: S. A. Wilkes, account ending **** 5603
To: Rescue Centre for Abused Male Wards
Amount: £5,402,108.00

‘It’s new,’ said Sherlock. ‘The government won’t fund it, but private donors will. It’s struggling a bit right now to get off the ground and outfit itself, but with such a generous donation from an anonymous donor, they’re about to start doing a lot of good for a lot of wards, and save them from people like you.’

‘You can’t do this,’ said Wilkes in disbelief. ‘This is my money, my own money! This is going to clean me out!’

‘Until your next paycheque from Shad Sanderson, yes. Don’t fret, you’ll be fine. That’s the real pity of the thing. I wouldn’t try my hand at cards again, though. That doesn’t seem to work out too well for you. If you’re worried about how you’ll eat for the next few days, though, don’t worry. I brought you another week’s worth of apples.’

‘Sherlock!’

‘Trust me, Seb, I’m watching you. So don’t think about returning to the likes of Irene Adler for help. Now, put your thumb right here, and press Send.’

Wilkes stared incredulously at Sherlock, like he’d just been asked to saw off his own arm. ‘It’s my money,’ he said again.

‘And it’s your call. Two options: Send, or I go to the press, and tell them everything.’

It was a bluff. He wouldn’t go to the papers or the news stations, not if it risked exposing John. But he needed to force Wilkes’ hand. The man had two things of any value to him: his money, and his reputation. He was willing to wager everything that Wilkes’ reputation was worth more.

It was. His hand was shaky, but he planted his thumb on the reader, and the money was sent with a merry ding of the phone. ‘If there’s any attempt to stop payment, I’ll be back. You know that, right?’
‘I know it,’ Wilkes said, his voice just as shaky as his hand.

Sherlock didn’t linger. He’d done what he came to do. It wasn’t the justice John deserved, nor the punishment Wilkes merited, but it was it was a start. And if he did this right, it would lead to some good in the messed up world they lived in, after all.

As he departed, Wilkes lifted his eyes only once to meet Sherlock’s, and they were filled with hate.

***

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ Sherlock said, gathering their jackets from off the back of the door where they hung on side-by-side hooks. The afternoon was clouded grey and threatened rain, but no more than a drizzle. The week had been warm, the promise of a hot summer still to come, but a cool wind was cutting through, and Sherlock thought they should get out of the flat for a spell. Besides, going for a walk, his mother had often said, was the perfect chance to bring up uncomfortable topics. Your blood is already pumping, she said, and there’s no need to face your companion.

‘Where are we going?’ John asked as he pushed his arms through the sleeves of a lighter waterproof jacket Sherlock had recently bought him. It was green and complemented his fair blue eyes.

‘Regent’s, I think. If it suits you.’

‘I should like that, Mr Holmes.’

He reached for the identifying bracelets on the coffee table and fitted them to his wrists. Sherlock glared at them, despising them a little more every day, but he schooled his expression before John could catch him at it and misunderstand.

Given the drizzle, Regent’s Park was sparsely populated but for the obligated dogwalkers, dedicated joggers, and young mums pushing prams covered in plastic domes. They strolled in companionable silence for a while, and anyone passing might mistake them as nothing more than old friends, as long as John kept his hands in his pockets. Sherlock indulged the fantasy.

‘My first trip to London, we came to this park,’ said Sherlock after a while. ‘It was on a school trip. We picnicked just over there.’ He pointed to a cluster of trees. ‘I remember little Alfie Smeath got sick after eating too many blackberries, and he threw them up all over Becca Horowitz.’

John laughed softly. It was like rare, beautiful music.

‘I didn’t much fancy being around other children,’ Sherlock continued. ‘An outing with three classes of six- and seven-year-olds was not my idea of a good time. I was supposed to bring a lunch basket. Instead, when Mummy wasn’t looking, I emptied it and packed it full of books instead, and I planted myself just there, and read for the duration.’

‘Did you have friends when you were a child, Mr Holmes?’

‘Books were my friends. I was content enough with them. I reckon most children experience school with a mixture of fond and painful emotions. Mine were mostly the latter, I suppose. I wanted to learn, exclusively, and not play silly games or practise social niceties. Therefore, I am afraid I’m rather deficient in my social niceties. Failed to learn.’ He smiled sideways at John to show he was making fun of himself. But he had come to it, and needed to transition. ‘I admit I am unfamiliar with inner workings of ward schools. How did you find yours?’

John’s cheeks took on the shade of rose quite unrelated to the exertions of walking or the chill wind. ‘Oh. Um. I’m sure they were fine.’ Sherlock said nothing, having learnt by now that if he let the
silence stretch, John would fill it. ‘I wasn’t much troubled by school.’

‘How do you mean?’ Had he found his education a pleasure, then? Had he found it easy? If that were the case, why couldn’t he—?

‘I did not often go.’

Aha. There it was.

‘Why not?’

‘You will not think ill of me?’

‘Never, John.’

‘I didn’t like to go. So if my host sent me off, I would only pretend. Though not all of them sent me off at all.’

Sherlock pointed at a park bench. ‘Rest that ankle?’

‘Thank you, sir.’

They crossed the overgrown grass to where a large shade tree overhung a bench to keep it dry. Sherlock brushed tree debris from the tight wooden planks, and together they sat.

‘Any reason you didn’t like going to school?’

John rubbed the tops of his knees, a nervous gesture Sherlock had observed in him before. But the motion didn’t persist, and John let his back touch the bench, and relax into it. Sherlock could almost perceive the internal debate, the old side of John that had always hidden his feelings and kept secret his memories, and the new side that said it was safe to give them a voice.

‘I was too stupid to learn,’ he said after a spell. ‘So the teachers didn’t like me.’

Sherlock grunted. ‘I don’t believe that for a second. Let’s try again.’

John looked amazed by the unequivocating bluntness. ‘Sir?’

‘You, John, are smart. Very smart. One of the smartest people I know, and that’s saying something.’

John’s lips quirked like he thought Sherlock was teasing him, and he wasn’t sure how to respond to such complimentary lying.

‘Think I’m having you on? I wouldn’t dream of it. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. Your memory for facts and details is astounding. I rarely ever have to tell you a thing twice! For example: You can name every bone in the human body. I can guarantee you that no one else in this park can do that, barring myself. Another example: You watch a professional chef on the telly make a soufflé even once, and you can replicate it with perfection. You recall conversations from many years ago with startling accuracy. And you do all this without ever opening a book, without ever writing a thing down. You’re brilliant.’

John’s flush was, this time, of a different kind of embarrassment. It was a good thing, Sherlock supposed, to be told you were smart by a genius. Only morons would have thought any different of John.

‘I couldn’t hope for a better student,’ Sherlock said with a sharp nod.
‘Student? Me?’

‘That’s right.’ He was pleased to hear the intrigue in John’s voice. This was a man who was thirsty for knowledge—probably even thirstier than he himself knew—and was excited by the prospect of learning knew things. ‘I should like to serve as your teacher, to fill in some of the gaps in your education.’

‘Like what?’ John asked eagerly. ‘Like detective work?’

Sherlock laughed. ‘Oh, you’re already learning that, aren’t you? You’re my bonafide assistant! No, what I mean is, oh I don’t know . . . detective stories. Books.’

John’s face fell.

Sherlock waited.

‘But Mr Holmes,’ he said, voice small, the light of enthusiasm snuffed out of his eyes, ‘I . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘I can’t . . . That is, I never learnt . . .’

‘To read?’

John shook his head, ashamed.

‘So, let’s teach you.’

‘But sir, I’m . . .’

‘You’re what? And don’t say stupid.’

‘Old.’

Sherlock chuckled. ‘Irrelevant.’

‘But they said, sir, that only young minds can learn to read. Old ones, like mine—’

‘John, the sad truth of it is, you have been told stupid things by stupid people. Come.’ He patted John’s knee, then pushed to his feet. ‘The British Library is only a mile from here. What better place to start?’

***

Before they walked in, Sherlock made John take off his bracelets, which he pocketed in his own Belstaff coat. John looked uncertain, but Sherlock just winked. Wards weren’t disallowed inside the library—though they did need to be accompanied by a host or host surrogate—but he wanted to avoid the looks, all the same.

Sherlock borrowed paper and pens from a service desk. Then he led the way to a private study room where the door closed behind them. Seated across from each other now, Sherlock smiled in a way he hoped would be read as zero-pressure-this-is-just-for-fun as he slid the pen across the table to John, who had gone from dubious at Sherlock’s earlier praises to nervous of the blank page in front of him, like it was an animal that might bite him if he didn’t pet it just right. Awkwardly, he reached for the pen.
‘I’m really no good at this, Mr Holmes.’

‘No one is good at anything on their first go. I was playing the violin for ages before anyone in the house could stand to be in the same room with me, I was so bad.’ It worked—John smiled. Sherlock continued, ‘I just want to get a baseline for where we start.’

John nodded, like he’d taken a swallow of marmite and was pretending to like it. Apples and marmite—John liked neither.

‘Okay then. Let’s start simple. Did you learn the alphabet?’

‘Some of it? I remember there was a song, but I was usually in the corner when the other kids were copying it down.’

Sherlock refrained from frowning. ‘Can you write your name?’

‘My now-name? Or my then-name?’

‘Your name. John.’

Chewing his lip, John took the pen in his right hand’s strangely clawed fingers and attempted his first written word since he was child. The pen wobbled and tip scratched, and when he was done, he set the pen down and awaited evaluation.

Sherlock turned the paper around and read the wobbly, slanted script:

\[JO\]

‘Oh!’ said Sherlock, not expecting the spelling.

‘It’s rubbish, isn’t it?’

‘It’s a good place to start.’

At the very least, the performance told Sherlock two things. Three things. One: John did have some knowledge of the English alphabet. Two: his spelling skill was strictly phonetic. And three: they had quite a long way to go.

He decided to start, then, from the beginning.

Next, he had John write out the whole alphabet, as much as he could remember. Of the twenty-six letters, he knew, well, nearly half.

\[ABCDLPGKJISTKZ\]

Yes, he’d forgotten most of the vowels, including the one in his own name. And he’d repeated the K. Some letters were flipped or copied wrong, and the order was a bit wonky. But it was a promising start.

‘If you can remember *zygomaticus,*’ said Sherlock, ‘this will be a breeze.’

They began with the uppercase letters. They copied out the lowercase letters. They sang the alphabet song. They practised sounding out each letter, one by one, and thinking of words that started with those sounds. Sherlock found a flashcard app designed for three-to-four-year-olds. He held up a B and had John name it.
‘Now give me three words.’


He held up an H.

‘Hello. Hot. Hobble.’

Next, a J.


‘Um, no.’

They stayed until John’s stomach made an audible growl. ‘Dinner!’ Sherlock announced. He was eager, himself, for a reprieve from the exercise. This was going to be more work than he thought.

***

He was seeing the world through John’s eyes more and more. There was something written on every street corner, in every shop window, on purses and t-shirts and car doors and hoardings and bus stops and every time you turned around, and John made sense of none of it. Well, that wasn’t quite true. As Mrs Hudson had observed, he was quite expert at ‘adapting the tools in his toolbox’. He knew his numbers, for one, so understood things like time and prices and bus numbers. He relied on pictures and context for the rest. And what he didn’t understand, or couldn’t sound out with his very rudimentary knowledge of the alphabet, he ignored and made do. He made do so well that Sherlock hadn’t even noticed, not until his head was twisted in the right direction. He was astounded. For that matter, he was also saddened—there was so much that John was cut off from, not being able to read. Seventeen hosts, and not one had cared to correct this. It really was despicable.

‘There are two classes of nouns,’ said Sherlock. They were sat across from one another in the sitting room of 221B, John with a legal pad and pen, Sherlock with a manual for instructing in adult literacy. ‘Common, and proper. Both name people, places, and things. Common nouns name objects in the ordinary fashion—boy, city, book—but proper nouns have particular names given to them and are capitalised.’ He paused, then clarified, ‘The big letters.’

‘I remember capitalised,’ John said, having learnt it the day before. ‘Upper-case.’

‘That’s right. Okay. Let’s try some exercises. I’ll give you two words, one common, one proper, and you decide which is the proper noun, write it down, doing your best with the spelling.’

‘Okay,’ said John, squeezing the pen, his eyes excitedly fixed on the page.

‘Dog or Spot.’ These sample exercises really did leave something of imagination to be desired.

John paused. ‘Is that a trick?’

‘Well . . . damn. Yes, both can be common nouns, but you would name a dog, not a spot, so . . . I just gave you the answer. Try it anyway. Write down Spot.’

John scratched onto the page: Spot

‘London or city.’

He bit his lower lip as he unsteadily transcribed: Londin
'Very nearly,' Sherlock said. 'London is spelt with two O’s.'

John scratched out his attempt and tried again: Loondin

Sherlock couldn’t help but chuckle and gave him the correct spelling. Enough with the subpar examples (he needed to find a more imaginative book, or he’d go mad). ‘Detective or Sherlock.’

Looking up warily, John looked less certain than before. ‘Those are long words.’

‘Give it a go.’

Holding the paper still with a flattened left hand, John slowly and timidly wrote out SSelok. ‘I don’t know shh,’ he said softly.

Sherlock smiled and took the pen from him, writing his name in large, crisp letters. ‘S-H makes shh. It looks strange, I know,’ he said, passing the pen back.

That was when he noticed that John accepted the pen with his left hand, and transferred it to his right, to copy Sherlock’s work.

‘John,’ he said, when the task was complete, ‘you’re left-handed.’

John looked at his hands, as though expecting to see something particular about his left hand to give it away. ‘Yes? I mean, it’s the stronger of the two, I suppose.’

‘Then you should write with your left.’

Cocking his head in confusion, John said, ‘But . . . people write with their right hands. Right? That’s why it’s called a right hand?’

It occurred to Sherlock that John, having never seen it written down, had never learnt that they were two different words. His whole life, he had understood the right hand as the write hand, or the hand that writes. He pursed his lips, finding this incredibly endearing, but he couldn’t let the misapprehension abide. ‘Try it with the left,’ he encouraged.

After a few minutes’ practice with the hand he had been born to write with, John’s face broke out into a wide, pleased-with-himself grin. The letters were still rather sloppy and childlike, but they came with greater ease, and Sherlock was proud.

‘So we both have silent H’s in our names,’ John mused, writing his name correctly for the fifth time, with relish.

‘Technically, I suppose. Though my H is critical to altering the sound of the S.’

‘What about your other names? Do they have silent letters, too?’

‘Let’s take a look.’ Sherlock spelt out his full name: William Sherlock Scott Holmes. There were no other silent letters, as such, but John was intrigued by the need for double letters in William and Scott, and two like-sounding letters coupled together to make one sound in ck. The two together seemed, he said, unnecessary. Sherlock only laughed.

Looking back at his own small, four-letter name, he said ponderously, ‘Mine is quite simple, isn’t it?’

‘John,’ said Sherlock grandly, ‘is a bold, confident, no-nonsense name. John is a man of rectitude, a man of stature, a man of letters. John needs no frills or double letters. He’s no lacey doily.’
John’s chin lifted a little, regarding his name on the page. He fought to keep his lips a straight line.

‘I have to ask—I’ve been wondering for some time—where does it come from? Did you, I don’t know, once know a John?’

The lips relaxed again in the pensive way John always considered questions about his internal life and history. ‘No,’ he answered slowly. ‘It was just a story.’

‘What story?’

‘I don’t remember it well. I was very little. Six years old, maybe?’

‘Your host told you stories? Read them to you?’

‘I didn’t have a host, at that time. I’d got sick. Pox, I think. I had spots all over, and I was so sick I couldn’t eat or get out of bed. I was a danger to the other children, they said, so they sent me away. Not forever. I mean, they promised not forever. They said they’d be back when I was well again, but they never did come back. So I was a long time in a, erm, it was like a house for problem children.’

Maintaining a straight face, Sherlock was silently and excitedly filling in the blanks in his internal database: 1999–2000, Children’s Asylum, Canterbury.

‘They called me Abel. I remember that.’

He mentally inserted the name after the date.

‘The house was really large—two floors and lots of bedrooms—though not very nice. After the infirmary, I was in a room with seven other boys like me. We had to share beds, but it was actually, like, one big bed, all the mattresses put together, and you didn’t want to be in the middle because it would get too hot and you couldn’t escape, and sometimes a boy would wet the bed—that’s why they were there, in the house, their hosts didn’t want bed wetters—and we’d all have to sleep in it, because once the doors were closed for the night, they were closed, and you couldn’t get up for anything, not for the toilet or because a rat bit your toe, not anything. And when that happened—the bed wetting, I mean—the nuns put us on the roof and made us take a sky bath, even in winter, because it was always raining, and even when it wasn’t, we’d be up there with buckets and sponges for a bath, and if we were caught playing, it was buckets and sponges in the kitchen, cleaning the tiles, and it was a really large kitchen, none of us wanted that . . .’

John trailed off, looking embarrassed that he’d said so much, and hadn’t answered the question.

‘Well, anyway,’ he said, rubbing the back of his neck, ‘the nuns, they told us stories, and I don’t remember many, or remember well, but I do remember . . . There was this one story about three brothers, and the youngest of them was called John, and he was the most loved. I . . . That’s all I remember.’ He flushed harder and shrank a little in his chair. ‘I liked that. I always thought, wouldn’t it be nice, to be John?’

***

It was slow going, at the start, which was discouraging for them both. Simple tasks—well, those Sherlock had deemed simple—sometimes proved massively difficult for John to perform. For instance, reading aloud:

‘I . . . was ssssick. Sick un to dee . . . dee . . .’

‘Death.’
‘. . . death w- wwwiii— wit—’

‘Remember, t-h makes a th sound.’

John’s voice wavered uncertainly over the book Sherlock had pulled from his shelves and set before him. ‘Withhhh thhhathhh . . .’

‘That.’

‘That. Lown— no, long aaaaag . . . aaaaag . . . on . . . why.’

‘Agony.’

It kind of was.

Fortunately, Mrs Hudson was a keen participant in John’s education. It was her idea for John to start a journal. ‘Every day, write down one thing about yourself, or one thing you’ve done that day. It’ll be good practice!’

His first day journaling, he produced the following, which took him some twenty minutes to write:

my nams JohN to day i woke up at 6 teh lite in mY rooms 2 Brite mista homs seys its Becus its suma winta is doka but i don no wyh i dint unde stand wot he was seng

It was only one of his many new assignments. Every morning, John was responsible for reading the headlines in the newspapers aloud over breakfast. Sherlock set him the task of practising his spelling by labelling items around the house with sticky notes, and after a week, the flat was covered in notes reading table and window and frij and klok. (He complained more than once that the letter c was pointless when there was already a k and s, which Sherlock agreed was trying.) When he misspelt one thing or another, Sherlock made him write it down ten times the correct way, and the sticky notes, over time, were corrected.

To get even more practice, when Sherlock left the house, or when John went out to do the shopping, they texted constantly on John’s new phone:

Don’t forget oranges.

do you want ice creem

Punctuation, please. And
is that how it’s spelt on the box?

Do you want ice cream?

That would be lovely, thank you.
Choose your favourite.

:)  

Mrs Hudson gave him a book of word puzzles, and in the evenings, while Sherlock argued with the telly, he did word searches, fill-in-the-blanks, and simple crosswords, and Mrs Hudson checked his work. He read one book a day, a children’s picture book she brought home from the library, and was made to report on it to check his reading comprehension. He read slowly at first, and with some frustration, and had to show her or Sherlock longer words for help, which Mrs Hudson obliged with, but Sherlock did not.
'Sound it out, you can do it. One syllable at a time.'

John sighed. ‘Con. Stan. Tin. O. Pul?’

‘Now all together?’

‘Con-stan-tin-o-ple?’

‘Quickly this time.’

‘Constantinople?’

‘Bravo.’

‘But that’s not a word.’

Sherlock laughed. ‘It used to be.’

Near the end of the month, he brought his journal to Sherlock at the end of the night, where he had written out his latest entry:

*Mister Homes liks tee whif huny and shooga. I like min wif milk not 2 much. Sumtimes the land lady Mz Hudsn brings biskits. May be I will buy brandy snaps when I go shopp to moro. I wont to lern to yose mony but Im not a lowd becus Im a word and words ant a lowd. If I do I mit steel and go to jell.*

‘This is wonderful, you’re doing so well,’ Sherlock remarked. ‘Full sentences and everything! You capitalised all the proper nouns and the pronoun *I*, without fail. Tomorrow, I want you to pay attention to your contractions. Can you circle the words in this that are contractions?’

It was one or two things at a time, not all of it together. It would come, he knew. With time and practice. And though he was happy to point out the different spellings of homonyms, like *right* and *write*, and *two* and *too*, he just couldn’t bring himself to tell John that his last name wasn’t *Homes*.

***

Every morning, while Mr Holmes was in the shower and before Mrs Hudson joined them for breakfast, John popped down to the street corner to buy the morning papers with his tab card: *The Guardian, The Independent, The Mirror*, and *The British Standard*, which Mr Holmes had always considered undisguised propaganda drivel. John didn’t quite know what *propaganda* meant, so he had tried to look it up in the dictionary. The trouble was, he didn’t see any word beginning *propo-*.

‘Damn shame, innit, son?’ said the clerk, running his tab card.

John pursed his lips, unsure what was being asked of him. Slowly, he nodded. When he didn’t understand something, he found it was usually best simply to agree.

‘Right though. Keep your chin up. It’s not so bad.’

Puzzled, he folded the papers under his arm and returned to the flat.

Mr Holmes was fresh from the shower and entering the kitchen, where he kissed Mrs Hudson on the cheek. Mrs Hudson, pouring coffees, hummed a good morning in response. John turned to hide his smile, pretending he hadn’t taken any notice. There had been a spell when something seemed wrong between them. But he didn’t know what, and it would have been rude to ask. Whatever it had been, it had passed, and John was seeing a lot more of Mrs Hudson these days, which suited him fine.
They all gathered at the breakfast table and tucked in, Mrs Hudson commenting on what a warm day it was to be and Sherlock making light of her concerns over people who walked their dogs at the hottest point in the day. Feeling bold, John piped in that he had seen dogs swimming in the ponds at Regent’s, and that it seemed a good solution to an overheated dog. Sherlock replied that that seemed a very sensible solution.

As breakfast wound down, Sherlock took the last swig of his coffee and said, ‘All right then, John, let’s hear it. Read us the headlines.’

‘Start with The Guardian,’ Mrs Hudson said. ‘I like to digest a little before I hear that claptrap from the Standard.’

This was John’s favourite parts of breakfast, and that was saying something. He reached for the papers, which he had left on a stack on his chair, and cleared his throat as he unfolded The Guardian over his cleared plate. His eyes went first to the big, bolded headline right at the top—long words today; he was excited by the challenge—but skittered down to the accompanying colour photograph, and his breath stopped. His fingers locked around the paper and a cold chill swept through him, leaving him frozen and staring at the photo.

‘Problem, dear?’ prompted Mrs Hudson.

For a moment, he wondered whether he were asleep. This is how they started, sometimes. He would be on Baker Street, in this very flat, in this very room, with Mr Holmes or Mrs Hudson or both. Until something intruded, and the world got darker, and uglier, and he was back there, trapped, and Baker Street had never happened. But he blinked, trying to clear his eyes, and the room didn’t shiver and melt away. Mrs Hudson touched his arm, and he jumped.

‘Oh!’ she eeeped, withdrawing her hand quickly and pressing her fingers to her lips.

Suddenly, Mr Holmes was on his feet, snatching the paper out of his frozen hands. His eyes grazed the headline before he tossed it over his shoulder and announced, ‘What a fantastic breakfast. Mrs Hudson, your eggs are nearly as good as John’s. Now, we shouldn’t wish to keep you from your appointment at the salon. Your hair’s been a bit frizzy of late. Best go tame it.’

‘Manners, Sherlock,’ she murmured, but she seemed to recognise a dismissal. John, head swimming, eyes burning, felt miserable, but his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth, and if he tried to open it, he might just throw up. He heard the door click softly upon her exit, then Mr Holmes’ purposeful footsteps as he came around the table.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ said John weakly, trying to stand, but his legs weren’t working so well at the moment, not even the good one.

‘No no, sit, take a moment,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘And no apologies.’

It was mortifying. Just a picture, just a stupid picture, it wasn’t real. Why was he like this? Why did he have to mess everything up? He obeyed the command and sank back into his seat, his face disappearing behind his hands. Meanwhile, Sherlock made quick work of clearing the table in front of him before dragging a chair close and laying a hand on his back. This time, he only tensed, and despised himself for it.

‘You’re okay. Let’s go ahead and breathe first, yeah?’ said Mr Holmes. ‘Like we practised.’

Mr Holmes meant after the nightmares. He’d had more, since Mr Holmes had first caught him at it and come upstairs, prompting his host to research techniques for calming down. Breathing was the
first step, and it did seem to help. Long breaths going in, steady breaths going out. He tried it, sometimes, when he was alone, and he needed it.

‘That’s good,’ Mr Holmes said. ‘Keep it going.’

But John couldn’t help himself from murmuring another sorry.

‘You know what? It’s okay. It’s perfectly fine to be upset. This is exactly the space to get upset in, yeah? You’re safe here. We don’t even have to talk about it, if you don’t want to. Just tell me what you need. Water? Ice?’

John shook his head.

‘Do you want me to leave? Would you prefer to be alone? Go to your room? Need the toilet?’

Again, John shook his head. ‘I . . . want to . . . move.’ He didn’t know why he said it. Only, he felt agitated, and if he sat there one second longer, he might need the toilet after all, and he didn’t want to get sick. He needed to move.

Mr Holmes moved aside, and John pushed back from the table. After one false start, he was on his feet. He paced to the windows, as though he might fly out of them, then turned sharply and strode to the door, stopping short of the threshold, not knowing what to do. He hit himself once in the side of the head, twice, feeling some measure of relief.

‘I know,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘Your Union Jack pillow.’

John stopped beating himself in the head and looked up, confused. ‘The pillow?’

‘Punch the stuffing out of it. Spare your skull.’

John stared. After a beat, he realised that Mr Holmes was making a joke. The levity of the offer broke something in the air, like slicing through a cloud that surrounded him, and he laughed, though briefly. He looked gratefully at his host. But the humour of the moment faded quickly.

‘Who is he?’ John asked.

‘Who?’

John pointed to the discarded paper on the floor. ‘The man in the newspaper. Who is he?’

Mr Holmes stepped closer to the paper, watching John warily from the corner of his eye. But he picked it up. ‘Did you read the headline?’

‘The words were too long,’ John said, sniffing. He needed to be back in control. He could do this. ‘I just saw the photo and . . .’

‘You recognise this man?’

John nodded gravely.

‘John, who was he to you? Another former host?’

‘No, sir.’ But Mr Holmes just continued to stare at him, concerned. He gasped a few breaths and said, ‘Guest.’ The colour slowly drained from Mr Holmes’ face. ‘He was one of Mr Wilkes’ guests. Please, sir, who is he?’ He pointed a shaking finger. ‘Why is his face in the newspaper?’
Mr Holmes looked like he didn’t want to say. ‘His name is Magnussen. Charles Augustus Magnussen. He’s the current Lord Commissioner of Emancipation. And he’s just suspended the programme, indefinitely.’

John swallowed, blinking rapidly. ‘Oh,’ he whispered. But the word took time to register. Emancipation. It was a big word, a scary word, one he had always feared. As a child, he had been taught that emancipated wards were deeply unhappy wards, left all alone in the world with no family and no host and no care, vulnerable to starvation, molestation, and even death, both violent and accidental. It was a terrible thing to do to a ward, he was told, and he believed it. But as he grew, those very fears became more and more his reality, and he saw no difference between emancipated wards and himself—not that he knew any.

He sometimes thought about what it would have been like, to be free. Free, not emancipated. There was a difference, wasn’t there? Free like those who had never been warded to begin with. Emancipation wasn’t freedom. Wards were wards for life; that was the way of it.

Then he met James. At the darkest time in his life, when death seemed beautiful and desirable, he caught a glimmer of another way, and began to wonder if he’d been wrong all along. Maybe the Highwaymen were real. Maybe Dover was real. Maybe emancipation meant escape, not release. Maybe there was another way out.

Now, he was confused. What had that man’s job been, really?

‘Emancipation?’ John asked. ‘That man . . . it’s his job to . . . help wards? To set them free?’

‘I’m so sorry, John.’

‘But—’ He felt his heart—that all important muscle keeping him alive—begin to throb painfully, and his face felt hot. His fists balled at his side. ‘But he . . . he hurts wards! He told me! He liked hurting them, he said he wanted to be the first, always the first, but he kept coming back. Again, again! He kept coming back, and he knew I was afraid, he knew he was hurting me, and he kept coming back!’

‘My God, John, I’m so—’

‘Why! Why did he do that! He’s supposed to help wards—he should have helped me!’ He beat himself in the chest. ‘He knew what Mr Wilkes was making me do, and he did it, too! He should have helped me get out! How could he—? Why—?’ He felt like he was crumbling. He gasped and bent over at the middle before righting himself. His eyes were swimming. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’

He went quickly the table; he needed water, something to drink. His throat was getting too tight, too dry. Grabbing a glass, he brought it to his lips, only to find it already drained. Something surged up from deep within him, a terrifying rage, and before he could stop himself, he screamed and hurled the glass at the hearth. It shattered in an explosion of crystal.

John gasped, horrified at what he’d done, what he’d thought, what he’d felt deep inside himself. This wasn’t the slip of the rice pudding bowl, or even the accident with the precious teacup. He spun toward his host, regret and self-abasement on his lips, when he saw Mr Holmes extending to him a second glass.

‘That’s worth at least two glasses.’ He nodded, indicating John should take it from him. ‘Wouldn’t you say?’

For a long moment, John didn’t move. Didn’t blink. Didn’t even breathe. Then John took the glass from his host, cocked his arm, and with all his strength rolling up from a deep well of hate, cast it into
the fireplace, where all things burned.
The next time John had a nightmare about being pinned down, tortured, and violated, he got angry.

He didn’t know if he shouted or just gasped, but he startled awake with a mouth gaping open and throat dried by air rushing in and out of his lungs, and his face was damp with sweat. No, no, no, why couldn’t they leave him be? He pummelled the mattress, then his forehead, where the dreams were stuck. It was over now, over! Just go away!

He whipped off the overly hot duvet and launched himself off the bed, aiming for the switch on the wall, hitting it with a tight fist. He pressed two hands over his heart and tried to breathe normally. Five in. Five out. But he was struggling to get a good breath. While holding it, he listened for footsteps on the stair, but there was silence. Maybe Mr Holmes hadn’t heard. Maybe he wouldn’t come this time. John felt a pang in his chest, quite different from the stuck breath. He didn’t want to be alone, just now. It would be okay—wouldn’t it?—to leave the bedroom and, well, recover himself in the sitting room. Mr Holmes, though sleeping, would be nearer, then, and that might be enough.

Still, he felt silly. He should have a reason, a purpose, in case he was caught. So, a drink? Yes. It would be okay to go get a drink, even in the middle of the night. He was allowed to do things like that here, on Baker Street.

He checked his watch on the nightstand. A quarter past three. He’d better be very quiet, then. He slipped into his blue-striped dressing gown and slippers, and, leaving on a lamp, headed down the stairs.

To his surprise, however, when he reached the kitchen, intending on getting himself a glass of water, Mr Holmes was just appearing, too, eyes squinting and hair dishevelled. But if his host was likewise surprised to see John at this hour in the morning, he gave no sign of it. All he offered was a sleepy smile, as if it were morning and they were meeting for breakfast. As he passed John by, he squeezed his shoulder and carried on to the sitting room, where he clicked on the telly and turned the volume low, leaving John to take his time and get what he’d come for.

John finished the glass quickly, filled it again, and drank half of it away. Then, still bearing the glass, he toed his way to the dark sitting room and peered in. Mr Holmes was on the sofa, on his phone, the screen’s glow illuminating his face. His bare feet were stretched out on the coffee table, toes flexing. John wasn’t sure what to do. Go back to bed? Apologise? Offer Mr Holmes a glass? But Mr Holmes, apparently noticing his hesitation, patted the cushion beside him without even glancing up from his phone.

John looked down at his slippered feet. Then at Mr Holmes, using the coffee table like an ottoman. Would it be all right if he . . . ? Swallowing, John stepped out of his slippers. The floor was cool on his bare feet as he crossed the room. He sat beside his host.

Neither said a word. John sipped his water and watched telly; Mr Holmes scrolled through news sites on his phone, reading more quickly than John, he was sure, ever could, even with lots and lots of practice. Gradually, he relaxed back into the sofa. Daringly, he stretched his legs out over the coffee table, holding his breath, anticipating an objection. None came. He exhaled. This was okay. This was good. This was what home meant.

Suddenly, Mr Holmes pulled back his feet. John’s heart leapt in fright, but Mr Holmes, in rising, squeezed his knee to indicate that he stay put. He did, and watched anxiously as Mr Holmes disappeared into the kitchen. He heard rummaging in a drawer and the open-shut of the fridge.
Seconds later, he reappeared with a half-litre tub of sea salt caramel ice cream and two silver spoons. He resumed his seat, popped the lid off the tub, and handed John one of the spoons.

They watched an old comedy on the telly, each taking turns digging into the ice cream. The programme was funny. Mr Holmes was laughing, so John started laughing, too. The dream was dissolving, and the anger with it. Maybe it was because of Mr Holmes. More and more these days, John didn’t think about the bad things, when Mr Holmes was around. It was like when cockroaches scatter from the light. Mr Holmes was like light.

Soon, John’s eyes grew heavy again.

Next morning, he awoke in his bed, though he didn’t remember having fallen asleep in it. He didn’t remember falling asleep at all. For some minutes, he thought he had imagined having woken in the middle of the night to begin with; he believed he had dreamed of leaving the bedroom. But there was an empty glass on his nightstand, and his dressing gown was draped over the back of the chair, not in the wardrobe, where he usually kept it, and his slippers were missing from the room entirely. So, it must have happened. It was the only logical explanation, as Mr Holmes would say.

Still, he couldn’t say how he had got back to his room. All he knew for sure was that he felt like the John from the story, and that was the best good he could imagine.

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No one knew anything about her. She arrived in a taxi and stiffed the cabbie, who couldn’t really hold a grudge. Not in a situation like this. At first, they thought she didn’t speak English because she wouldn’t answer any questions, even simple ones, such as ‘What’s your name, love?’ or ‘How far along are you?’, so they treated her as foreign until, in the eighth hour of labour, delirious on drugs, she began to murmur, ‘They promised, they promised . . . a land of dreams.’

‘Miss? Miss?’ A nurse wiped the tracks of sweat from her brow and cheeks, and gave her ice chips to suck. ‘The doctor’s on the way, miss.’

She turned her head from the proffered ice. ‘No joy, no love, no light. Ahh!’

After that, she didn’t say another word.

The baby was born full term and healthy, with strong lungs and steady heartbeat. He was swaddled in white and presented to her with congratulations, but she turned onto her side and closed her eyes, refusing to hold him.

A nurse took care of him, those first few days. She fed him, changed him, bathed him, and kept careful records of his hours of sleep and wakefulness. Just a year ago, Lucy had become a new mother herself. She fell in love easily these days with newborn babes. Already, this baby boy was precious to her. She breathed in his new-babe scent and hummed her favourite songs, and dressed his little feet in warm booties, his delicate hands in mittens, certain that if the mother saw him like this, an adorable doll-like bundle, she would be less afraid, and more inclined to embrace him as her own.

But when she arrived at the hospital one morning, planning, first thing, to try again with the new mother, she was intercepted just outside the maternity ward.

‘Nurse Watson, we’ve had another one.’

‘Another what?’
But she already knew. It was altogether too common these days: mothers in hard circumstances, or mothers with too many children already, or mothers who gave birth to the wrong sex, or mothers who were overwhelmed with the thought of raising a child with deformity or disease . . . They just walked away. The news adverts promised to take care of them, when mothers could not, and since the expansion of the Ward Programme to that of a lifelong designation, abandonment rates had been on the rise.

‘What will happen to him?’ Lucy asked. She held the little unnamed baby in her arms while the hospital manager filled out the CFCA paperwork.

‘This one?’ The woman shrugged, not even pausing her pen. ‘Another one for Dr Stapleton’s research, I suppose. But that’s above my paygrade. Yours, too, Lucy.’ She shook her head and added her signature at the bottom of the form. ‘Damn shame, though. This one looks so healthy, so normal. Now, I doubt he’ll make it to his first birthday.’ She pulled the form from the clipboard, folded it, and stuffed it in an envelope for internal delivery. ‘Who knows what he may have become, in another life?’

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On a mission to find his slippers, John yawned into his fist as he came down the stairs, stopping short halfway down. He sniffed. Was that . . . bacon? Curious, he continued down and into the kitchen, where he saw Mr Holmes at the hob, turning bacon with a pair of tongs. A stack of buttered toast was at one elbow, beside a pitcher of orange juice.

‘Ah! John!’ Mr Holmes said when he realised John was behind him. If he registered John’s bafflement, he was choosing to ignore it. ‘Good morning!’

‘You’re making breakfast,’ said John, the bite of guilt nipping at him. Had he overslept? Was Mr Holmes hungry? His head was still too fogged with sleep.

‘I’m making birthday breakfast, yes.’

John blinked away the tiredness. ‘Oh! Happy birthday, Mr Holmes.’

Mr Holmes chuckled. He lifted the bacon from the pan and set it atop kitchen paper to soak up the grease. ‘You’re about six months too late on that count. My birthday is January 6. Yours’—he popped two more slices of bread into the toaster—‘is today.’

For a long moment, John just stared, uncomprehending, like the words had been uttered in another language, or at least a made-up language, like in that poem Mr Holmes had him read to practise his sight-reading, the one about the Jab . . . Jabbing . . . Wonky Jabber. Something like that. Then a lightbulb went on in his head, and John gasped sharply. He whirled to the wall calendar, where he saw a big red circle around Monday, July 7, and the words in Mr Holmes’ large script: John’s Birthday. That hadn’t been there before, he was certain.

‘Is it really?’ he asked.

‘Yep.’

‘Really really?’

‘Positively.’

‘You’re not having me on?’
'Would I do that?'

'July 7? Every year, July 7?'

'Happy birthday, John.'

John felt like his whole body was alight, down to his toes. He felt warm all over, like he was a pot boiling over, a firecracker ready to explode. He couldn’t believe it, could not believe it! He had a birthday! July 7! He repeated it, again and again, making sure it stuck in his head so he would never forget it, while Mr Holmes chuckled and poured three mugs of coffee.

'But how do you know? How old am I?'

'It’s in your records! And John, you know how old you are!'

'Thirty-eight?'

'Yes, thirty-eight.'

'I’m thirty-eight! Today!'

Then Mrs Hudson appeared, and John couldn’t help himself.

'It’s my birthday today, Mrs Hudson!' he said, forgetting to wish her good morning.

Her arms spread wide. ‘Happy birthday, love!’ Then she kissed him on the cheek and embraced him. ‘You didn’t think I’d forget, did you? Sherlock’s been talking about it for a month.’

‘I’ve the whole day planned,’ said Mr Holmes, handing plates to Mrs Hudson to set the table. ‘First, breakfast. Then, what do you think, Mrs Hudson? Presents after breakfast, or do we wait until cake tonight?’

‘Oh, don’t ask me, it’s not my day,’ she said.

‘John?’


‘Why wait indeed,’ said Mr Holmes with a wink.

It was a rare thing that John had no appetite, but he was so excited that his stomach was doing all sorts of funny things, and digesting wasn’t one of them. Even so, he ate two slices of buttered toast and four strips of bacon, chewing until it was paste. Though traditional, Mr Holmes kindly excluded eggs. Instead, there were oranges.

Without bothering to clear away breakfast first, they sat him on the sofa and placed a small stack of presents on the coffee table in front of him. Presents plural, he noted. He didn’t really want anything. That is, he didn’t want for anything. But it was the thought of a present in and of itself that had him beside himself with glee. They could wrap up the morning paper and call it a birthday gift and he would have been just as giddy, because today was his birthday, and it was being treated as such.

But neither Mr Holmes nor Mrs Hudson was careless enough to gift him the morning paper. Instead, he peeled back the gift wrap and found a flip calendar, like what Mrs Hudson had suggested buying for him so many months ago: a fat, 24-month daily calendar with photographs from around the British Isles, accompanied by inspirational quotes. On this day, July 7, the quote read ‘See opportunities, not obstacles,’ which Mr Holmes called banal, a comment that earned him a slap on
the arm from Mrs Hudson.

He also received a globe of planet Earth, which rotated slowly on its axis when plugged into the wall, with all the countries labelled in tiny print. It took him about a minute to find the State of New Britain, but he did it without any helping, because he knew it was an island, though he had thought it much larger and much nearer the middle. There was also a book about a murder on a train that Mr Holmes said made him want to become a detective and that he believed John would enjoy. John flipped through it. It was a lot of pages, a lot of words, but he was excited by the challenge. And Mrs Hudson had given him a French cookbook, replete with pictures and words both, and reassured him that the book itself was not written in French.

Last of all, he opened a large, flat box.

‘Your own laptop,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘The modern man of letters ought to know how to type as well as he can write.’

They spent the next hour setting it up. It was a lot more complicated than John’s phone, and after the basic tutorial he was sure he’d never get the hang of it. Mr Holmes encouraged him that, with time, he’d be an expert. He hoped so. It was really fancy, just like Mr Holmes’, slim and sleek and silver, though with a few more restrictions designed for ward use.

‘Worry about it later,’ said Mr Holmes when the screen prompted him to set up an email account. ‘Who wants to spend their birthday cooped up in a stuffy old flat anyway? We’re going out!’

John quite liked the stuffy old flat, but he liked going out, too. Especially if he was going out with Mr Holmes.

‘Where are we going?’

Mr Holmes actually rubbed his hands together.

‘I’ve been begging her for weeks and weeks, and finally, finally, finally she said yes, yes, she has a specimen. John: how would you like to come with me to the mortuary at St Bart’s and examine a whole cadaver?’

‘Really?’ John asked. He felt a tingling of anticipation in his fingertips. Would today’s surprises never end?

Mr Holmes nodded with barely restrained glee.

‘I can see where the heart goes? And a real lung?’

‘Digestive tract from tongue to rectum, skeletal features laid bare, a brain, John, a human brain!’

‘Yes!’

‘Oh, you boys and your playthings,’ said Mrs Hudson, shaking her head as though she disapproved, but even John could see she was amused. ‘Off you go, then. But don’t forget I have cake for you tonight.’

At Mr Holmes’ go-ahead, John rushed upstairs to change. It was his birthday. His birthday. He would definitely have something to write about in his journal tonight.

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'Awful,' the woman said, two hands over her heart, ‘just awful.’ Her name was Mrs Reynolds, but he didn’t know that yet. All he knew was that he was scared of her. Her hips were wide and her bosom ample, and her feet were spilling out over the sides of her shoes. ‘He saw it happen?’

‘Police say they found him in the room with her.’

The woman who had brought him held him in place with a hand on his small, yellow head. Sometimes, she petted it, but mostly she just rested her hand there, as if he were a crutch.

‘Hasn’t said much at all, really,’ the woman continued. ‘But he’s young. He’ll forget. Give it a month, and he’ll be calling you Mummy, I reckon.’

‘Oh!’ The woman laughed. ‘I’ve got enough ragamuffins that do that as it is!’

‘Six, you say?’

‘Seven, though, the oldest is gone away to university. Husband and me, we gave her the last ward, start her off right with one she knows. Ah, but this little darling.’ The large woman bent over, hands on knees, to meet his level. ‘Big house, full o’ kids. You’ll never want for company, will you?’

He couldn’t raise his head, not on his own, so she lifted it by the chin with two pudgy fingers painted a shocking pink. He would always remember that. Mrs Reynolds with the pink fingernails.

‘There now, love. No need for tears. You’re part of the household, now!’ She laughed, pinched his tear-stained cheek, and straightened. ‘Where do I sign?’

The woman who had brought him left; he never saw her again, and could never remember a thing about her, but for the buckles on her shoes. His new host, Mrs Reynolds, threw back her head and lifted her voice to fill the house: ‘You’uns! Git here, right quick! Time to meet the new ward!’

He jumped at the boom of her voice, and his fear spread to every limb as a stampede of feet sounded above his head and tumbled down the wooden staircase. Suddenly, he was surrounded by children, some tall, some short, some boys, some girls, and all older and bigger than he. They circled him, put their faces close to his, touched his puffy red cheeks and tugged the hem of his shirt with the Orange Turtle on. ‘Whassis name, Mum? What do we call him?’ ‘Does he like dinosaurs?’ ‘He’s not sleeping with me!’ ‘Where’s the tat, Mummy, I don’t see his tat!’

‘Not ’til he’s eight, love. This one’s but four. And his last name is dreadful, just dreadful. We’ll name him ourselves.’

He wanted to shrink away, to hide his face, or hide in a cubby. He wanted Mummy. He wanted Harry. Overcome with terror, not understanding what had become of him, he began to shake and sniffle, and a warmth spread across his lap and down his leg.

‘Eww!’ the children shouted in chorus, leaping backward.

‘Mummy, he’s made a puddle!’ shrieked one of them, and they all laughed. Later, the children named him Puddle.

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It had been a long while since John had set foot in a real hospital, like St Bartholomew’s. And he hadn’t set foot inside one. He’d been wheeled in on a gurney and left again in a wheelchair. But the smell was familiar, that of antiseptic and lemon cleaner. And it was so white. He folded his hands behind himself as he followed Mr Holmes down corridors and into the lifts, careful not to touch
anything.

‘The pathologist and I go way back,’ said Mr Holmes, punching a button labelled M. It was nice to know that. M for moon, map, Mrs Hudson. ‘Molly Hooper,’ Mr Holmes continued. M for Molly, John thought. ‘Top in her field. That’s why she’s the Yard’s number one pick for performing autopsies on suspected murder victims.’

M for murder.

When they reached the bottom level and stepped out of the lift, John read the sign that greeted them.

M for . . .

‘Mor-gew,’ he said.

‘The U-E on the end is silent.’

‘Morgue.’

‘Perfect.’

‘Thank you.’

They passed through swinging double doors of silver steel and entered a room that was an instant curiosity to John. One whole wall of cabinetry was silver, like the doors, but square and stacked. On another wall were a series of sinks, some normal-sized, some large enough to bathe a dog in, and aluminium shelves that reached the ceiling, each holding boxes of supplies and instruments he wouldn’t have been able to name . . . unless labelled, he supposed. And on the wall opposite from that were more cabinets, though of the usual sort, and a long counter filled with canisters and flasks and sample cups, and a microscope, like what Mr Holmes kept in the kitchen. It was a laboratory, and quite a fancy one.

In the centre of the room were three long tables of silver, each overlaid with a long, white cloth, though there was no doubt what the cloths hid beneath: the outlines were distinctive.

‘Molly!’ said Mr Holmes, striding forward with arms spread wide toward the room’s sole live occupant, a woman in a white lab coat and long ponytail, whose back was currently to them. Then she turned, and Mr Holmes stopped short, halfway across the room. ‘Oh!’

‘Now Sherlock, please don’t say anything,’ she said, holding out a hand to keep him at bay. ‘I don’t need your deductions or opinions or judgements, all right? And please don’t be like everyone else and try to touch my belly.’

It was a belly that stood out proudly through the parted curtain of her lab coat. She rested her hand there like it was a shelf.

A long, long silence followed, and John shifted his weight uncomfortably, not knowing where to look, so he stared at a covered cadaver. Finally, Mr Holmes spoke. ‘I . . . wasn’t going to say a word.’

‘Oh, shut up, I see it all over your face.’ She rolled her eyes and turned back to the counter where she angrily pulled out a fistful of purple gloves from a box. ‘The only reason I invited you over here was to get it out of the way, your knowing about this. Everyone else does, but you’re never around anymore. So there. Done. Now let’s get on with something you care about more.’ She waved a desultory hand at a nearby table. Then she spotted John.
‘So,’ she said, calming down a little. John fought the urge to shrink away. Had Mr Holmes told her that he was bringing is ward? Most people didn’t like that. ‘You must be John.’

‘Yes’m,’ he nodded.

‘Sherlock tells me you’re interested in human anatomy.’

He nodded again.

‘John has memorised most human anatomical features from pictures in books and isolated samples,’ Mr Holmes explained, ‘but as you and I both know, it’s nothing compared to the real thing in a real body.’ He cleared his throat, still obviously distracted by her belly.

‘So, you’ve never seen a real cadaver before,’ she said to John.

‘No, ma’am.’ She gave Mr Holmes a look that John read as sceptical of his interests, or maybe his ability to handle it. He didn’t want her to reconsider, so he added, ‘I’m not squeamish, ma’am. And I promise not to ruin anything.’

Mr Holmes, hands folded behind him and chin lifted high, gave her an imperious eyebrow lift. ‘Promise is a promise, Molly.’

She sighed, shaking her head, but she smiled kindly. ‘I have three cadavers here today, one female, aged sixty-nine, and two males, aged forty-seven and eighty-two. The med students finished their exams this morning, and the cadavers won’t be picked up for another three hours. You have until then. Gloves, please. And fair warning: you’ll be smelling of formaldehyde for the rest of the day.’

Biting his bottom lip to contain his excitement, John accepted the purple latex gloves. Then Ms Hooper, standing on the side of the table opposite him and Mr Holmes, folded down the first sheet, and they began.

Ms Hooper was marvellously informative, and she let John do more than just watch. She let him do everything himself! Granted, the cuts and stitches had already been made. But she let him lift the rib cage and hand it to Mr Holmes in order to see the lungs and heart underneath. She even let him pick the organs up while she described them, and put them back in the right place, correcting him when he put them in upside down.

‘When are you due, Molly?’ Mr Holmes casually asked in the middle of her instruction, apropos of nothing.

‘Shush,’ she hissed at him, then continued on as if he wasn’t even in the room, having John find both kidneys and the liver.

The second body had been prepared in such a way that exposed the muscles and blood vessels of the arms and legs. That is, the skin had been entirely removed. John gaped in wonder, and as she described muscle contraction, he flexed his own hand as though testing out his own muscle contraction for the first time, or at least of being so keenly aware of it. His brain let him do that, eh? Interesting, that a brain could send a signal like electricity to individual muscles with hardly any effort at all.

At one point, she stood beside him, to lift an arm and demonstrate how flexing one finger was connected to the arm, and he looked up to see that Mr Holmes, on the opposite side of the table, was focused with laser-like precision on her protruding belly, eyebrows pinched.

‘Let me show you where that happens in the brain,’ she said, clearly unaware as she walked around
the table to where the detached parietal bone rested like a lid on top of the rest of the cranium. Mr Holmes’ eyes followed her belly.

John cleared his throat.

Mr Holmes’ eyes snapped to his. His ever-expressive eyebrows lifted in innocent inquiry.

John shook his head in minuscule measurements.

What? Mr Holmes mouthed.

Rude, John mouthed back, then dropped his attention immediately back to the exposed muscles of the hand. His face flushed and heart suddenly pounded at what he had just done. He glanced up with ready contrition, only to see Mr Holmes smirk.

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Abigail Clearwater, Mrs Reynold’s mother, was a lonely woman, half blind and at least a quarter senile. Her grown children had already made her sell the goat and milking cows, but she insisted on tending a garden and keeping chickens.

Because Puddle was not fitting in well with the other children, and because they believed that it would be good for Mrs Clearwater to have a little helper underfoot, they drew up the transference papers after only a year of hosting, deciding to go, instead, with a baby. A baby, they reasoned, wouldn’t have any past traumas to manage, and really, it was getting to be a little much, all the crying and tantrums. A little boy shouldn’t be so recalcitrant, they said. A little work, they said, would do Puddle some good.

‘Now, there’s a ward school just half a mile from here, Mum,’ Mrs Reynolds instructed her mother. ‘The Buitendorf boys can walk with him on their way to their own school. We’ve already discussed it with Mrs Buitendorf, it won’t be a problem. Just have him ready by half seven. He’s doing well enough, we’re told. Counts to twenty and knows his ABCs and how to tell time.’

‘He’s too small,’ Mrs Clearwater grumbled. ‘How’s this one supposed to be any use to me?’

‘He’ll fetch you your walking stick, Mum, and find your slippers and bring in the post . . . and the eggs! Wouldn’t that be a smart chore? Just give it time. He’ll grow, get stronger, brighter. Soon enough, I expect, he’ll be able to read you the newspaper. You know how reading is such a strain on your eyes.’

‘Too small,’ Mrs Clearwater repeated, her frowning lips lined with dried spittle. ‘He’d fit neatly in my saucer.’

So he was registered with the name Teacup.

Teacup was afraid of the old woman, whose girth was rivalled only by that of her daughter’s. Her voice was like a bark when shouting for him, and when she was displeased with him she rapped his knuckles with her walking stick. But he had a bed to call his own, and it was rather nice not having to fight for a portion of his dinner plate.

On weekdays, the Buitendorf boys dutifully came to collect him for school, but the moment they were clear of the front door, they relegated him to walking at least ten steps behind, then twenty, until one morning, they abandoned him altogether. He knew he was supposed to turn at the corner with the little red fence, but because every house was built of the same red brick, all standing in a row, he didn’t remember what came next. He must have taken a wrong turn, or not turned when he ought,
or gone in a circle, because he wandered and wandered and never found the school at all. Nor could he find his way back to Mrs Clearwater’s. When his little legs had wearied and the stress of doing wrong became too much, he sat down on the middle of the pavement and began to cry.

In time, he was surrounded by adults, a woman who’d spotted him from her window, and a couple walking their dog down the street, and others, lots of others, asking each other questions about him, lifting him to his feet, and gripping his shoulders to keep him in place.

‘Where are his parents?’

‘Why isn’t he in school?’

‘Did anybody call the police?’

Someone had, and soon there were uniformed officers, bending at the waist and putting their noses close to his, asking, ‘What’s your name, love?’

He told them, but he was himself confused and gave the wrong one, his real one, then corrected himself and gave his last one, then corrected himself again and gave his new one.

‘Ah, a ward, is he?’

‘Then where’s his bracelet?’

‘See?’ one of the neighbours said. ‘This is why we should tat them younger. For when they wander off!’

He bowed his head, crying, ‘I don’t want to be a ward! I want to go home!’

The officer sighed. ‘Let’s find his host.’

They stopped asking him questions and started making phone calls. After a time, they escorted him back Mrs Clearwater, having to ring the bell three times before she hobbled her way to the front door. Then they brought him inside, sat him upon the sofa, and explained the way of things:

‘This is your host, Teacup. Do you understand? You mind her, do what she says. Because you are a ward. That’s just the way of it. It won’t change. So you better grow up and learn to appreciate that, okay? No more wandering where you shouldn’t. You go to school, you come back here. Simple. Your life is simple. Now say, Thank you, Mrs Clearwater, for being my host.’

He was sat on the sofa with arms crossed and head bowed, embarrassed to be crying. But they prompted him again. Finally, without lifting his head, he murmured, ‘Thank you, Mrs Clearwater,’ to make them happy.

Mrs Clearwater hated him. He knew it. She didn’t care if he went to school, didn’t care that he didn’t like the soggy fish and boiled cabbage and liver and onions she fixed for meals, didn’t care if he wore they same clothes for a week straight because her washer was busted. She never ran out of chores for him, just to keep him busy and out of her hair while she watched telly at every hour of the day, and if he came too near, she was liable to smack him around for doing them wrong. So he stayed out of the house as much as possible. Not to go to school. School was frightening. He had no friends, and all the other children made fun of his name and his clothes, and the teachers were always sitting him in the hallways with his back to the wall, and he wasn’t allowed to come back into class until he had practised being quiet.

Instead, skived off nearly every day, spending time with the chickens Mrs Clearwater kept in the
The chickens were like him, he thought. Locked up, eating the same thing every day, working for their host with no reward for themselves. They were birds. They should be able to fly. So one day, he set them free.

Neighbours had to help round up the chickens, all but three: one had been nabbed by a fox, and the other two were simply never found. With the neighbours standing around in the back garden, and Teacup by the restored coop, Mrs Clearwater exited the home, leaning heavily on her cane as she shuffled closer, eyes fiery and jowls aquiver. She switched the cane to free up her hand, brought her sizeable arm back, and smashed her palm across his face so hard he fell to the chicken-shit-strewn earth.

He would never be able to remember them all, over the course of his lifetime, and never knew for sure if there had been an incident preceding this one, but it was the first time he could recall ever being struck like that.

‘State says, no closed fist, or that’s what you’d be getting instead!’ she hollered.

The other adults said nothing, did nothing, just stood and stared.

It wasn’t long after that. A week? A few days? Mrs Clearwater put him the backseat of her car and drove him into the country, a drive that felt like it took a really long time, but he had no real way of knowing. He didn’t recognise anything. It was farmland, as far as the eye could see, with posts and fences and trees lining dirt roads that jostled him to and fro. When they came to a place where one road intersected with theirs, Mrs Clearwater stopped the car and told him to get out. He looked at her with fear and confusion. ‘Open your door, now, love. Go on. Go stand over there by that sign post.’

He used his shoulder to push open the heavy door, and closed it again. As he headed to the corner where the post stood, he heard the car rumbling again, and whipped around. She was leaving. She was leaving him there. He had messed up, and now she was leaving him.

He didn’t cry. He was alone and afraid, and the sun was going down, and he thought the foxes might get him like they had got the chickens, and tear him to pieces, and no one would ever find him. But then . . . there was no one to look. He was alone. All alone. He understood that now. That was what it meant to be a ward. Having no one to notice that you were gone.

***

‘What happens to wards when they die?’ John asked.

They were standing on the north bank of the Thames beneath the Millennium Bridge Memorial, where Mr Holmes had purchased a red poppy from a street vendor to lay at its base with the others. He didn’t often come down this way, he said, but when he did, he always left a poppy.

After leaving St Bart’s, they had gone in search of lunch, but only half-heartedly. It was a lovely day just to wander, and there was time, Mr Holmes said, to breathe in London before the next event, which he wouldn’t disclose because he wanted it to be a surprise. They passed by a beautiful white building with a domed roof that Mr Holmes had called St Paul’s Cathedral, and when John said he’d never seen it before and didn’t know what it was, Mr Holmes decided to lead an impromptu guided tour on foot of historic London, and their next stop had been the Memorial.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mr Holmes. ‘Like . . . do wards have souls? I’m not really the one to be asking on that front, John.’
‘I mean, do they bury us? Is our final name put on a grave in a cemetery? Are we taken apart so that doctors can study us, like the ones in the morgue? Are we medical waste, like what Ms Hooper was talking about?’

Mr Holmes frowned. He’d been surprised, too, that one of the cadavers had a registration tattoo on her arm. Ms Hooper had remarked that the ward had been a donation by one of the hospital’s doctors.

‘I am unaware of any ward cemeteries . . .’ Mr Holmes said, though with some hesitation. ‘When Barnaby passed, we had him cremated.’ He rushed to add, ‘Perfectly ordinary. Many Britons, ward or not, are cremated. But hey. John. It’s your birthday. Why are we speaking of death on your birthday?’

John shrugged. ‘You’re the one who took me to a morgue.’

There was a beat of silence. Then both burst into laughter.

‘You liked it,’ said Mr Holmes, nudging him in the side as they continued walking.

‘I did, I did,’ John giggled.

As they continued east toward the Tower of London, they grabbed burgers from a food truck and ate as they walked. The burger was juicy and dripped down their fingers, which they happily licked clean when they were done. They stopped at the Monument to the Great Fire of London but declined to go up, rested John’s ankle at St Magnus The Martyr, and were nearing the Tower of London when they were forced to take another breather: John’s bracelets were flashing blue.

John wasn’t the only ward on the street. At least two dozen sets of bracelets lit up, probably more. It was almost twenty minutes before they were cleared by Ward Patrol and could continue on their way.

They swung south, toward Tower Bridge, which John had only ever seen from a distance, and never crossed on foot. He’d always wanted to. They passed beneath the first tower and were halfway across when he felt Mr Holmes’ hand on his back, stopping him in the centre of the bridge and turning him west overlooking the Thames and the city to describe what they were seeing: on the south bank, the Shard; on the north, the Walkie-Talkie and the Gherkin, and in the far distance, Big Ben.

Then Mr Holmes pulled out his phone. ‘Here’s a good spot, I reckon,’ he said. ‘Oi.’ He singled out a pedestrian and held his phone out to her. ‘Mind taking our photo?’

‘No problem,’ she said.

John stood stupidly facing the phone, not sure what to do with his hands or where to look.

Mr Holmes put an arm around his back, holding him at the opposite shoulder. ‘Smile, John. It’s your birthday.’

He smiled shyly, happy but self-conscious.

When the woman handed the phone back, Mr Holmes thanked her, and they looked at the photo together. John couldn’t explain why he felt so emotional, looking at himself in the photograph alongside his host, but the feeling was akin to the moment he’d been told he had a birthday.

‘Not bad,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘I’ll send it to your phone.’ He smiled and lifted his eyes to John’s.
'Your eyes,' he said, cocking his head to the side.

John blinked up at him, uncertainly.

'They’re a bit sensitive to sunlight, aren’t they? I’ve noticed you squinting all day.’

John didn’t know what he was talking about. It was always bright outside, even when it was cloudy. His eyes always hurt just a little.

‘Come on, let’s fix that.’

They left the bridge and stepped into a shop. Mr Holmes walked up to a rack of sunglasses and picked up a pair. He gave them to John to try on.

‘Ooh, those look good on you.’

John’s eyebrows rose as he peered up at Mr Holmes from behind dark glasses. ‘Yeah?’

‘Oh yeah,’ Mr Holmes smiled. ‘Very cool.’

The first few minutes, as they continued back west along the south bank, he felt strange wearing the sunglasses. Strange and transgressive, like he was trying to hide, doing something wrong. But there was pleasure, too: he could open his eyes fully, without squinting, without them watering. They were comfortable. He felt comfortable. What’s more, he saw that no one was looking at him funny. No one was looking at him at all. And that’s when he realised: he could look at them. Behind dark lenses, no one knew where his eyes roamed. He didn’t feel the need to focus his eyes straight ahead, pretending there was no one else around him. Instead, he could be just like everyone else, a part of the crowd. Like, normal.

Cool. Yeah.

***

They called themselves Sam and Sal. Their accents were strange, unlike anything he’d ever heard. He could barely understand them. But they promised him cake and sweets, and they smiled real nice, and he was so hungry and tired and frightened. So he climbed into the car, and off they went.

He never did learn the names of the other wards. They weren’t allowed to talk to each other. They weren’t allowed to talk much at all. But he had learnt to count, so he gave them his own names: One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six. That made him Seven.

One and Two slept in cupboards in the kitchen and were always the first to be fed, and the first to get to pee in the back garden in the morning. Three and Four shared the largest cage in the corner by the telly that was always playing game shows with laughing people, and Four and Five occupied the smaller cage behind the sofa. Six was in the cupboard beneath the stairs with the purple lock on.

And he, Seven, had his own cage in the toilet, where the tub used to be. There also used to be a door, he supposed, but it was gone now, giving him a clear view to Four and Five. The toilet didn’t work. The bowl was filled, instead, with empty tins and plastic cups and old toothbrushes and pill bottles that spilt over and covered the floor. They were to defecate into a cardboard box in the hallway. One and Two, their job was to bury it in the field. A first, the whole house smelt of human waste, but over time, Seven didn’t smell anything at all.

He didn’t fit so well in his cage, but he learnt early on not to complain. Sam and Sal didn’t like it when they complained, or cried, or screamed, or asked for water before it was watering time. Sometimes, he thought about the day he got into their car and wished he had hidden in the bushes.
Would he die here? He felt like he would die, sometimes, when they forgot about him, and more often when they didn’t, when they rammed his chest with a broom handle to keep him from screaming, or covered his head with a bucket when he kept asking for food, or putting a whole bar of soap in his mouth when he shouted Stop it! when they beat the other children.

He wouldn’t remember much about this time in his life, not even enough to say how long it lasted. Weeks, certainly, and months most probably. Later, upon reflection, and knowing a little bit more about the ways of the world and his place in it, he would decide that it had been for the money. The more wards, the larger the stipend. He didn’t understand, though, how he’d been any use to them. He’d been found, not bought. But there’d been no one to ask, to make sense of that dark period in his life. All he knew for certain was that he’d got sick. His skin erupted with little red spots that itched and bled when he scratched, and he got fever and wouldn’t eat.

‘He’ll make ’em all ill,’ said Sal to Sam, ‘then what’ll we do?’

‘Best be rid of ’m, then,’ said Sam to Sal.

So they took his limp body from his cage, and One through Six watched him go, with eyes big and sad, and he wondered what would become of them, and wondered for many years, and knew he would never stop wondering. Sam and Sal took off all his clothes and wrapped him in towels and drove him far away. He thought he’d be left where they found him, on the side of an unpaved road. But they drove him, instead, into a city. It was night, and cold, and there were few lights. They came to a gate and told him to get out and go sit by the gate until someone found him in the morning.

‘It’s not forever,’ they said. ‘When you’re well again, we’ll be back.’

But they left him there, and it would be morning before he was found by the women in the black dresses and covered heads, and he knew, because it had happened before, that the hosts who were not really hosts wouldn’t be back. He only hoped that One through Six would get ill, like him. It seemed the only way to escape.

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‘Classic Chinese escapology act,’ Mr Holmes whispered into his ear.

They were at the circus, though it wasn’t at all like the circus John had once known. It was called the Yellow Dragon Circus and had a very limited run. Apparently, they were a travelling circus, and all its performers were Chinese. That meant, none of them were wards. And there were no clowns at all.

They stood around a central circle lined with candles, and the performance was taking place within: a man was bound in chains, lashed to a board, facing down a large feathered arrow the size of Mr Holmes’ harpoon. John couldn’t help the uptick in nerves. Images—real or imaginary?—flash before his eyes, and it was as if he himself was tied up, staring down the deadly arrow and desperate for escape.

Maybe that was why Mr Holmes was holding his elbow and talking into his ear in low, unworried tones.

‘The crossbow’s on a delicate string. The warrior has to escape his bonds before it fires. He’s practised this many, many times. He knows precisely what he is doing.’

John nodded slowly, trusting what Mr Holmes was saying. Mr Holmes had nothing to do with the act itself: he wasn’t in charge of that arrow, and he wasn’t pulling the man free from the chains. Nevertheless, John felt like Mr Holmes was in complete control of everything. So, if he said the man
would be fine, he would be fine. It was that simple.

‘She splits the sandbag, the sand pours out . . .’ Mr Holmes continued to whisper. ‘Gradually, the weight lowers into the bowl. It’s like an hourglass, for the escapee, but also for the audience, designed to heighten our anticipation and therefore the thrill . . . when he . . . finally . . .’

Escapes! The crowd let out a collective sigh of relief and began to clap. John joined them in enthusiastic applause while Mr Holmes chuckled beside him, letting go of his elbow but otherwise staying close. The woman turned slow rotations, addressing the audience.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, from the distant moonlit shores of the Yangtze River, we present, for your pleasure, the deadly Chinese bird-spider!’

John was the last to stop clapping.

***

The nuns said it wouldn’t hurt. It was a privilege, they said, an honour. He was eight, and it was time for him to receive his ‘sign’, a symbol, an announcement to any and all who would see it that he was under the special care and protection of New Britain, a veritable son of the nation, a treasured brother to all citizens, and would be all the days of his life.

But it did hurt. A needle etched into on the soft, sensitive skin of his inner left arm, near the wrist, and though he didn’t cry—he prided himself on the fact that he didn’t cry—it hurt all day and all night, and they wouldn’t even give him ice to make it feel better. He thought it would hurt forever.

‘Hush now, Abel, crying won’t make it better,’ they said. ‘This is a good thing! It was a nightmare figuring out who you were when we found you. Now, you’ll never be lost again!’

With the tattoo, and after two years of the nuns working hard to get him to vocalise again (that’s what they called it: vocalising; they meant talking), he was ready, they said, to be properly warded with a host family. They submitted his name and registration number to the local auctions.

‘How’s his temperament?’ asked one tall man, circling him where he stood on a chair and eyeing him from foot to head.

‘A gem of a boy,’ the nuns praised, nodding eagerly. ‘Never a lick of trouble.’

It was a lie, Abel thought. He had been an anxious and angry child, when he had first come to them. Unstable, they said, lashing out at the slightest provocations, tossing things around the room if anyone came to near him, throwing a fit whenever they tried to bathe him, until they beat the devil out of him. Now they called him subdued, a word he thought he understood but didn’t much like. Never a lick of trouble? He thought nuns weren’t supposed to lie.

‘And his marks?’

They hesitated in their reply. ‘I wouldn’t call him studious . . .’ said one.

‘A bit of a dunce, to be honest,’ said another, rushing to add, ‘but what need does he have of books, really? He’s a worker, this one. He’ll do all his chores, no fuss.’

They hadn’t really tried books with him, not after they put the first one in front of him and he did nothing but scribble all over the tissue-paper thin pages in black ink. He could no longer recite his ABCs anyway, and was rather skilful at cleaning erasers and chalkboards. The lessons he really needed were those of discipline and attitude correction. He learnt that a host is a master, and a ward
is a servant, just like in the stories. Obedience to the master was the highest of virtues.

Another inquirer asked to see his fingernails and the insides of his ears. ‘Never had a male one,’ she said. ‘Is he aggressive?’

‘Oh no,’ said the nuns. ‘A peaceful boy, you can be sure.’

‘You say that now, but the way I hear it, the moment they hit puberty, hell’s bells, they become peeping toms and pyromaniacs!’

The nuns laughed, and Abel detected a note of nervousness. He didn’t know what a peeping tom was, or a . . . pi-rol-man-i-c . . . but they sounded bad, and he was sorry if he was one.

‘Can he be cut before that happens?’

‘Oh, well, erm,’ said the nuns uncertainly. ‘You have to get special permissions to do that. State has certain strictures, you see, and prefers them to pass through puberty first, or it can lead to other health complications.’

The woman sniffed. ‘I’ll just scrape together the money, then, shall I, and stick with a girl.’

After a veritable parade of potential buyers had passed through, a couple arrived, a man and a woman, both with long hair to their elbows and loose-fitting clothes. Ms Hazel and Mr Horace, he would come to know them as, given that he would never learn their surnames. They circled him, too, but rather than ask questions, they ran their fingers through his hair and smelt his neck and pressed their hands to his chest, declaring that his . . . chukras? . . . were blocked, but they could get his energy flowing right so he could be perfectly balanced with the universe. Abel didn’t understand much of what they said, but he noticed the nuns rolling their eyes and shaking their heads, the way they did when the children said silly things. But they made no objections when Mr Horace said they’d take him, and Ms Hazel opened her woven handbag. They struck a bargain for £3,000: £2500 for the ward, and £500 for the nuns’ trouble. Then they took him home in a taxi, Mr Horace humming and Ms Hazel drawing a flower around the new tattoo on Abel’s arm using green biro.

‘I like Moonboy,’ said Ms Hazel, though to Mr Horace, not to Abel.

‘I thought we decided on Indigo or Dusk.’

‘Moonboy,’ she said, dreamily. ‘It speaks to me. I feel the name humming in my throat, like music.’

Moonboy lived in a village called Lingfield, in a two-storey flat with Ms Hazel and Mr Horace—and Mr Guthrie and Mr Marley and Ms Sage and Ms Rain and Ms Prairie and Mr Ziggy, who all had rooms of their own, but Moonboy stayed with Ms Hazel and Mr Horace in one of the upstairs bedrooms, on a floor mattress. He slept between them, except for the nights they took off their clothes and rolled on top of each other and made the funny noises. They said he could watch, and join them in a few years, but he preferred to face the wall and wait for it to be over.

He helped them with their garden, the one indoors, in a room with all the plastic and foil on the walls. It was really warm and damp in that room, but he didn’t mind so much. He liked working with his hands, even getting soil underneath his fingernails. He didn’t even have to wash up before dinner. The nuns would have hated that!

When he wasn’t tending to the plants, and while the adults slept through the day, Moonboy loaded up a special knapsack Ms Hazel had made just for him, with all the bright threads and beads, and headed out onto the streets. He was their special courier, a distributor of tiny packages and collector of dosh. He’d never held money before, and didn’t know how much it was worth or how to count it,
but he felt important, being allowed to carry it. His job was very important, Mr Horace said, so just do it right and stay away from the bobbies, and he’d get treats for a job well done.

They didn’t always remember to feed him, but that was okay, because he knew how to pour his own dry cereal into a bowl and boil water for noodles, and he only burnt himself a few times on the hob, though often what he ate made him feel incredibly poorly. The kitchen was never cleaned, but covered in grease and grime, with rubbish all over the floor. The smoking room was really stinky and dark and reminded him of Sam and Sal, with empty bottles and bongs and ashtrays on every surface, and the music never stopped playing, which made it difficult to sleep. He didn’t know how they all managed it so easily. So, whenever he could, he escaped the house to do his job, never once thinking he should be in school. Mr Horace didn’t believe in school anyway. Said it was an establishment propaganda machine and other big words. Ms Hazel said the universe was the only school he needed.

He was eleven years old (he thought; he never did know when his birthday was) when it all went wrong. He was out on a delivery, in a park, and had given away two packages and had three more in his knapsack, when a twitchy fellow, sniffing and rubbing his nose, came up to him.

‘Hiya, kid,’ he said. ‘You, uh . . . you got any more?’

‘More what?’ he asked. He knew he wasn’t to sell to anyone who didn’t know Mr Horace and Ms Hazel by name.

But the man did know their names, and he was persistent, persuasive. He had money, too, lots of it. He showed the kid his wallet, full of banknotes, and Moonboy was satisfied. He pulled out another tiny brown package, but as they made the exchange, the man with the open wallet flipped something around, and he saw a shiny silver circle.

‘That’s you in trouble, sonny.’

A bobby! He whipped around and took off like a shot through the park, his little legs pumping furiously. The man chased after him, and though he had walked with a wobble and sway when Moonboy had first seen him, he proved to be speedy and agile, and next Moonboy knew, he was being tackled to the grass, their skulls knocking together painfully.

He was arrested. He’d never been in handcuffs before, and though it wouldn’t be the last time, it was certainly the scariest. It wasn’t until the copper had loaded him into the backseat of his car and began driving away, when he began lecturing Moonboy about how badly he’d been raised, and wouldn’t his mother be proud to see him now, that it came out that Moonboy didn’t have a mother. He had a host. He was a ward.

The plan changed. The copper pulled over and pulled him out of the car. He pushed his left sleeve to the elbow and scanned the tattoo. Equipped with new information, the copper made some calls on his radio. Then they waited for what felt—to Moonboy—to be a very long time. The copper didn’t talk to him, barely looked at him. Then, without warning, he started the car again, and they headed straight back to the house.

The copper stood behind him, hands on his shoulders, his wrists still cuffed, while the other uniformed officers, a whole swarm of them, surrounded the house and approached the front door. What happened next frightened him. When the door opened, the police forced entry, shouting, banging about. There was screams from inside, and Moonboy gasped, impulsively starting toward the house, but the grip on his shoulders tightened and held him in place. Soon, they started coming out, the police with Mr Ziggy and Ms Sage and Mr Guthrie and all of them. And last of all, Ms Hazel and Mr Horace.
‘What have you done, Moonboy!’ shouted Mr Horace when he saw him. ‘What have you done to us?’

Ms Hazel was crying. ‘Sneak! Sneak! You’ve bad energy! All along, you were bad! Bad, bad, bad!’

‘Ms Hazel, I’m sorry!’ he cried. ‘I’m sorry! I didn’t know! I didn’t mean—!’

‘I hate you!’ She spit in his face as she was dragged past. ‘Evil boy!’

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The sun was sinking but not sunken as Sherlock held the door open for John to step into the restaurant on Northumberland Place, just on the edge of Notting Hill.

‘I met Angelo three years ago when I successfully proved to Lestrade that, at the time of a particularly vicious triple murder, Angelo was in a completely different part of town, house breaking.’

‘You got him off?’

‘Something like that. Hello,’ he said to the maître d’. ‘Is Angelo here?’

‘Not tonight, I’m afraid,’ said the man. ‘He’s off Mondays. Would you like to leave a message . . .’

But he trailed off, glancing over Sherlock’s shoulder to John, whose bracelets had just lit up green.

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said Sherlock. It was the fourth time today. ‘Give them here, John. We’re on private property, no need to wear them indoors.’ John, cheeks tinged pink, handed over the bracelets, and Sherlock stuffed them into his pockets. He turned back to the maître d’. ‘Ah. Well. No bother. I’ve a reservation under Holmes. I prefer the bench by the window, as Angelo knows.’

‘I see . . .’ the maître d’ said. ‘I do not think that table is available. Perhaps one in the back.’

Sherlock stared at him, annoyance beginning to tickle in the back of his brain. He had seen, before entering, that the table was most certainly free, and as he had made the reservation with Angelo personally, he knew which table had been saved for him. With an exaggerated twist of his head, he declared, ‘Aha! A reserved sign and everything. Just as I thought. John, let’s sit. Two menus, if you please.’

John took the bench against the window, Sherlock the chair opposite. When the waiter came to drop off the menus, he apparently forgot to mention the wines, and when he left, he deftly took the tealight candle away with him. Sherlock ignored him. While he was well-liked by the owner of the restaurant, the goodwill did not necessarily extend to the staff. Some people resented a favoured customer.

‘Anything on the menu,’ Sherlock said. ‘Whatever you want.’

‘I’ve never eaten at a restaurant like this before,’ said John picking up the menu. He wore that excitable expression that had been popping up all day long and made Sherlock’s heart warm. It was more than likely that his prior hosts had never taken him out to eat. Perhaps the closest he had come was the diner with Sally Donovan.

John read the entire menu, and slowly, his brow scrunched up as he tried to sound out the trickier Italian. He was able to figure out the simpler words common to English, like spaghetti and risotto, but tripped up on words like gnocchi and sciusceddu, and asked Sherlock what they were. He seemed overwhelmed by the options, and was likely forgetting one as soon as he moved on to the
next, until he came to nearly the very end of the menu.

‘Oh! They have pizza!’

For a man who had a terrific palate and talent in the kitchen (Sherlock noted with fondness), John had a special liking for the simpler things.

When the waiter reappeared, Sherlock ordered two Cokes, bruschetta al pomodoro to share, a rustica pizza for John, and gnocchi di nonna for himself. The waiter jotted down their order and retreated.

‘Did you catch him?’ John asked.

‘Did I catch who?’

‘The real killer of the triple murder.’

‘Oh! Indeed. Quite the puzzle, that. Really, it all came down to a very particular brand of socks . . .’

And he began to relate the story in exquisite and technical detail. For his part, John was hanging on his every word, nodding when appropriate, eyes widening at the more startling bits, asking just the right questions. But then Sherlock noticed how John’s eyes flicked beyond him, over one shoulder then the other, and his posture and demeanour began to change. His head was bowing, almost imperceptibly, and his smile faded to one that seemed painted on. His shoulders were ever so slowly curling forward, like he was trying to shrink into his chair, or make himself even smaller to hide himself behind Sherlock. Hide from whom? Whose eyeline? John was blinking a lot, discernibly uncomfortable, and Sherlock, still talking as though he were a pre-recorded story, was baffled as to what had changed. Until, that is, he refocused his eyes on the glass behind John. Through the window, one could peer out onto the street. But the glass also reflected the room behind him, and there, Sherlock could see the other patrons.

While some were engaged in conversations with their party and others had their noses buried in the menu or the screens on their phones, several were staring in their direction, their expressions marked by disapproval, or glancing repeatedly in annoyance, or glaring. At John? Whatever for?

‘Erm, John,’ said Sherlock. ‘Just the tiniest bother: the headlights from passing cars, they’re, er, irritating my eyes. Would you mind swapping seats with me?’

‘Of course, sir,’ said John, and they swapped, placing John’s back to the room and Sherlock in full view of the arseholes who couldn’t mind their own business. Sherlock continued his narration, and at one point, when he perceived John glancing outside, he deftly scratched his nose with a protruding middle finger, a gift for the onlookers. Then he haughtily ignored them, dedicating his attention solely to his friend.

The drinks arrived, but with them, the waiter discreetly dropped a folded note on Sherlock’s serviette. John moved to take a sip, and Sherlock inconspicuously unfolded the note, just enough to read it before hiding it under the table.

There have been complaints. The presence of the ward is disrupting our guests’ enjoyment of their meals. Kindly remove him without making a scene. Drinks on the house.

His heart was pounding; he could feel the anger pulsing in his ears and curling his fingers. Sherlock looked across the room and locked eyes with the waiter. Then he moved his hand from under the table and to the side, out of John’s light of sight but well within the waiter’s, crumpled the message, and pointedly dropped it to the floor.
The waiter’s face was stone, and he turned away like nothing had happened.

None the wiser, John started talking about the escapology act, wondering how it was done, and if there were ever any mistakes, and what if something went wrong. Sherlock was drawn back into conversation, explaining the nature of restraints and contortion and the art of illusion and performance, a subject he himself had been fascinated by since he was a boy.

Perhaps if he hadn’t been so caught up in his own excitement and John’s reciprocal interest, he would have seen and therefore acted sooner. But it happened suddenly. A couple, having finished their meal, got up to leave. Rather than taking the straightest course to the exit, they walked a circuitous route that would have them pass directly behind John’s chair, and when they did, the man decided to make a bold and unambiguous statement. He grabbed John’s glass, still brimming with Coke, and upended it over John’s head. As the ice-cold fizzy drink sloshed down his hair, neck and back, John squeezed tight his eyes with a gasp.

Sherlock shot to his feet as the man clanked the glass back to the table.

‘Best scoot on home, get him cleaned up,’ said the man. Behind him, a small smattering of applause. But most of the patrons sat stunned. It was one thing to be bothered, another to be confrontational about it.

Sherlock marched around the table, fists tightening, ready to deck the bastard. But of a sudden, John stood in his way. With droplets of fizzy drink still coursing down his cheeks and brow, and with eyes averted, embarrassed, he nevertheless put out a hand out to stop him.

‘Sir, please. Can we just go?’

‘Listen to your ward, mate.’

Sherlock’s chest was heaving in anger. Just go? After this offence!? He looked down, and John up, his eyes pleading, blinking rapidly, desperate to disappear. Dammit, and on his birthday! Sherlock nodded curtly, turned John around, and pointed him to the door. But he himself didn’t make it two steps before he simply couldn’t take the injustice of it all. From a nearby table, he snatched up the drinks of the couple sitting there, spun around, and splashed them directly into the face of the git who had started it all. The man howled in rage, and Sherlock grabbed a chair, pulling it between them as a barrier.

‘Go, John! Go!’ he commanded. The man behind him flung the chair aside amid the commotion of a roomful of people starting to their feet.

They erupted out onto the street, four or five diners in hot pursuit. ‘Go go go go!’ Sherlock urged.

John was sprinting as fast as he could, but the limp hampered his speed.

‘Take my hand!’

They grasped hands, John’s right, Sherlock’s left. They reached a box junction and flew across just before the light turned, and Sherlock pulled John around a corner, through a pedestrian cobbled street, down five stone steps, and into narrow alley where they ducked behind a parked car to catch their breaths.

Seconds later, the men ran past their hiding place.

‘I think,’ said Sherlock, panting, ‘we lost them.’
Tucked close beside him, he felt John’s shoulders pitching forward, a whimpering in his throat. He turned sharply to where John’s head was practically buried in his knees.

‘John? Oh God, I—’

John lifted his head, his lips twisting and eyes sparkling. Not from distress. He was trying not to laugh.

‘That was,’ said John, unable to suppress the giggles bursting out of him, ‘the most ridiculous thing I have ever done!’

Sherlock stared in surprise. Then he, too, began to laugh. John covered his mouth, wary of making too much sound, but Sherlock didn’t hold back. Their laughter echoed down the alley like a choir.

At last, with their abs aching and giggles subsiding, Sherlock nudged John with his elbow. ‘I think I remember Mrs Hudson saying something about chocolate cake.’

John, still smiling, nodded, and Sherlock helped him to his feet. As they started away, back toward Baker Street, John leant into him with his shoulder, and nudged him back.

***

Mr Depaul called him Shitwad because on the day he took him in, he had diarrhoea and shit in his pants. Lots of kids at the pound had been sick, but this one was supposed to be okay. Even the vet said he was. But on the bus ride to Epsom, it came on suddenly: his gut clenched, his face flushed with heat, and he needed a loo straight away. But he didn’t make it.

Disgusted, Mr Depaul made him strip and sleep in the tub that night, which upset Mrs Depaul, because it was the only toilet in the house. He was expelling from both ends all night long, filling the air with the stench of his bowels and the sounds of retching. It didn’t make for a very good first impression.

The weeks wore on, and Mrs Depaul made it undeniably clear that she did not like him:

‘I don’t like you,’ she said. She slapped thick globs of marmite on his toast, tossed it onto a plate, and thrust the edge of the plate into his chest. ‘Eat.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, because he didn’t know what to say.

‘Don’t be sorry, it’s pointless, your being sorry.’ She turned back to the sink and started cleaning up, screwing the lid on the marmite and scrubbing the countertop. ‘Swear to God, if I have to launder your sheets one more time because you can’t control that little prick of yours, I’ll rub your face in it.’

‘I—’ He bit his tongue, face hot with embarrassment. He didn’t mean to. He just didn’t know how to stop. He was always asleep when it happened.

‘Outta my face,’ she said, putting her whole splayed hand on his face and shoving him backward.

The Depauls had wanted an exemption from being hosts, on account of their being foreign-born, but their application had been denied. On advice from friends, they went with a child, not one so young it would need special attention and rearing, but neither one so old it would be recalcitrant and hormonal. But they were unhappy about it either way and were damned determined to let him know it.

Shitwad couldn’t do anything right. He was ugly, he took up too much space, he breathed too
loudly. What’s more, he was on the cusp of a changing body, though one wouldn’t guess it to look at him. He was small, pale, frail. Maybe because he was always getting sick. Maybe because he wasn’t eating right or not getting enough sun. But he was definitely going through a change, and Mrs Depaul didn’t like it one bit.

‘Filthy, disgusting, makes my skin crawl just thinking about him. Dirty mind, dirty body, dirty house.’ And she cleaned another dish.

Things got worse with the Depauls. While Mr Depaul took to ignoring him almost completely, Mrs Depaul took away his bed and laid out cardboard, calling him a dog that needed housebreaking. She fed him marmite for every meal, until just the smell of it made his stomach turn over. She smacked him with a broom handle and threw dust in his face from the dustpan, and called him a mucky muck, sometimes saying how things would be better if they just burned the whole revolting house down with him inside it.

He talked back, said he wished she would just get on with it, if it meant he never had to eat another marmite sandwich again, or hear her screaming at him for things he couldn’t help. For his sauce, she forced him to swallow vinegar, whole glasses worth. A nasty drink for a nasty tongue, she said. It made him nauseous and burned in his throat. The postman delivered every disciplinary tool in the catalogue, but none of them had the corrective effect Mrs Depaul desired, so she came up with many of her own.

During the day, they sent him to school. Since living with the nuns, he had spent very little time with other ward children, and he didn’t like them, nor they him. They all sat in desks facing forward, averting their eyes from one another, except for when one of them started ‘acting out’, as the teachers said—screaming or throwing things or attacking one of their peers. There was a Rowdy Corner and a Bad Boy Box and Naughty Girl Cupboard. Shitwad was only sent to the Rowdy Corner a couple of times for fighting, but he spent hours in the Bad Boy Box, and once in the Naughty Girl Cupboard with the Box was full. They laughed at him about that for a week, even the girls.

At lunch, they had to sit together, but they never asked each other about their hosts or commented on each other’s marks and bruises or made judgements on their ward names. At the insistence of the teachers, however, they did call him Wad. His other name was too vulgar, they said, and if any of them were caught saying it, they’d wash their mouths out with soap and a scrubber. It was not an idle threat.

They all knew that family children were the favourites, so on that thing they all agreed: they hated the family children.

Some of the wards smelt of wet dogs or old clothes or rubbish; others dressed nice and traded shoes and kept sweets in their pockets. Some of them came to school infrequently, a couple of times a week. Some they saw one week and then never again. They were like the teachers that way, on constant turnover. One of the teachers called it a ‘revolving door school’, but the children never quite understood what that meant, only that the children never quite understood what that meant, only that the teachers didn’t seem to like them much, especially the stupid ones. Shitwad was one of the stupid ones. Unteachable, they called him. An idiot whose only use was as a push-broom or sponge. So they put him to work. When he got caught doodling instead of working through his workbook, they sent him to clean toilets or scrub tiles in the kitchens or collect rubbish from the yard with the other morons.

Shitwad’s time with the Depauls came to an abrupt end on the day Sweet Pea came to school with lice, and all the children were sent home early, before lunch, with instructions to have their hosts check and double check and triple check their scalps. But when he entered the house, he found bags
in the hallway and open suitcases on the sofas. Suddenly, Mrs Depaul came into the room bearing an armful of folded clothes, stopping dead at the sight of him.

‘You’re to be in school!’ She threw the clothes into the suitcase. ‘Moule à merde!’

‘A girl got lice, so—’

She came around the sofa and slapped him. ‘Don’t talk back.’ Then she raised her voice to call for Mr Depaul. ‘Louis! The shit stain is back early! Deal with it!’

The Depauls were leaving. Moving. Mr Depaul had a job offer back in France, or Mrs Depaul had an ill sister who needed looking after, or they had received a windfall and could now live how they wanted, and they didn’t want to live like this. Shitwad never knew for sure. He would never even be sure whether he ever actually learnt why they had left, or whether he had invented the reasons in his own head after the fact in an effort to make sense of it all. Whatever the reason, the Depauls meant to do it quickly, without bothering to handle all their affairs before setting out, including the matter of their eleven-year-old ward, if indeed he was still eleven.

He remembered that there was a fight about what to do about him, fuelled by a panic he couldn’t make sense of. He remembered trying to leave the house, though he wasn’t sure why, and being yanked about by his arms and tossed into walls. He remembered, too, being dragged into the kitchen and the two of them, Mrs Depaul included, wrapping his hands in duct tape and securing him to the oven door. He couldn’t even ask why because they taped up his mouth, too. He would remember that especially, because he wanted to scream so badly, for hours and hours after they had gone, and he couldn’t. It was luck, really, that the next door neighbour’s hired window washer had got the address wrong. That’s how he was found, three days later: tied to the oven, starving and dehydrated, and sitting in his own filth, barely alive.

***

John headed straight to the shower to get the sticky dried Coke out of his hair and off his skin, then dressed in freshly laundered clothes. It was late, and he was hungry; Mr Holmes said he would order take away.

While they ate, John told Mrs Hudson about their day, every part of it, excluding the mishap at the restaurant, which he didn’t really think she needed to know about. Afterward, she brought out the two-tiered chocolate cake lined with raspberries and the words Happy Birthday John in chocolate butter icing. She even lit candles, and Mr Holmes played a birthday song for him on his violin before they tucked in.

It was about an hour later: Mr Holmes was in the shower now himself, and Mrs Hudson had gone back to her flat. John was alone in the sitting room, in his chair, slowly spinning the globe in his lap, not yet ready for bed, not wanting this day to end.

A soft knock sounded on the open door. He turned his head. There, stepping tentatively into the room, was the police detective, Mr Lestrade.

John hastily set aside the globe and found his feet. ‘Good evening, sir, Mr Lestrade, sir.’

He hadn’t seen him in months and months, but he remembered him.

‘John, isn’t it?’ said Mr Lestrade. ‘Is, erm, is Sherlock in?’

‘Mr Holmes is indisposed. Is it impor—? That is, shall I go get him?’
‘Uh . . .’ Mr Lestrade shifted his weight from one leg to the other and back again, seeming uncomfortable. ‘I can wait. It’s just, there was an incident tonight . . . at a restaurant . . . an assault claim . . . not my division, but when I heard it involved Sherlock, I said I’d take care of it, and . . .’

‘Is Mr Holmes in trouble?’

‘No no, nothing to worry about. Well, I mean, they’re pressing charges, but . . . Never mind. I’ll just . . . wait here, shall I?’

‘Of course, sir.’ But Mr Lestrade made no move to sit, and he and John stood awkwardly, staring at each other for a long, long moment. Finally, John said, ‘Would you like some chocolate cake?’

‘Cake?’

‘Today is my birthday.’

He went into the kitchen and cut a generous slice of chocolate cake and presented it to the detective.

‘Thanks,’ said Mr Lestrade with half a laugh, like he wasn’t expecting to end his day with chocolate cake. He sat in Mr Holmes’ chair to eat it. ‘So. Well. Happy birthday.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Go on. Have a seat.’

‘Thank you.’

John sat in his own chair, wondering just how long Mr Holmes would be in the shower. His fingers tapped nervously on his knees.

‘Was it a good day for you, then?’ asked Mr Lestrade, taking a big bite. With a full mouth, he said, ‘Wow, that’s good.’

‘Mrs Hudson made it for me,’ said John. ‘And yes, sir, a very good day.’ For a few more seconds, there was silence while the police detective continued to eat. Then John said, ‘Is it usual, sir, for wards to have birthdays?’

Mr Lestrade laughed briefly. ‘I should think so.’ He took another mouthful.

‘Does yours?’

‘Every year.’ But then Mr Lestrade slowed, and he set his fork on the plate and the plate on his lap, and he fixed John with an imperious and not-altogether-pleased expression that John didn’t quite understand. ‘This is working out all right for you, then, you and Sherlock?’

‘Yes, sir, very well, sir.’

‘Huh. Who would have thought.’

He was wolfing down the cake like he hadn’t eaten a thing all day. John thought he should offer a glass of water or tea or coffee, but he was too much distracted by the police detective’s manner. He debated, chewing the inside of his cheek, then decided to risk a question.

‘Is it very surprising?’

Mr Lestrade laughed shortly. ‘A little. The way Sherlock was dragging his feet about replacing his
ward, and you being from a pound and all. It was a rough go at the start, as I understand. I’m glad it’s working out for him.’ Then he murmured, as though to himself, ‘I’m about to find myself in the same boat.’

‘What boat, sir?’

‘On the market for a new ward.’ He snarled, a bit bitterly, cutting through the last hunk of cake and icing with the edge of his fork as if it were as tough as steak. ‘End of the month, the divorce is final, and Angela goes her merry way, taking Hopscotch with her. Going back to Birmingham, she says, where she’s from. Taking Hopscotch. So.’ He didn’t finish the cake, setting the plate aside with a loud clank. ‘Come August first, I’ll have thirty days to register a new ward. What do you recommend, John? Think I should try the pound, too?’

John frowned, abashed. ‘Will you miss your ward?’

For a long moment, Mr Lestrade stared at him like he had a lemon on his tongue, and John wished he could retract the question. He had no business asking questions. With Mr Holmes, it was one thing, but this was the police. He shouldn’t be so curious.

‘Let me ask you something,’ said Mr Lestrade. ‘Back in January, I think it was, you said something. You said it wasn’t good for female wards to have male hosts.’

Would Mr Holmes come soon? He didn’t like the way this conversation was turning. ‘I’m sorry, sir, I meant nothing by it.’

‘No? You must have meant something by it. Why would a dying woman use her last teaspoon of strength to scratch the name of her ward into the floorboards with her own fingernails? You thought it was an entreaty to take care of the nine-year-old ward Rachel, who wasn’t safe with her host father. Well, guess what? You were right. Apparently, one of my constables had WSC look into it, and wouldn’t you know it. Jennifer Wilson’s husband was an abusive man. He was ready to remarry quickly so he could keep the ward and keep on being an abusive man. Let’s not get into the details. Needless to say, the ward was removed. So yeah, you called it. But would that be me, too, do you think? If I was the one allowed to keep Hopscotch, do you think I would turn molester?’

‘Sir, I—’

‘Because it’s not true. Sometimes, the male partner is exactly the right person for custodial care of his ward. But does the county court ever award a female ward to the husband in a divorce proceeding? Ever? Of course not. And there’s nothing you can say, no argument you can make, so that they will even consider it. It’s a law on the books: the female partner becomes sole host of a female ward.’ He huffed. ‘The male is always a potential monster, de lege lata. So they’ve just . . .’ Mr Lestrade was losing steam; it was as though sudden and inexplicable anger was leaking out of him. ‘Taken her away from me. Just like that. Gone. I’ve known that girl since she was five. Twenty-two years, I’ve been there for her, nearly all her life I’ve been there, and now I’ll never see her again. It’s not like one day she’ll come of age and choose to come see me. Is that fair? Is that just? I would never hurt her. Angela treats her like a serving girl, but to me, she’s as good as a daugh—’

He stopped suddenly.

‘Sir?’

Mr Lestrade rose swiftly to his feet, tugging on his suit jacket.

‘A little late to the party,’ John heard behind him. Mr Holmes was walking through the kitchen, hair
still damp from his shower. ‘Though I see you are enjoying some of Mrs Hudson’s chocolate cake all the same.’

Face bright red, Mr Lestrade looked flustered and embarrassed. ‘You’ll pass along my compliments.’

‘Sure. I presume you are here about the incident at Angelo’s?’

‘That’s right.’ He was struggling to swallow, still recovering from his outburst. John decided it was time to fetch him that glass, and he gave up his seat for Mr Holmes and the police detective to talk.

‘Perfect. Because I’d like to press charges.’

The two men discussed the matter at hand in clipped, professional tones. Mr Holmes related what had happened and Mr Lestrade asked questions and made notes, and it was all over in a matter of minutes.

‘I wouldn’t worry about it,’ said Mr Lestrade, putting away his notepad and standing to let himself out. ‘I’m sure he’ll drop the charges when you do.’

‘I’ll do no such thing,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘Thank you for dropping by.’

‘Sherlock.’

The two men faced each other. John watched from the corner of his eyes, from his place at the kitchen table.

‘I don’t like what this has become.’ Mr Lestrade motioned between them.

‘There’s an answer to that,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘Something has to change.’

‘I know.’

‘And that something is not in this room.’

Mr Lestrade nodded slowly.

‘Good night.’

***

They called him Twitch because he was so jittery, restless, and nervous from day one.

He didn’t know where Beckenham was. He only knew that it was farther from the sea than he had ever been. Not that he could remember the sea. Not really. But he had seen pictures. Like the ones in magazines. When no one was looking, he tore out the pages and shoved them in a back pocket, to look at later, when he was alone. He couldn’t ask for the whole magazine. He was a ward, and wards had no need for magazines.

The Hastings already had a ward, a female one named Goldberry, but she was an adult, and not one to be passed on to one of the Hastings’ sons when they came of age, so they needed to break in another. There were two. Sons, not wards. Fourteen and fifteen years old. Wendell and Peter. Wendell named him. The new ward was, after all, his birthday present.

It was with the Hastings that the nightmares, which he had always had, became more earnest. He woke up crying some nights, other nights screaming and waking up the whole household. Mrs Hastings tried to console him, but her patience was wearing thin. Wendell and Peter just poked fun.
‘Twitch. Hey, Twitch. You get stiffies when you sleep?’ they asked him in the morning, through the door, as he used the ward toilet he shared with Goldberry. ‘Is that what you’re scared of?’

‘Oi, Twitch, that last host of yours,’ they said while he hauled their football gear to the park, ‘did he finger you? You get fingered? You did, didn’t you?’

‘Guess what, Twitch,’ they said when they came back from the cinema. ‘The girl in the film had tits like this.’ They held their splayed hands in front of the chests and bounced them up and down. ‘This do it for you? Give your willy a tingle?’

A few months went by, with Twitch dreading going to sleep at night because of the nightmares, and dreading the dawn for what Wendell and Peter would say to him before they went off to school. He wasn’t going anymore, which was just fine by him. Instead, he spent his early mornings shadowing Goldberry in the kitchen, learning how to make a proper full English, his later mornings doing the family laundry while Goldberry worked in the garden with hedge trimmers and hoes, and his early afternoons, before the boys came back, doing whatever chores Mrs Hastings deemed necessary. He was allowed to play with the boys in the afternoon, but they didn’t ever let him touch the controls to play video games. He could only watch. And they wouldn’t let him play on teams in the park, just keep score from the pitch line.

Then one evening, as Twitch was brushing his teeth before bed, both boys appeared at the door of the ward bathroom.

‘Hey Twitch,’ Wendell said, ‘you can’t read, can you?’

They knew he couldn’t. He’d been teased about it before, when they tricked him into spreading lotion on his sandwich bread because they said it was mayonnaise.

‘Well, if you could, then maybe you’d know what tomorrow is.’

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It’s your birthday.’

Twitch gasped sharply.

‘That’s right. We saw your records and we talked to mum. She’s planning you a huge birthday surprise tomorrow. Cake and presents, the lot. But—Wendell lowered his voice to a whisper and leant in—’it’s a surprise, all right? We’re not supposed to tell you. So act surprised, okay?’

That night, Twitch couldn’t sleep, he was so excited. His birthday! He had never known when it was —no one had ever told him. Cake and presents, and people wishing him a happy birthday? He hoped he would get to blow out candles. And maybe he’d get a bike! Or a football. Or a new shirt no one had ever worn before. Maybe he would be allowed to play video games, even for half an hour. It was all too wonderful to think about. He wiggled in bed all night, for the first time eager for the sun to come up.

When morning came, he was out of his bed like a shot, used the loo, dressed, and hurried to the kitchen. Goldberry was making breakfast as usual. Mr Hastings had already left for work. Mrs Hastings was scuttling about searching for her keys and shoes. No one even looked at him.

It was fine. Tonight, when the family was all home—that was when they would celebrate.

Mrs Hastings was home first and fell into conversation with Goldberry, virtually ignoring him. It’s a surprise, he thought. She’s just pretending. The boys came home next, but only for about five
minutes before they were off to a friend’s. Dinner was its usual affair, and Twitch ate his spaghetti in silence, wondering if the cake was coming out for dessert. But there was no dessert, let alone a cake.

By nine o’clock, his bedtime, no one had wished him a happy birthday. They’d barely spoken to him. The boys, laughing to each other, retreated to their rooms. Mr and Mrs Hastings were left watching telly when they noticed Twitch was still in the room.

‘Off to bed, Twitch,’ Mr Hastings said.

He stood from the chair, but came closer.

‘Mr and Mrs Hastings?’

‘Hm?’ They didn’t pull their eyes from the screen.

‘Am I thirteen today?’

‘Hm? What?’ Mrs Hastings glanced his way briefly. ‘Twelve, thirteen, you know how old you are, don’t be silly. Now off to bed, don’t make us tell you twice.’

Numb, he obeyed, and went straight off to bed without even brushing his teeth. But after an hour of lying there, staring at the ceiling, and listening to Goldberry snore, the devastation crashed down on him. He didn’t cry. Crying was releasing something deep inside, but he had nothing left in him to escape. Rather, he felt like he was sinking, sinking, down, down, into a black hole of nothing. He could hear Wendell and Peter laughing, though he didn’t know whether it was through the wall or in his own head, and he resolved never to be the fool again. He would stop hoping for things he would never have. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of believing they’d hurt him. He would lock it all away.

***

Before climbing into bed that night, John sat at his writing desk and popped the cap off his blue biro. For the first time since beginning his journal, he wrote the date at the top of the page:

July 7, 2031

Today was my berthday. It was the best day of my life.
Summer for John (Part 2)

July 10, 2031

Mister Homes took me to the royal obsevatry in south London today. I learnt about compass maps and stars so saylers new wich way to sayl sellers. I sor a giant teleskop. Also I stood me on a gold line that raps round the planet. Mister Homes took a pik picture. On the way home there was a axident blocking trafikk. Mister Homes and me were in a teleskop for 3 owers. He was very bored. I din’t mind. Sumtimes I fink I’m more pashint win things go rong. He sed we should play games to pass the time. Debus Dedush Dedukshin games. Im not very good at them yet. I could gess only 3 things about the shoe shoe we found in a skip for praktiss and Mr Homes gest 9. He is so smart.

John read over his work and sighed. He capped his blue pen and picked up a red one, circling the words he knew he hadn’t got right. Then he turned to the dictionary.

Mr Holmes had set up a wonderful writing corner for him in the sitting room by the window, opposite his own corner where he stored his violin and music. It was a lovely space, this, one of his favourites in the flat, a space that didn’t need clearing for meals and where he could store all his study materials, and it was his very own. He had a desk for writing made of cherry wood, with all sorts of drawers and cubbies; a holder for pens and pencils of all colours; shelves for his writing journals, word puzzles, practice books, dictionary, and stories; and different papers: lined, blank, and sticky. Finally, in a skinny drawer just above his knees when he sat on a blue swivel chair he’d picked out himself, a new, shiny, silver laptop.

He was just learning to type. It was lots harder than writing by hand. The keys weren’t even in the right order! Astounding how Mr Holmes could type so fast and not even look at his fingers while doing it. John found he had to hen-peck each letter, one at a time, and even then he made mistakes. So he preferred writing by hand. It was astounding, actually, how easily his left hand could do it. At least, as far as comfort went. Spelling was still really tricky. He was good with capitalising and full stops and apostrophes (mostly), and because he didn’t understand commas at all he avoided them entirely, but it was the spelling that did him in each time.

But he was determined to become what Mr Holmes was already calling him: a man of letters. On Wednesday mornings, John had taken to joining Mrs Hudson on weekly trips to the library to pick his own books for the week. He liked stories but found those aimed at his reading level to be too childish for his liking, and so he gravitated more to educational books, still rich in pictures and large in text, but interesting. One week, it was book about insects, another week about nutrition, another week, the human brain. This week, it was the solar system, and thus Mr Holmes’ idea to go to the observatory. He devoured the books. He could read a whole book in a day, if he put his mind to it, even the longer ones. When he had questions, or wanted to know more, he could ask Mr Holmes, or, as Mr Holmes taught him, he could ask the Internet. Not that that always worked:

are ward brains differnt

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Disappointingly, he found that there were some questions he wasn’t allowed to ask the Internet.

‘The answer, John, is no,’ said Mr Holmes when John asked him instead, sounding a little
exasperated.

‘Sorry, sir,’ John said, fearing he’d asked something superbly stupid.

‘I’m not angry with you,’ Mr Holmes reassured him, ‘but with them.’

John wasn’t entirely sure who them was, or why Mr Holmes pointed to the ceiling when he said it, but he had already asked one dumb question that day. Best not follow it with a second. Mr Holmes kept saying how smart he was, and he didn’t want to prove otherwise.

And he had developed a renewed interest in Mr Holmes’ shelves. He tried to read one of the books once, a thick one with dark red cover and shiny gold lettering, but even the first page had proved too challenging. Still, Mr Holmes encouraged his interest.

‘What’s this one about?’ he asked one evening, in the yawning hour before bed, angling a book from the shelf.

‘That’s a compendium of unsolved crimes from the mid-19th century. It kept me occupied while my own practice was getting off the ground.’

‘And what’s this one?’ John asked, moving on to its neighbour.

‘Oh, you’d like it. It’s about a mad scientist who assembles various the limbs and organs of cadavers together, reanimates the dead tissue matter with electricity, and brings the creature back to life.’

John stared, disbelieving.

‘It’s a work of fiction, John.’

‘Oh. Of course. And this one?’

‘That’s a diary, actually,’ said Mr Holmes, walking over to take the book in hand, reminiscently. ‘Quite a famous one from the 17th century. Samuel Pepys lived through the Dutch War, the Great Plague, the Fire of London, events of historical interest, and kept a first-hand account of it all, alongside his personal life. I read it in school and found it fascinating. He probably had no sense of the time he was living in, and how great a bearing the things he witnessed had on the future of this country. War, disease, devastation . . . We look back on his time from our present day, knowing bad things were to pass, but to someone living through all of that? It must have felt like it would never end.’

John thought about that, all day and into the night and the next day as well. He thought about how Mr Holmes had on his shelf the diary of someone he had never known, who had lived hundreds of years ago and was still remembered for the things he had written. And he began to think, what if the things he was writing every day were read by more than just Mr Holmes and Mrs Hudson? Well then, he thought, perhaps he should have something important to say. The only trouble was, what?

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Maggie Steiner advertised herself as a Ward Youth Handler: an expert in correction and obedience training of wayward wards in the highly regarded Know Your Place Programme, run by the WSC. She explained to Mrs Hastings on the phone:

‘The process is CFCA-certified and my methods are approved by the Ethics Commission on Ward Welfare. We will work together to discuss the behavioural problems you’ve experienced and establish a routine uniquely suited to your ward’s needs. Then we’ll sign a host-deferment document.'
Essentially, what that means is that your ward will come to live with me during the re-education process, which generally lasts anywhere from six months to a year. You are exempt during that time from any hosting duties with the understanding that they will resume once the contract has been fulfilled at the end of the corrective period, and you receive back a calmer, more respectful, more dutiful ward.’

‘And it’s guaranteed?’

‘My success rate is 100-percent, Mrs Hastings. I assure you, I’m the best in the industry.’

Some six months after acquiring him, like someone had flipped a switch, Twitch changed. The Twitch Switch, Wendell and Peter took to calling it, which amused them greatly. But for their parents, the hosts, it was no laughing matter. Twitch had become unruly and destructive. He tore the curtains from the windows in the ward room he shared with Goldberry, pried up decorative stones in the garden and smashed them on the pavement in front of the house, and chucked them at the windows, shattering one completely. He took to backtalking his hosts and refused to come when called, sometimes even refusing to eat. When they wrangled him into his chair at the kitchen table and set a bowl of beef stew in front of him, he hurled it across the room and threw himself back into his chair, screeching it along the lino and flailing when they tried to come nearer. One day—the day of the incident that finally prompted them to seek help—he lay down in the middle of the street, refusing to move even when honked at by passing motorists. It was the honking that caught the Hastings’ attention. It was time to get him some help.

They signed the papers, and Twitch moved house from Beckenham to Dulwich Village where he became known as Ash.

‘I call all the wards under my care Ash,’ explained Maggie Steiner. ‘Do you know why?’

Ash shook his head. He refused to look at her. He never looked at someone anymore, not unless he was sure he wasn’t being watched.

‘Because that’s what I have to reduce you to. Then, you become a beautiful phoenix, rising from the ashes, a happier and more glorious self, ready to return to the hosts who cared enough to send you to me.’

That was the year the government updated the identifying bracelets from a single leather band imprinted with ward registration numbers to dual electronic bracelets. They were thick, black, and heavy, lacking the sleek, lightweight, indestructible design of the more sophisticated flexiglass that would come about in another fifteen years. As a new feature, they also had GPS tracking devices implanted in the casing and could flash red in emergency situations (the other colours, along with mild-shocking capabilities, would come later still).

All wards were issued the new identifying bracelets; but the bracelets were not the only new ward disciplinary device. A collar was introduced, designed primarily as a punitive instrument, and it was still in its pilot-testing phase. As a certified Handler, Ms Maggie Steiner was sent a prototype for her to use and review.

She fitted the collar around Ash’s neck with the same disinterest as dressing him in a necktie. Not that he’d ever worn one of those, either. Like the bracelets, it was thick, black, and heavy, and if nothing else made for uncomfortable swallowing. She locked it in place with a tiny key and flicked a switch on the back.

‘Say, my name is Ash.’
Ash glared at her and refused even to part his lips.

‘I will get the paddle,’ she warned.

He crossed his arms tightly and dared her to with his eyes.

She had to hit him pretty hard to get a reaction out of him. He was gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes, but then it became too much, and he let out a scream. Only, it wasn’t a scream. It was just air. There was a startling sensation in his throat, a numb buzzing, like when his legs went to sleep from sitting too long, and it frightened him.

‘Ah! There we go! See here, Ash. I am your host. You will do what I say, when I say.’ She brushed dampened fringe from her brow. ‘So, I’ll tell you again: Say, my name is Ash.’

Eyes watering with anger, Ash pierced his lips together. He breathed loudly through his nose and braced for more.

Life with Ms Maggie Steiner only got worse. She kept him in the collar for hours, even days at a time. It did nothing to stop him from eating or drinking—as uncomfortable as it was—so it wasn’t unusually cruel, she said. And she only ever beat him using CFCA-sanctioned methods, so that was okay, too. It was for his own good, after all. Docile ward, happy host. Happy host, happy ward. See? It was all for him.

‘The ward system,’ she taught him, ‘is the modern evolution of a very old, honoured British tradition. A thousand years ago, there were lords and serfs. Two hundred years ago, masters and slaves. A hundred years ago, the elite and the worker. Now, we have hosts and wards. See? Always a class on top, always a class underneath. It’s the natural order of things, and you need to know your place in it. The lower respects, serves, and obeys, the upper provides for and protects. The sooner you accept that, the happier you’ll be. So, again, let us go over the house rules.’

She sat him on a wooden chair in the centre of her study and taught him the house rules.

‘Never,’ she said, ‘call a host by his given name. You are his inferior, and to call him by his given name is to elevate your status, to assume you are as respectable as he, and you are not. So. Always address your host as Mister or Sir, Misses or Ma’am.’ She smiled down at him. ‘Though you can call me Maggie.’

‘Yes, Maggie.’

She brought a switch down across his wrist, which rested in his lap.

‘You may call me Ms Maggie.’

‘Ms Maggie?’

She brought down the switch again. It stung so hard he thought he was bleeding, but when he looked, the skin was merely welted, not broken.

‘You may call me Margaret.’

‘Thank you, Ms Steiner, no,’ he said tearfully.

‘That’s better. And remember: Any host who tries to tell you differently is tricking you, and you’ll just get more of the same.’
She taught him that a proper ward did not take up space unless it was given to him: a room, or a bed, or a seat at the table. He was not to enter host spaces, like bedrooms, or use host personal property, like phones, or sully host private spaces, like toilets. He was not to be idle and should never be prompted to rise from his bed in the morning. He should always begin his chores without reminder or complaint. And if he should find an unoccupied hour, he was to fill it with industry, not indolence.

To build his work ethic, she made him scrub every inch of lino with a toothbrush and vinegar, and when that was done, to do it again, and when that was done, to do it again, until his hands were cramped and knees sore and the cuts on his hands from the switch were stinging from the vinegar, and his eyes burned from accidently rubbing them from weariness. When he complained, she made him drink it, and then it was back in the collar or being beaten with the switch or paddle.

To teach him discipline, she made him stand blindfolded in the middle of a room with a measuring cup filled with water on his head, for hours, sometimes all day, and if he moved a jot, the water would spill. The first time, when she turned her back, he drank it all away. For that, he was made to wear pinch shoes for a week. He would always remember how one of his toenails turned purple, and how it was weeks still before it looked normal again. He never understood how this exercise was meant to teach him anything.

To curb his natural lusts, she showed him graphic photographs of naked women in explicit positions, insisting that he look, and each time he did, the switch came down on his hands. ‘You remember the sting in your hand,’ she said, ‘each time you think of a woman as a sexual object, each time you think of touching yourself.’ She made him shower in cold water every day and wear underwear made of burlap.

He hated Maggie Steiner, maybe more than he hated Wendell and Peter, and the guilt of hating consumed him, because he was taught it was wrong to hate. It was wrong to have unpleasant thoughts about one’s host or situation. It was wrong to wish for better than one got. But try as he might, he couldn’t help those thoughts, and he only hated more, which only heightened his anger, which only made him lash out more, which made her beat him more, which made him hate her more. It had been six months, and he was still not cured.

Twelve months, she had said, and then she would send him back to the Hastings. He couldn’t bear the thought. Six more months with her. Returning to the Hastings. Being warded to Wendell Hastings for life. He just couldn’t bear it.

He wanted Mummy, and she was dead. He wanted Harry, and she had vanished. All that was left of them was Dover. He wanted Dover. The sea and the dandelions and the red shoes that were his own. He dreamt about it both day and night, with open eyes and closed, until one night, nursing an empty stomach and stinging palms, he decided he was tired of dreaming.

He ran.

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The streets were crowded at midday as John weaved his way home from a bookstore. That had been Mr Holmes’ suggestion. Libraries were all well and good, but those books had to be returned. What if you really liked one? What if you wanted to keep it always? A man of letters, Mr Holmes said, ought to have his favourite books on his own shelf in his own home, to read whenever he pleased. So, he insisted John buy whatever books he liked for his very own, and to charge them on the tab card.

So now, tucked under one arm, he carried a brand new copy of a book called The Three Musketeers.
He and Mr Holmes had watched the movie the night before, which John had rather enjoyed but which Mr Holmes had complained deviated too far from the source material, and John’s interests were pricked. He wanted to know the real story for himself. The book was long and the print was small, but he was determined to one day finish it.

He meant to head straight back to Baker Street, but a vendor on a street corner caught his eye, and he came to a stop. The kiosk was like the ones that sold newspapers, paperbacks, and sweets, but instead of books, this one was selling . . . games?

John’s attention had been captured because he recognised the box for Battleships, and as he looked closer, he saw a few others he recognised (Operation, Cluedo, and the one with the hippos and marbles that cracked Mr Holmes up so much), but most were unknown to him. He had no idea so many kinds of games existed.

‘You look like a man who likes his games.’

John nodded timidly.

The vendor stepped out from behind the partition, grinning from ear to ear. He was a hefty chap with full dark beard and a black t-shirt that said *The Reason I Have Friends Is So I Can Beat Them at Risk*. John was proud of himself for knowing that. He liked that he could read t-shirts now.

‘Come, friend.’ The man extended an arm, as though to invite him inside a palace. ‘Let’s talk.’

Twenty minutes later, John left the vendor carrying a box that was surprisingly heavy for its size, his heart thrumming at the impulse buy. Mr Holmes had specifically granted him permission to buy books and groceries and the like. But games? Was forty pounds for a game a lot of money? Maybe he should have checked first with Mr Holmes and come back later. Just to make sure it was okay and that Mr Holmes wouldn’t be mad.

*It is okay, it is!* John told himself as he turned onto Baker Street. Mr Holmes didn’t get mad, not at him. It would be fine. And if not . . . No, stop thinking that way. He’s never hit you, and he’s not the sort to start now, not over this. Besides, he had bought it with Mr Holmes in mind. All these months, and Mr Holmes had given him so much. He had nothing to give back in return. But a new game, well, it was the sort of thing they did together, playing games. It would be fun to learn one that was new to both of them.

In fact, by the time he reached the front door of 221, he was so convinced of Mr Holmes’ inevitable delight that he couldn’t wait to get inside and share what he had found. He let the door fall shut behind him and hurried up the stairs, but at the first landing, he halted. There were voices in the room. Mr Holmes’, as expected, but someone else’s, too.

‘. . . all this “playing house” nonsense. It shan’t hold, you know.’ There was a pause. ‘You’re being naïve,’ the stranger continued, ‘if you expect some fairy tale ending.’

John edged up the stairs, prepared to go straight to his room if need be.

‘I know I’m not in a fairy tale,’ Mr Holmes retorted.

‘Do you now?’

‘If I were, I imagine a house would have been dropped on you long before now.’ Suddenly, Mr Holmes’ voice boomed. ‘Do come in, John! My brother was just leaving.’

John jumped, not realising he’d been spotted. Embarrassed, he stepped lightly across the threshold,
but no further. Seeing the elder Mr Holmes standing in the middle of the sitting room in his three-piece suit, and the younger Mr Holmes, too, in a suit jacket and carefully arranged hair, he felt suddenly foolish to have brought home something so childish as a game, and he tried to hide it behind his leg.

‘What’s that? What have you got there?’ asked the elder.

‘Play nice, Mycroft,’ Mr Holmes drawled. Then he smiled at John and crossed the room. Having Mr Holmes nearer at hand, standing between him and the elder Holmes, relaxed him. He hadn’t seen his host’s brother since Christmas, and the encounter had worried him greatly. The man was large and important and seemed not to care for wards like John, the kind that came from pounds. What’s more, he knew things, things in his permanent record. Had he come to make sure John would be be got rid of? His own Mr Holmes had resoundingly disabused him of that fear, but seeing him again put John back on edge.

‘May I see?’ asked Mr Holmes.

John swallowed and passed the board game to his host.

‘Mayhap Mansion Murder Mystery,’ Mr Holmes read out loud.

The game suddenly sounded incredibly stupid. ‘I thought,’ said John, softly, bashfully, as though he could stop Mr Mycroft Holmes from overhearing, ‘it would be like solving your cases.’

Mr Holmes’ smile widened as John spoke. ‘Well, well, well,’ he said as he turned the box around in his hands. ‘How clever of you. And look at that. For three to six players. Mycroft, you’re staying for tea.’

The elder Holmes spluttered. ‘Pardon?’

‘I’ll put the kettle on. You and John’—he passed the game back—‘will learn the rules and set up the board.’

While Mr Holmes worked on the tea and sandwiches, John sat red-faced at the table across from the elder Mr Holmes to open the box and pull out all the pieces. The instructions were long and complicated, and there were more parts to it than any game he’d ever played before. With every passing second, he regretted buying the game more and more. It would take all afternoon for him just to read through the how-to of it, let alone to play the game itself. Mr Mycroft Holmes had tasked himself with opening all the little plastic baggies and sorting the tokens and cards, but John felt the man’s condemnatory eyes on him, and his own blurred as he tried to concentrate on page 1 of the manual. He couldn’t think. The words were wavy and he could barely make it through a sentence. It was as if all his practice had been for nothing. He was screwing it up, and they hadn’t even started. This was no fun at all.

‘Give it here,’ said the elder, plucking the manual from his hands. ‘You sort the cards.’

When Mr Holmes returned, the other Mr Holmes launched into a rapid explanation of the rules. He was speaking so fast and with such big words that John began to panic. His own Mr Holmes never made a game sound so impossible. He couldn’t explain it, but he felt that he was on trial, and if he didn’t showcase his own smarts soon enough, there would be trouble from the important man.

Then Mr Holmes caught his eye and gave him a small wink. It was enough. He understood: Mr Holmes would help him through.

They began to play. John’s randomly assigned character, represented by a little green token, was
called Cornelius Forrester, a professor of antiquities specialising in ancient Egyptian talismans (John
didn’t know what a talisman was and hoped it wouldn’t prove too important; if they had been alone,
he would have asked, but not with the elder present). Mr Holmes, the blue token, became Luke
Winters, a paranormal investigator with a proclivity for communicating with the recently deceased.
And Mr Holmes the Elder was a yellow token named Suzy McGill, a fifteen-year-old child minder
who knew all the town gossip. He scowled at his assignment, but took his turn first.

The murder of a non-assigned character (in this case, a purple token dubbed Hester Johannessen,
curator of ancient artefacts) began the game, and after every full round, paranormal perils, monstrous
mishaps, and grave misfortunes befell the players as they manoeuvred around the board, picking up
clues, outrunning ghosts, fighting off demons, and outwitting one another, each intent on solving the
murder, catching the murderer, and restoring the mansion to a state of peace.

Mr Holmes the Elder, now in the butler’s kitchen, drew a card.

‘You fall through a trapdoor and hit your head on the way down. While unconscious, the Impish
Spirits transport you back to the start. Move your token, and lose one turn. Oh, bloody hell! This is
third turn I’ve lost! Who shuffled these?’

‘Shut up, you’re unconscious,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘John, your turn.’

John had been heading for the attic for three turns now, to pick up Old Granny’s Key, and all he
needed was to roll a four. He rolled a two and drew a Misfortune Card.

‘You hear a tum— tum . . . ul . . . tumultyooo—’

‘Tumultuous,’ said Mr Holmes the Elder grumbled, arms crossed huffily from the loss of his turn.

‘Unconscious,’ Mr Holmes reminded him.

‘Tumultuous rumbling,’ John continued, ‘above your head. Suddenly, dark clouds . . . begin to . . .
roll, no, r-roil? roil . . . What’s roil?’

‘Like, twisting and curling, a swirling motion.’

‘Not, like, royal? Like the king?’

Mycroft sighed impatiently.

‘It’s spelt differently,’ Mr Holmes said, shooting daggers at his brother.

‘Oh. Roil on the . . . seeel—’

‘Ceiling,’ Mr Holmes the Elder put in.

Mr Holmes kicked Mr Holmes under the table.

‘. . . on the ceiling like smoke. Next you know, there’s a . . . clap of . . . t-, I mean, thunder . . . and
then it’s a d— de— deloo . . . deluge? Deluge.’

‘Deluge,’ Mr Holmes affirmed. ‘It’s like, a downpour. Enough rain to cause flooding. Go on, then,
what happens to you?’

‘Lose a turn, I should hope,’ said Mr Holmes the Elder.

But John’s attention had caught on the word. ‘Deluge,’ he repeated. Then it clicked. ‘That’s it! Sir,
that’s the word! Mr James said he was from the Del—’

Abruptly, he cut himself off.

Mr Holmes the Elder uncrossed his arms and leant forward, hands on knees. ‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing, sir.’ Wrong company, wrong thing to say. He wished he’d been smart enough to keep it to himself, and remember it for later, when it was just the two of them again.

‘No no, you were saying . . .’ Mr Holmes the Elder’s eyes were fixed on him like it was the first time he’d really looked and noticed John was in the room. And that his face was crawling with cockroaches. ‘What do you know about the DULUGE?’

‘I know nothing, sir.’ John’s head inclined, and it was all he could do from shrinking back into his chair.

‘Who is this James? Sherlock, what is he talking about? Make him answer.’

‘Whatever are you going on about, Mycroft?’ said Mr Holmes innocently, reaching for the dice. ‘Now, to get myself into that cellar to talk to Spooky Spike.’ He shook the dice in his hand.

‘Sherlock! Make your ward answer me!’

Mr Holmes brought a closed fist down on the table. All the pieces jumped, and John with them. ‘I don’t give John orders. I’m not his master. I will, however, support him in kicking you out of the flat for being so disrespectful, if he so chooses. This is his home, not yours, and a guest does not make demands of his host’—he pointed at John with the dice—‘whilst in his house. Wherever are your manners?’

John blanched, staring between the brothers, wavering between terror and amazement. Had Mr Holmes just called John a host?

‘Now, from where I’m sitting, you’re just trying to distract from the fact that you are losing, and John is four turns away from solving the whole thing. Can you really be so childish that you can’t bear to lose?’

‘You’ve been helping him,’ Mr Holmes the elder accused.

‘Hardly. We do not permit cheating in this house. Do we, John?’

John shook his head.

‘What happens if one of us cheats?’

‘He has to do the washing up,’ said John.

‘That’s right.’ Mr Holmes was glaring at his brother from across the board. ‘There is no king of this castle. We are joint rulers. So jointly, we make the rules. Anyone under this roof must abide by them. No exceptions. Not at this table, nor anywhere. Right?’

‘Right,’ John echoed.

‘And you, brother mine, are unconscious. And the rules state, no talking while passed out. Page 9. You read it yourself. Take your penalty, and return a Chance Medallion to the pile.’

Mr Holmes the Elder glowered, but chucked the medallion he’d acquired three turns ago into the pile.
he’d taken it from.

‘Also, you’re to do the washing up after the game,’ Mr Holmes added, and cast the dice.

To his great surprise, John won the first game. He’d never even played before, ever, and he’d won! Mr Holmes the Elder was so put out that he insisted on playing another round, which Mr Holmes conceded to, though only after his older brother did the washing up. It was a strange thing indeed to be in the sitting room with nothing to do but reset the board while a houseguest worked in the kitchen. It made John uncomfortable. But Mr Holmes kept smiling at him, and carrying on like there was nothing at all amiss, and when Mr Holmes the Elder returned, they played again, and with much less fuss. Mr Holmes won that one.

‘Very well, I’m off,’ said his brother. As he stood and straightened his shirt, he said, ‘Game of chance, that’s what this was. No real thinking involved, just lucky picks. John, has my brother introduced you to Diplomacy yet?’

John saw Mr Holmes roll his eyes, but he was smirking as he collected the pieces to return to the box.

‘No sir. Is it a game?’

‘Indeed. Relies on strategy. Next time, we’re playing Diplomacy.’

‘Sounds like rousing good fun,’ said Mr Holmes, grinning up at his brother.

Mr Holmes the Elder merely grunted. He took his leave, and Mr Holmes stretched his hands behind his head and legs out in front of him. He chuckled.

‘Well done,’ he said to John.

‘Sir?’

‘He likes you.’

‘He does?’

‘It’s the surest way to win my brother over: beat him in a board game. Though, to be fair, just playing would do. Mycroft has a weakness for games.’

John was perplexed. ‘He didn’t seem to much like me, sir.’

Mr Holmes smiled. ‘He’s a bit chilly, I’ll grant you. But trust me, he likes you.’ Mr Holmes seemed quite satisfied with himself, but he added, ‘There’s no obligation on your part, though. You know that, right? Feel free to think him a grumpy old barmpot.’

John wasn’t quite sure what he thought. The elder Mr Holmes was sharp around the edges, and would as soon as crush you as look at you. So it seemed. All he knew for sure was that he liked being liked. It was enough to be liked by Mr Holmes, and he quite liked being liked by Mrs Hudson, too. Two people liking him was more than he deserved, really. Still. To think someone else might like him, too, even just a little, was like just a little extra cream in his coffee. It tasted good. Really good.

‘Now then,’ said Mr Holmes, ‘about this sudden deluge.’

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Ash stole two boxes of biscuits, a jar of olives, another of peaches, half a bag of crisps, and what was left of a loaf of bread, dumped it all in a pillowcase, twisted the neck, and threw it over his shoulder. The front door was bolted shut and all the windows had bars, but Ms Maggie Steiner had forgotten about the tiny window in the host bathroom above the tub. While she slept, he quietly stood on tiptoes in the tub and pried open the tiny window. He dropped his sack through the opening. Then he hoisted himself up and out. He was tiny, too.

Dover was a seaside village. He knew that much. He also knew that New Britain was an island. So even though he didn’t know exactly where it was or how to get there, he reasoned that all he had to do was keep walking in one direction until he reached the sea, and then walk along the shore until he reached Dover. Surely, he’d recognise it. He saw it often enough in his dreams.

So he started walking. As much as possible, he kept off the main roads and hid in the shadows. He travelled by the moon, not the sun. It was easier to hide from unfriendly eyes at night, and in any case, if he didn’t keep moving he would freeze. During the day, he found places to hide and sleep—in rubbish heaps when he was still in the city, but as the city fell away into open country, he slept in the fields and under trees and once in a barn. After only a few days, he had eaten the full contents of his sack and took to rummaging for discarded food from the bins behind pubs and once nicking a sleeve of biscuits from a shop.

He was afraid. He knew where he was going, but not how to get there or how long it would take. He was afraid of being seen by people—Ward Patrol, policemen, nuns, anyone who might spot him for the runaway ward that he was. He had left the bracelets behind, but surely one only had to look at him to know. He thought they might hunt him down with dogs, or that he might be attacked by foxes or bears, or that he’d be trampled by horses or smashed by cars or creamed by trains, if he wasn’t careful. Despite it all, he felt something he’d never felt before and couldn’t put into words but which kept his feet moving. Any hour now, he might crest a hill or break through the trees, and then he’d see it: a wide, blue-grey sea of untroubled waters, a place he’d once called home.

They caught him near Maidstone. A rural vicar spotted him first, curled up beneath a stone archway in the church cemetery early in the morning. The vicar took him into the church’s kitchen, fed him up, and called the authorities.

They did not return him to Ms Maggie Steiner, although, the way he heard it, she was petitioning to have him back and to set him straight. But he was a runner, and runners had to be dealt with in a different way.

They sped him away from the sea, to a place called Six Mile Bottom, where a sprawling farm became his new residence. There, they clamped both ankles in padded restraints with a plastic-coated chain running between them, giving him about eight inches slack. They called it a hobble, which prevented him from running at all. In fact, he couldn’t take even one normal step. All he could do was shuffle and hop up and down steps.

‘Three months,’ they told him. ‘Three months you’ll work on this farm. During the day, you’ll wear that hobble. At night, your legs will be restrained to your bed and your door locked. After three months, we’ll evaluate whether you’re still a flight risk.’

It was a rehabilitation farm for wayward wards, all male, aged twelve to seventeen, which made him not only the newest detainee but, at thirteen, also the youngest at that time. To name him, they drew a slip of paper out of a jar by the door to the main house. Theoretically, the jar held up to fifty names. At the time of his arrival, twenty-two were in use. He was called Bruno. The last Bruno, they said, had improved well enough that they had sent him back to his host family, and wasn’t that something to aspire to? The new Bruno thought differently, but he kept his black thoughts to himself.
They weren’t all runners. Some of them were destroyers, others fighters, some thieves, and others pervers. If they continued in their wayward ways and into adulthood, they were warned, there would be different consequences for their crimes. They didn’t know what. They could only speculate. But their punishments on the farm were enough for now. The runners wore hobbles; the destroyers were blindfolded; the fighters were drugged; the thieves were shackled; and the pervers were clamped. Their first three months on the farm, the restrictions were never lifted. After three months, there was an evaluation, at which time many of the boys were relieved of the restrictions and allowed, instead, simply to work.

All laboured. It was a working farm, and there was much to do: planting and pruning and hoeing and milking and feeding and foaling and cooking and cleaning and building and digging—the boys did it all, under the watchful eye of the overseers, of which there were few. The director was seldom present. He was an Oxford man, they said, and spent most of his days in a world of academics, which, to the boys, made him as mysterious as a wizard. They took to calling him Oz, a reference Bruno didn’t understand. To him, Oz was just a funny word.

Bruno’s first three months’ labour was dedicated to feeding, milking, and cleaning up after the cows. At four every morning, he awoke to the sound of an alarm clock, rang a bell to be unlocked from the bedposts, and hobbled his way to the barn where sixteen cows waited to be milked. In the beginning, he was slow and clumsy and afraid of the cows. Milking took him hours and hours and left his hands cramped and aching for hours more. But over time, he grew accustomed, and what once took all morning he could now finish in under four hours, and he found he was quite content with his chore. The barn was quiet, and he didn’t mind the smell. Rather, he found it manure-earthy and hay-sweet, almost pleasant. He liked the cows, too. They were called by numbers, but he took to naming them after the flowers they grew in the greenhouse: Rose, Peony, Lilac, Poppy, Tulip, Foxglove, Dandelion, Bluebell, Honeysuckle, Lily, Daisy, Oxlip, Mistletoe, Ivy, Hop, and, his favourite, Cowslip (which he thought was clever, a private little joke he alone appreciated). The cows greeted him every morning with a chorus of mooing. They didn’t judge him, or mock him, or hate him. They liked him. At least, he imagined that they liked him, even preferred him. And he liked them quite well, himself.

He was so pleased with his assignment in the barn that he stopped minding the hobble at all. He was used to it. He didn’t complain. He even thought that running was the best thing he had ever done, if it meant he would end up here. Perhaps, he thought, he could stay on. He could be a farm ward, all his life, and look after the cows. And if he were very good, one day, maybe, the overseers would take him to the sea, just to look and know it was real.

The other boys took notice of his satisfaction, and they were jealous. It wasn’t fair, they complained, that Bruno got to be somewhere he liked. That wasn’t punishment. And if the overseers wouldn’t fix it, and put him on tougher duties—working in the fields, maybe, or building fences in the hot sun—then they would find ways to punish him themselves. So they started teasing him by hiding his dinner plate so he couldn’t eat, calling him Bungo or Bufter, and beating him up when the overseers weren’t watching. No one raised an eyebrow. After all, it wasn’t uncommon when the boys arrived at breakfast with split lips and black eyes. Farm work was rough work, and rough work left marks.

When that failed to change anything, they took more drastic action.

It had been very nearly three months, and Bruno was only four days away from his evaluation. On a morning just like any other, he awoke and rang his bell and an overseer unlocked him from the bed. He dressed and was fitted with the hobble and given a bread roll for his breakfast, which he ate as he made his slow, shuffling way across the mowed field to the barn. Just a few more mornings, and he would be relieved of the hobble, free to walk normally again. He wondered whether the cows would notice the change in his fortune, and be pleased for him.
He grasped the large barn door and pulled, the familiar scent of hay and manure washing over him, and the cows began their greeting chorus. But before he could reach the light, let alone the stool and pail, he was attacked.

The boys fell on him and stuffed his mouth with a rag to muffle his screams. Then they dragged him kicking and squirming across the length of the barn. In an empty stall, they held him down, arms spread eagle and legs as far apart as the hobble would permit, one boy to each limb and another straddling across to keep him on the straw-strewn floor. Another held an axe.

He thought he was going to die. But they didn’t chop off his head. No, an older boy brought it down on the chains between his legs. Again, again, the strident clang of the heavy metal axe against the hobble. What were they doing? A few more days! Just a few more days, and he’d be free of it! What were they doing!

They wrangled him out of the barn, out the back, and in a huddle, they hurried him into the trees, deeper, deeper into the forest. They were panting, sweating, swearing at each other to hurry, to be quiet, to shut him up. Where were they taking him? Why? But every attempt to ask and every struggle was met with fists in his face and stomach and a wrenching of his limbs until finally, what felt like miles from the farm, they dropped him to the forest floor.

It was still dark. Even if the sun were rising, which it was not, the forest would remain in shadow. But they had a torch, and they pointed it down on him. They rucked his left shirtsleeve up his arm and illuminated his registration tattoo. If they said anything, he would never be able to recall, for a white-hot panic had seized his mind. What he would always remember was the fire. Who knew that such a little flame from one of the overseer’s cigarette lighters could hurt so much? It was a searing, a slicing, a piercing pain as they held the tiny fire to his wrist, to melt away the tattoo. He watched his own skin bubble and drip as tears poured from his eyes and his teeth tore at the rag still in his mouth.

Suddenly, they stopped. They got off of him, and they ran, the beam from the torch bouncing through the trees.

Some hours later, the overseers found him with the use of sniffer dogs. He was wandering through the woods, lost and bleeding. He was dragging chains in his wake, tangled with twigs and leaves. The hobble was broken, and he walked with a lumbering gait as though his ankles were made of wet noodles.

Having discovered the axe in the barn, they accused him of breaking his own hobble. Having found the lighter in the forest, they condemned him for burning off his own tattoo. The believed he was running, again, and wouldn’t listen to his protests or defences, but punished him with triple his time in a new hobble made of steel. They branded him with a new tattoo he was unable to see, placed on the back of his neck. He would no longer milk the cows, but dig ditches for drainage from sunup to sundown so that his back ached and hands blistered, and all the while the hobble weighed him down, mind, body, and spirit.

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Mr Holmes sat in his chair, holding his violin like a guitar and plucking the strings absentmindedly while John, sitting across from him, scrolled slowly on his phone with intense concentration.

The cases were piling up in Mr Holmes’ inbox on his website. Mr Holmes had already deleted the boring ones. The remainder he left for John to pick from. Licking his lips, John read aloud the one that sounded, to him, most bizarre.
‘My husband is three people,’ he read slowly. ‘We’ve been . . . mar— married for two years, and I’ve noticed that he has three dis— dis . . . tin . . . tink . . . distinct patterns of . . . moles on his skin. Am I going . . . crazy?’ He looked up. ‘What do you think, Mr Holmes?’

‘Triplets,’ said Mr Holmes instantly. ‘Identical, obviously. Occurs in one in a half-million births.’

‘She married triplets? And she doesn’t know?’

‘Evidently not. That’s the easy part. The real question is, why is he lying? What does he have to hide?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

Mr Holmes’ fingers drummed the violin excitedly. ‘Shall we go find out?’

It was exciting to be going on cases again with Mr Holmes. After the last one, John had wondered if he would ever be invited again and feared his poor handling in the wake of the upset at the bank had ruined Mr Holmes’ faith in him. But this week alone, they’d gone out three times—between reading and writing lessons, museum excursions, and outings to the park to help exercise his leg, Mr Holmes said—and solved three cases, and they had each been amazing. Mr Holmes was amazing. So amazing that John just had to write about it that night in his journal:

July 24, 2031

_Mister Homes and me sold a case today. It was a strenje one. Had me stumpt but Mister Homes was brilleent. He sed to me after that he had it sold even before the woman where done telling her story. He let her finish as a kurtisy. I thot that was kind. Heres what happind . . ._

‘We’re going to get inside the house,’ said Mr Holmes, taking a corner, ‘without them knowing who we are. So first. Bracelets.’

John didn’t even question it anymore. When Mr Holmes told him to take off the bracelets, he did. Mr Holmes pocketed them.

‘Good. Now. Punch me in the face.’ And he turned his cheek to John, an invitation.

John startled. He fell back a step. ‘Sir?’

‘It’s quite all right. I’m going to ring the bell on the pretext of needing minor, self-administered medical attention. I just need a shiner to pull the story off. Go on then.’

But John was aghast and could only shake his head.

‘Trust me, John, it’s fine. I know how to take a punch. Right here, give it your best go.’

‘No sir,’ John murmured, taking another step back. He couldn’t believe what Mr Holmes was asking him to do, not Mr Holmes. People hit when they were angry, because they needed to teach a lesson or punish for wrongdoing. It was hateful, hurtful. He couldn’t hurt Mr Holmes. ‘No sir,’ he whispered again. He felt like he might just cry. Why did Mr Holmes want him to do such a hateful thing?

‘Hey, hey,’ said Mr Holmes, stepping closer, resting a hand on his shoulder, then taking his hand, which John was holding against his own cheek, and pulling it away from his face to hold. John hadn’t even realised he’d lifted his arm. But he thought he could feel the shadow of a stinging cheek. His vision blurred with wet eyes.
'John, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Look, let’s forget about it, okay? I don’t want you to hit me. Because we don’t hit each other, do we? You and I, we never do that.’

John nodded, blinking rapidly.

‘You going to be okay?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Should we do this case another day?’

‘No sir, I’m okay. Promise.’

‘Okay. Then’—Mr Holmes dropped his hand—‘let’s come up with a better plan.’

It didn’t take Mr Holmes long, not to finagle a way into the house (stomach cramps), nor to explore the house, having asked to use the loo and leaving John to make small talk with Mr Liam Lindley, whom they had dubbed—just between the two of them—the Mole Man. Mrs Cynthia Lindley was not at home, but the ward was, an adult male called Finn. John’s heart was pounding the whole time, fearing he might say something stupid or give away their investigation, or let it slip that he, too, was a ward. But small talk was easy enough. Just stick to the weather, Mr Holmes had suggested. It’s what we all share in common.

Then, from somewhere in the back of the house, they heard a triumphant shout. They hurried to a back room where Mr Holmes had discovered a trick door in the wall behind a cupboard, and through the door, an entire room wherein resided . . . two more Mr Lindleys. The triplets.

Mr Holmes announced who he really was and named John his assistant, without also naming him his ward, which pleased John. Then he made his accusations, that all three were pretending to be one man, Liam, and taking it in turns sleeping with Mrs Lindley. He demanded to know why, and the confessions came out. It had been a joke at first, dating her one at a time, waiting to see how long it would be before she realised she was dating triplets. But they had fallen for her, all three of them, and they couldn’t decide amongst themselves who should win out. So, they agreed to share, alternating weeks. It was an ill-thought-out plan, a ruse that couldn’t last forever, two of them always hiding and playing video games in a secret back room, kept fed by the ward, who alone knew of the duplicity . . . or rather . . . triplicity?

Then Mrs Lindley came home and, seeing triple, dropped the shopping at her feet.

An hour later, on the long walk home, John said, ‘I used to think free people quite clever. But that wasn’t very clever at all, what those triplets did. How could they think they could keep up that kind of lie?’

‘You’ll find that most people are actually quite stupid, once you get to know them,’ said Mr Holmes.

‘It’s easier with wards, though.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Keeping them shut away. Like secrets.’

Mr Holmes slowed his pace. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I was kept like that once. Like a secret. In a house.’
'Do you mean . . . with Wilkes?'

For a moment, John was confused. Then he thought. ‘Oh right. Yes, I suppose it was like that with Mr Wilkes, too.’

‘But there were other times? Other times you were . . . kept secret?’

He nodded slowly, a little wary of the things he was saying now. He hadn’t meant to talk about things that happened before. It wasn’t that he thought Mr Holmes would think ill of him; he knew by now he was safe from such judgement. Still, he usually kept these things so close to his chest. How had he so easily slid into talking about such upsetting things . . . and not feel particularly upset?

‘There was,’ he began, ‘this house. Far away from other houses. A secret house, with secret children. And hosts who . . . who I don’t think were hosts at all.’

For the first time in his life, he told the story of Sam and Sal, and Mr Holmes listened.

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After a year of being hobbled, Bruno never walked the same again. He had so long shuffled about, favouring one leg over the other to move him along, that the repetitive movements and pressure in all the wrong places had twisted his foot so that the toes pointed inward and the ankle bone jutted outward. There was a persistent dull pain in his foot, aggravated if he tried to run. But his running days, evidently, were over. He’d learnt his lesson. No more running.

He remained on the farm for three years. Boys came and went. Some months, the farm was swollen with wayward wards and the jar of names was emptied; other months, it was quiet. Bruno wasn’t the only long-term ward, but he was one of the few, and it wasn’t until he was sixteen that they came to him one day, while he was picking apples in the orchard, and told him that next morning, he was leaving. Someone was paying a thousand pounds for him because he was a good worker. It was time for him to move on.

His final act was to return his name to the jar, and he left the farm nameless.

Mr Whittaker, his new host, was a stocky man with greying hair and specs as thick as a glass bottle outlined in heavy black frames. It was the distinctiveness of those specs that stuck in his memory and would, over time, be the only thing he would remember of this particular host, because on the day he was taken from the farm, Mr Whittaker drove him straight to London and to a massive building made of red brick and spires and towers and expansive green lawns. Mr Whittaker said it was a college for women, but the kitchens were in need of workers of either sex.

‘We’re here for a job interview,’ said Mr Whittaker.

They didn’t get to walk any of the fancy paths or go past the white statue in the middle of the courtyard, but instead went through a door and down some long steps until they had reached a basement, passed through several doors, and at last reached a room where they were invited to take a seat.

‘I’m here to apply for work as a dishwasher,’ said Mr Whittaker.

The man across the table nodded, his eyes sliding to Mr Whittaker’s ward and back again. ‘Previous work history?’

‘Farm work, and damn good at it. I’m a workhorse, I tell you. Give me all the hours you can.’
‘And are you of good temperament?’

‘The best. I’m very calm and respectful.’

‘Any bad habits? Smoking, drinking, anything of that nature?’

‘Not at all. They didn’t let us smoke on the farm.’

‘Will you require lodging and meals?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

It at last occurred to the ward that Mr Whittaker was speaking not about himself, but about his ward, as though in his ward’s voice. This was work for the ward. Ward labour. Even the ward knew that such a thing wasn’t legal. Strictly speaking. The farm was one thing, government-sanctioned, rehabilitative, unpaid. This was something else.

‘You’ll work from six in the morning until two in the afternoon,’ said the man he would come to know as Mr Reid, the kitchen manager, ‘and again from four until eleven, seven days a week. I will pay you at a rate of four pounds an hour.’

‘Much obliged.’

‘Sign here.’

Mr Whittaker signed his own name, and sent his ward to work in his stead. All earnings, of course, went directly to the host bank account.

The new dishwasher was called Scrubs.

Scrubs was a good worker. Washing dishes was easy, nothing like digging ditches. That had been back-breaking work, made all the harder by his wonky ankle, which he had hoped would right itself in time but never did. Still, ditch-digging had given him muscle, and though he was small, he was strong. It wasn’t long before the kitchen manager added to his work at the dish-washing station to include hauling dozens of sacks of potatoes and crates of tinned foods every morning from the lorry to the kitchens, breaking down those crates in the afternoon, and lugging all the rubbish to the skips in the evening.

One day, the kitchen ran out of eggs for that night’s dessert, and Mr Reid turned to Scrubs and said, ‘Go fetch eggs, six dozen,’ and handed him a tab card. He’d never done any shopping before, let alone used a tab card, and he said so. ‘Take Telma with you.’

That was how he first met Telma Whitehouse. He had seen her, of course, from the far end of the kitchen. She was a worker, too, though not like him. Not a ward worker. The ordinary sort. She worked in the evenings, arriving only a couple of hours before dinner service. She chopped vegetables, mostly, and sometimes stirred pots. She was tall and skinny and dark and beautiful, with curly brown hair always gathered into a ball on the top of her head. And when she smiled, he felt himself flush, especially when that smile was for him.

‘They make you sleep here, too?’

They were returning from the market with the eggs, a carrier bag in each of Scrubs’ hands. Scrubs felt embarrassed, believing she was making fun of him, so he just smiled shyly and shrugged.

‘Is that a yes?’
‘Yes, miss.’

‘I told you: call me Telma.’

But he knew better than to call her Telma. Ms Maggie Steiner’s voice was still in his head, and her switch was upon his hands.

‘You sleep in the kitchens? Really? What about your host?’

‘Mr Whittaker doesn’t live here, miss.’ He didn’t know where his host lived, but it certainly wasn’t here.

‘But where do you sleep?’

‘In the back, miss.’

‘Will you show me?’

When the dinner had been served and all the dishes cleaned, the kitchen closed down for the night. Telma was supposed to leave, like the others, but she hid until the others were gone, and Scrubs led her to one of the walk-in pantries, where they stored the giant sacks of potatoes against one wall, and a pad and blanket on the other.

She laughed when she saw it. ‘Oh! What a horrible little place! You shouldn’t have to stay here! It’s not civil. Come back to mine.’

He startled and shook his head. She grabbed his hand. ‘I insist.’

Telma wouldn’t take no for an answer. Which was how he found himself being led by the hand to a building several streets away where they crept up three flights of stairs, entered a dark flat, and sneaked to a back room, which was her bedroom. She told him to take off his shoes and crawl into bed against the wall, and she crawled in after. He was careful to press himself to the cool wall and not be a bother. But by morning, she was curled around him with her forehead pressed to his shoulder.

He was late to the kitchens that morning, but no one seemed to notice.

Telma was the friendliest person he had ever met. She smiled at him, joked with him, taught him how to chop vegetables and stir pots. No one stopped her. She dipped wooden spoons into a broth and held it to his lips and made him taste it, asking, ‘Which does it need? More salt, or more pepper?’ As time went on, they let him chop vegetables and stir pots all on his own, when she wasn’t even there. But he preferred it when she was. She was . . . nice.

Some nights—not every night and not many nights—she sneaked him back to her room, so he could sleep in a real bed that didn’t smell of rancid potatoes. The flat was always dark, its occupants always sleeping, and he always came and left in secret.

It was very late one evening when they returned to her flat. As before, Scrubs removed his shoes and was getting read to crawl into the bed when Telma put her hand on his shoulder and pushed him slowly down until he was sitting on the mattress facing her. She clicked on a lamp, dimly illuminating her room.

‘You’re sweet. You know that?’

He blushed.
‘I know you’re a ward and everything. But even wards feel things. Don’t they?’ She began to unbutton her blouse.

Scrubs dropped his eyes to his knees. The heat in his cheeks burned unpleasantly.

‘I know you like me. I like you, too. And we don’t have to say anything to anyone. In fact, we shouldn’t. This is our secret, okay?’ A hand reached under his chin and tipped it up.

She had dropped her blouse to the floor and wore only a white brassiere lined with thin lace. Slowly, she unclasped the brassiere from the back and slid the loops down her arms, tossing it aside. She waited for him to say or do something, but his mouth had gone dry and he felt paralysed with fear, unable to move away or protest or even take his eyes off her small, pert breasts.

Telma reached for his arm, his hand, and drew it up to her bare breast, and pressed.

A lash cracked through his head. Wrong, wrong, wrong! He was a bad ward! He sprang to his feet. The suddenness unbalanced her, and she fell to the rug.

‘Sorry, miss, sorry!’ he choked, and he was out the door like a shot, through the flat and down the stairs and out onto the darkened streets. Then he broke out into a stumbling run, his twisted ankle protesting each step. It was a miracle he wasn’t spotted, by Ward Patrol or bobbies or anyone who might spot a runner. He returned to the kitchen and to his potato pantry, and he curled up on the mat that was his bed and pulled a blanket around his shoulders. But he couldn’t sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Telma without her shirt on, and the lash cracked again and again through his head. Bad ward! Bad ward! He hit himself in the side of the head to punish himself, as though it might keep the lash from falling. Bad ward!
August 3, 2031

_Somethink bad happind today. Mister Homes had a nother case. We were looking for a kidnapt dog that were missing for 4 days. The poolese polise thot it were the whyfe whife becuse she likd the dog so much. I shood say the were divorst. So exwhife. So they thot she had it. But Mister Homes sed it culdn't be her becuse of her shoes. The ones with heels what Mister Homes said was importent. Turns out the theef were his bizness partner. But when we went to his garaje to get the dog there was a fite and Mister Homes got hurt._

John daubed a cotton ball, wet with surgical spirit, gently against Mr Holmes’ broken skin, just below the eye on his left side. Mr Holmes winced and sniffed a gasp.

‘Sorry, sir.’ John pulled his hand away quickly.

‘Doesn’t hurt at all.’ Mr Holmes indicated he continue.

John raised a sceptical eyebrow. ‘Is this you knowing how to take a punch?’

‘It was a cheap shot,’ said Mr Holmes defensively. ‘I didn’t see it coming, the skink. In a fair fight, I would have given him my forehead.’

John cocked his head, not sure he understood. For one, he’d never heard the word _skink_. For another . . . his forehead?

‘The forehead is hard bone,’ Mr Holmes explained. ‘When you see it coming and there’s no time to duck or roll your shoulder back, you tuck your chin and let the blow connect right here.’ He touched the middle of his forehead. ‘Hard bone. Might have broken his hand and left me barely dizzy.’

Pensive now, John stepped back and mimicked what Mr Holmes was explaining, tucking his chin and exposing his forehead. ‘Like this?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Have you been in many fights, Mr Holmes?’

Mr Holmes chuckled. ‘My fair share, I suppose. I actually studied boxing as part of my, erm, rehabilitation.’ He gingerly tapped the goose egg growing out of his cheekbone, wincing again at the pressure. John, meanwhile, went for the plasters. ‘I got pretty good, if I do say so myself. It was good distraction from the incessant cravings. Gave my body something to do besides ache for another hit of a seven-percent solution. And it was useful besides. Like I said, I’ve had a fair few scrapes where knowing how to throw a fist and take a hit has proven useful.’

‘Wish I knew how to do that,’ said John softly. It might have been useful to him, too. ‘I’m just glad you’re okay.’ He was careful not to pull or press the tender skin as he applied the plasters.
When it was done, Mr Holmes, remaining where he sat, said, ‘I can teach you, if you’d like.’

‘Teach me?’

‘We can add it to the list. Two or three days of boxing lessons, every week.’

‘Teach me how to take a punch?’

‘And deliver one. But boxing is more than just punching.’ Mister Holmes clenched his fists and held them up in a boxing pose, giving a couple of restrained one-two, one-twos. ‘It’s terrific exercise. Builds muscle, increases bodily and spatial awareness, improves hand-eye coordination. And yes, it gives you the confidence to engage in your own self-defence. Should the need arise.’

Interested, but uncertain, John said, ‘Might I get in trouble, knowing something like that?’

‘In this house, John? Please.’

John smiled bashfully and dipped his head. ‘I . . .’ He had begun speaking without knowing what he would say. But then the words were coming, like he’d planned them all along. ‘I like living here, Mr Holmes. With you. Very much.’

At first, Mr Holmes seemed taken aback. Apparently, he hadn’t been expecting those words either. They had nothing at all to do with boxing. But he reached up and clapped a hand on John’s shoulder, squeezing gently. It was a pressure that warmed John, deep down. ‘I like you living here. Very much.’

‘And it will be for always, won’t it?’

Nodding gravely, Mr Holmes said, ‘For always.’

‘Then, will you teach me? To take a punch?’

‘To throw one, John. We’ll start with that.’

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Telma stopped talking to him.

He still saw her, from across the kitchen, but every time he caught her eye, she turned away like she didn’t know him.

‘Troubled girl,’ Mr Reid said under his breath as he came to stand beside Scrubs on the pretext of checking the hot water tap where Scrubs peeled potatoes at the large sink. ‘Don’t fret over her. Best you stay clear altogether. Hear me?’

Scrubs didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t realised someone had noticed an attachment of sorts between them, let alone a falling out.

It was some weeks later that Telma finally spoke to him. Scrubs was mopping up a spill—one of the servers had tipped a tray and overturned four bowls of beef stew—and she was skirting by on the far wall.

‘I have a boyfriend,’ she said, as though she hadn’t been giving him the silent treatment for more days than he could count. ‘He thinks I’m beautiful.’

With that, and a straightened back, she continued on her way.
Winter came, and with it, Telma drew ill. At least, that was what Scrubs observed. She would lift a pot off a lid and her face would go green, and she’d run for the toilets to retch. The first time she didn’t make it, he wordlessly cleaned her sick from the wall and the tiles. The second time, he offered her a ginger ale from the walk-in to calm her stomach, as he knew that often helped his own. And the third time, he patted her back while she crouched over the toilet bowl. She thanked him. ‘You’re not so bad,’ she said, smiling, and he couldn’t help but smile back.

A few days later, Mr Reid caught his eye from across the kitchen—he was slicing onions for a French onion soup—and crooked his finger. His eyes were stern and his mouth turned down into a grim frown. Nervously, Scrubs left his station and followed Mr Reid into his cluttered office.

‘Take a seat, Scrubs.’ Mr Reid sat, too, and folded his hands together on the desk in front of him. He shook his head glumly as he appraised Scrubs, who shrank a little under his gaze but didn’t know what he had done wrong.

‘Three years you’ve been here, yeah?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Nineteen years old now, are you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’re a good worker. Not just work ethic, neither, son. Talented. Makings of a chef, I dare say. ’Nother life, youda been somebody special, I’d wager.’ He sighed. ‘I told you she was trouble. But I guess I just didn’t tell you soon enough.’

‘Sir?’

‘Your mate, Telma Whitehouse.’

Scrubs blushed. He hadn’t known they were mates. The thought pleased him.

‘She done you bad, son. She done you real bad.’

‘Miss Telma’s not done anything to me, sir.’

Mr Reid frowned at him again, this time with pity. ‘Telma’s pregnant,’ he said, ‘and she’s pointing the finger’—Mr Reid pointed his own—‘at you.’

The blood drained from Scrubs’s face and his hands grew numb.

‘She says you forced yourself on her.’

Scrubs couldn’t move, couldn’t blink.

‘You hear what I’m saying to you, son? She says you raped her.’

‘No sir,’ Scrubs whispered, breathless with fear.

‘I know it. Trust me, I know it. But her father is right mad about it. That’s why I have to get rid of you. For your own good, see. You can’t stay on. I’m sorry, lad. You’re one of the decent ones. But you can’t stay.’

‘But . . . Mr Whittaker?’
‘He’s coming to collect you in the morning and take you back. But he won’t keep you neither, not if he knows what’s good for him.’

It was a shame no one stopped to think what was good for Scrubs, or they might have removed him that very hour.

It was past midnight. Scrubs was lying in the potato pantry one last time, trying to sort out what he had done wrong and when, and wondering where he would lay his head tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, when he heard footsteps down the tiled hallway. He pushed himself up on his elbows, alarmed, because in the three years of his sleeping down in the closed kitchens, not once had he heard another living creature bigger than a rat. Who would be coming at such an hour?

Suddenly, the door flew open with a resounding bang he felt in his clenched teeth, revealing the silhouettes of five men, maybe more. There wasn’t enough time to count.

‘Fucking raping bastard!’

He cried out as they fell on him, right there in the tightness and darkness of the pantry. ‘Git him git him git him!’ Someone was pummelling his face, someone else pulling his arms in either direction and pinning his shoulders to the mat. Then someone tugged his trousers and underwear down to his knees, and the cool night air surrounded his genitals.

‘Cut him up! I want his balls on my mantel!’

A fist clenched his penis like the jaws of a bulldog, another seized his testicles. He screamed, but a fist slammed against his teeth and he tasted blood. Then, the blade. It pierced, then sliced, then sawed, its small, serrated edge ripping through skin, muscle, blood vessels, and nerves. Trapped behind an oppressive hand, he screamed so loud he didn’t even recognise himself. He twisted and fought, and as the blade lost its target, it nicked and sliced his thighs and hips. Hot blood leaked out of him and soaked through the mat below.

‘Can’t see! Where’s the damn light!’

‘Shut him up, shut him up.’

‘Shut up, you son of a bitch, shut up! You deserve worse than this, a thousand times worse!’

In a fog of agony, he was barely aware of the shouting in the hallway, or the men who rushed in to take the other men away. He thought he heard Mr Reid’s voice, but he could never be sure whether the kitchen manager had come to help him or his imagination was tricking him. But one moment, he was at the centre of a vicious pack of wild animals savagely tearing him apart, and next he was being lifted onto a pallet and carried out of the kitchens and into the back of an ambulance. He thought they were taking him away to die.

Next morning, upon waking in a strange bed, and with his senses restored to him, he learnt what had happened.

It had been Mrs Whitehouse who had first learnt of the pregnancy and confronted her daughter. Telma said she had been attacked by a ward in the kitchens where she worked. He had overpowered her, frightened her, and forced himself upon her in a potato pantry three months before. She had been too ashamed and afraid to report it, she said. Mrs Whitehouse called up Mr Reid, believing him to be the wayward ward’s host, and threatened legal action, not only against the ward for having assaulted her daughter, but Mr Reid himself for employing ward labour at Royal Holloway. Mr Reid denied everything, and even went so far as to recommend to Mrs Whitehouse that she look a little
deeper into the matter of a secret boyfriend, saying that her daughter was not the innocent little girl she believed her to be.

Wheels were set in motion to remove the ward, but not before Mr Whitehouse got ear of what had happened. He was not the sort of man to wait on the police to sort things out. He gathered together a small mob of comrades, including two brothers, a nephew, a workmate, and the workmate’s partner, to deal with the matter themselves.

While he lay in a hospital bed of white, pain throbbing throughout his body despite the drugs, Scrubs listened as a doctor explained it to him in clinical terms, not all of which he understood. His face was pretty busted up, but the nose had a clean break and would heal well enough if left alone. Contusions up and down his arms and torso were ugly but not serious. His scrotum was severed but not entirely detached, and though he had lost one testicle, the surgical team had been able to save the other. He had suffered some minor lacerations to the inner thigh, hipbones, and penis, requiring forty-two stitches in all. His was considered a partial and involuntary castration, but he was not classified as a cas, not with the one testicle and penis still intact, so, strictly speaking, his reproductive function was uncompromised. He could still produce gametes and secrete hormones, and the attack, over time, the doctor said, would have no negative effect on his ability to urinate or achieve and maintain arousal. Not that he was permitted the latter, not him. Ultimately, it would be up to the courts, or his next host, whether the castration be made complete. It all depended on whether he was found guilty of raping the girl. Because he was unqualified to testify in his own defence, he would simply have to wait until the baby was born, and a DNA test could determine whether he was, indeed, the father.

With the report delivered, the doctor left. He was alone with only a beeping machine for company. No one came to see him. Mr Reid and been arrested, and Mr Whittaker, too, but he didn’t know that, and never would. There was no one at all, in all of London, in all the world, who was thinking of him, wondering if he was okay. It was an ache of emptiness that stung deeper than any blade could sink, and which no medicine could wash away.

***


John bounced on his feet, eyes fixed on the target painted in the centre of the punching bag. He concentrated on keeping his elbows tucked to his ribs and gloved hands up at the chin, until he threw a jab or cross, just like Mr Holmes had taught him.

‘Now hook!’

He rotated his hips, pivoted his feet, dropped one heel and raised the other, and swung his arm into the side of the bag.

‘Excellent. All right, take a break. Get a drink.’

It was his seventh session in about three weeks. Mr Holmes said he was getting good. He felt good. Amazing, actually, throwing his weight into the bag, standing his ground, or letting the impact from a hit pass through him like he was water. He worked hard, even when his muscles ached and his breath was short and the sweat dripped down his face like rain. But he kept thinking, I’m water, I’m water, and he drank and kept going until Mr Holmes said it was time to stop.

They were both hot and sweating as they stepped outside the gym where Mr Holmes ‘knew a guy’ and could get him in without hassle. Summer was drawing near its end and was still pleasant, but a nice breeze cut through the streets of London, cooling the perspiration on their skin. The sun was
sinking, and they could have called for a taxi, but they decided to walk and enjoy the evening, making their slow, winding way back. Mr Holmes told stories and John made jokes, and they talked and laughed the whole way home.

Back inside the flat, Mr Holmes let John shower first. He twisted on the hot water and began to undress, pulling the sweat-sticky shirt over his head, folding it neatly, and setting it atop the closed toilet lid. He was about to remove the gym shorts when he caught sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, and paused. His arms, his chest, they had always been so . . . slight. Small. He had always been small. It was a truth about himself he had always known. He was small, he was defenceless, and what others wanted of him, they took.

Now, he thought he saw something else. A body that was . . . whole. He wasn’t any bigger than before. His arms were still kind of skinny, his chest still flat. But there was new definition in him, new muscle, new strength. For a long moment, he stared at himself in a way he’d never been able to bring himself to stare before. He saw capable hands, not a scarred wrist. He saw sturdy shoulders, not the bullet wound. He saw powerful legs, not a deformed ankle. He saw a man, not a cas. He stared until the steam from the shower obscured his view. Lifting his left index finger to the glass, he cut through the fog, writing in big, bold letters the word Mr Holmes kept using to describe him: strong. He smiled.

He fully undressed and stepped into the shower, letting the heat wash through him. Water meeting itself.

***

Scrubs had already been placed via lottery with a family in Stratford by the time the official results from the paternity test came back. He was not the father. Mr Whitehouse got the news while sitting in a prison cell, convicted for causing grievous bodily harm with intent against a warded person. He had been sentenced to two years.

The Vissers’ last ward had been called Tucker, of whom they had been terribly fond. He had been a large ward with a gentle spirit and an affinity for dogs, but a tragic accident involving a lorry that ran a red light while Tucker was crossing the street on a walk with the family dog had resulted in his death, as well as the death of the French bulldog he loved so well. The Vissers were heartbroken and decided they would not attempt to replace the dog. They had no choice, however, about the ward.

They knew that the new ward, called Little Tucker, had been accused of something terrible, and though absolved of any wrongdoing, Mrs Visser would take no chances, not with her nieces visiting regularly and the next-door neighbour’s twin girls being only thirteen. And she had herself to think about, too. So, after consulting with physicians, the Vissers opted to put her fears to rest irrevocably, applied for full castration, and were granted permission to go ahead with the procedure when Little Tucker was twenty years old.

He came to them a morose ward, and became only more so after his surgery. It wasn’t that he was combative or disrespectful, but the damn thing never smiled or laughed or offered flowers and compliments like his namesake had once done, and his piss-poor attitude was affecting the whole household. Mrs Visser complained of depression to her therapist and irritation to her husband, until one day, Mr Visser returned with a tidy solution. Send him to perform volunteer work. If he merely provided a service and generated no income, technically, they couldn’t be cited for violating ward labour laws.

They sent him to Stratford Garden Care Home—where Mr Visser’s mother resided—for twelve hours every day, eight to eight. There, he wasn’t allowed to bring the residents their food, or mop
their hallways, or clean their windows, lest such chores be construed as ward labour and get the care home into trouble. Instead, he was asked to visit the residents and keep them company. No more, no less.

At the start, he was afraid of them, remembering grumpy old Mrs Clearwater and her walking stick and chicken coop. He even started cringing at the word teacup, thinking he was being called. But day by day, his fear was draining. Very little was required of him but to sit and listen to the residents’ stories, and oh, they had stories to tell! Stories of long-gone childhoods and loved ones and happy days, and they found in him an indefatigable listener. They requested his company and said their days were better when he visited. Some of them had poor eyesight and poor hearing and poor health, but they always knew when he came into the room for a visit, and their faces lit at the sight or sound of him. They didn’t treat him like a ward. Maybe they didn’t even know?

He knew all their names. He held their hands while they cried from loneliness or confusion, or when their hands couldn’t stop shaking. He couldn’t bring them their food, but he could help them eat it, especially those who couldn’t manage a knife and fork anymore. He encouraged them to eat when they had nearly lost the will. And he sat at their bedsides when they were sick, and while they died. During those years, he saw so many die. Often, he was one of the few attending at the hour of their passing, the one holding a withered hand and speaking soft words of comfort.

Though surrounded by sadness and death, he was not himself defeated by it. Being with the dying, trying to make their final days peaceful ones, helped him forget his own brokenness and the mutilation. Those things didn’t matter here. When he left for the day, he counted the hours until he could return and be with those who were happy to see him again. He felt useful, important, even if the only ones who knew it were soon to be gone from the world.

He didn’t know how it would come to an end, but from the start, he suspected it would. That was the way of things. He wasn’t meant to have good things. It was all just a matter of time.

The end came when old Mrs Lawrence’s health took a turn and her daughter came to see her. It was then that the daughter discovered items missing from her mother’s jewellery box: her wedding band, her late husband’s gold pocket watch, sapphire earrings. Mrs Lawrence, who was barely able to speak, who could scarcely open her eyes, murmured only two words, over and over: Little Tucker, Little Tucker. She was calling for him, as the staff each understood. But that’s not how her daughter interpreted things.

He was accused of being a thief. They searched his person, the grounds, and the home of his hosts, who were none too pleased about having a thief for a ward. Nothing was found and no charges were filed. But the Vissers put in a request anyway for an immediate removal of the ward, citing untrustworthy behaviour. In just twenty-four hours, he was gone.

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September 13, 2031,

A woman named Julia was found in her bed with strange red speckles all over her body. Polese didn’t know how she died. Mister Homes seys its because there idiots. But I think its rilly cus this one was such a puzzle.

To Mr Holmes’ great delight, Mr Lestrade asked him to come out on a case. Just a little one. Just to examine a body, he said. And yes, he could bring John.

They arrived at St Bart’s before the detective inspector, and they went straight to the lifts, where John, remembering his first visit, excitedly punched the M button. M for Morgue. He knew that one
now, and he felt the familiar thrill of getting to do something so interesting and important, and even the police said he could come.

‘You’re still working, Molly?’ said Mr Holmes by way of greeting.

Ms Hooper was the attending pathologist, and her stomach was larger than ever.

‘One would think,’ he carried on, ‘this close to your due date—’

‘No one told me you were coming,’ Ms Hooper interrupted, looking put out and trying to close her lab coat over her extended stomach.

‘No one told me you were pregnant. Funny, life’s surprises.’

‘Mr Holmes,’ John murmured under his breath. That seemed a very impolite thing to say to a woman clearly discomfited by their being there, and her in such condition.

‘I wouldn’t remark upon it,’ said Mr Holmes, ‘only it seems that our lovely Ms Hooper here appears to have gained no less than two stones, but upon examination of her bared ankles and unusually small breasts—’

‘Sir!’

‘Sherlock!’ Ms Hooper protested, her face a fiery red. ‘I’ve a mind to throw you out! Don’t think I can’t, or that I won’t!’

‘He doesn’t mean nothing by it, ma’am,’ John hastened to say. They were on a case, and he really didn’t want to be thrown out.

But if Mr Holmes had a retort or Ms Hooper a further objection, both were cut off as, at just that moment, the police arrived: Mr Lestrade, of course, but also the constable, Ms Donovan. She slowed when she saw him there, gave him a little wave and smiled. He lifted a hand gave a small wave back. He had told Mr Holmes about knowing her, from before. Would she be displeased, if she knew he knew?

The free people greeted one another—Ms Hooper to Mr Lestrade, Mr Lestrade to Mr Holmes, Mr Holmes to Ms Donovan, Ms Donovan to Ms Hooper—and John had no expectation of being included, but when Ms Hooper finally went to uncover the body for their examination, Mr Lestrade turned to John and said, ‘All right there, John?’

‘Yes sir, thank you,’ John said softly, clasping his hands together around his back. He knew he shouldn’t be nervous. He’d been invited, after all. Furthermore, Mr Holmes was there, and he wouldn’t let anything bad happen to him. Still, he couldn’t help but feel out of place among them, and worried they would want him gone.

The examination began, Mr Holmes pulling out a little magnifying glass. It was the same one he’d used to teach John about fingerprints. They had inked their own fingers and pressed them to paper, then scanned them into the computer and blew them up so Mr Holmes could teach him about arches, loops, and whorls. He spent a long time looking at Mr Holmes’ fingers under that magnifying glass, then his own, then Mr Holmes’ again, noticing the differences. Mr Holmes told him that everyone had an identifiable pattern, unique to them. So John, he said, was one of a kind, distinct, special. Different, and not in the bad way.

Now, Mr Holmes was using that same magnifying glass to take a closer look at the red speckles across the dead woman’s skin. Ms Donovan asked questions of Ms Hooper. John was standing a
little further back, not wanting to get in the way, especially with such important people in the room. If it had been just the two of them, him and Mr Holmes, he would have asked to look through the magnifying glass. But not with all these people here. He had best keep quiet.

But Mr Lestrade was inching his way closer until they stood side by side.

‘You really like this stuff, eh?’

John swallowed. Was it okay to say yes? Was it strange? Would Mr Lestrade think him not normal, deviant, maybe even a risk to his host if he said yes? ‘It’s very interesting, sir,’ he said.

‘He teaches you all sorts, doesn’t he?’

‘Whatever he pleases, I am happy to learn.’

‘You don’t find it . . . challenging? Hard?’

John licked his lips, thinking. ‘Quite, sir. But . . . the merit of all things lies in their difficulty. I should think.’

Mr Lestrade’s eyebrows rose, like he was surprised by such an answer. John coloured more deeply and dropped his head to stare at his feet. Those weren’t his words. They were the words of Aramis, from *The Three Musketeers*. He just liked the way they sounded.

‘I have a new ward,’ Mr Lestrade said suddenly. John’s head came around and found Mr Lestrade to be smiling. ‘I thought you’d be interested.’

‘Very good, sir. Are you . . . pleased, sir?’

Mr Lestrade rubbed his chin, pensive. ‘It’s a funny thing, John. I was fighting this. I knew it had to happen. I knew it was a long time coming, but the tighter and tighter my deadlines, the more I resisted. Until, one day, I was driving by the same shelter where Sherlock found you, and I . . . I decided to go in.’

‘You went back to the pound?’

‘I thought, it worked out well enough for Sherlock, didn’t it? You two, you seem . . . happy. Honestly, I’ve never seen Sherlock more happy. He’s like a different man.’ He laughed a little. ‘So I went in, just for a look, making myself no promises. I didn’t even make it past the ground floor. I was on my way to the stairs, but I looked through the window of the door to the Child Sanctuary, and I spotted him, sitting by himself and bouncing a ball between his knees, looking kind of alone, and I just— My heart stopped. My feet stopped. I just . . .’

‘A child, sir?’

‘Yeah. Just a boy. Ten years old.’

John remembered being ten. It wasn’t the loneliest he’d ever been; nevertheless, he didn’t much like thinking of it. Like the others, it hadn’t ended well. ‘What do you call him?’

‘Well, I asked him what he’d been called before, in case he wanted to keep it, you know? And the name he’d had . . . Let’s just say, I couldn’t call him that. It was like with Hopscotch. I didn’t want to call her *Hopscotch*. I wanted to call her Helena. I’d always liked Helena, and I thought, you know, beautiful name for a beautiful little girl. But as a kid, Angela had had this rabbit named Hopscotch, and thought it was cute, a cute name. That was our first major fight, naming the ward, and I lost.
Anyway, that’s no longer here nor there, is it? She’s gone.’ Mr Lestrade cleared his throat and pressed on. ‘All I knew was, this boy, he deserved a better name than the one he’d had. He deserved a good name. I thought of you, actually. Sherlock says you picked your own name, yeah? So I sat down with him at the kitchen table, and we wrote down all the names we both liked, and he chose his favourite: Michael. His name is Michael.’

John smiled softly. ‘It’s a good name, Mr Lestrade.’

‘It is, isn’t it? He’s a good boy.’

‘I’d like to meet him.’ He was surprised by his own forthrightness and so hastened to add, ‘If I may.’

Mr Lestrade brightened even more. ‘Yeah? Yeah! That’d be great.’

‘Does he like games? We can play games.’

‘He’d like that quite a lot, I reckon.’

‘If the two of you are quite done gabbing,’ said Mr Holmes, ‘you’ll want to take a look at the double puncture wounds on the right ankle.’

Instantly, Mr Lestrade re-engaged as a detective and stepped forward to see the marks for himself. For his part, John was chastened, until he saw Mr Holmes’ characteristic wink in his direction. ‘You first, John,’ he said. For all his hard exterior and cool detachment, John knew that what lay beneath was only warmth. Sometimes, he thought he alone could see that.

In the taxi on the way home, Mr Holmes congratulated him.

‘I dare say, you’re warming the hearts of all my acquaintances. Lestrade’s a good man, always has been, but he’s been an unhappy one for a long while now. I didn’t see it before because I was not unlike him. I just didn’t know how to help. You did.’

‘I did?’

Mr Holmes nodded but didn’t explain. ‘I should get you to work on Molly, next.’

‘Ms Hooper, sir? Is she unhappy?’ And how could John possibly help? He didn’t even know what he had done to help Mr Lestrade.

‘Happy people don’t lie, John. They don’t have a need to.’

John blinked. ‘Did she lie, sir?’

‘She’s been lying for months, evidently. Thin ankles, unswollen breasts, obvious signs of deceit, if one thinks to look. The conclusion is inescapable. Molly Hooper, despite all appearances, is not, in fact, pregnant. The question, then, is why she wants us all to believe she is.’

***

Behind Clapham High Street was a doss-house. It wasn’t supposed to exist. Not many knew it did. But Bo knew. He knew because his new host, Mr Doyt, brought him there to look after the users, as he called them.

They filled large, dilapidated rooms with floor mats, mattresses, and sleeping bags. The windows were large and high up, but the electricity didn’t work, so at night, they lit candles and used battery-powered lanterns. It was a place to get high, and a place to crash in the afterglow. It was also a
place to get sick. That’s where Bo came in. He was to care for the sick. When they were dehydrated, he tipped water into their mouths. When they hadn’t eaten in days, he spoon-fed them soups and beans, straight from tins. When they vomited or shat themselves, he cleaned their messes, laundered their clothes and blankets, and bathed and redressed them.

When they died, he told Mr Doyt, who took it from there. And when that happened, he felt like he had failed them all. Mr Doyt never beat him for it, never even said a word about it. The look in his eyes said it all.

He moved among them, a sack of bottled waters over his shoulder, distributing. In one corner, a man pulled a yellow tube around his upper arm, flexing and relaxing his hand into a fist repeatedly until the vein popped up near the crook of the elbow. Along one wall, a group of users circled a table, cutting heroin with a razor and snorting it, whooping with each snuff. They didn’t need him just yet.

He crouched by a newcomer, who had been high the night before and now slept on his back, but fitfully. Bo gently laid the backs of his fingers against his brow, pushing away dark curls to feel the skin directly. It was hot. It shouldn’t have been hot like that. He lifted an eyelid and saw that his bright blue irises were filled, his pupils reduced to a pinprick. Still high then. Bo wetted a cloth and pressed it to the young man’s forehead and rolled him onto his side, just in case. Then he carried on with his duties.

A few hours later, the man began to stir, and Bo returned to lift him up to sitting so he could get some water in him. The young man moaned, likely with a stomach ache, his eyes bleary and red, and he tried to thwack Bo away during his first couple attempts to move him. But Bo was persistent, pulled the young man up, and rested his back against a flat pillow pressed to the wall. He unscrewed the lid from a water bottle, tipped the man’s head, and said, ‘Drink.’

The young man drank. Then he moaned again, crying a little.

‘This isn’t for you,’ Bo said softly. He wasn’t supposed to talk to them, but he did sometimes. Usually just to tell them the pain would pass, everything would be okay, and other empty reassurances. But this was new. He didn’t know why he was saying it. It was just that the young man didn’t look like he belonged here. His clothes were nicer than the other users’ clothes. His shoes were newer than other users’ shoes. He didn’t belong.

The man murmured something under his breath, something Bo didn’t quite catch. He thought he heard the word brother.

‘Hey,’ said Bo. Sluggishly, the man lifted his eyes. ‘Don’t die in this place. Kay?’

They stared into each other’s eyes for a long time. Then the young man’s eyelids grew heavy again, and Bo lowered him back to the mat to sleep.

By next morning, he was gone, and though he sometimes looked for him, Bo never saw him again in that place.

***

The puncture wound on the speckled blonde’s ankle was intended to look like a snake bite. That, coupled with the poison found in her system, was intended to point to Julia Stoner’s fiancé, Percy Armitage, who kept snakes. Intended was just the word. It was not, in fact, a snake bite. The poison was not snake venom. Julia Stoner had been murdered.
The trail of evidence led Sherlock to Julia’s stepfather, a Doctor Roylott, who developed cosmetics at a laboratory in Hampshire, well outside of London. Which meant, to Sherlock’s chagrin, that John could not accompany him for the arrest. It had been a good one, too. The man was all spluttery and indignant at having been caught poisoning his stepdaughter—who stood to inherit all her terminal mother’s fortune—via bubble bath.

It was nearly sundown by the time he returned to Baker Street. The late September autumn air was fittingly chill, and as he unwrapped himself in the entryway, he heard, above his head, patting feet and recorded music. He began to ascend the stairs, his brain registering the adagio three-four time of a violin duet from his own collection, and the footsteps to match the rhythm. Then Mrs Hudson’s voice.

‘One-two-three, one-two-three, good, good, try not to watch your feet-two-three, one-two-three . . .’

Sherlock tip-toed to the open door and peered inside. He couldn’t stop himself from smiling at the sight before him. The furniture had all been pushed aside to provide the most floor space possible, and Mrs Hudson was holding John’s arms up in a dancing pose as they moved in a box step. She was teaching him to waltz.

‘. . . one-two-three, one-two-three, you’re getting it!’

John’s back was to the door, but even so, Sherlock could see the intensity of his concentration in the rigidity of his back and tension in his arms. A more natural boxer than a dancer, he thought. His head was inclined downward to watch his own feet. For her part, Mrs Hudson was trying her very hardest to be graceful with such a stiff partner.

Sherlock crossed the floor and tapped John’s shoulder. ‘May I cut in?’

At his host’s sudden appearance, John startled, his face flushing red. Obviously, he’d not heard Sherlock come home, so focused was he on this new task. Even Mrs Hudson jumped a little. ‘Oh! Sherlock!’ Then she laughed, turned, and opened her arms to him.

She was light in his arms, and followed his lead with grace and precision as she gazed adoringly up at him. ‘You’re a dancer!’ she exclaimed in happy surprise.

They turned easy circles around the room, John looking on from the kitchen with studious wonder, watching their feet very closely as though to memorise each step.

‘Mother insisted,’ he replied. ‘And I admit: I was rather good at it. You dance very well yourself.’

‘I learnt as a girl,’ said Mrs Hudson reminiscently. ‘My . . . sisters taught me.’

When the music ended, they stepped apart, and Mrs Hudson clasped two hands in front of her breast, saying. ‘Oh, what a treat, dancing with both my boys on the same night. Now Sherlock, John and I already ate, but we made you a plate in the fridge if you’re hungry. John made dumplings and a bok choy salad, so tasty, but we’re both such disasters with the chopsticks, aren’t we, John? We couldn’t stop laughing.’

‘You managed better than me, Mrs Hudson,’ John said brightly. Then, to Sherlock, ‘Did you solve the case, Mr Holmes?’

‘Why John, what a question!’ said Sherlock with mock offence.

‘I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it,’ said Mrs Hudson, ‘but as for me, I’ll have to hear it another time. My show’s about to start.’
'I'll see you home,' said Sherlock.

It was entirely unnecessary, but Mrs Hudson was perceptive enough to know something was on his mind, so they returned to her flat together.

'I think you should tell John,' he said once the door was closed behind him.

'Tell John what?' She moved toward her rocker and sat down slowly.

'You know what.'

Mrs Hudson sighed with the remote control in her lap. Sherlock stood in front of her, blocking her view of the telly.

'What good would it do?' she asked.

'What good wouldn’t it do! He’s come so far, but in so many ways he still sees himself as a lesser thing. We can fix that. If he knew how you were once a ward yourself, he would see that he’s not alone in his troubled past! He would see how you—someone he admires and respects as a free person—used to be like him! He would see that there is no difference between the innate human dignity of wards and of free people, not in value or intelligence or worthiness to be loved and respected! I need him to see that. I can’t tell him and convince him, he has to see it. He needs you for that. You are no less a person today than you were back then, and if he can understand that, and believe it, it would give him hope——'

'Hope?' Mrs Hudson interrupted. ‘Sherlock, listen to me. I admire your sentiment . . .’

'Verny sentiement, it's——'

'. . . and I understand what you want for him. But what hope do you expect to impart? The hope that one day, he’ll be just like you?’

'Why not?' he griped.

'Because it’s impossible. Don’t look at me like that, Sherlock. You have to know it’s true. Emancipation for wards has been terminated. Suspended, they say, but we know better, don’t we? You get to take off whenever you please and follow a trail of clues wherever it may lead you, solving cases on the other side of the country, if need be. But that will never be John’s life. He’ll never be able to chase after you. He’ll never see Dover. He’ll never work or earn money or have a family. And that’s not your fault. You know that, right? It’s not your fault. What you can do for him is what you’re already doing. You’re giving him a happy life. A home, a family, security, new experiences, and he’s happy, can’t you see? He’s very happy. Don’t think you’re not doing enough. You are. Listen to me, love,’ she continued emphatically, seeing his discouragement. ‘Showing him the things he can’t have, showing him what I once was? That will just break his heart.’

Sherlock left her flat feeling deflated. He knew John was doing well, and that he was happy. He saw it in his face every day. It was like he was . . . alive. Thinking back to the nameless ward he had first brought to the flat that past winter, alive was exactly the word. It was a transformation. So why was it not enough? Sherlock wanted to give John more, so much more. He wanted to give him the world. And all he could manage was a little flat buried in a heartless city. How could that possibly be enough?

As he mounted the stairs for the second time that night, he heard that the music had been turned back on. He smiled sadly and continued on until he found John dancing by himself in the centre of the room, his arms extended to hold an invisible partner while his feet traced an invisible box. He heard
John counting under his breath. ‘One-two-three, one-two-three . . .’

‘Lead with your torso, not your feet.’

John stopped dancing and spun around to face his host, clasping his hands behind him as though he’d been caught stealing.

‘I thought you’d be a little longer,’ he said, grinning from embarrassment.

Sherlock ignored that and crossed the room. ‘Here, let me show you.’

He lifted John’s hand and placed it on his bicep, his arm rising to form a circle between them. He placed his own hand flat against John’s chest. ‘Lead from here.’ Gently, he pushed back on John’s chest as he took a step forward, and John took a step back. Their arms remained linked, eyes locked. ‘See? Your heart leads. Where your torso goes, your feet follow, not the other way around. Yeah?’

John nodded sombrely.

‘Good. Then, you can begin . . . to turn.’

He moved John out of the box step and slowly, they waltzed a circle around the room. Sherlock removed his hand from John’s chest and grasped his hand instead. He put his other hand around his back, touching his shoulder blade. ‘You’ve got this, you’re a natural,’ he praised.

John’s face lit with a smile. It was the most beautiful smile in the world. There was nothing shy about this one, nothing held back or hiding or embarrassed or uncertain. It was open and trusting and . . . happy. Mrs Hudson was right about that. And Sherlock thought, how could anyone, seeing this, seeing him, ever want to hurt him? How could all those hosts before him not . . . love him?

John’s eyes, so blue, like the memory of an ocean, held his and didn’t let go. Sherlock didn’t want them to. And he didn’t want to let go, either, not now, not ever. He wanted to hold John, just like this, forever. He was the most precious thing he had ever held in his life.

He drew John nearer now, their feet still moving, but their joined hands pulled in and were held between their hearts, until the music faded and they were left standing in the centre of the room in silence, holding one another closer still, not letting go.

It was then that Sherlock knew it for certain, something that had been true for a long time now.

He didn’t know precisely when he had started falling, but it was over. He was fallen.

He was in love with John.

And he knew, too, as he dropped John’s hands and stepped back, as his heart burst inside of him, that falling was the very worst thing he could have ever done.
One morning in early October, Mr Holmes came into the kitchen, fully dressed, and announced that he was leaving London.

‘A case,’ he explained. ‘I may be gone for a few days.’

‘Oh. Okay,’ said John. He stood at the hob, frying bacon, still in his pyjamas and dressing gown. He had been looking forward to sitting breakfast together and was taken aback by the abruptness of this departure, and not a little disappointed that he couldn’t go.

But apparently, there was no time for breakfast, because suddenly Mr Holmes was grabbing his big black coat from the back of the door, and without a backward glance, he was gone.

John ate alone, quietly planning his day. He did not want for things to do: there were his books, of course, and he’d begun to learn maths, now, too, and was working his way through his multiplication exercises. So there was that. He’d also been meaning to try making macarons, ever since watching a demonstration on the telly. And if he asked, he was sure Mrs Hudson would take him on his museum trips, or maybe she’d practise dancing with him again. It had been such a pleasure, the first time, and he had been wanting another go at it.

With so much to do, he got to work right away, storing up in his head his simple successes and amusing happenings to tell Mr Holmes when he returned.

He kept himself so busy, in fact, that as evening drew nearer and he checked his watch, he was surprised to see that it was dinner time, he’d only managed half of what he’d planned, and he’d instead got distracted by a book. (By now, he had nearly finished *The Three Musketeers*, and he was so excited to reach the end that he just couldn’t stop.) He should put it aside and get dinner in the oven.

But when he closed the book and scooted to the edge of his chair, he thought, *I don’t much feel like cooking tonight.* And he froze in the act of rising.

He really should eat something. That meant cooking.

But he didn’t feel like cooking. He wanted to keep reading.

No, no, he had chores. And it was his job to cook. If one wanted to eat, one had to work.

*But.* He didn’t feel like cooking. Not tonight.

He simply . . . didn’t feel like it.

Slowly, he sank back into his chair, tapping the closed book on his knees and worrying his bottom lip under his teeth. Slower still, he set the book aside, reaching instead for his phone.

*I’ll . . . order a pizza. Just for me.*

He paused, phone in hand. This was okay. Yeah, Mr Holmes wouldn’t stop him. Wouldn’t care. Would probably roll his eyes if John asked permission. Yeah. This was fine.

*Just for me,* he thought, as he scrolled through his address book.

Mr Holmes had copied all of his own contacts into John’s phone over the summer, including their
favourite takeaways. He found the one he was looking for, licked his lips, took a deep breath, and made the phone call.

‘Buscetti’s Pizza Parlour, how can I help?’

‘Hello,’ said John. ‘A pizza, please? For delivery?’

‘Sure thing, mate, what can I get you?’

‘Erm, medium sized. Mushrooms . . . and onions . . . and pineapple,’ he asserted. ‘Please.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No.’

‘Our system is registering this order for the residence of Sherlock Holmes, and this call is being placed from a ward-issued mobile. Do you want to charge it to the host tab card?’

Was it that easy? Did other wards have it so easy? ‘Yes, please.’

There was a pause, and for a wild moment, John thought it had all gone wrong, that they were suspicious he didn’t have his host’s permission, or there was a law he didn’t know about that he was violating. He held his breath, but in the next moment, he heard, ‘Charge has gone through. Your pizza should arrive within the next thirty to forty minutes.’

An hour later, he was happily munching his second slice of pizza at the kitchen table, not even using a plate, just eating straight from the box with his left hand, his right holding his book open and flat on the table. D’Artagnan had just been arrested and was being taken before Cardinal Richelieu, and he was dying to know what would happen next. Would he be executed, like Milady de Winter? Would Athos, Porthos, and Aramis come to his rescue? His eyes wanted to skim ahead faster and devour the story, but he couldn’t read that fast. He painstakingly pushed through every sentence, delighting in every word.

It was nearly midnight by the time he finished. He had relocated to the sofa, lying on his back, propped up on every pillow in the flat, and a blanket tucked around his middle. He closed the book, brow furrowed with . . . disappointment? That hadn’t been how the movie had ended, with exciting swordplay and all musketeers rushing in at the last, to vanquish the Cardinal and save the king and to stand with d’Artagnan, declaring one for all and all for one! In the book, D’Artagnan had been all on his own. He had faced the man he was sure would sentence him to death and calmly accepted his fate, only to be granted the commission to the rank of lieutenant. The thing he had always wanted! But at what cost? He had lost his lover and his friends. In the end, he was all alone.

What sort of ending was that?

If he had written the ending, John mused, resting the closed book on his chest as his eyes grew heavy, he would have written a happier one, the one d’Artagnan deserved. All stories deserved happy endings. Not like real life. Though, he continued to ponder, his own story was pretty happy, now, after all the bad that had happened. Maybe happy endings were part of real life, too, sometimes.

He fell asleep on the sofa that night, not even realising it until morning when the sun pushed through seam in the curtains. Mr Holmes was still away, which meant John had another day to himself. As before, he made a plan.

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Mr Holmes had said John could help. He didn’t know how. But he thought it important that he try.

His nerves were fired up as he rang the bell marked 2A. He had found the address in his phone and mapped it, just as Mr Holmes had taught him to. He wasn’t quite sure, though, which bus to take, so he had walked for over an hour to reach it. Now, his ankle was bothering him something awful. Resting it would have to wait.

He held his breath, shifted the bag from one hand to the other. Until now, he’d felt good about this, clever even. But as the silence on the other side of the door persisted, he hoped it wouldn’t be broken. He didn’t want that door to open. It would give him the perfect excuse to leave and pretend he’d never come. This was stupid, stupid. Why had this ever seemed a clever idea?

Just as he was about to let out a breath of relief, the door creaked open, slowly, and only by an inch as the woman on the other side peered through the crack at him. Then she pulled the door a little wider and stuck her head out.

‘John?’

‘Hello, Ms Hooper,’ he said, abashed.

‘What are you doing here?’ Her eyes scanned over his shoulder, then her neck craned further out the door to peer down the street. ‘Is Sherlock with you?’

‘No, ma’am, he’s out of London today, he . . . we . . . I . . . we wanted to give you this,’ he finished in a rush, then thrust the yellow paper bag with the cartoon giraffe on toward her. ‘For the baby.’

Her mouth turned into an o-shape, and for a moment, she seemed frozen in the doorway. ‘Oh! Thank you, John. How thoughtful. Erm.’ She stepped back and opened the door wider. ‘Won’t you come in?’

John bobbed his head agreeably and stepped over the threshold into a dimly lit flat. Though midday, all the curtains were drawn, and all the doors were closed. Ms Hooper’s belly was just as large and round as ever, and John forced himself to pull his eyes away and not look for any signs that would prove Mr Holmes’ theory right . . . which he very much doubted and felt guilty for it. But it couldn’t be helped. She certainly looked pregnant.

And the evidence was everywhere, really. A new pram by the door with its tags still hanging from the hood; a stack of boxes of nappies tucked beneath the kitchen table, atop which were piles of folded baby clothes and bibs; and the parts of an as-yet-unassembled cot leaning against the far wall. If Ms Hooper was not indeed preparing for a baby, then John was dumber than a codfish.

He hoped he wasn’t dumber than a codfish.

‘Are you feeling well, Ms Hooper?’ he asked.

She laughed a little forcibly. ‘Ah well,’ she said, patting the top of her belly softly, ‘we’re almost there, you know! I’m as well as can be hoped for. Shall I open this now? Or . . .’

‘If you’d like.’

‘Take a seat. Can I grab you a bottled water? The kettle’s in need of a wash.’

John glanced into the kitchen and saw the mound of unwashed dishes nearly spilling from the sink. ‘Ms Hooper, may I be of help to you? I can do the washing up.’
‘Oh no, no—’

‘It would be no bother. I’m well practised at it.’

‘No, John, I couldn’t ask you to . . . Oh, well isn’t that precious.’

She had pulled from the gift bag a small, stuffed elephant, and a children’s picture book called *Elephant Ears*, which John had found amusing. He didn’t know much about babies and was not accustomed to giving gifts. He had been so flummoxed in the shop—surrounded by baby clothes, furniture, toys of every colour, nappies, dummies, and bottles—that he just gravitated to what he knew, and that was books. The soft stuffed elephant seemed a fitting accompaniment.

‘Thank you. Thank you very much, John, this is lovely.’ She smiled at him. Then: ‘Well! I suppose you’d best be off!’

He was a little startled by the abrupt dismissal (nearly as abrupt as Mr Holmes’ sudden departure the day before), which she must have seen in his face, because she carried on, ‘So good of you to come, but I’m sure you have things to do, and I really ought to rest. You understand.’

‘Are you sure I can’t be of any help?’

‘No no no—’ She was beginning to rise, a hand extended toward the door as though to guide him to it, when from down the hallway, a tinny, warbling voice called out in distress, ‘Molly? Molly?’

Ms Hooper froze in the act of rising, and John turned to look down the hall where he saw, coming toward them, a petite young woman with a hand over her own extended belly, shuffling toward them, her face twisted in consternation. Below her oversized t-shirt she wore grey trackie bottoms, which were darkened in a wide circle at the crotch, as though she had wet herself. When she saw John, she gasped and stopped, then began a hasty retreat.

‘Sunny!’ Molly called after her, springing into action to chase her down the hallway. ‘You silly thing, I thought you napping!’ But she stopped short of the bedroom door and spun back around, shaking a finger at John. ‘Out!’ she hollered. ‘Get out, now!’

‘Sorry, ma’am, I’m sorry!’ He could feel his face burning red, and he started toward the door. This had been a terrible mistake! He had seen something he should not have seen, and now he knew something he should never have known. He should have taken Mr Holmes at his word.

He reached the door, but to his further shock and dismay, he was shoved away from it before he could touch the doorknob. Ms Hooper blocked his escape.

She threw herself in his path and pushed him back by the chest. ‘Stop! You’re not going anywhere! Not until . . . until . . .’

‘I won’t say anything to anyone,’ John vowed, alarmed.

Her eyes were wild, darting, from him to the back of the flat where they both heard the woman called Sunny moan long and loud.

‘What about?’ Ms Hooper challenged him.

‘That your ward is having a baby, ma’am, not you.’

‘Bollocks!’ she swore. Then she grabbed John by his collar to drag him away from the door and threw him onto the sofa. ‘I’m sorry!’ she cried. ‘I really am, but you— No one can know about this!'
No one! So you’re staying right here until I decide what to do with you!’

The whole turn of events was a bit mad, and not a little alarming. Within minutes, John found himself tied to a kitchen chair with hosiery and Ms Hooper was running around the flat, pulling wet towels from the wash and draping them over furniture to dry, running water and ice chips back and forth between the kitchen and bedroom, and muttering her apologies to John every time she passed him by, but not without adding, ‘Months of careful planning, months! And you show up today? And I just let you in? Damn that Sherlock Holmes!’

‘Mr Holmes doesn’t know I’m here,’ he tried to reason, but she carried on as though not hearing him. She had abandoned her fake silicon belly, leaving her in an oversized shirt that hung off her bony shoulders and made her seem oddly sunken. Meanwhile, from the bedroom, John listened to poor Sunny’s laboured panting and crying, and Ms Hooper’s coaching her to breathe through the pain.

When she reappeared in the kitchen again, over an hour later, to refill the ice chips, John with growing worry about his situation, said, ‘Miss? Miss?’

She couldn’t make eye contact. ‘I can’t deal with you right now,’ she said. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’

‘I can’t feel my hands, miss.’

Her head came around sharply to see John’s hands, tied to railings of the chair, swollen with blood. She burst into tears.

‘I’m sorry!’ she cried. She clapped a hand across her mouth, then covered her eyes with her hands, then dragged her fingers across her scalp where she fisted her hands in her hair, loosening it from its tight ponytail. ‘I didn’t mean for this to happen! Ever since I found out she was pregnant, I’ve had to hide her, I’ve had to pretend it was me. She hasn’t left the house in months! I’ve not left the house unless wearing that damn bump! The lies I’ve told, to everyone! You can’t imagine the stress of it! But what else was I to do? What? Just let them take her? I’ve done everything under the sun to get ready for this and hide it from the world. Such careful planning! I given her prenatal care, studied how to deliver a baby, all on my own! She’s not even due for another two weeks! So when you showed up, and she was napping, I didn’t think . . .’ She doubled over, sobbing.

‘I can help, miss.’

‘It’s all over!’ she continued, as though she hadn’t heard him. ‘If I let you go, word will get out. If I don’t . . . People will come looking. Of course, they will. Sherlock bloody Holmes! You can’t keep secrets from him, you just can’t. I was an idiot to think I could fool him. Sunny is doomed. That baby doesn’t have a chance in hell! How did I ever think I could get away with this?’

She began to turn away, to leave the kitchen and John in the chair with an uncertain fate, but John persisted. ‘Mr Holmes won’t cause trouble for you, miss. Me neither. You don’t need to be afraid.’

‘Please, John, what do you know about it?’ she said angrily. ‘That baby will be warded, Sunny will be taken. Then they’ll go after the Buffington’s ward, once they figure it out. It’ll be Storage for the both of them.’ Her back fell against the wall. ‘I’m . . . I’m sorry. I can’t let you go. Not until I figure out . . .’ But she couldn’t complete the thought. Defeated, she shook her head and returned to Sunny.

He wanted Mr Holmes to return to London, to realise something was wrong, and use his detective brain to find him in Ms Hooper’s and talk sense to her. If he could only reach his phone! But she had taken it from him when she tied him to the chair. _Don’t panic. Don’t panic. She won’t hurt you. She’s not your host, she doesn’t have the right. Don’t panic._
It was only a short while later, twenty minutes maybe, that Ms Hooper came stomping back to the kitchen. She bypassed John entirely, yanked open a drawer, and pulled out a knife. His heart stopped, a frightened protest on his lips, until he felt the blade’s serrated edge sawing the nylon knots binding his wrists, then his ankles, and suddenly he was freed.

‘Go,’ she said wearily, pointing toward the door with the blade. ‘Get out of here.’

John stared, not sure what was happening.

‘Just . . . give us a day. Please? Before you say anything. That’ll give us a chance to . . .’ She stopped herself from finishing.

John stood from the chair on shaky knees and rubbed his wrists with numbed fingers, first the one then other, trying to restore feeling. But he didn’t go anywhere.

‘Didn’t you hear me? Get out of here, I said.’

‘No, ma’am. Mr Holmes said I could help. And I mean to, if you’ll let me.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Sherlock sent you to help?’

‘To be fair, I don’t think this is what he had in mind.’

She laughed, incredulous, and said sarcastically. ‘What, you’ve never delivered a baby before?’

‘Only animals, ma’am. Horses and cows.’

Ms Hooper gawked. ‘Are you serious?’

‘I worked on a farm, ma’am. Once.’

‘Sherlock got you from a farm?’

‘This was a while ago, ma’am. But please let me stay. Let me do the washing up, to start. And if you need anything laundered, or tidied, or assembled? I could do that, too. I saw the cot needs assembling. I could—’

‘Nope. None of that.’ Ms Hooper seized his hand and pulled him toward the bedroom. ‘I’m going to need your support in there. Sunny will, too. Neither of us have ever done this before.’ Then, dragging John in her wake, she pushed into the room, where Sunny’s time was near at hand.

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In total, according to Ms Hooper’s clocks, poor Sunny laboured for eleven hours and forty-two minutes, which meant that the baby girl was born into the world well after midnight. Sunny named her Hannah. On paper, she would be listed as the firstborn daughter of Margaret Louise Hooper.

John stayed the night. Of course, he did. Without his host, he wasn’t allowed on the streets after dark. He didn’t even notice when the sun had gone down. Distracted as he was holding Sunny’s hand and coaching her on keeping quiet, lest the neighbours hear, he hadn’t given any thought to the hour, not until his phone went off just minutes after sundown: Mrs Hudson was worried.

‘I’m so sorry, Mrs Hudson, it’s all my fault,’ said Ms Hooper, speaking into his phone on his behalf, stepping out of the room so Mrs Hudson wouldn’t overhear something she ought not hear. ‘I knew Sherlock was out of town today, so I invited John to Bart’s for another anatomy lesson. We got carried away examining cancerous tumours, and next I knew . . . Well, you know how it goes when
you’re tucked away in a morgue! And see, the thing is, I live quite near the hospital, and rather than risk trying to get John home without verified escort, I told him he could kip on the sofa. I’m sorry, I should have thought to call.’

She was a smooth liar. But then, John supposed, she’d been at it for a while. Like Mr Holmes had said.

In the wee hours of the morning, Sunny slept, and Ms Hooper, though likewise exhausted, took a long, hot shower. John was left holding little Hannah, all clean and swaddled and sleeping in his arms. He rocked gently back and forth in the new rocker that had been set up in Sunny’s room. He was captivated. From her tiny nose to her impossibly tiny fingernails, he couldn’t look away, nor could he believe that he had been present for such an impossible miracle as this baby girl, who should never have been, yet was, and he was holding her. She would grow up like all free children—nourished and nurtured. Loved. She would never wear the bracelets, the collar, the tat. She would be adored by two women: her own mother, and the woman pretending to be.

Perhaps that was a tragedy all its own, John thought. That she would never know Sunny for who she really was.

Like he would never know his own mother.

He never really gave any real thought to her, the woman who had given him life. Nor to his father. It was as if these people had never existed in the world, and yet, even John knew that was a stupid thought. They had lived and breathed, just like him, and maybe they still did. Maybe he passed them on the streets and didn’t even know them, nor they him. It was a terrible thing, not knowing how he had come into being. He just was. One day, he would un-be. And the world would carry on as if it didn’t matter that he had ever lived in it.

Unaccountably, he realised, for the first time in two days, that he was missing Mr Holmes.

And as he stared at the baby, only hours old, he was struck with a thought that had never resonated so strongly, had never formed itself so fully: that little Hannah, this very child he held in his arms, stood at the fork of two paths, one in which she led a life as a free citizen, and one in which she was a ward of the state. It was only by the grace of Ms Hooper that she would walk the free path, and not the warded one. But she was not born to one or the other. She was not inherently free, anymore than she was inherently warded. She was human. She was the same as any other. That was what Mr Holmes had been trying to teach him. John was human, too. In the right circumstances, he might not have been a ward at all. He might have been free. Free like this little child.

But now . . . this was what he was. This.

He fitted the bracelets back to his wrists.

‘You need to leave quietly,’ said Ms Hooper, shepherding him toward the door. ‘And stay away for a few weeks, yeah? You don’t know anything, John.’ She reached for his arm. ‘You won’t say anything. Will you? Not to anyone?’

For the thousandth time, he promised that his lips were sealed, and when Mr Holmes figured it out (as they both knew he would), John assured her that he would keep her secret, too. He was good man. Of course he would.

He left her flat and headed back to Baker Street. Having not slept the night before, John appreciated the brisk morning air, which roused his faculties. He was just cutting through Russell Square Gardens, on his way home for a well-deserved sleep, when he heard someone calling his name:
‘John? Sherlock’s John!’

As it always did when he suffered a fright of the unexpected, his heart skipped and he turned his head sharply, but it was only to see a portly man in a light tan trench coat, sat with others on a park bench, waving to him. John slowed as he recognised the man, who was rising to his feet.

‘I thought that was you,’ said the man, smiling.

John bobbed his head in greeting. ‘Dr Stamford, yes, hello.’

He had not seen the doctor since his tumble down the stairs, and had been quite embarrassed about the whole thing. Mr Holmes said he had also been the one he called on that first night, when his mouth had been hurting so terribly owing to the tooth extraction, but honestly, he didn’t really recall Dr Stamford’s being there, he’d been so delirious with pain. In either case, Dr Stamford had seen him only at very low points, and times he really preferred not to recall. He was doing so much better now. He wished he could erase Dr Stamford’s memories of him from before and start again, if at all.

The doctor clapped a hand on his shoulder. ‘Out and about early, I see. Fine day for a Sunday stroll. On your own?’

‘Mr Holmes is attending to business, sir.’

‘You’re looking well,’ continued Dr Stamford. Yes, he was definitely thinking about the tooth, the tumble. John shifted his weight and looked down at his feet. ‘Everything good at home?’

‘Yes sir, very good, sir.’

Dr Stamford squeezed his shoulder, looking pleased as punch, which John didn’t quite understand, but he didn’t have long to think on it before Dr Stamford turned him toward the park bench where he had been sat, along with a small coterie: two adults and three children, one in an electric wheelchair.

‘John, I don’t believe you’ve met my family. This is my wife, Alice,’ he said, extending a hand to her. The kindly woman, whose arm was rested on the arm of a little boy in the chair. ‘And our kids, Philippa, Heidi, Joey, and Sam.’

John nodded pleasantly at them all, not failing to notice that two of them—Philippa and Sam—wore bracelets, just like he did. They were wards. Yet Dr Stamford had claimed them as his own children.

‘I was just about to run for some coffees and hot chocolates for the kids. Join us?’

That was how John found himself, quite unexpectedly, sipping coffee and strolling through the park with Dr Stamford and his family, like they were old friends. It was a strange sensation, and not altogether a comfortable one, at first. He didn’t know what to say, or why he had been invited to walk with them, or even why he had said yes. For the first ten minutes or so, he tried to figure out what they wanted of him. Slowly, though, such suspicions began to fade. There were no demands made of him. Dr Stamford and his wife talked about the kids, mostly, and what they wanted to be for Halloween. Eventually, they came to a picnic table set in the middle of the park and rested for a spell, finishing their coffees. The adults talked and the children played.

‘What did you get up to this past summer, John?’ asked Mrs Stamford.

‘Oh,’ he said shyly, embarrassed to be talking about himself. But feeling he needed to give a better answer than that, he said, ‘Went to the library a lot. And museums.’

When they didn’t laugh, didn’t ask him why he should need a library when a ward his age had no need to be learning anything, let alone how to read, but asked instead what he liked most, he
suddenly found himself going on and on about his favourite books and the Egyptian artefacts from
the museum and going on cases with Mr Holmes. They listened with interest and asked probing
questions, and he felt himself warming to them so that when the time came for them to carry on with
the children, and he knew he ought to continue on home, he was a little sad to go.

‘We’ll have you over for dinner sometimes,’ said Mrs Stamford, readjusting the hat on Samuel’s
head.

‘I’d like that, thank you,’ he said, and waved them all goodbye.

Revived by caffeine, and light in spirit, John continued on his way another ten minutes, when he
heard his ring tone. His first thought was that it must be Mr Holmes, and he scrabbled for the phone
in his pocket. He wanted to share in this happy feeling. But when he saw the name of the incoming
caller, he was simultaneously disappointed and surprised. Mr Lestrade?

‘Hello?’ Had the detective inspector somehow got wind of the fact he’d not returned home last
night? Was he in trouble for helping Ms Hooper? He could fathom no other reason for this
unprecedented contact, and happy bubble began to deflate.

‘John! Good morning!’

‘Erm, good morning, sir.’

‘Sorry to be calling so early and out of the blue, but say, are you busy today? Like, in the next hour
or so?’

‘Erm, no?’

‘No? Oh! Good, good, so I was thinking. You said you might, that is, that you’d be interested, yeah?
In meeting Michael?’

Mr Lestrade’s new ward? Unexpected, this call, but not unwelcome. How curious. ‘Yes sir, I did,’
he replied.

‘Great! Yeah, so the thing is, I have the day off, and I told Michael we’d head to the park, kick
around the old football, teach him a thing or two about the game. You had mentioned you’d like to
teach him some games, right? So . . . you want to come?’

Phone pressed to his ear, John stopped walking and looked around, like he didn’t know where he
was. ‘Me, sir?’

‘Of course. Sherlock, too, if he wants to come.’

‘Mr Holmes isn’t in London, sir. But . . .’ He hadn’t meant sport. He’d been talking about games like
what he and Mr Holmes would play together. Moreover, he didn’t know anything about football. No
one had ever let him play. He should tell Mr Lestrade, he really should. In the end, though, he didn’t
want this opportunity to pass him by. ‘I’d like to come. If I may.’

‘Then get down here! Hyde Park, north end. Just meet us by Marble Arch.’

Excitedly, he changed course. He was off to play football! Sleep could wait.

***

He was exhausted. His ankle was killing him. His stomach was empty. But as he left Hyde Park,
waving farewell to Mr Lestrade and little Michael, John couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. It hadn’t been a real game, just some practices, like fancy footwork and running the ball down the pitch. For a beginner, Michael was good and never tired, a cheerful child eager to impress his host, something John could sympathise with. And Mr Lestrade was not restrained in his praises.

John wished Mr Holmes had been there, too. It had been . . . fun.

Now, however, he yearned for his bed, his leftover pizza, crap telly (as Mr Holmes would say). The twenty-minute walk to Baker Street had never seemed so far.

But he had scarcely left the park, had only just crossed the street, when a shiny black car pulled alongside him, and the window rolled down.

‘Fancy spotting you here, John.’

John fell back a step. He could feel his face fall, too.

Mr Mycroft Holmes waved him closer. For a few seconds, John’s feet felt rooted to the pavement. He had will his legs to carry him closer. Just two steps, though. He was wary of any more.

‘I was just on my way to Baker Street, in fact,’ Mr Holmes continued. ‘Here.’ He pushed open the car door, revealing a spacious interior. ‘I’ll take you the rest of the way.’

John hesitated. Tired as he was, he didn’t much fancy the idea of getting into a car with Mr Holmes. Then again, this was his host’s brother, and a government man besides. He was in no position to refuse.

Still, he tried. ‘Mr Holmes is not at home, sir.’

‘I’m aware.’

‘I’ll tell him you called by.’

‘No need.’

‘I prefer to walk, sir.’

Mr Holmes cocked his head imperiously and said, ‘Really now, John. Don’t be difficult. You’ve been out of the flat for twenty-four hours now, running your little . . . errands.’ He did a little twirl of his fingers and gave John a simper. ‘Clearly, you’re dead on your feet. Get in. It’s you I was on my way to see, in any case.’ He reached beside him and lifted up a long, flat cardboard box. A board game. ‘As promised.’

Feeling he had no real choice in the matter, John nervously got into the backseat of the luxury town car, and Mr Holmes told his driver to proceed. Presently, they arrived at Baker Street, and as though passing through a dream, John led Mr Holmes inside and up to the sitting room, where they sat across from one another at the table and Mr Holmes began to unpack the game called Diplomacy and explain its rules. Was this really why he had come? To play the game?

‘This game isn’t about chance,’ said Mr Holmes, putting derisive emphasis on the word, ‘it’s about tactics and negotiations. Let’s see what you’ve got.’

The board was a map of Europe from 1914, and it was complicated. It involved a negotiation phase, a movement phase, alliances and intelligence sharing and adversaries and supply centres, and quite a lot more than John could keep in his head all at once. Mr Holmes had to repeat himself many times,
which John could see he found tiresome. It was not at all like playing with his own Mr Holmes, who spoke clearly and made sure John understood before moving on. Not for the first time that day, he wished Mr Holmes would just come home.

He made another stupid move and lost another supply centre. Mr Holmes snorted. ‘Things to always remember, John. Disinformation. What is it? I did tell you.’

‘Something that isn’t true, sir.’

‘Lies. It means to lie, John. It is false information designed to deceive. I keep feeding you disinformation, and you keep gobbling it up. That is your mistake.’ He waved his hand over the board. ‘I keep telling you these places are safe havens. Spain, Italy, Belgium.’ His eyes flicked up. ‘Norway.’ He sighed. ‘Have they ever once proved to be?’

John shook his head tiredly, wishing this game would be over. It had been well over an hour already, and all he could think about was his pillow.

‘You’re not listening.’ Mr Holmes sounded angry now.

‘I am, sir,’ he protested.

‘You are hearing me, but you’re not listening.’

You see, but you don’t observe. Mr Holmes had said that himself. His own Mr Holmes. Many times.

‘Sherlock needs to do better with you,’ Mr Holmes muttered. ‘That much is true.’

A little fire inside of John was lit. Just a little one. He didn’t appreciate Mr Holmes’ berating of his brother, not in anything, and certainly not where it concerned John. It was owing to Mr Holmes that John was doing so well these days. He was turning in a good ward. How could anyone say he should do better?

Perhaps if he had been so tired, he would have questioned it sooner. ‘Sir, you knew Mr Holmes was out of London today?’

Mr Holmes the Elder hummed in the affirmative.

‘You came to see . . . me.’

‘That’s what I told you.’

‘But you didn’t want Mr Holmes here when you did.’

‘Is it fun,’ Mr Holmes asked sarcastically, ‘playing detective?’

John frowned, and his sense of discomfort at being alone with Mr Holmes elevated.

Mr Holmes sighed and sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest and giving John an imperious look, two part scolding, one part condescending, and one part . . . pity? He stared long and hard, and John did all he could not to shrink into his chair under that gaze. He felt as though he were under a hot lamp, and that Mr Holmes could read minds, which seemed a dangerous prospect. So he tried to focus on the football game he and Mr Lestrade and Michael had played in the park, and not on the baby of the female ward he had held in his arms that very morning.

Then Mr Holmes pulled out his phone, swiped, clicked, scrolled, and set the screen in front of John without a word.
John stared. His heart guttered. He’d almost forgotten that face. How long had it been since he’d last seen it? A year? No, more than a year, certainly. It had been summer when this man had come into the flat with hidden sandwiches and an Oyster Card. The guest who was not a guest.

‘His name was James Sholto,’ said Mr Holmes. ‘Know him?’

Frozen in his chair, teeth clamped together, John’s mind raced. What did Mr Holmes know? That his name was James, for one. What else? And what did John know that he shouldn’t? This man, James, who had made him promises and broken them, was a stranger to him, he could say as much. He had met him once and never again. Why did Mr Holmes care? What had he done?

‘Of course you do,’ said Mr Holmes, answering his own question. ‘You see, I can play detective, too. You said two things in the same breath: DULUGE, and James. Wasn’t much of a challenge putting two and two together.’

‘I don’t know him, sir.’

‘I don’t think that’s true. You may not know much, but you know some things, and I want you to tell me what. How did you come by him? Or rather, how did he come by you? The DULUGE are infamously enigmatic, to the point where some don’t even believe they exist, or in any meaningful numbers. So tell me, John. Everything.’

‘I have nothing to tell.’

‘Lying isn’t useful unless you can do it convincingly. You, John, are a terrible liar.’

More than ever, John wished for his own Mr Holmes to burst into the room to intercede. Or for Mrs Hudson to turn up unannounced. But he was on his own, and he was afraid. He couldn’t quite account for it. He didn’t know what he knew, or why it was of such importance to talk about, only that he felt it was a mistake to do so. But was it not a greater error to refuse to talk? This Mr Holmes was not as kindly as his brother. He had power in high places.

But his Mr Holmes’ words floated back to him.

_This is my flat. This is my chair. That is my front door._

‘Sir, you are from the government?’ he said softly.

Mr Holmes blinked. ‘Am I from the government? What a question. I hold a minor position in the British government, yes. What of it?’

‘Then . . . do you know Lord Magnussen, sir?’

There was no immediate reaction, but John recognised the look: it was the same one he had seen many, many times on the face of his Mr Holmes. The man was thinking, and quickly.

‘Naturally,’ Mr Holmes said at last. ‘He is one of the most powerful men in Britain. Certainly in London. Why?’

John’s heart was racing, but he pressed on. ‘Is he a good man?’

Mr Holmes’ his eyes narrowed. ‘What kind of question is that? I’m not here to talk about Charles Magnussen, I’m here to—’

‘Is he a good man?’ John asked again, no longer able to make eye contact. He’d just interrupted his
host’s brother, and he wondered if the repercussions would be swift and painful, or slow and nauseating.

But Mr Holmes answered. ‘It cannot be said otherwise: he’s a great man.’

John lifted his eyes. They burned. He blinked to keep them from spilling over. ‘If that is your opinion of him, sir, then I . . . I’m afraid you are no longer welcome in this home.’

A horrible silence descended, which was ended only when Mr Holmes spluttered, ‘Pardon?’

There was no retracting now. John stood and took two steps back from the table, extending his arm to the door. ‘You may leave, sir.’

‘You’re ejecting me?’ Mr Holmes was astounded. ‘You? Ejecting me?’

‘This is my flat,’ said John, ‘and I’m in charge of who enters it.’ His arm remained extended, boldly, though his eyes remained affixed to the floor.

The chair screeched loudly as Mr Holmes stood from the table and slowly advanced on John. When he was right at his shoulder, he paused, and John slowly lifted his head to make eye contact. His breath hurt in his chest. ‘Fascinating,’ Mr Holmes whispered fiercely. Then, without further desultory remark, he proceeded out the door, leaving his game behind.

***

John anticipated fallout from what he had done. He didn’t know what or when, but it seemed as inevitable as night following day. There would be trouble, no doubt in his mind. He meant to meet it bravely.

Still, when John’s phone lit up only an hour later and he read the name Sherlock Holmes on the screen, he quailed. His brother had most surely told him what John had done, and it was unacceptable. Stupid, stupid, he thought, steeling himself as he answered the call.

‘Mr Holmes?’

‘John! There you are, old chap. I’ve missed . . . erm, London. Everything okay? Not too quiet having the place to yourself for a few days, eh? You . . . how are you?’

Whatever doubts he had been harbouring melted like the morning frost. Though it had only been a short while, he hadn’t realised how much he had missed Mr Holmes’ voice. It was like a little more milk in his tea, or extra thick wool socks when his feet were cold. Suddenly, he wanted to tell Mr Holmes everything he had seen and heard and done over the last three days, not as confession, but the stranger impulse just to share and hear Mr Holmes react to his adventures. Instinctively, he turned toward the front door with a wistful wish that Mr Holmes would walk through it.

But his reserved nature won out. ‘I’m well, sir, thank you. Have you solved the case, sir?’

A long pause.

‘John, I have something to tell you, something important, so . . . Are you at home right now?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Nothing on the hob, nothing in the oven, nothing to attend to?’

‘Nothing, sir.’
‘Good, good. And are you alone? No one else with you? Mrs Hudson or anyone?’

‘No sir, I’m alone. Is everything all right, sir?’

‘Yes, yes, everything is smashing. I just think . . . perhaps you should sit down for this.’
The Watsons

‘Perhaps you should sit down for this.’

Mr Holmes sounded odd, not quite himself, and it put John on edge. Heeding the recommendation, he slowly sank into his chair and licked his lips in nervous anticipation as the silence drew out. For a moment, he thought he had lost the call, and he checked his screen but saw the seconds still ticking.

‘Sir? I’m sitting.’

‘John, I’m in Dover.’

The word didn’t register. Not at first. It was an impossible word, an impossible place, and how could Mr Holmes be in an impossible place? But then it settled in his ears and resonated in his funny little head, and when it did, his heart nearly lurched out of his chest. He gasped and clapped a hand over his mouth.

‘Are you still there? John?’

He clutched the front of his shirt for something to hold onto. ‘Dover. You’re in Dover, Mr Holmes?’

‘I’m in Dover.’

‘My Dover?’

He heard a soft chuckle vibrate through the phone. ‘That’s the one.’

John’s head was spinning. He felt almost faint, like those times when he’d not eaten in days. ‘It’s real. It’s really real.’

‘As real as London, I assure you.’

‘What’s it like! What do you see?’

‘It’s brilliant, John. Beautiful.’

‘The sea? Can you see it? Can you see to the other side? And the cliffs? Are they white like in the pictures?’

‘Whiter. I’ve taken about a hundred photos to show you when I get home, and I’ll send you a few in the meantime. But John, I need to tell you why I’ve come to Dover.’

John still felt like his head would lift off his shoulders and the rest of him collapse, but he had the wherewithal to say, ‘For a case, sir, wasn’t it?’

Another pause. ‘For your case, John.’

He felt jolted. His world stopped spinning and came into laser-like focus. ‘My case?’

‘That’s right. I came to find Harry.’

It was a good thing Mr Holmes had told him to sit. John felt like the floor had fallen out from under him. The feeling sped from his limbs, and briefly his vision whitened out. He clutched the phone with both hands now, and pressed it to his ear like he was cradling his head. His breath was sharp in his
chest. His heart. His heart was on fire.

‘Harry,’ he whispered.

‘I found her, John. I found her.’

‘Harry,’ he said again, disbelieving the words he was hearing. His throat was closing off and his whole head began to buzz.

‘It took some doing, but you gave me the first clue, and that was Dover. She’s still here.’

‘Is she okay?’ John said, a sudden sob breaking free of him.

‘Oh John, she’s brilliant. She’s healthy, she’s happy, she has a good family.’

It was too much to bear. Crying, John wrapped a hand around the back of his head, curling over his knees. Harry. She was alive, in Dover, and okay. All the years he’d spent hoping for her, fearing for her, all those sleepless nights . . . She was happy!

Mr Holmes gave him time, time enough to catch his breath and ask, ‘Does she’—he gasped a breath and wiped his eyes—‘does she remember me?’

‘Oh yes. She remembers you very well. She hasn’t stopped thinking about you in thirty-four years. She’s . . . she’s here with me now. Do you want to talk to her?’

John began to tremble. ‘She’s there?’

‘Yes.’

‘With you? Right now?’

‘She’s right here, John. Here, let me switch over to video phone. You can see her.’

John gasped. A sudden charge of adrenaline shot him to his feet. Hastily, he wiped his face on his sleeve, but there was nothing for it. He couldn’t stop the tears. He held the phone at arm’s length, waiting for the screen to turn. A few seconds of darkness, and then Mr Holmes’ face appeared. He smiled.

‘There you are,’ Mr Holmes said warmly. He said nothing of John’s red-splotched cheeks or wide, wet eyes. ‘Let me pass you over.’

Another heart-stopping few seconds passed, John in perfect stillness.

Then suddenly, after thirty-four years of missing her, there she was.

***

The night Sherlock danced with John, he couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t think. Not like he needed to. His brain seemed to have been hijacked. It wouldn’t stop thinking about John, and he couldn’t stop thinking about how thinking about John was a problem, and not a trivial one.

He paced. He remembered every time John had smiled, and how he, Sherlock, had actively worked to elicit each one. He loved that smile. It made him happier than he could say, happier than he could ever recall being. Even when they were apart, he obsessed over the things he could do or say to bring that smile to John’s face. He also thought of the closeness they had been enjoying lately—the openness of thought and feeling, the easiness of physical proximity, this sudden and strange longing
to touch and be touched, if only by a hand on the shoulder or feet brushing under the table.
Correction: he had been enjoying it. He wouldn’t presume to enter into John’s head and imagine he
took quite the same pleasure as Sherlock. This was his fault. All his fault. Because he remembered
something else:

Lucy Harrison. She had loved her ward. She had loved him too much. In the end, her love had killed
them both.

Sherlock was terrified in a way he had not known possible. To care so much about another human
being, and to know that such intense felling could prove so catastrophically dangerous, made him
physically ill. Twice that night he went to the toilet, expecting to be sick. Nothing happened. But he
knew he had to do something. He couldn’t stay in this house. He couldn’t be near John. Not just
now. Not until he managed himself. Not until he came up with a plan to ensure both John’s
happiness and safety.

By morning, he had one.

He was out the door like a shot, barely glancing in John’s direction, as he didn’t trust himself beyond
a quick morning greeting. Then he hurried to the Tube, which took him to King’s Cross, and from
there boarded a train to Dover. He was on a mission to find John’s family.

He had little to start with: a host, female, murdered in 1997 in a private residence in Dover. From the
comfort of his flat, he’d already searched what he could in online databases without success. He
suspected that Lestrade was right. He wouldn’t graciously be granted access to old case files if he
popped into the Dover Police Station, even if he flashed one of the badges he’d nicked from
detective inspector. His first stop, then, was Dover’s local library.

It took three hours of scouring the daily papers (five local, two of which were no longer in print) on
microfiche. Three-hundred and sixty-five issues each. He was hoping for a sprawling headline:
LOCAL WOMAN MURDERED or STABBING OF LOCAL WOMAN LEADS POLICE ON
MANHUNT. But of course he wasn’t so lucky. January, February, March, and every time his eyes
landed on the word murdered or killed, the victim was almost certainly not the woman he was
searching for: there was the old man whose wife had bashed his head in with a rotary phone, or the
eighteen-year-old girl strangled to death by her boyfriend, or the thirty-something shot in the head
during a drive-by, or the murder-suicide poisoning of twins. Most of the victims were male, and most
of the killings were not knife-related. The ages were wrong, the locations, the circumstances. He
pushed on through April, May, June, reading every headline, skimming every story, July, August,
September . . . His eyes were tiring with the strain of reading the tiny print.

Sometimes he jotted down notes of headlines to investigate further, if his initial search yielded no
likely results: ‘Custody battle over two child wards continues’ and ‘estate for sale after owner’s
passing’ and ‘police still looking for fugitive’, though the stories themselves seemed unlikely.

But then, in a late issue in October 1997, he came across an article titled simply, ‘Local woman dies
in home’. The article was short, less than forty words:

Oct. 20 – Local woman was discovered dead in her Castle Street residence on Monday after her
daughter informed neighbours that something was wrong. No cause of death has been released.
Family members have taken the child into their care.

Sherlock jotted it down as a potential lead along with the others.

At the end of his search, he returned to his short list, and it was the article about the Castle Street
woman that most bothered him. For one, the victim had not been named, though the information
would have been of public record, given that she had died within her own home. Any reporter worth her salt would have been able to get a name, easy. Nor was any age provided, neither of the victim nor the child. No wards were mentioned, and no follow-up reports appeared in the papers through the end of 1997, eliding entirely the cause of death in a presumably healthy mother.

He carried his investigation to Castle Street, a short one-way street lined with shops on one end and houses on the other, all under the hill atop which rested Dover Castle. There, he chose the oldest looking pub with the oldest looking owner.

‘You’re asking me to remember something that happened more than thirty years ago?’ The portly man stood hands akimbo, an apron tied low around his gut, which jigged with his chuckle. Apparently, he thought Sherlock’s request for information about a woman who had lived on the street in 1997 was amusing. Sherlock would have been more annoyed, if his accent didn’t remind him so much of John. ‘Sorry, mate, my memory’s not that good.’

‘It was a homicide. Woman was stabbed repeatedly. You don’t remember that?’

The old man’s face fell. ‘Oh. You’re asking about Lucy.’

Sherlock honed in like a bloodhound. ‘Lucy who?’

‘Lord, let me think. Been a while, eh, mate? Young Lucy were a nurse, husband’d left her, had a kid, ‘f I remember right. Lucy . . . Winston. Walston. Watson! That were it. Lucy Watson.’

‘Watson,’ Sherlock repeated. ‘Which house was hers?’

‘Thirteen. Jesus, how these things come back to you, eh? Yeah, it were thirteen. Folks’s always been suspicious of thirteen. Round here, for good reason.’

‘Murder wasn’t reported in the paper,’ Sherlock observed.

‘S’pose not. But little town like this? Word gets around. Never heard nothing of the who or the why, o’ course. Say, you a detective? You doing one of those cold case things?’

Sherlock started toward the door. ‘Keep it under your hat, won’t you.’

With a name, and an address, the world was now open to him. Day one had drawn to its close.

***

Lucy Watson had been born Lucy Christine Stafford in 1963 in Canterbury, baptised that same year at St Martin’s, and married Hamish Watson in 1985 in the same church. All of that was church record, which Sherlock learnt on day two of his search. During his visit, he learnt, also, that in 1991, she had given birth to a daughter, Harriet Lucy Watson, baptised in the same church as her mother. Lucy had been thirty-four when she died. She was buried in the cemetery behind the church.

Sherlock visited the grave, laying flowers at the base of the headstone.

It wasn’t just a visit to honour the dead. Her grave stood alone, he noted. There was no one named Hamish Watson buried there. The church had no records of the man, beyond the marriage record.

On day two, Sherlock also gathered the public record of her schooling, and beyond. She had been a nurse in the maternity ward at Buckland Hospital from 1988 to 1995. She had purchased property on Castle Street in 1990. She had served one year on a fundraising committee for the hospital. Beyond that, he could find very little about her. She had no blood relatives, besides Harriet, who had been
warded upon the death of her mother. Any record of the girl after that had been sealed.

So Sherlock turned his attention to Lucy’s husband, Hamish Watson, and discovered a brother, a twin, named Rory. Whilst Hamish had disappeared from the records, Rory Watson came with a death certificate, having died in a motorbike collision. Sherlock would have thought this a dead end, had it not been for the fact that Rory Watson had died October 19, 1997.

The same day Lucy Watson had died.

Sherlock didn’t believe in coincidence. The universe was rarely so lazy.

It was a new piece of the puzzle, a new string to follow, and on day three, it led him to the doorstep of Rory Watson’s widow, a woman named Charlotte Wright.

***

Mrs Wright, sixty-four, almost closed the door in his face, and perhaps would have done, had she at least one mean bone in her body, which she did not.

‘We don’t talk about Rory in this house,’ she said. ‘Now, if you please . . .’

‘Is it because he was murdered?’ Sherlock asked, his tone blasé, but it had the desired effect. Mrs Wright’s face fell and her lips pulled into a frown.

‘It was a hit-and-run,’ she said weakly.

‘Or rather, a hit.’ He took one step closer to the door, wiggling a toe past the threshold lest she decide, after all, to thrust the door shut. ‘The police reports may have called it a hit-and-run, just another fatal motorbike statistic, but you and I both know that’s not true. Don’t we?’

‘Do you?’ Mrs Wright challenged.

‘Of course. Because he died the same day your sister-in-law was stabbed to death, a detail conveniently left out of news reports. Conclusion: a cover-up. Lucy Watson was killed for a reason, likely the same reason they took out your husband, whose twin brother had disappeared more than two years earlier. Or had been disappeared. You can help me find answers, Mrs Wright, if you will only tell me what you know. We can still see justice done for your family.’

‘I have a new family now, one I mean to protect.’ But she looked troubled. Good. She was considering letting him in. ‘Who are you? Police?’

‘No.’

‘Reporter?’

‘No.’

‘Government?’

‘Perish the thought. My name is Sherlock Holmes. I’m a friend. A friend of the family, as it were. Please, may I come in?’

Mrs Wright’s home had the tidy-cluttered, long-lived-in country aesthetic Sherlock associated with Mrs Hudson. Potted plants stood in every corner and on every sill and shelf; decorative plates, framed cross-stitched landscapes, and kitsch artwork overlaid nearly every inch of a garish wallpaper; and reupholstered furniture clearly dating from a bygone era cluttered the sitting room in
muted mauves and fading blues. The air smelt of pine and pipe smoke, which Sherlock found to be quite homely, and a cat on the rug in a strip of sunlight lifted its head as Sherlock passed, but, finding nothing of interest or threat about him, returned to its nap.

‘Please,’ said Mrs Wright, gesturing to the kitchen table. He sat, and she put on the kettle.

‘Water is fine,’ he said.

‘It’s for me.’

While she waited for it to boil, she commented, ‘You’re young. You couldn’t have known Rory.’

He folded his hands together on the table. Skirting the question, he said, ‘It must have been a terrible shock. Losing them both in a day.’

‘You couldn’t imagine. You could never know. The pain of it.’

‘I should hope I never do. I’m sorry.’

She nodded sombrely.

‘Did your husband have any enemies?’

She huffed. ‘Do you mean, besides the State of New Britain?’

Sherlock’s more excitable eyebrow twitched. *Confirmation.* Two family members die violently on the same night; one’s death is passed off as a hit-and-run; the other’s isn’t even labelled a murder, the manner of death entirely erased from the records. And who controlled the levers of the media who printed the story and the police who were first on the scene? Who indeed.

‘Rory Watson was a firebrand,’ he concluded.

Mrs Wright seemed to be chewing her tongue.

‘What was his cause?’ Sherlock pressed. But when she continued to look doubtful of him, he decided to light a fire in her. ‘Was he a radical? Was he of the ilk who sets bombs to historic landmarks to send a message to the government he hated?’

Her eyes flashed angrily. ‘How dare you, Mr Holmes.’

‘Homegrown terrorists killed my parents,’ he said, unapologetic. ‘I just want to know the sort of man we’re talking about.’

‘Rory’s cause was truth. He was not a violent man. What they did to him was unconscionable. To him and Lucy both.’ Mrs Wright stood suddenly, and for a moment Sherlock thought he was on the verge of being thrown out of the house. Instead, she marched toward the cooker. The kettle had begun to simmer.

When she returned with the tea spread—two cups, milk, and the pot—she was much calmer. ‘I’m sorry about your parents.’ She poured him a cuppa.

‘Thank you,’ he replied. ‘It seems we have both suffered losses in this invisible war.’

‘War, you say. What are you really, Mr Holmes?’

‘Just someone trying to set right a few wrongs.’ He paused for effect. ‘And travel the right highway.’
Her eyes went wide. ‘You’re one of his. Aren’t you?’

‘One of whose what?’

‘Don’t play games with me, you must know I was never involved in any of that. The London Underground Highway, whatever they call it. Deluge, or some such nonsense.’

Sherlock felt the excitement course through his veins but carefully controlled his expression. She knew about the DULUGE! But . . . one of his? What had he stumbled across? Okay, Holmes, he coached himself, play it cool. ‘Let’s just say my sympathies run deep.’

‘You can’t speak openly of a thing like that,’ she said in a hissing whisper.

‘No one is listening. I need to know where it started. What exactly was Rory involved with?’

Mrs Wright looked worriedly to the windows, the door, as though someone were peering in, and disapproving of what they saw. Her gesture tickled a memory in his brain, but before he could place it, she had begun to talk.

‘If I tell you what I know, you must promise to leave and never mention me, and never come here again.’

‘I promise.’

‘Rory was a founder.’

‘Of the DULUGE?’

‘Yes.’

‘God.’ He hadn’t expected that. A rebel, a rabble rouser, a radical of some sort. But a Highwayman? Fascinating. ‘How did it all start?’

‘With a professor.’

Rory Watson had studied history at the University of Sussex, a favourite pupil of Professor Martin Endersby, whose research the university would later denounce as unfounded, biased, and incendiary, not fit for a scholar, despite his decades of publishing and dozens of peer accolades. Professor Endersby’s scholarly interests included the Great War, German occupation, and the Surge, but in the early 1980s, his attention had turned to focus on the ramifications of the reconstruction period. It was during this time that Rory began to sit in his lectures, and soak it all in.

‘I was at uni to study social care,’ Mrs Wright said. ‘Our paths crossed at a party, and I thought he was cute. Funny. A bit outspoken, to be honest, though that may have been the drink. He did drink, I won’t lie. Might have got to be a real problem, if he’d got the chance to grow old. But we fell in love, and he proposed summer after graduation.’

It was only at the wedding that Charlotte discovered that Rory’s brother, who had been mentioned but never formally introduced, was, in fact, his twin, which Charlotte thought a cruel omission of fact. Nevertheless, she liked him. The brother had been hosting jointly a ward their own age who had grown up with them, and who now would go to Hamish, as Charlotte was bringing into the marriage a ward of her own, a woman old enough to be her mother, named Gwen. An inheritance ward, really, now that her own mother was of exemption age.

The new Mrs Watson got a job in Kent, where she was from, but there was little market value for
someone with history qualifications. So, while Charlotte worked and kept their new family in the black, Rory took temp jobs and began studying to become a paralegal. What Charlotte didn’t know was that he had quit his courses. Instead, he spent most of his time in libraries, as if his undergraduate studies had never ended, reading every work of twentieth-century history he could get his hands on, and maintaining correspondence with Professor Endersby.

As part of her social care work, Charlotte frequented local hospitals, from Dartford to Dover, and it was while visiting Buckland Hospital in Dover that she met and befriended a young nurse named Lucy Stafford. On a lunch date where they ate Caesar salads and analysed the most recent developments on *Coronation Street*, Lucy bemoaned her single life and asserted that there were no good men in all Southern England. It was then that Charlotte decided to play matchmaker.

‘My husband has a single brother,’ she said. ‘A carbon copy with a sweeter temper . . . and a real job!’

Hamish Watson and Rory Watson, though identical in looks, were quite opposite in temperament. Where Rory was zealous and stubborn and intellectually driven, Hamish was mild in his passions and steady in his moods, preferring to work with his hands. He was not unintelligent, but quieter, keeping his thoughts mostly to himself, unless asked. Despite all differences, they were best mates, always keen on the other’s good opinion, always watching each other’s backs, even when no assistance was requested, or welcome.

Knowing that Hamish would object to anything like a set-up, Charlotte and Rory conspired to get Lucy and Hamish in the same room as though by happenstance. So a chance meeting at a pub it would have to be during a casual gathering of friends and acquaintances. To their delight, Hamish gravitated toward Lucy at once, and by the end of the evening, he had eyes and ears for none but her. When they left the pub together later that evening, Hamish guiding Lucy to the door by the small of her back, Lucy cast one last look over her shoulder at Charlotte and mouthed a *thank you!* The Watsons congratulated themselves on a job well done with one more round and some celebratory lovemaking when they got home.

Lucy and Hamish were married. Their life together proceeded in the ordinary way: he worked as an odd-jobber and did very well, depending on the time of year; she worked in the local hospital as a maternity nurse; the ward, who had learnt much from his host, did handyman work around the house; and after a short while, they had saved enough to buy a house on Castle Street. Soon, Lucy was pregnant, and in the spring of 1989, she gave birth to a little girl. They named her Harriet.

‘In those days, we were all such good friends. Lucy became like a sister to me. The four of us, we were always hanging out in each other’s houses. Rory and I were just a stone’s throw down the road in West Hougham. We’d have dinner, or else just drinks, or talk the night away. Not about anything important, usually, but after a drink or two, Rory would start in on his research. We used to joke about it, called it his “did you knows”. Did you know that in 1965 an entire village in Essex just disappeared, people and all? Right off the map, can’t get there by road or train. Did you know that no living Briton has ever actually met a Norwegian? Think about it, he would say, have you ever known one who has? Do you know one yourself? Odd, that, don’t you think? Did you know that the average life expectancy of a warded person, even a healthy one, is seventy percent that of a non-warded one? He sounded like a conspiracy nutter. We listened and laughed, but week after week, he was coming to us with these stories, and after a while, we stopped laughing.

‘Hamish didn’t like that kind of talk, he really didn’t, and when Rory would get going, things got a little tense between them. But Lucy . . . she hung onto every word. Eventually, she started to come to nights out with stories of her own, things she witnessed in her nursing work. Sometimes, she said, a host with a pregnant ward would come in, eight, nine months along, and leave hours later without
the baby. Wards never left with babies, she said, and this was before it was made law that no ward is permitted even to have a baby. We didn’t believe it when she told us, what they did to the wards, to the babies. Anyone would have been scandalised, back then, to hear it. But then it was made law—you’re too young to remember—and now everyone just takes it as a given. But Lucy was pretty shaken up about it. She was in the profession of delivering healthy babies, not terminating pregnancies against the will of the mother. I guess that was the thing, though, wasn’t it? The mothers didn’t have a will to execute. Wards weren’t—aren’t—allowed to parent.

‘She would tell us about all the free mothers who came in, gave birth, and left the baby behind. Happened all the time, she said. Mostly single mothers, but not always. Sometimes it were women from good homes with good husbands who just didn’t want the responsibility, or only wanted a girl and not a boy, or what have you. So just like that. Abandoned. Warded. In the seventies and eighties, it was so common that the ward numbers doubled—*doubled*—in less than a generation. We were supposed to be phasing out the programme. That’s what they *used* to say. We were to care for those children who lost their families in the Surge until they were able to care for themselves. That was the plan. Being a ward of the state was never supposed to be a life-long designation, you know. But once the government took on the responsibility of care, they were never going to give it back.

‘Listen to me. Now I’m sounding like Rory. My dear Rory.’

Mrs Wright looked wistfully out the window, as if seeing the world in a different time, long ago.

‘What happened to them?’ Sherlock prompted.

‘Lucy came to me one day in tears. The stress of her job was getting to her, I thought. There had been another one. Another abandoned child. Since becoming a mother, her heart had become especially tender, toward *all* children, but there was something about this one boy. She couldn’t get him out of her mind, couldn’t stop going on about how cruelly he was being treated. To be honest, I . . . I asked her to stop talking about it. It upset me, the stuff she’d go on about. Speculations, I thought. She didn’t *really* know, she wasn’t *privy* to anything. Or maybe I didn’t believe her. Our get-togethers were no longer fun. It was just Lucy and Rory exchanging horror stories, and eventually, I put my foot down. I didn’t want to hear it anymore. They weren’t helping things, just complaining about them, and I didn’t . . . I just couldn’t anymore.

‘They respected my demand. We still hung out, but things weren’t the same. I could tell Rory was stewing, and Lucy was distracted. So they started talking to each other, privately, behind my back, and behind Hamish’s. It wasn’t an affair or anything. But they were both obsessed with the plight of the warded class, as they called it, and they needed an outlet, someone to obsess with. Rory wouldn’t talk to me about it because I wouldn’t let him. I wish, looking back . . . I don’t know what I wish. I wish he’d never gone down that road to start with. It was bound to lead nowhere good.’

‘I didn’t realise, at the time, that Rory and Lucy had moved on from just talking about things. Talk without action is just lips flapping in the wind, I remember him saying, early on. Talk was one thing, but *writing*? Writing was action. He started up a newsletter. I didn’t know much about it at the time. It wasn’t like today, with the Internet, where you could find an audience with a few mouse clicks. This newsletter, it became his full-time job. When he was supposed to be working as a paralegal, he was researching and writing, spending our money on printing and postage stamps to send to his little thought-group. I thought it was little, anyway. I really had no idea of its true size.

‘And Lucy, she wanted to take action, too, but of a different sort, and it all had to do with that little boy. It’d been over a year since he was born, but, as I understand it, he had never left the hospital. He was still there. For research. For study, I thought, but Lucy thought it was some sort of *experiment*. There were other children, a dozen or more, I don’t know. She couldn’t save them all,
I suppose, and but she could save one, and he was the one. And Lucy was determined.’

‘I never knew it for sure, and I don’t know how, but I think Rory must have helped, if only by putting the thought into her head. One thing I do know, though, is that Hamish was none the wiser. One day, he just comes home, and there’s Lucy with a fourteen-month-old crying in her lap, inconsolable. She said it was legal, entirely legal, and she had the ward documentation to prove it. And it wasn’t like anyone was coming after her. But she could never say legal and look you straight in the eye. Foolish girl. I hate to say she sealed her own fate, but there was trouble from the moment she brought that little boy home. She invited it to her doorstep. You see, the very next day . . . That’s when Hamish went missing.

‘We filled out a missing persons report, put up flyers, called everyone we knew, did everything we could think of, even went on the radio. But the police . . . We never did find him. We never got answers. None that helped us sleep at night, anyway. But I’m convinced—to this day I’m convinced—that he was taken. Snatched up off the street. The thing is, though, it wasn’t meant to be Hamish that disappeared. It was meant to have been Rory.’

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. ‘You believe Rory was targeted for political writing. For assisting with the removal of the child from the hospital. And that they mistook Hamish for Rory.’

Mrs Wright nodded. ‘Like we told the police, Hamish had called earlier that day, said he was coming by the house. Didn’t say why. I know he was upset about the little ward boy, probably needed to talk to someone about it beside his wife. He took the bus, we’re sure of it. He always did. He used the van only for jobs. And Rory, he took the bus, too, going between West Hougham and Dover. They knew it. Whoever had been watching him, watching the house, they knew Rory always took the bus. We think that they saw Hamish get off at the stop in West Hougham, and they thought he was Rory. It was night. No one was around. We think they jumped him before he ever reached the house. Took him. Disappeared him. That’s what we think happened. It’s the story I’ve been telling myself for thirty years. Because Hamish, no matter what he felt about Lucy bringing the child home, would never, ever, have left his family. Harriet was only three years old at the time, the apple of her father’s eye. And he loved Lucy desperately. The police were wrong. Liars, maybe. He didn’t leave his family. He was taken.

‘After losing her husband, Lucy finally felt proper afraid. She was done with Rory and his talk of revolution. She thought of selling the house and moving north, but she only ever got around to selling off the ward. Hamish’s ward, I mean. She would tell anyone who asked it was because she was a young widow, and it wouldn’t do to have a male ward her own age in her house with her anymore. But I think it was because that ward was a reminder, and she couldn’t deal with that.

‘As for Rory, he felt . . . deserted, so to speak. He was mourning his brother, but he was so angry it was hard to deal with him. I wouldn’t talk to him about the hope of a ward uprising, and Lucy wouldn’t talk to him about liberation. Not anymore. I was hoping Hamish’s disappearance would have sobered him, made him realise the danger he was putting himself and his family in. But it did the opposite. He became vengeful. His heart was broken, and he poured all his anger and despair into something new. I heard the word highwayman out of his mouth only once because—I’m deeply ashamed of this, Mr Holmes—because the moment he spoke that word, I slapped him across the face. I forbade him speak such a thing in our house. He agreed, though I could see it rankled him. What good was it, though, in the end? I could shut his mouth, but I couldn’t keep him from thinking, and planning, and growing his little network of like-minded firebrands. And I had absolutely no power at all . . . to hide him from the eyes of those who were watching him too closely.

‘I don’t know what tipped the scales, or why they decided to act when they did, or why they went after Lucy, too. Maybe it was punishment for what she had done. It had been three years since she
brought that little boy home and treated him as her own. Maybe they didn’t like that she’d got away with it. It’s a terrible thing, Mr Holmes, to have so many questions and only speculations to answer them with.

‘I’ll never forget when the police knocked on my door. It was eleven o’clock at night, and I was waiting up for Rory to come home. He was late. Much too late, and no phone call. That wasn’t like him. So when I heard the knock, I didn’t even need to see that it was the police. I knew something was terribly wrong. They said Rory had been involved in a hit-and-run. He’d been on his motorbike. He was dead on the scene, no witnesses. I fell apart. I called Lucy, but she wasn’t answering, and it wasn’t until next morning that I found out that she had been . . . God, it hurts to talk about all this, even now. She had been murdered. A housebreak. A robbery turned murder. She had been stabbed twenty-two times. Twenty-two times, Mr Holmes, and nothing taken from the house. Her purse was right there on the kitchen table, and nothing taken. Idiot police, trying to persuade me otherwise. I knew it wasn’t robbery from the start. But like with Rory, they never found who did it. But I know who. I don’t know the name or the face, but I know what Rory knew: that the government wanted him dead. The State of New Britain killed my husband, killed my sister-in-law, killed my brother-in-law, just like it’s killed so many others of its own people, people it was created to protect. And the world keeps turning, like none of it ever happened. No mark on the world at all, just on me. That’s what it feels like, anyway. Most days.

‘I had lost all my family. Nearly. There was still little Harriet, just six years old. The police had removed her to a shelter and WSC were beginning the paperwork to classify her as an orphan and ward of the state. I fought it, tooth and nail. She was not without family. I was her family, she still had me. She needed me. They wouldn’t listen. I hired a solicitor, and filed petitions, and all the while, the clocks were running down. They said because I wasn’t blood, I wasn’t really family. If Rory were still alive, it would have been a different story, but as far as the council was concerned, I was not true relations. After thirty days, I lost. Harriet was officially warded. So I did the next best thing, and I became her host.

‘It was just Harriet, Gwen, and me for five years. Harriet was like a daughter to me, though I know I could never be her mother. She had almost no memory of her father, but she remembered Lucy too well, and was haunted by what had happened to her. Still, I did my very best to make her happy and whole. As she got older, though, the reality of her being a ward really began to take hold in us both. She would never leave my house, never fall in love, never have a family of her own. Happy and whole? Not for wards like Harriet. She watched Gwen grow old and sick and die a ward’s death without having known any of those things, and she knew that was her fate.

‘Sorry. You don’t need to hear me wax on about that. You’re asking about Rory. About five or six years after he died, I had two encounters, a couple of months apart. The first came to the house. A man I’d never met before knocked on my door, like you did. He wanted to talk about Rory, like you did. He said they were continuing his work. “They” were organising in London. “They” were creating an underground railroad, inspired by the one in America, and did I want to be a part of it? They needed someone in Dover, a port city, and who better than the widow of the man who started it all? I threw him out. I screamed in his face and threw him out of my house. I never wanted to hear another word about it, not about Rory, not about secret organisations, nothing. I threw him out.

‘Then there was a woman. A stranger with a kind face I met in a coffee shop while I was making my rounds for work. She struck up a conversation with me and we just got to talking, I didn’t think a thing of it. Not until we started talking personal lives, and I mentioned I was unmarried and she asked if I’d ever been married. I had the distinct impression, then, that she was steering the conversation. I said yes, years ago, but offered no details, and any normal woman would have picked up on my reluctance to divulge more—and to a complete stranger, no less—and back off. That’s what normal women do. But she asked me: what happened to him? Not what happened to the
marriage. What happened to him. I can’t explain it entirely, Mr Holmes, but I knew that if I kept talking, she would pull out of me what she wanted to know: was I sympathetic to the plight of wards, as my husband was? Was I carrying on his work, like others did? Was I a threat? I got myself out of there, and I promised I would never say a word of it ever again, not to anyone, not even when I remarried. God only knows why I’m talking to you. Family friend, you say? A friend of Rory’s is a Highwayman, but you’re not that, either, are you?’

‘No,’ said Sherlock, ‘I’m not. I’m more a friend of Lucy’s.’

‘Like I said, she’s dead. Thirty-four-years dead. You would have been only a baby, if you were even alive.’

‘Of someone who knew her, and remembers her.’ He glanced out the window. ‘Mrs Wright, is your husband informed of this history?’

‘Stephen? He’s a good man. He’s been good to Harriet. But I’ve told him very little of Rory, and nothing of what he was involved with. We’re both getting older now, and his health is poorly. Harriet takes good care of him. She takes care of both of us. I worry what will happen to her when we’re gone. We have no children, no grandchildren, to take care of her.’ Mrs Wright shook her head helplessly. ‘Harriet’s taken Stephen to his doctor’s appointment, and when she gets back, Mr Holmes, I’d kindly ask you to be gone.’

‘Then I’m afraid,’ said Sherlock, ‘that I have already overstayed my welcome.’ And he nodded toward the window where two figures were approaching the house: one, an old man with thinning grey hair and a prominent stoop, holding the arm of a younger and stronger woman, forty years old with curly, sandy hair and smart-looking, rectangular rims framing her eyes. To the unknowing observer, she looked perfectly ordinary. But Sherlock, knowing what she meant to the person most dear to him, almost couldn’t believe she was real.

‘Oh!’ Mrs Wright shot to her feet. ‘Say nothing of what I have told you. Please, Mr Holmes.’

He pulled his eyes from the window. ‘I’ll say nothing of Rory or highways,’ he promised. ‘But permit me to introduce myself.’

The door opened, and Sherlock stood to greet them with extended hand.

‘A friend of the family,’ he said with a smile, shaking Mr Wright’s spotted but firm hand. Then he turned to the woman. ‘Afternoon. I’m very pleased to meet you.’

The woman looked surprised, and glanced at Mrs Wright as though for insight or direction. ‘And you, sir,’ she answered.

‘I’m here on someone’s behalf,’ he said, discreetly taking the measure of her. Though uncertain of him, she was certain of herself, and her politeness was born of good rearing more than subservience. From the callous he felt on her index finger as they shook hands, he knew she was fond of needlework, and the framed cross-stitched artwork on the walls he now knew were hers. She wore little makeup but for mascara to bring out her fine lashes behind the spectacles, and she dressed boyishly for a woman her age. ‘Someone you used to know.’

While Mrs Wright looked on nervously, and her husband with no sense of the gravity of it all, Harriet merely cocked her head in puzzlement. ‘Who?’

‘You knew him as a child. A little boy with red shoes who called you Harry.’

As Mrs Wright’s hand flew to her mouth, Harriet gasped so violently her whole body shook as
though she had just been electrocuted. ‘Hamish!’ she cried. ‘You . . . you know Hamish?’ Tears filled her eyes and Sherlock started to smile and nod, but before he could get in another word, she spun to Mrs Wright, crying, ‘Auntie Charlotte, did you hear! Oh my God! Oh my God! Hamish!’ She threw herself into Mrs Wright’s arms, embracing her tightly. Just as quickly, however, she pulled away again and twisted back toward Sherlock. ‘He’s okay? Oh please, tell me he’s okay!’

‘He’s okay, I promise you,’ said Sherlock, feeling his throat getting thick. He swallowed hard. ‘And he’s never forgotten you. He misses you.’

‘Oh my God,’ she said again, the tears flowing freely, hands covering her face. Mr Wright had his arms around her now.

‘The little ward boy?’ Mr Wright said to his wife in an undertone, making sure he was following the conversation.

Mrs Wright nodded, looking dazed.

‘Lucy named him Hamish,’ Sherlock reflected solemnly.

‘Yes,’ she confirmed. ‘After the man she loved.’

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Harriet and John spoke for only a short while. Both were in too much shock at the start, and then overcome by too many emotions, to have a proper conversation, and to make matters more awkward, they were virtually strangers who did not know what to say to one another. Sherlock and the Wrights tried to give them some privacy, moving to the sitting room, but Sherlock couldn’t help but overhear. John kept asking if she was all right, and Harriet kept asking where he’d been all this time. All he would answer her was London. Meanwhile, Mrs Wright repeated, ‘I can’t believe she’s found him. I can’t believe it.’

When they said their tearful goodbyes, Harriet passed Sherlock his phone back, still alight.

‘I’ll be on the train back to London tonight,’ he said.

John, eyes puffy and cheeks red, nodded. ‘Tonight,’ he said. ‘Thank you. Thank you, Mr Holmes.’

When he hung up, Harriet was standing expectantly at his side. ‘You’re going back to London? Right now?’

‘Yes,’ he said as he slid his phone in his pocket. ‘It’s time for me to return home.’

‘Will you take Hamish something for me? Sorry. John, I mean.’

‘Of course. What is it?’

She hurried from the room and up the stairs. When she returned moments later, she was bearing an old shoebox in her hands. Her eyes still glistened. ‘I remember the day they took him away. I didn’t understand what was happening, or that I’d never see him again. When I did, I worried he’d forget about me.’

‘He never did,’ said Sherlock.

‘I wrote him letters. I didn’t have anywhere to post it to, but I wrote it all the same. I’ve been saving them, here, in this box.’
‘You’ve been writing to him all this time?’

‘Every year. On his birthday. July 7. For years, I’ve believed he would never get to read them. But . . . these are for him. Would you take them to him for me? I want him to have them at last.’

Sherlock accepted the box, weighty with thirty-four years of birthday letters. ‘You have no idea,’ he said, ‘how much this will mean to him. No idea.’

‘I have some idea,’ she said, smiling and pushing back her tears.

‘Anytime you want to call,’ he said, ‘please. Call. Have your aunt call my phone, and you two can talk whenever you like.’

‘Really?’ Harriet looked between Mrs Wright and Sherlock, and both nodded. ‘Oh, thank you, Mr Holmes! Thank you for finding me. Tell Hamish—John, I mean . . . Tell him, I’ll talk to him again. Very soon.’

He left the Wright home, the shoebox held reverently in two gloved hands. He didn’t look back. Just now, it was too hard. His heart was breaking. The plan was working, and he knew he had just found John his next home.

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Sherlock took the train back the Kings Cross and the Circle Line to Baker Street Station. As he drew nearer the flat, it was city-dark, and he could see the light in the upstairs window. He picked up his pace and jogged across the street, eager to see the look on John’s face when he showed him the shoebox he dutifully bore under his arm. He didn’t consider that John had been equally as dutiful, watching the street from the sitting room window. So Sherlock was taken by surprise when John flew out the front door to greet him.

‘Mr Holmes! Mr Holmes!’

John stopped short on the pavement just feet from him, his face alight in the dark, wearing the unalloyed smile that made Sherlock’s heart burn deep inside of him.

‘You found her,’ John panted. ‘You—’

He hesitated only a moment and made two false starts, but then, his ebullience overcame him, and he pitched himself forward, throwing arms around Sherlock’s neck. If Sherlock hadn’t seen it coming in time to brace, he was sure the two of them would have toppled to the pavement.

The embrace was unexpected, coming from John. Such an overt show of affection! In the past, John had allowed Sherlock to put arms around him in times of particular emotional distress, but it hadn’t been exactly reciprocal. Not that Sherlock was looking for reciprocation. Always, Sherlock had been careful not to encroach on his personal space, feeling it would be unwelcome, if not inappropriate. If ever there was touch between them, it was soft and infrequent, and always announced, as during boxing or in-house therapy, and in almost all cases, Sherlock had been the initiator, watching closely for signs of displeasure, just in case he needed to take a cue and back off.

But this. John’s euphoria was as warm as his embrace, and what else could Sherlock do but wrap arms around him in return and squeeze tightly. He couldn’t stop himself from laughing softly, saying, ‘That I did, old boy.’

Then John seemed to realise his forthrightness. He stiffened and pulled back, face flushed and eyes averted as he smiled shyly. That was when Sherlock read him properly, taking in the measure of him
from shoe to crown.

‘Hey,’ said Sherlock, taking his face in his hand and lifting it to examine more closely. ‘You didn’t sleep last night.’

‘Erm, no sir,’ said John.

‘Was it nightmares?’

‘I . . . can’t tell you, sir. Not just yet.’

‘Oh.’

For a few breaths more, they stood with eyes locked, Sherlock’s hand beneath his jaw, until Sherlock, realising what this might look like to the passer-by, removed his hand and shifted the shoebox into it to keep it appropriately occupied. He cleared his throat.

‘Let’s get you indoors, it’s freezing out here,’ he said. The sun gone down, and the October air was especially chilled. John had burst out of the flat without a coat.

John turned back toward the front door, and Sherlock stopped himself from guiding him forward with a hand at the small of his back. He needed to tamp down the resurgence of the very feelings he had fled from in the first place.

Once inside, Sherlock instantly spotted three things of note: an empty pizza box propped against the rubbish bin in the kitchen, a new stack of books pulled from the shelves on the table beside John’s chair, and a board game on the main table: Diplomacy. His eyes widened in alarm. Mycroft had been here?

Before he could ask John about it, however, John launched into questions of his own: How had he found her? What was she like? Did she really, really remember him? He wanted the whole story, top to bottom, and Sherlock obliged. He took John along the path of clues and told a detective’s tale. But the things Mrs Wright told him in confidence, he did not share. Only the parts that spoke of the family John had once known. John hung onto every word, literally on the edge of his seat, eyes glassy and lips parted in awe.

As Sherlock came to the end, he lifted the old shoebox he had set aside, saying, ‘She never gave up hoping she’d see you again. She never stopped wondering where you were, how you were. Does she remember you? Oh yes. Every year, on July 7, she wrote you a letter. Every year, John.’ He handed him the box. ‘She wants you to have them now.’

John’s lips closed and his jaw tightened, holding the box on his lap. He blinked rapidly, and remove the lid. Inside, dozens of envelopes, long and short, white and yellow and blue, each stuffed with letters, each labelled Happy Birthday Hamish and the year: 1995, 1996, 1997, until the latest, 2031.

‘Hamish,’ John whispered, holding up the first letter and reading the envelope.

‘Your name,’ Sherlock said. ‘Your very first. Can you hear it?’

John closed his eyes, and lips retracing the word as his ear cocked toward the sky as though listening for a sound carried on the wind. Then, sadly, he shook his head. ‘She named me after her husband?’

‘Yes. After your . . . well, your father.’

‘Father?’ In John’s mouth, it sounded like a foreign word.
‘It’s a family name,’ Sherlock said. ‘That’s what people do, when they love someone. They give them special names, names from the family members they have loved.’ When John said nothing, only continued to look at the letter without opening it, Sherlock added, ‘You take your time, and think about it.’

John’s head came up. ‘Think about what?’

‘Changing your name. Should you prefer it.’

‘I could do that?’

‘I’m sure it’s just a matter of paperwork.’

‘Oh.’ He shrank a little in his seat. ‘Do I have to?’

‘Heaven’s no.’

‘Good.’

‘Excellent,’ Sherlock said, perhaps a tad to quickly. They looked at each other straight on, and, understanding one another, broke into laughter.

It was good to be home. For now, he put aside his plans. There was still time. And what he had left of it, he meant to enjoy.

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John read the letters at least a dozen times each, sometimes privately secreted away in his room, sometimes in his chair by the crackling fireplace, sometimes at his desk, where he sat with a fresh piece of paper, tapping the butt of a pen against his temple.

‘Sir?’ he said, turning in his chair.

Sherlock looked up from the morning paper.

‘Would you help me write back to her?’

Though John and Harry had talked via video phone several times over the last few weeks, Sherlock knew that those letters were a special treasure to John. It was tangible proof of a past and a family, and of a love that had been there all the while.

He had shared some of the letters with Sherlock. As a child, Harry’s handwriting had been large and sloppy, her spelling atrocious, and sometimes difficult to make out, which was oddly comforting to John. The letters were short and spoke of a child’s cares: naming the new kitten, being forced to eat green beans, her favourite colours. She wrote that she hoped he was eating chocolate cake on his birthday.

But as she grew older and her handwriting evolved into a tight scrawl covering lengthier and lengthier letters, her concerns, too, grew more sophisticated.

Dear Hamish, Today you are thirteen, and I fear you may have forgotten all about me. No one calls me Harry anymore, even though I ask them to. Auntie Charlotte says it’s not proper, and not the name my mother gave me. But Mum called me Harry, too, like you did. I don’t think Auntie believes me…

Dear Hamish, Today you are eighteen. I hope your celebrations are going well! I like to think that
today you are at the cinema with mates or enjoying a party with your host family. Do you have
many friends? I had more friends when I was in school, but these days, it’s just Lulu next door. She’s
a ward, too, and my age. I don’t think I’ve ever had a friend that wasn’t another ward. It’s annoying
sometimes. I don’t feel like one at home, but the moment I step out of the house, I’m reminded.
Maybe you know what that’s like...

Dear Hamish, Today you’re twenty-five. Sometimes, I can’t believe we’re so old! Or that so much
time has passed since I last saw you. I wonder what you look like, or if I’d recognise you. I thought
about including a photograph of myself with this letter, but it seems silly, since all I’m going to do is
put it in a shoebox. Still, I want to give you a present. I don’t think you have one of these, so I’m
putting in a photo anyway. It’s me, you, and Mum, a few months before it all went wrong...

The photograph showed a woman with long, sandy blonde hair caught up in the wind. She wore
jeans and a striped jumper, and was sat on the doorstep in front of 13 Castle Street. Her daughter
stood beside her with a hand on her shoulder, head cocked so dramatically it was nearly parallel with
the ground, and one foot extended in something of a balancing act. On the woman’s knee was a little
boy in red shoes, hand extended as though reaching for the camera, mouth open in a delighted smile.
The photograph was now framed and hanging on the wall of John’s bedroom, beside the painting of
Dover and just over another photograph of Sherlock and John on Tower Bridge.

‘Why should you need help?’ Sherlock asked. ‘You’re an excellent writer.’

‘Not as good as her,’ said John. ‘I misspell and mess up my commas and . . . I don’t want her to
think me stupid.’

Sherlock had not been deliberately eavesdropping on John’s conversations with Harry. But
sometimes, it couldn’t be helped. Ward phones were programmed so as to restrict all outgoing calls
to within the district of registration. The only exception was ward-to-host and host-to-ward calls.
This meant that John had to use Sherlock’s phone for all calls, and Harry had to use Mrs Wright’s.
John felt badly about this (even though Sherlock insisted he wasn’t bothered), and he never
wandered far, even though Sherlock said he could take his calls anywhere—in the privacy of his
bedroom, out on a walk in the park, whatever he’d like. But it usually meant John stayed right there
in the sitting room, and never farther than the kitchen.

Harry was the garrulous sort, and seemed prepared to share every detail of her life that John had
missed out on. John, in typical fashion, was more of a listener, and content to be so. But when she
tried to drag stories out of him, when she asked questions about his childhood and host families, he
became evasive or vague, or, in some cases, outright lied. As far as she knew, John’s childhood had
been a quiet one, he’d moved quite a bit but his hosts had always been good to him, and he’d had
several unnamed friends along his way. It was all fabrication, and it saddened Sherlock to hear him
construct a false narrative of the history he wished he’d had, to paint himself and his life as a
character he thought Harry would admire. From his former hosts to his current writing skill, John
wished something better for himself. Harry was the canvas of his reinvention.

‘I’ll help,’ Sherlock promised, and John’s shoulders sagged with relief.

As the weeks carried on, so did John. Sherlock knew about Molly, Sunny, and little Hannah (he’d
seen the charge on the tab card for a stuffed elephant and deduced the whole thing), and they made
visits together. They were invited to Mike Stamford’s for dinner, and though Sherlock didn’t often
accompany him, John spent time playing football in the park with Lestrade and Michael. He kept on
with boxing and therapy and writing lessons and maths exercises, all the while chatting with Harry
and penning her letters, which Sherlock posted for him. Things were going well, and Sherlock was
making deliberate efforts to keep the boat steady.
Until one day, John signalled to Sherlock that he needed to talk.

‘Something on your mind, John?’ Sherlock asked, entering the sitting room and putting Billy back on the mantel. He had just found the skull, for the second time, outside his bedroom door. John was sat at the table with the morning paper, looking anxious.

‘Yes sir.’

Sherlock pulled back a chair, adjusted his dressing gown, and sat with him.

‘Sir, do you remember when you first asked me about Dover? The night I broke Mrs Hudson’s plate?’

‘I remember that Mrs Hudson broke that plate, but do go on.’

‘Well, sir, you said that Dover was really not so far. Eighty miles?’

‘Your memory proves as sharp as ever,’ said Sherlock, but the warning censors in his brain were beginning to twinkle to life.

‘And you said how easy it would be? To go? There and back again in a day, leave the bracelets behind? We’ve done it before, sort of, taking the bracelets off, and nothing bad happened. It could be fine, just for the day. A few hours, really. No one would even . . . know.’

Sherlock was shaking his head before John even finished, and he trailed off, eyes pained, already knowing what the answer would be. Had to be.

‘I’m sorry I ever said that,’ he said. ‘Truly, John. I wasn’t thinking straight. Mrs Hudson was right: it’s too risky. When I went last, do you know how many checkpoints I had to pass through? Boarding the train, exiting the train, passing through the city gates. And then I had to do it all over again coming back. If I had taken a car, I would have had to show my ID at the traveller’s checkpoints on the M2, the A2, and the A256. Forget the lack of bracelets: you don’t have travel papers. They’d go looking for the tat straight away.’

‘But we could find another way!’ John persisted. ‘You’re so clever, Mr Holmes, I’m sure you could think of something. Just for a day. Not even a whole day.’

Sherlock felt John’s disappointment like an ache in his chest. ‘It’s too dangerous, John. If we got caught, you’d be accused of running. Dover is a port city, you know that. And the punishment wouldn’t be a rehabilitation farm, not for an adult, especially and adult with a history of attempts on his record. They’d take you away, and they’d cite me for abetting a runner. That’s more than just a fine; it’s jail time. They take these things seriously, and I should never have treated it so flippantly. I’m sorry. What you want, it’s innocent enough. But it’s just not possible.’

John’s eyes were misting, and his face flushed red. ‘She’s so close, Mr Holmes,’ he said thickly. ‘I can see her and talk to her, but . . . it’s not real. It’s not really her. It’s like Dover all over again.’

Sherlock wanted to reach across the table and touch him. He kept his fingers locked together under the table. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s . . .’ John was struggling for the words; Sherlock could see the battle on his face. ‘For so long, it was just the picture in my head. The memory. Then I saw it in the magazine, and I knew I hadn’t imagined it. My memories weren’t bad, and Dover was real. So it meant she was real, too. I just couldn’t get close enough. But if I held onto the photos, it was like, I could almost touch it. Even so, I had to hide them. And then you brought the painting, and I didn’t have to hide looking
anymore. And then, sir, you went to Dover, and I knew it was real. Talking to Harry again, it’s like I’m almost there. But . . . I’m not, am I? It’s like they’re saying, you can come this far, but no further. Step to the line, but do not cross. Talk to her, but it’s not her real voice, it’s a machine. See her, but it’s not her real face, it’s a screen. It’s not real, none of it.’ His voice cracked on the final syllable.

‘I’m sorry, John, I don’t know what to—’

‘It’s not fair,’ he said forcefully, brow furrowed in frustration. ‘What harm would it do, just to let me see her? If they said I had to wait, I’d wait. I’d wait a year, or ten years, if I knew that one day, they’d finally let me go. But they say no, never? Never? From now until I die, this is it? This far, and no further? It’s not fair, Mr Holmes!’

‘It’s not. You’re absolutely right. It’s not fair, it’s not right, it’s . . .’

He didn’t know what else to say. Or rather, he knew exactly what he should say, but he didn’t want to say it. Since returning from Dover, he’d been looking for the right moment, the open door. He thought he’d have to create the opportunity. He wasn’t prepared for John to do it for him. Now, here was the door, and he wasn’t ready to cross the threshold.

Trying to hold himself together, even as he felt himself breaking apart inside, Sherlock said, ‘There is a way.’

John froze, but the shine took on the light of hope. ‘There is?’

‘A legal way.’

‘Oh sir,’ John whispered. ‘Whatever it is, whatever it is, I’ll do it.’

Sherlock quailed, fighting against the terrible burning sensation in his chest. ‘I’ve talked to the Wrights. They’re on board, if you are.’

‘Yes sir, what? What is it?’

‘You can live in Dover, John. You can go home. Be with Harry, and never have to long for that life again. It can finally be real.’

As his words penetrated, John’s face slowly drained of blood, leaving him white as a sheet. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I can’—Sherlock couldn’t look at him anymore—‘apply for a transference of registration. The Wrights, they’re good people, I’ve met them. They would be good hosts to you. And more importantly, you would be with Harry.’

There was a long silence. Sherlock’s mouth had gone completely dry, and when he dared to look up again, he saw that John, rather than appear delighted, looked as though he had been cut to the quick.

‘You’re sending me away?’

Sherlock felt jolted. ‘That’s not what I—’

‘But you said,’ John interrupted, ‘let’s not make it nineteen.’

‘I did. I know. But John, I would visit. Every weekend, if that’s what you wanted.’

Shaking his head in disbelief, eyes flashing angrily, John’s fists tightened on the table. ‘You said this was my home. For always, you said it!’
‘It is, John!’ He didn’t stop himself this time from reaching across the table and laying a hand on John’s arm. ‘For as long as you want it to be, I swear. I just thought, maybe, you would prefer to be with your family.’

John snatched his arm away, pushed back his chair and backed up from the table, hurt etched into every line of his face. ‘I thought—’ he stuttered, gasped, clutched at his stomach. ‘You said—You were my family.’

He twisted away, his breathing ragged and shoulders hunched, spiralling toward panic.

Sherlock practically threw his chair across the room in his rush to get to John, turning him around, and taking his face in in hands. ‘I am. Oh God, John, I take it back, I take it all back.’

‘But you don’t want me on Baker Street?’ A tear spilt down his cheek and ran over Sherlock’s thumb.

‘I do! Please hear me, I do. You’re my best friend, John, my family, and I mean that.’ *I’ve never meant it more in all my life.* ‘All I want is to see you happy. I want that more than anything.’ *More than my own happiness.* ‘This matter of going to Dover, of needing to see Harry with your own two eyes—it’s a problem that I’m trying fix, and I don’t know how.’ *I love you and I don’t know how to stop.* ‘I thought . . . I made a mistake.’ *Thinking I could protect you from me, when I know you need me, too.* ‘I thought you’d prefer to be in Dover. It’s what you’ve wanted for so long, and there’s a way to make that happen. But . . .’

*Now I’m watching your heart break in front of me.*

John was shaking his head fearfully. ‘I didn’t mean it, sir, I’m sorry, I swear I didn’t mean it. Please, I don’t— I can’t— We don’t have to find a way to Dover. I shouldn’t have said that. I would never do anything to get you into trouble. Please let me stay, please, Mr Holmes.’

It was no use trying to convey how sorry he was, or his reasons for saying what he had said, however well intentioned. John was beside himself, and he needed to hear only one thing.

‘You can stay, you can stay,’ Sherlock said vehemently. ‘Of course you can. This is your home. This is where you belong. For always.’ He stroked the side of John’s head. ‘Do you believe me?’

John nodded, and tried to force a smile, which was belied by the tears still sparkling in his eyes. ‘I believe you. Thank you, sir.’ But underneath it all, Sherlock saw something he had not seen in John in a long time: doubt.

All those long months Sherlock had endeavoured to build trust between them, to bolster John’s confidence in his new life and in himself . . . In an instant, it had been undone. In that moment, Sherlock would have given anything to wind back the clock. He would never have said what he said. Maybe he would never have gone to Dover to begin with. Mrs Hudson was right after all. Showing John what he couldn’t have had the power only to wound and destroy.

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They didn’t talk about Dover again. Sometimes, from the corner of his eye, he caught John looking at a map on his computer screen. Now that he knew where Harry was, exactly where, and his former address on Castle Street, he spent a lot of time just staring at the map. Sherlock said nothing, but he couldn’t help but wonder what was going on inside John’s head, and worry.

In many ways, though, things returned to normal. John still read, wrote his letters, video chatted with Harry, watched his cooking shows, experimented in the kitchen, went on walks with Mrs Hudson,
played games with Sherlock, met up with Lestrade and Michael in the park, visited Molly and the baby, planned outings to museums, laughed at funny shows on the telly, kept up with his maths lessons, and requested performances on the violin.

It was a good life, and Sherlock meant to keep it that way. No more disruptions. No more clever solutions. Sherlock would manage his feelings as he should have done from the start, and care for John as he deserved. If this was the life John was relegated to, then it would be a good life, as good as Sherlock could make it.

He couldn’t help it, though. He worried, still, that it was not enough. Sherlock was not enough. Baker Street was not enough. It wasn’t real happiness. Like John said, it was one or two steps removed from real. It was close. But there was a line: this far, and no further. And John knew it. Sherlock could see it in his eyes when he hung up the phone with Harry, or finished another book, or bid Sherlock good night at the end of the day. It wasn’t enough.

Then, in early December, a year since first arriving on Baker Street, John put on his coat and left the house. To do the shopping, he said. But he didn’t come back. Night fell, and John was gone.
Sherlock didn’t bother with even a cursory knock: he barged straight into Mrs Hudson’s unlocked flat, calling her name.

A moment later, she startled from her bedroom, still in her nightdress and fighting with the strings of her open robe. It was only grey-dawn and all the curtains drawn, so the flat was still as dark as midnight. ‘Sherlock!’ she shrieked, searching for the switch on the all. ‘The devil—!’

Sherlock found the light plate before she did, and when the room was illuminated, she shrieked again. ‘Good lord, you look a fright! What’s wrong?’

He caught sight of himself in a hallway mirror, paler than usual, all glassy-eyed and hair a-whirl, but he wasted no breath reassuring her that he wasn’t to be fretted over. ‘John didn’t come home last night.’

She blinked and stared, as though he had told her the dinosaurs had been resurrected and were performing Shakespeare in the park.

‘He left to do the shopping around four yesterday, and he—he didn’t—he never—’ He took a gasping breath, trying to steady himself. ‘I can’t find him anywhere. He isn’t answering my calls or texts, and I can’t track his phone, meaning it’s been turned off or the battery has died. Then I found these.’ He dug into the pocket of his Belstaff coat and pulled out a pair of identifying bracelets. ‘I tracked the GPS chips on my phone. They were tossed into a bin near Euston Station. He can’t’ve boarded a train, though, because there are no new charges to my account, not even for the shopping. Mrs Hudson, I’ve been out all night, looking for him. I can’t find him. I can’t . . .’ He couldn’t continue. The choking fear that had been threatening to overcome him all night was crashing upon him again.

Dumb with shock, Mrs Hudson took the bracelets out of his hands and held them up to her own eyes, as if looking for evidence that they weren’t really John’s. When she found her voice, all she could say was, ‘No. No, he wouldn’t run. Sherlock, he wouldn’t.’

‘I know—’

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep the tears from falling.

‘Maybe . . . maybe he got lost! Or hurt? Have you checked the hospitals? The vets? Oh lord, you don’t think he was picked up by Ward Patrol? But then, they would have called you! Oh!’ She grabbed his forearm. ‘You have to report a missing ward within twenty-four hours, Sherlock. That’s the law.’

‘If I report him missing, they’ll treat him as a runaway. He can’t have that, he already has a record, and who knows what will happen to him then? We can’t take that risk!’

‘You’re taking a risk as it is, Sherlock, if you don’t report him missing!’

‘That’s why I have to find him before they do. But I’ve been to the hospitals, I’ve checked the vets, I gone everywhere I can think, everywhere. Everywhere in London.’

‘Then you must not be looking right!’ Her eyes were brimming with tears. ‘He’s out there, Sherlock! You get back out there and find him! You have to find him!’
He took her by the shoulders to steady her. ‘I need your help.’

‘Just tell me how.’

He nodded to her sitting room. ‘Don’t leave the flat. Leave the door to the hallway open. In case he comes back, you’re the first to know, and you call me at once. Meanwhile, keep the telly on, London news. If anyone comes to the door, police or Ward Patrol or WSC . . . You don’t know anything. Okay? Not about Dover, not about Harry. Nothing. You assume he and I went out for the day, that’s it. You know nothing.’

Mrs Hudson’s wet eyes widened. ‘You think he went to Dover?’

‘I think he tried. I’m going down there myself, right now.’ He forced a smile, but it couldn’t hold. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll find him. I’ll find him. I’m a bloody detective, it’s what I do.’

He spun away from her and headed for the door, but he couldn’t stop himself from slamming a hand against the jamb as he passed through. Dammit, John! he thought. Why did you have to run? Why did you do it alone?

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Hiring a car would be faster, certainly. But if John went to Dover, chances were he had gone by train. If he had meant to go there and back again in a day, that was the only way. So Sherlock followed the most likely path.

Still, his own doubts rankled him. For one, how had John paid for a ticket? Sherlock noted no new charges on his accounts, not for so much as a bottled water, and John had no other means to buy a ticket. More importantly, Sherlock doubted John would have made it past the checkpoints to begin with, not without revealing himself a rogue ward. He may have abandoned the bracelets, but he had no other papers, and a body search would reveal the tattoo. Yet Sherlock had received no notification whatsoever that his ward had been apprehended. They would have contacted him about such a thing, surely! Even if they didn’t bring him home, even if they took him instead to a pound or to a detention centre or anywhere else, they would have at least informed the host! Wouldn’t they?

Unless they were waiting for the host to make a report. Twenty-four hours, that was the time allowance for reporting a lost ward. Every minute that ticked by, he was chancing it, chancing it. The ticking clock felt more like a guillotine poised to descend.

If he was honest with himself, he knew full well that John hadn’t taken the train. Likely, he had gone on foot. Maybe eighty miles didn’t seem such a distance to a man desperate to reunite with his estranged sister. In any case, he’d done it before, even made it as far as Maidstone. But he’d been a child, and in the years since then, security measures had only intensified, not slackened.

He kept checking the police blotters from London to Kent until he saw that he was draining the phone’s battery. Fortunately, there was a charge-box by his seat, and he threw his phone into it, restoring its battery back to nearly 100% by the time the train pulled into the station in Dover.

As he queued to exit the station, he sent one quick text.

*Any visitors?*

A minute later, Mrs Hudson responded:

*No one.*
If John had been caught, they’d tell him. That was how it worked. He’d know. It was okay. It was still okay.

He went straight to the Wright house, where it became clear in less than a minute that John was not there, nor had he ever been. Mrs Wright was cordial but wary of his claim of ‘just popping in to say hi’, especially as he didn’t stay for tea. Harry was delighted to see him and mentioned only how wonderful it was to talk to John regularly, and that she was looking forward to the weekend when they would chat again. Sherlock murmured something about John being a little under the weather and not to be surprised if he wasn’t up for the chat. His hope that John would be safe and happy back in the flat by weekend was beginning to wane, his panic to escalate.

He spent the rest of the day in Dover, afraid to leave it, half convinced that the moment he returned to the station he would miss some vital clue. His neck snapped around every time a ward’s bracelets lit up on the streets, every time he heard someone utter the name John or anything that sounded remotely like it, every time he caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of a man with roughly John’s height, build, and complexion.

He was fooling himself. John wasn’t in Dover. If he was anywhere, he was off the beaten path. En route? Or was Sherlock wrong entirely? He’d made a leap of logic and wasted an entire day chasing a false trail. Amateur. He needed to start at the beginning.

Heart heavy, he returned to London.

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What he needed was resources. Access to surveillance, CCTV, WSC monitoring databases, that sort of thing.

But he couldn’t go to Lestrade. Lestrade was a good man, a sympathetic man, but even Lestrade wouldn’t bend to help without asking questions, and he wasn’t one to break the rules and allow Sherlock not to report his ward missing. Furthermore, access to CCTV and all the rest would require a warrant, which would involve a magistrate, which would alert Ward Patrol. So Lestrade was out.

It had been three days, and John was still missing and unreported. He’d missed his window to report him, rendering himself a lawbreaker. He cared little for himself, however. His mind kept spinning terrible scenarios, reviving stories of tragedies that had befallen missing wards in the past: John had been attacked and dumped into a skip; John had attempted a water escape and drowned in the Thames; John had been smuggled away in the back of a lorry and suffocated before reaching the port; John had been kidnapped and thrown into a cage, for god-knows what reason.

Sherlock couldn’t return to the flat. It screamed of an absence and left him cold and gasping with the fear that he would never see his dear John again.

Desperate, despairing, Sherlock turned to his very last recourse.

***

‘Well well. Hello, little brother,’ said Mycroft, standing from the leather office chair behind his impressively grandiose desk of solid cherry wood, antique iron bail handles, and ancanthus mouldings. Mycroft had always had ornate tastes. ‘What an unexpected pleasure. I . . .’ Mycroft’s eyes narrowed, looking at him. Then he gave of wave of his fingers at the woman perched on the edge of a chair with an open diary. She interpreted the gesture as immediate dismissal and left the room at once.
'Don’t you look a fright,’ Mycroft carried on tightly, coming around the desk. ‘Let me see your arms. Both of them.’ And he reached for Sherlock’s sleeve.

Sherlock jerked his arm away. ‘I’m not using. Dammit, Mycroft.’

But Mycroft grabbed him under the chin and steered his face so they were nearly nose to nose.

‘Bloodshot eyes. Dilated pupils.’ He sniffed. ‘You reek of body odour and city sewage.’

‘Wrong conclusion,’ Sherlock snapped. He pushed Mycroft back, second guessing his decision to come in the first place. ‘My eyes are red because I haven’t slept in three days. My pupils are dilated because the lighting in this room is far too dim. And you guessed it, I’ve been roving city sewers and back alleys and, hell, even skips. I haven’t changed my shirt since Wednesday.’

‘God.’ Mycroft sniffed again, this time with derision. ‘One of your cases, is it? You never did take care of yourself when you got distracted with a puzzle you couldn’t solve. I would have thought hosting that John of yours had turned you into a proper adult. My mistake.’

‘I didn’t come to be berated,’ Sherlock said, glaring. ‘I came because I need . . .’

‘My help, is it? How droll. The great Sherlock Holmes, stumped.’ Mycroft leant backward, placing two hands behind him to prop himself on the desk, and crossed one ankle over the other. He simpered. ‘Do tell.’

‘You must promise me something first.’

‘Oh go on.’

Sherlock raised a warning finger. ‘Promise me you’ll tell no one.’

‘Ooh, an intrigue.’

‘No one, Mycroft. I mean it.’

‘You’re in a bit of trouble, aren’t you? Maybe a big bit of trouble.’ He sighed out dramatically. ‘Very well. I promise. I’ll cause you no added measures of grief, if I can help it. You seem to be good enough at creating it all on your own.’

Sherlock turned this over in his head, not sure the guarantee was earnest or binding enough to merit his satisfaction.

‘Oh come on, Sherlock, out with it,’ Mycroft griped.

He broke. ‘John is missing.’

Mycroft’s expression froze.

‘He’s been missing for three days. I need your help to find him. Before the police. Before Ward Patrol. Before anyone.’

‘Shit.’ Mycroft turned away from him and scrubbed a hand down his face. ‘Shit shit shit. Dammit, Sherlock!’ He spun back around. ‘I told you he was a runner. This is precisely why you should have let me choose your ward. But no, you just had to go with a rescue. It was only a matter of time before you had a mess on your hands. What has it been, barely a year? Shit!’

Sherlock felt his entire body sizzle. ‘Would you dispense with the I-told-you-sos and help me? He’s
in danger, and—’

‘Three days, you say, and you haven’t reported him? You just let a runner go? God! They find out about this Sherlock, and your negligence will reflect poorly on me. You’ll ruin everything I’ve worked for!’

Shaking with anger, Sherlock balled his fists at his sides. ‘My mistake. I thought this was about saving John. I should have remembered: the only man you’ve ever given a damn about is yourself.’

He turned to leave. He shouldn’t have come at all. What had he expected? Mycroft to gasp, clutch his pearls, and spring into action to save some ward not even his own? Ludicrous. A tiger didn’t change its pinstripes. He was a bureaucrat, through and through, family be damned.

‘You’re not the only one who grieved Redbeard, you know.’

Sherlock halted in the doorway, startled by Mycroft’s seeming non sequitur, and also upset by it. He turned his head but didn’t look back. ‘What?’

‘He was my family, too. His death was devastating, to all of us, myself not excepted.’

Facing him now, Sherlock shook his head, confused. ‘What do you mean, his death? Redbeard was sent to live with a new family. We never heard from him again. How—?’

‘You can’t really be so naïve. As a seven-year-old child, of course that’s what we had you believe. But you’re a grown man, Sherlock. All these years, did you never figure it out? Redbeard was a runner. They caught him. And they executed him. He was shot down near Brighton.’

It was as if Sherlock had transported back in time, to the estate, sitting upon a sofa between his mother and father in his pirate’s hat. Redbeard isn’t coming back, his father had said, while his tiny son’s heart broke in two. It was happening all over again, the pain as real as it had been the first time. But in the iteration, the memory rewrote itself as if the truth had been spoken from the start: They killed him.

‘I killed him,’ Mycroft whispered.

Sherlock’s mouth had gone dry with his short, sharp breaths, but as he looked up into his brother’s eyes in the dim lighting, he saw the shimmer of tears.

‘How?’ he asked, barely audibly.

But Mycroft was not accustomed to being viewed in so vulnerable a position. He turned away and walked toward the cabinet where he stored his drinks. He was a brandy man. Today, however, he reached for the whisky bottle. He poured two fingers into two glasses.

‘Why would they shoot him? For running? They killed him for running? Why! What are they afraid of!’

Mycroft bypassed these questions with one of his own. ‘Did you ever know his name? His real name I mean.’ He must have accepted Sherlock’s silence as answer enough, because he continued on, ‘It was Cian. His father had been Brian, his mother Deirdre.’ He passed Sherlock a glass and took one for himself.

‘How do you know this?’

He sipped at the glass. ‘I asked him. I knew him longer than you did, Sherlock. When I was little, it
was me he used to read bedtime stories to. It was me he taught to play draughts and chess and all the rest. I grew older, and you came along, and you were the one who took over playtime. But at night, after he had put you to bed, I sneaked to his room, and we talked. I asked questions. You were a curious lad, but I dare say, I was more so. I learnt how he’d been made into an orphan at ten years old. It was during the Surge, when the bomb fell on Belfast. I asked about his first host, Protestants who decried his Catholic baptism as illegitimate and made him join their own faith. I asked him why he had not been emancipated when he came of age at eighteen. There were a host of reasons, all physical. Scar tissue, deformation, keloids, retinal scarring from flash-blindness experienced as a child, the radiation that had killed his parents. In short, he had been deemed a cripple, in need of lifelong care. Emancipation had never been an option for him.’

‘Scar tissue? Deformation? I never saw any of that.’

‘No, you wouldn’t, would you? Maybe in time you would have noticed that one eye was slightly cloudier than the other from the cataracts, but the scar tissue and keloids, those were hidden beneath his clothing, beneath the beard. He showed me one night.’ Mycroft dragged two fingers across his left breast. ‘Here.’ And then across his stomach. ‘And here. He had health problems, too. When he was younger, he’d been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. He’d suffered other malignant growths. Ward health care had been top rate, back then, and he’d pulled through. But he still dealt with anaemia while living with us. Took medication for it. More often than not, when Mummy took him for an ‘outing’, as she called it, it was to another doctor’s appointment.’

Sherlock shook his head, not in disbelief but in wonder. ‘I never knew any of this.’ The whisky was beginning to warm in his hands.

‘You were a child. Your prerogative was to play. But don’t feel yourself uniquely excluded. The only reason I knew any of it myself was because of the time I spent with him behind a closed door. I alone called him by his true name, Cian, like it was a secret between us. I knew Father wouldn’t approve. He was a fair man, as you recall, but a traditional one, and he knew the hierarchy of things. So, if he had heard us whispering our grievances over the changes made to the CFCA since its inception, or rehashing the philosophies of Thomas Paine and John Locke, or theorising the existence of Highwaymen, he would have put a stop to it, I’m sure.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows twitched. ‘You were a child. What did you know of Highwaymen?’

‘Little more than you did, at first. Playground rumours, mostly, the kind I later told you to ignore as fanciful stories made up to entertain. But I went looking. I read compulsively everything I could get my hands on until I was convinced the Highwaymen were real, and I shared everything I knew with Redbeard until he believed it, too: that there was a way out of New Britain, and a refuge in a faraway land called Norway. It was my intention to get him there.’

‘My God,’ Sherlock said. ‘You found the Highway.’

‘No. I never did. I didn’t know where to look. Instead, I fancied myself a Highwayman. I thought I could do it myself.’

With a frown, Sherlock asked, ‘You were a teenager.’

‘Just fourteen. Though, to be fair, I was a rather intelligent fourteen. Just not a wise one. I planned everything: the route he would take, how long it would take him, what provisions he would carry, what identities he would assume. God, I thought I was so clever. I thought I could save him.’ In one motion, he downed the rest of the glass and returned to the cabinet to pour himself another.

‘From us?’
‘From this.’ Mycroft lifted the whisky bottle to the sky. ‘Britain. Once a trader of slaves, now a manufacturer of them.’ His arm fell. ‘I was a fool. He was a fool for believing me.’

He poured another two fingers.

‘Father was informed after it happened. I don’t think he ever understood it, why Redbeard would run. Did he not provide a good home? Had he not been a generous host? It never crossed his mind that Redbeard, old as he was by the time he died, had always dreamt of being . . . free. Nor could he fathom that it was his own son who had fed the desire and was to blame for his ultimate demise. I could never tell him, or anyone. So I lived with the terrible secret, alone . . . all my life. Redbeard had been my friend, and I sent him to his death. Because I was ignorant. Because I was idealistic. I saw the monster for what it was, but didn’t respect its power, and because of that, a good man died. It was a hard, sobering lesson for a child.’

‘So, what, you gave up?’ Sherlock was incredulous. ‘You joined the government you hated, the government you knew was corrupt, to instead become part of . . . No. No, that’s not it, is it?’ Things were becoming clearer. His brother, the man he had known all his life as an unfeeling, self-involved coldly logical automaton, was coming into focus in an almost unrecognisable way. It had never been about himself at all. ‘You’re still looking for them, aren’t you? The way you reacted during the game, your questioning of John while I was away . . . All these years later, you’re still trying to find the Highwaymen.’

Mycroft returned to his leather chair and sat heavily. ‘Yes.’

‘Then why are you being so difficult!’ Sherlock exploded, the drink sloshing in his hand. He slammed it down on the desk. ‘If you want to help wards, to save them, why have you been such arse to John? From the very start, since the day you met him, you’ve done nothing but intimidate and bully him, threatening to send him away, if only to the estate.’

‘If I came across as unduly harsh, I . . . apologise.’ He cringed as he said it, as if the words themselves were acid on his tongue. He was not a man who apologised for anything. ‘I was annoyed with you, not him. I needed you to be uninvolved in the matter of wards.’

‘Why!’

‘Because I know you! I know how you are! Losing Redbeard broke your heart. You never took to Barnaby the same way, and it was just as well. Emotional distance, that’s where you shine. With a ward at the estate, you were free to indulge in your little hobbies and hurt no one but yourself. But get a ward involved in your life, and you’re asking for trouble. Bring a scandal upon yourself, but not yourself and a ward. You want to get high? Fine, but don’t bring a ward into your world of addiction. You want to solve murders? Go for it, but don’t bring a ward to a crime scene. You want companionship, go out and get it, but don’t find it with a ward. You get compromised, Sherlock, when you care about someone. You get stupid. And as my brother, your stupidity attracts attention that I cannot afford. I’ve spent years, my entire career, getting to where I am now—a place where I could keep an ear to the ground without raising suspicions. I have my finger on the pulse of the nation, I have plans to . . . And John was exactly the sort who . . .’ He closed his mouth. Breathed. Started again. ‘Do you have any idea, Sherlock, what it is I do? Hm?’

Sherlock didn’t even open his mouth. The truth was, he had never asked. He had never cared. He was a man who knew things, who meddled, who could get things done and be an arse while doing it. But specifically? No. He had no idea.

‘I thought not,’ Mycroft said with a weary sigh. He pulled his phone out of the inside coat in his pocket and turned his attention to the screen. ‘But now I have to fix this, don’t I? Because I can’t risk
abetting a runner, even by negligence, neither can you. I have to help you find him, or we are both in hot water. Isn’t that right?” Without raising his eyes from the screen, he asked, ‘What is his registration number?’

Sherlock swallowed away the lump in his throat. ‘Erm, JW6462-11.’

As he continued to type, Mycroft said, ‘Things are too sensitive for me to become involved in the way you would like me to. If this all goes south, you never came here, and I never knew John ran. Got me? You can’t understand, but there are bigger matters at play than the safety and wellbeing of a single ward. But I can, perhaps, point you in the right direction by checking his registration to see if he’s crossed any checkpoints or been flagged by . . . Huh.’

Sherlock started forward, hands planted on the desk and leaning forward, craning to see the screen. ‘What? What do you see?’

‘Ward registered as JW6462-11 was issued a host recall three days ago at 16.10 hours.’ Mycroft looked up. ‘What time did he leave your flat?’

‘Four o’clock, three days ago.’ He shook his head in irritation. ‘Host recall, what’s that?’

‘It’s an alert system. In an emergency, if a ward is away from home, a host can issue a recall on his ward. Ward Patrol picks up the ward and escorts him home immediately. Recalls are not very common, not since mobile phones. Unless the ward is being recalcitrant.’

‘I never issued a recall. You must have typed the number in wrong.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You must have done,’ he protested.

‘This is your John, is it not?’ Mycroft read again: ‘Male, aged 38 years, British stock, host listed as . . . oh. Perhaps I was mistaken after all. Tell me the number again?’

‘JW6462-11.’ There was a loud, long pause. ‘What? Mycroft, what? Who does it say is listed as his host?’

‘Not you.’

‘Who!’

‘This is strange. Sherlock, you did file the paperwork, didn’t you? Your name is not even listed in the history. This ward is registered to someone called Sebastian Wilkes.’
It was cold again. Another winter in London was fast encroaching, but John was well outfitted for the cold. He had the black coat Mr Holmes had bought him last winter, and a new green one with a detachable hood for wetter weather, which was what he wore now, hood detached. He had a scarf and a hat and boots (though today he had opted for a pair of brown shoes), and gloves, too, though he had left them at home. He wouldn’t be gone long, he reckoned, and he often found gloves cumbersome, what with the bracelets and all.

He had written up a short list of items they needed to stock up on—milk, bread, grapes, tea, honey, biscuits, washing up liquid—which he carried in his wallet, inside his pocket, next to his mobile. It was a little thing, maybe, but he took certain pleasure in writing up his list, rather than memorising it. He spent time writing out each letter with careful, straight lines, in case anyone else should see it, they would know he was good at penmanship, and maybe admire him for the neatness of his letters.

As yet, there had been no snowfall, but the boys who liked to throw the snowballs also liked to make wards trip by walking too close behind and stepping on the heels of his shoes. When he was alone, they made sport of walking close beside and crossing a leg in front so that he stumbled. So he crossed the street quickly and took the first left to get away from them, already planning to make a wide circle to avoid them when he returned.

The shop wasn’t far, but he took his time anyway. The cool air helped him to think, a practice Mr Holmes actively approved. Thinking exercised the mind, he said. He encouraged John to write the things he thought, even if they didn’t seem too important or clever. Sometimes, Mr Holmes said, if you had a problem that needed solving, writing was a very useful way to find an answer. But first, John reckoned, before he wrote a word, he had to think.

Lately, he’d been thinking about Harry. Mr Holmes said she was his sister, and even Harry talked about how incredible it was that after so long she had found her long-lost little brother. Sister, brother—they were beautiful words, ones he wished to take hold of, swallow, hold inside himself, making them a part of himself. But as much as he wanted it, he felt it was . . . wrong . . . to say he had a sister, to name himself a brother. Untrue, unearned, undeserved. So if he said it, he would be a liar, and liars were bad and needed to be punished. He once wrote the word sister, and was so afraid of it that he had to scratch it out, scratch-scratch-scratch, until the line was so black he couldn’t make out the word at all. How could he claim her? For that matter, how could she honestly claim to love him? She didn’t even know him. But then, was it love he felt for her? Love? What did that mean? The things he felt terrified him in a way he’d never been terrified before, because he wanted it, but at the same time feared to get what he wanted because what happened, then, when it was gone? When it was taken away or disappeared? What would be left of him? They were big thoughts, bigger and more complicated than he knew how to write about. But he couldn’t stop thinking about them. And the more he thought about them, the more he hurt inside.

He was just nearing the grocer’s when he felt a light buzzing around both wrists. Startled, he came to a stop and looked down. His bracelets were alight and flashing purple. For a moment, he just stared. Purple? What did that mean? What was he to do? His whole life, he’d never seen the bracelets, neither his own nor anyone else’s, flash any colour other than green, blue, or red. He looked around and saw that other pedestrians were watching him with a funny look in their eyes. One man passing by muttered, ‘What’s that all about, then, eh, mate?’, and continued on his way.

Moments later, he spotted the approach of a Ward Patrol officer, headed straight for him, and his
stomach did a queer little flip. *It’s okay*, he reassured himself. *You’ve done nothing wrong. Just a spot check.* But he couldn’t help the pit of dread in his gut. Purple lights? Why purple lights?

‘Bracelets, please,’ said the officer, pulling out his pen-wand.

John presented his bracelets, and the lights deactivated. He breathed. The officer seemed little concerned, and so he should follow suit.

‘Right. Tattoo, please.’

John turned to let him scan the tattoo. He permitted himself a question, and a simple one. ‘Am I okay, sir?’

‘Oh sure,’ said the officer. ‘What this is, is a host recall alert. Something’s come up, and your host needs you returned to your residency without delay.’

‘Is he all right? I just saw him,’ John said. He’d never experienced a host recall before, didn’t even know what one was for. Was Mr Holmes in trouble? Why didn’t he call? ‘I’ll go home at once.’

‘It is my duty to escort you. Come along then.’ He steered John around and toward a patrol vehicle, walking him by the elbow. He could feel the eyes of Londoners watching his back, wondering what he had done.

‘Really, sir, it isn’t far at all. I can go on my own.’

‘That’s not how this works. Now, you’re not going to give me any trouble, are you, Tiny? We follow protocol, and everyone’s happy.’

John’s feet stopped cold. The officer tugged him along, but he pulled back and held his ground. ‘That’s not my name,’ he croaked.

‘No funny business. Come along, I said.’

‘But that’s not my name. I’m not . . .’

‘The summons is unequivocal. Mr Wilkes will have you home at once.’

A thrill of terror passed from John’s feet through his stomach and to his heart, and he jerked back, yanking his arm from the officer’s grip altogether. Shaking his head, he stepped back again, then again, and again.

‘Hey now,’ the officer said in a tone of warning. ‘Don’t make me drag you along, hear me?’

John turned and ran.

His feet barely touched the pavement. Wind whistled past his ears and stung his cheeks. He ran so fast and so straight that people ducked left and right to avoid his arrow-like flight.

‘He’s a runner! He’s a runner!’

The officer was chasing him, but he couldn’t risk looking back. He darted into the street. Cars slammed on their brakes, tyres squealed, horns blared. All he could think to do was run, fast and far. He needed to get home, back to Mr Holmes, back to where he was safe.

But he was going in the wrong direction. His ankle was already beginning to pain him. And then, the bracelets—they flashed red. They tightened automatically around his wrists, locking up. And then,
the shock.

He gasped, stumbled, but kept on going. It was a tingle, really, little more than a tickle. But then it happened again, a spiking around his wrists that sent hot shivers up his arms. He cried out, and his pace slowed. He tried to pull the bracelets off, but they were so tight now that he couldn’t claw even a finger beneath them. One final shock, and he felt like his arms were on fire.

Suddenly, with the force of a bull, the Patrol Officer tackled and drove him to the pavement. He landed with such force that the wind was knocked from his lungs and the skin of his chin flayed against the concrete. Pinning him by the neck, the Patrol Officer commanded him not to move. John didn’t know where they came from, but presently he was surrounded by another two, three, maybe four more officers. His hands were bound behind him and he was being lifted to his feet and hauled away.

He found his breath and cried out any who would hear him: ‘That’s not my name! He’s not my host! He’s not my host!’

They ignored his protests. The back door of the patrol vehicle swung open, and they lifted him inside.

‘He’s not my host! Please, listen to me!’ In his panic, he wrested his shoulders and kicked out with his feet. ‘My name is John! I live on Baker Street! My host is—’

‘Sedate him,’ said one of the officers.

Next he knew, there was a sharp prick in the side of his neck, and uncomfortable burning, and the world began to swim out of focus until all became blackness.

***

Consciousness came slowly, like a softly glowing coal that needed more oxygen. That was something Mr Holmes had taught him. Oxygen could blow out a flame, or keep it burning. To John, this sounded like a paradox, but Mr Holmes explained it further.

*Consider this glass of water, John. You need water to survive, true? Too little, you dehydrate. But too much water can drown you. It’s about balance. It’s about control. You are in control. Now try again, and start the fire.*

He licked his lips. Dry. Throat, too. Water. He needed water. He swallowed. Blinked. Tried to clear his head. But he didn’t move. Not at first. When he opened his eyes opened, he saw nothing. Then he began to feel the pain. It pounded in his head, ached up and down his body. Slowly, he touched his fingertips to his face, and a sharp stinging pain spread across his cheek from raw, scraped skin and bruised bone. He hissed, wanting to fade back into black, but he was afraid. Where was he? Where was Mr Holmes?

Gingerly, he sat up on the cool floor, turning his head this way and that, but still, no light, not even a sliver enough to see his own hand in front of his face. He patted his trouser pockets, but his phone was missing, along with his wallet. For that matter, he realised his coat was gone, too. And . . . his shoes? Yes, he was wearing only socks. He felt the cold now, and shivered. Licking his parched lips again, he felt for his wristwatch and depressed a small button along the clockface to illuminate it. He read the time, 19.23, and frowned. Wincing again, he lowered his forehead into a hand and tried to breathe, tried to remember what had happened . . .

With a gasp sharp enough to hurt his ribs, his head came up, and he illuminated his watch again, and
held it there. What little light it provided he used as a torch, and strained his eyes to take in his surroundings. It didn’t take long. Through the green dim, he made out a bare cot set against the wall of a very small space, and an aeroplane blanket. His shiver became a tremor.

He scrambled to his feet, clasped a hand to his mouth, and backed away from the cot as if it were on fire, but he took only two steps before his back struck a wall. The room was thrown back into blackness, but he knew it now, its precise dimensions, every corner, every inch of the place. No no no! He couldn’t be here, he couldn’t! This wasn’t real! He flung himself at the door, desperate to escape, to burst through and discover himself in 221B, where Mr Holmes would be waiting for him in the sitting room, playing his violin, ready to calm him and talk once again about the nature of nightmares and persuade him that it was all in his head and he was safe, safe and home. Home. But the door was locked.

No no no!!

He kicked it, hard, again, again, hard enough to splinter the wood but not break through. That was when he heard footsteps on the other side, coming from down the hall. Terrified, cursing himself, he hurried away from the door and into a corner of the room, furthest from the door, but not far enough. The door crashed open and light spilt inward. Silhouetted against the light of the hall stood Mr Wilkes.

You want a hard and dirty buggering all night. Say it. Say you’re a slag. Say it, little fucker.

‘Little fucker,’ Mr Wilkes said darkly.

John’s head twitched violently, and a for a moment, he didn’t know if he was here or there, then or now. There was no time to work through it. Suddenly, Mr Wilkes was advancing on him in the dark room, and he couldn’t press himself back far enough, he couldn’t melt himself into the wall or turn himself into stone or wake himself up at home.

‘Please no! No!’

With a fist as hard as iron, Mr Wilkes cracked him across the face.

His head rebounded off the wall. He didn’t cry out, only slumped, but nor did he fall to the floor. Mr Wilkes caught him at the throat and pinned him there.

‘God, that felt good,’ he said through gritted teeth, and he let out a great sigh, the way his guests used to, once they had finished. ‘I’ve been wanting to do that for a long, long time. You were supposed to keep your mouth shut. Remember that? You rat. You shit-stain. You’ve crossed me for the last time, Tiny. Now let’s shut you up for good.’

***

Something had gone terribly wrong. In his head. It had to be. Something he had seen on the street, or heard, or smelt, had triggered a bad memory. It had happened before, but usually it didn’t stick. Now, he was stuck. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real. He’s was in Tiny’s world again, and he didn’t know how to escape.

My name is John. My name is John.

He had been left in the dark. He was cold. He was hungry. And the longer he sat, huddled in the corner, shivering and crying and trying not to cry, he began to doubt whether any of it had been real to start with. Maybe he had gone mad. He had heard stories of wards losing their minds. What if that was him? Hadn’t this been precisely what Mr Wilkes had said would happen to him?
There will be no more going out. Ever.

This room, this darkness, this coldness. Had he never left it? Had it all just carried on as before? Sometimes, when a guest was there and was trapped in the master bedroom, and while they claimed him, he did a little trick where he turned off his mind and imagined himself somewhere else, just until it was over. What if he’d done that again, and this time, it just took him longer to come back.

You’ll stay locked until you’re needed.

When would he be needed again? He sat with his knees to his chin, arms hugging his legs. He rocked. He hit himself in the side of the head. But he couldn’t make a sound beyond that. Mr Wilkes had fitted his neck with a collar. He could cry, but without voice. He remembered being shot. But he had survived. And found a new home, a better home, with a better host. A host who was more than a host. A friend. His . . .

What were you thinking would happen next? Did you think you’d be put with a nice family? Get real. You’re dirty . . . You’ve ruined yourself, Tiny.

No! No! His name was John! It was! He’d chosen it himself! Mr Holmes had let him. Mr Sherlock Holmes of 221B Baker Street, where he had lived for the last twelve months, his home. His family. It was real, it had all been real!

But his overwhelming fear made the conviction waver. What proof did he have? All truth was supported by evidence, that’s what Mr Holmes said. And the fact that such a thought was in his head at all, that was evidence itself, wasn’t it? Of course, it was.

And something else. My name is John, he thought. J-O-H-N. I live in London, he thought. L-O-N-D-O-N. Yes! Yes! He knew how to read, had learnt to write! His brain hadn’t been able to do that before! All the things he knew now, about anatomy and astronomy and chemistry and physics were things Mr Holmes had taught him! He was learning maths and reciting the countries of the world and reading poetry! Because he was a man of letters. His host had made him so. My host is named Sherlock Holmes. S-H-E-R-L—

Was that the front door? Was he back? His heart began to race, that soft and tired muscle that had been working so hard for so long to keep him alive. Sometimes he thought it might burst. He strained to listen, but there was nothing else. No more sounds. A trick of his mind, maybe, or another door in another flat of the building where no one had ever questioned his comings and goings, or wondered what went on behind the closed door marked 1405.

He checked his watch. It had gone two in the morning. He was supposed to have been home many hours ago. Was Mr Holmes worried? Did he know what had happened? Did he understand that it was a mistake, and that it wasn’t John’s fault, and would he be able to make it right? Was he coming for him, to take him home? Oh, how he just wanted to go home!

Aha. There was one more thing. Someone had taken his coat and his shoes, but he still had the wristwatch Mr Holmes had given him for Christmas. Its glow was soft but real. When he felt like he was sliding, when panic began to resurge, when he struggled to recall his name, he pressed the button and the subtle green light was enough to recall him to the truth. His name was John. Mr Holmes was real. And he was out still out there.

Please find me, Mr Holmes, he whispered, his face softly illuminated by a dim green glow.

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'On your feet, dog.'

John startled awake. Despite the fear and pain, the cold and hunger, his body had succumbed to exhaustion. He had slept fitfully, but he had slept.

Before his mind could properly dispel the haze of sleep, Mr Wilkes’ hands were fisting the front of his shirt and dragging him upward before hauling him from the ward room. His feet scrambled for purchase as he was pulled down the hall and into the master bedroom, where Mr Wilkes dropped him to the floor. Alert and alarmed, John scrambled to his feet and backed away from his attacker, though the door was blocked and he had nowhere to run. In desperation, he looked around for something that could serve as a barrier—or a weapon—or only discover a room he no longer recognised.

It was bare. The sofa that had been set before the fireplace was gone, the rug was gone, the curtains were gone. The bed was still standing, but it had been stripped down to the mattress and all the blankets and sheets were missing. The chest that had stood at the end of the bed, gone. The mirrors, gone. The shelves where once had stood candles and incense, gone.

On the bed was a brown paper bag labelled *Wolf and Badger*.

Mr Wilkes paid no mind to his distress. ‘Take off your clothes and put on these,’ he said evenly, indicating the bag.

John didn’t move. He stared at the unassuming bag, afraid of what might be inside.

‘I won’t tell you twice.’

‘Why?’ All he could manage was a whisper. The collar stole his voice with its every electrical pulse.

‘Why? You don’t get to ask questions. You just do as you’re told.’

‘You’re not my host,’ John said.

John’s jaw clicked shut and he braced, disbelieving the gall of speaking to Mr Wilkes like that. Mr Wilkes’ eyes darkened, piercing John with the most hateful a glare John had received in all his life. Without taking his eyes off John, he reached into the pocket of his trousers and withdrew what appeared to be something like a black handlebar. But a sudden flick of his wrist, and the expandable baton sprang into being. To his further dismay, Mr Wilkes’ face suddenly cracked with a grin.

‘Now you see, Tiny, that’s where you’re wrong. I am absolutely your host. It’s *my* name on the registration. I’m the one who issued the host recall alert, and who did they bring you to? Me.’ He tapped John on the forehead with the tip of the baton. Then he grinned, pleased with his intimidations. He returned the baton to its compact form, and pocketed it.

He walked to the bed and turned the paper bag over, its contents spilling out.

‘I have no interest in hosting you, believe me,’ said Mr Wilkes as he lifted the first item: a simple-cut, long-sleeve, pure white shirt with no collar and buttons halfway down. ‘You were a nightmare. But you were lucrative. You made me rich.’ He folded the shirt neatly and set it at the corner of the mattress. ‘In fact, you made me millions.’

John blanched, not understanding. But . . . the debt . . . ? He had been close to paying it off, but not close enough. Right? That was what he had been told.

‘And then along comes Sherlock Holmes, and he robs me blind. Did he tell you? When he realised
just how profitable you had been, he wanted that money—money you had made for me—for himself. The utter bastard. He stole my money, Tiny. He fucking stole it. With the click of a button, he was five million pounds richer, the thief. Five-fucking-million pounds. Did he tell you that? And he leaves me destitute. Think I was going to stand for that?

He lifted a pair of trousers next, equally white, equally plain, made of the same loose fabric which cinched at the waist with a drawstring. The fabric of both shirt and trousers was so thin John could clearly see the outline of Mr Wilkes’ hand on the other side.

‘I don’t believe you,’ John said weakly, his throat hoarse from the mild electrical pulse that rendered his vocal cords slack.

Mr Wilkes laughed without humour.

But he just couldn’t believe it. Mr Holmes had promised. He said he wouldn’t tell Mr Wilkes that he’d told what he’d been made to do, he wouldn’t tell anyone. And besides, Mr Holmes was no thief. He’d once chasteised John for stealing a plate. There was no way he would have stolen five million pounds! Not Mr Holmes.

And there couldn’t be any five million pounds because of the debt! This was impossible! He was stupid and didn’t know much about money, but none of this made sense!

‘You think Sherlock was above greed? No one is. You see a cash cow, you milk it, plain and simple. But believe what you like, you simpleton, it makes no difference to me. I intend to be made whole. That’s the only reason you’re here right now. So stop gawping at me like a fish, and get dressed.’

‘No, sir,’ said John, trying valiantly to keep his whispering voice from quavering.

‘Tiny. Don’t defy me.’

‘My name is John.’

Mr Wilkes’ eyes darkened again, and he stepped forward menacingly. Startled, Tiny flinched. (Not Tiny. John. John.) His shoulders hunched, but he stood his ground. That was when Mr Wilkes’ eyes fell to his hands: one was holding the other at the wrist, covering the watch.

‘What’s that?’ He seized John’s wrist and, with a harsh yank, extended his arm. ‘A Tag Heuer? Are you kidding me? Sherlock bought you a Tag Heuer? You?’ He twisted John’s arm to get to the clasp. John tried to pull his arm back, but Mr Wilkes slapped his face. ‘Hold still.’

John didn’t know the value of the watch, not in numbers. But he knew what it was worth to him. It had been the first gift he had ever been given, as far as he recalled, and it was the last physical reminder of his life on Baker Street. Mr Holmes had given it to him. It was proof—tangible proof—that he was important to someone, that he mattered to someone. And he wasn’t going to just let someone take it.

He pulled his arm away again, which drew Mr Wilkes into his circle. With barely a conscious thought, his feet pivoted, hips rotated, and he hooked his opposite fist square into Mr Wilkes’ jaw.

Mr Wilkes let out a painful cry and staggered backward. There was no time to be stunned at what he had just done. He seized his opportunity, and bolted from the room.

He made it as far as the front door, only to find it locked. Panicked, he lifted the security plate, desperately trying to remember the passcode he had cracked so long ago. But he could hear Mr Wilkes hurrying after him, and there was no time, no time at all. So he took to pounding on the door,
both fists pounding, hoping a neighbour would hear and call the police.

He was seized by the back of his shirt and tossed into the centre of the now bare room. Mr Wilkes fell on top of him. He felt hands around his throat over the collar, squeezing hard. He gripped Mr Wilkes’ arms, trying to dislodge him, feeling his face turn purple as it swelled with blood. He let his arms go lax, flopping out to either side of his body. Then, in one swift movement, he cupped his hands, swung his arms upward, and smashed them against Mr Wilkes’ head, one cup around each ear.

The man hollered in pain, and John suspected he’d accomplished exactly what Mr Holmes had once taught him during their boxing and defence lessons: he had created a sudden change in air pressure with his cupped hands, and burst one if not both of Mr Wilkes’ eardrums.

With a roar of anger, Mr Wilkes flew into a torrent of blows. Pain rained down on him like hail, and though he tried to kick and flail and punch and scratch, he resorted, at the last, simply to trying to shield himself from the deluge.

At last, Mr Wilkes exhausted himself. Moaning and spitting, he sat back, lurched to his feet, and leant his back against the door.

‘I could kill you,’ he panted as John rolled onto his side, holding his ribs together as though they’d been splintered into a thousand pieces. ‘I should have done, last year. But I need you alive, and whole. You’re not worth anything to me dead. But just know it. I could kill you, Tiny.’

He pushed himself up to his knees and sat back on his heels. He could feel blood trickling down his face from his nose and a split lip. He spit blood onto the floor and glared at Mr Wilkes.

‘John,’ he said.

Mr Wilkes pulled out the baton, formed the weapon, and pulled back his arm. John never felt the blow. He was laid out cold on the ground.

***

He was starving.

Mr Wilkes provided him water, one bottle a day, and nothing else. By his reckoning, he’d been held for four days. Each time he came into the ward room to deliver it, he made sure John saw that he was wearing his wristwatch.

He had little to do with John, otherwise.

Mr Holmes had not come.

*He’ll come. He’ll find you. Mr Holmes will take you back to Baker Street.*

H-O-M-E.

He spelt it out on the floor with a finger, in the dark. It was like an invisible talisman, warding off the evil of madness. It was a reminder of who he really was. It was a promise to himself that this was not the end.

There was so much he wanted to do, so much he had yet to learn. And he had only found Harry. They had only just started getting to know each other again. The fear of never seeing her again, after having just found her, was enough to confirm what she really was to him.
S-I-S-T-E-R.

If he never made it back, he would never get to help Mrs Hudson repaper the kitchen. He would never get to play football again with Michael and Mr Lestrade. He would never get to see little Hannah grow up. He would never get to have dinner again with Dr Stamford and his family. Worst of all, he would never . . . That is, he had such plans with . . . His life was meant to be with . . . He was most loved by . . .

S-H-E-R-L . . .

Someone was coming.

Mr Wilkes’ footsteps stopped on the other side of the door. John waited, breath stuck in his chest, stomach clenching. He was conserving his water, trying to portion it out a little at a time. He had the good sense of how to make it last a day, and he still had half the bottle. If it had been morning when he received it—and he couldn’t be sure that it was—that meant it was now evening.

The door opened. The baton expanded with a snap.

‘No more funny business,’ Mr Wilkes growled. ‘On your feet. Move.’

John grabbed the wall and pulled himself to his feet. Warily, he exited the room. Mr Wilkes shepherded him into the master bedroom where the white clothing was still laid out on the bare mattress beside a folded towel.

‘You have five minutes to shower, ten to dress. Get to it.’

Too weak to fight, or argue, or question, John shuffled to the bathroom, but as he moved to close the door behind him, Mr Wilkes added, ‘Door stays open.’

He trembled—from cold, from fear, from embarrassment—and pulled off his clothes. He stepped into the shower where he found a bar of soap. He washed his body and his hair with it. Each second that slipped by, he hoped he was only another second away from Mr Holmes crashing into the room to put a stop to this, and whatever was going to happen next. But his five minutes expired, and he was still alone with Mr Wilkes.

While he showered, Mr Wilkes had disposed of his clothes in a bin bag. All that was left for him to dress in were the thin white clothes. He was not given any undergarments.

Once he was clothed, Mr Wilkes surprised him by removing the collar.

‘Last time I’ll get to hear this canary sing,’ he said. ‘Ready to go home?’

John couldn’t stop his gasp; its sharpness was like a knife in his chest.

‘I’ve struck a deal. I’m getting paid today. That’s all I wanted, Tiny. Restoration. We’ve come to an understanding, see, and as soon as I turn you over, I get what’s owed to me. Well? Where’s the smile? The thank you? Tiny, I’m sending you home.’

He stared, disbelieving, not daring to hope but unable to stop the flow of emotion at the mere thought of seeing his Mr Holmes again.

Squeezing John’s shoulder in a paternalistic manner, Mr Wilkes leant in close. ‘What do we say?’

‘Th-thank you, sir.’
Mr Wilkes patted John’s swollen cheek in an almost affectionate manner, but the touch was a painful one nonetheless. ‘He won’t be too pleased by this, I reckon. But give it a few days. It’ll fade.’ He grinned. ‘I told you before. I’m not a bad guy. I just don’t like being taken advantage of. Come on. Let’s go make the exchange.’

John was numb with shock. That was it then? He’d been held for ransom, and now that it was paid, he could go home? He was so happy he almost cried, but he wouldn’t believe it for himself, not until he saw Mr Holmes with his own two eyes, not until he felt himself safe in Mr Holmes’ arms.

He followed Mr Wilkes out of the flat. ‘I’m selling this place, too,’ said Mr Wilkes as he locked the door behind them. John dared a sidelong glance at him, noting the cotton wool ball stuffed into his right ear. His upper lip sported a bump and slight discoloration. ‘Should bring in over half a million quid, I’m told. Better than what I paid for it. Terrific location. You just have to be sure prospective buyers don’t know about the bloodstain in the ward room. You know I had to replace that floor altogether? Damn thing wouldn’t clean up, not even with bleach. Fucking nightmare, that was.’

They entered the lift, and Mr Wilkes selected -1. John knew it was for the car park below the building, though he’d never been down there before but once, when Mr Wilkes had first brought him to the flat.

Mr Wilkes made a show of checking his new watch for the time. ‘He should already be waiting for us, I reckon. Stand straight, Tiny, and try for a smile.’

The doors dinged open, and John felt a rush of cold air swirl inside the lift. He hunched his shoulders against the chill, the fabric flapping against his stomach and legs, but Mr Wilkes took him by the elbow and steered him forward into the underground car park. It was well lit though not well occupied, but for about a dozen cars parked between their lines. And one more, a shiny black town car, in the centre facing them, its headlights shining brightly and pointed directly in their direction.

John’s heart skipped a beat. That was Mr Holmes’s car, he recognised it. Not his Mr Holmes’; his brother’s, Mycroft Holmes. He’d ridden in it himself, when Mr Holmes the Elder had picked him up off the street some weeks back.

The door opened, and two figures stepped out of either side. But the lights were so bright in his eyes that John couldn’t quite make them out. Mr Wilkes walked him closer, and the two men, both tall and thin, came to meet them.

But something was off. He didn’t realise it until that moment, but he knew his Mr Holmes’ silhouette —the squareness of his shoulders, the litheness of his gait, the crown of curls around his head. These men . . . these were not his family. His heart began to sink, his blood pressure to rise, and as his tension grew, so did the grip around his elbow.

‘Don’t move,’ Mr Wilkes rumbled under his breath.

At last, like a knife cutting through the high beams, Lord Magnussen strode into view.

A shudder of terror chased through John’s whole body like an electric shock that continued to reverberate. ‘No,’ he whispered. As he began to fully understand what was happening, the panic took its stranglehold. ‘No! No, please, sir, please!’ He turned to Mr Wilkes. ‘I’ll do anything, I swear! Please don’t sell me to him. Not him. Please, Mr Wilkes! Please—!’

Mr Wilkes seized the back of his neck with fingers as strong as the jaws of a wolf and shook him roughly. ‘Shut up!’ he hissed. ‘Shut it!’
‘Trouble, Sebastian?’ asked Lord Magnussen.

‘Not in the least,’ replied Mr Wilkes. His fingernails sank so deeply into his skin, John knew he had drawn blood. ‘I’ll shut him up.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind them feisty. That’s a side of this one I’ve not yet seen.’

John tried to retreat, his feet pushing him backward, but Mr Wilkes held him in place as Lord Magnussen slowly approached. He wore a well-tailored grey suit, a blue shirt and black tie, and shiny black shoes. His spectacles were rimmed with thin silver and rested lightly on his nose. He was not a man who smiled; he never smiled. But looking down at John now, he smiled. John froze, his brain short-wiring. He had learnt about this in a book. When threatened, animals had one of three responses: flight, fight, or freeze. To his horror, he froze.

‘Let me take a good look at him.’

To keep him in place, Mr Wilkes gripped one arm, and the second man the other, holding him taut while Lord Magnussen walked around him and performed his inspection.

‘He’s changed a bit, hasn’t he? Grown wiry. More flesh, but also . . . muscle.’ He paused behind John, who felt him over his shoulder like a storm cloud about to break. Suddenly, hand covered his right buttock and squeezed. ‘Firm, yet plush.’

John twisted. ‘Don’t touch me.’

‘Ohh,’ Lord Magnussen breathed with a chuckle, keeping his hand where it was and closing in behind, his head coming around over John’s shoulder. ‘I’ll touch what’s mine.’ He snaked his hand around his thin trousers and gripped John in front. ‘Mine.’

‘I’m not!’ John gasped. But slashing through his mind were visions of this man disrobing by the fireplace, of a steady advance, of a large figure looming over his naked and vulnerable body. Hands everywhere—covering his mouth, closing around his throat, digging between his legs, twisting him, wrenching his limbs, flipping him over, slapping his skin until his puffed red. It would last all night, he knew. And another night, and another. He felt small and powerless, tiny in a world of monsters.

‘Mr Wilkes, please,’ Tiny begged. ‘Not him, anyone but him. Please! Mr Holmes will pay, I know he will. Please!’

‘Tell you what,’ said Lord Magnussen, circling back around and bending at the waist to bring his nose only inches from Tiny’s. ‘You want a different host? You want to go back to this, what is his name, Mr Holmes, is it?’

Tiny nodded tremulously and mouthed a pathetic please.

‘I’ll make you a deal. You and I, we’re going to play an old game. I’m going to flick your face. And if you can keep still, little man, and not flinch, not even blink . . . then I promise, hand to God’—he lifted his right arm in solemn vow—‘I will send you back to him.’

A hot tear slid down his cheek. As if he were nothing more than a puppet, as if someone else were controlling the movement of his head, he nodded. There was no choice but to concede. That was the only choice he had ever had.

Lord Magnussen raised his hand to Tiny’s face, his middle finger poised to flick.

Be still. Be still. Be still!
‘Here it comes,’ said Lord Magnussen. ‘Your one chance. Don’t fuck up.’

*Be still! Be still! Be—!

He flicked his finger. A sharp pain struck Tiny in the eye. He flinched.

The men around him threw back their heads and laughed.

‘That settles it then!’ declared Lord Magnussen. He pulled out his phone. ‘Colonel, get the paperwork for Mr Wilkes, here. Let’s make this official.’

The second man dropped his arm and returned to the car. Meanwhile, Lord Magnussen accessed his accounts on his phone. ‘Quarter of a million quid, as agreed, and I dispose of our mutual . . . problem.’

‘My sincerest thanks,’ said Mr Wilkes.

‘On paper, you understand, it will register as £2,500. Anything more than that would raise an eyebrow. So just between friends, let’s call the remainder compensation for your troubles. Finder’s fees, storage fees, that sort of thing. Move the money into an offshore account, and no one will go looking.’

The man he had called ‘Colonel’ returned with a leather notebook, which he opened to a page before handing Lord Magnussen a pen. With a flourish, he signed, and passed the pen to Mr Wilkes, who did the same.

‘It’s done!’

He turned back to Tiny and stroked him beneath the chin with a cold, damp finger, long and slow. ‘Colonel, put our new pet in the car. Time to take him home. Mr Wilkes, pleasure doing business with you.’

They shook hands, and without so much as a backward glance, Mr Wilkes left. The Colonel grabbed the back of Tiny’s white shirt and marched him forward toward the black car that would carry him away from one cruel master to another.

*Do not despair. Mr Holmes will come.*

No. He’d been left behind, discarded. He was a ward, nothing more. Wards were easily got rid of, replaced, forgotten. Used, abused, beaten, turned into nothing. He was nothing, nothing.

*You are family. You are loved. Mr Holmes told you so himself. He loves you. He loves you. You are loved.*

He shook his head, tears welling, the black car looming like a hearse. Unwanted. Unnoticed, unconsidered, unloved. Tiny knew it, as sure as he knew anything. He was unloved.

*No! Your name is John! Remember it. You are John!*
The Turbid Ebb and Flow

Mycroft Holmes seldom involved himself in personal matters. Since committing the gravest error of his youth, he had decidedly distanced himself from such things, even and especially where it concerned family. He wasn’t like that anymore. Sentimental, that is. Fortunately, one could categorise affairs of a missing family ward under *business*, and to that he dedicated himself wholeheartedly.

For one, he needed to get Sherlock under control. Mycroft had scarcely finished pronouncing the name *Sebastian Wilkes* when his excitable little brother let out a torrent of expletives before flying out of the room like a bat, leaving Mycroft staring stupidly after him. Shaking off the feeling of bewilderment, he went into research mode to discover who exactly was this man called Wilkes.

His first results—the most surface of them—was largely unimpressive. Wilkes was a banker by profession at Shad Sanderson. Mycroft found an address in a posh neighbourhood and a list of next of kin and a birthdate . . . Hm. Born the same year as Sherlock. A few more clacks on the keyboard, and he discovered that both Sherlock and Wilkes had attended Oxford together and therefore had likely known each other there. Knowing his brother’s historical lack of friends of any sort, Mycroft reasoned that the chances were slim that they had got on, and, given Sherlock’s reaction to the name, perhaps they had even harboured a fair bit of animosity for one another. That would be something else to question Sherlock about, once he got the chance. In the meantime, however, there was the matter at hand.

Less than an hour after his abrupt departure, Sherlock rang.

‘He’s not here, neither of them is here, the flat is empty, the son of a *bitch!*’

‘Sherlock, shut up, slow down, and talk to me.’

‘This wasn’t even the address, was it? Dammit, why didn’t you stop me? Of course, he wouldn’t have brought John here! John told me as much! He’d never set foot here before, didn’t even know where Wilkes lived! He was stuck by himself on Blackwall Way!’

‘*Sherlock.*’

Sherlock stopped talking. Loud breathing punctuated the silence before he started again, deeper, angrier. ‘What was the address on the host recall? Was it Blackwall Way? Tell me the number, tell me which flat.’

‘First, *you* tell me this: what does Sebastian Wilkes want with your ward?’

‘There’s no *time* for this, Mycroft. The address!’

‘You need to talk to me. I need a *clear* picture of what the hell is going on, and you need to slow down and think *rationally*. What’s the plan, Sherlock? Say you find him in the next hour. What will you do? Break down the door and kidnap your John?’

‘Kidnap! Wilkes is not his host! I am! By all legal rights, Mycroft, John is *mine!* I filed his registration a year ago, and I never signed him away!’

‘I know that, Sherlock. I scanned his tattoo myself when I first met him. *Of course* he was registered to you. But as of *today*, he is not. So. What do you conclude?’
‘Someone manipulated the record.’

‘Who?’

‘Not Wilkes, he’s a moron, and doesn’t even have enough money to make a bribe. So someone . . . with power.’ Then he whispered, as though to himself. ‘Oh God.’

‘Precisely. If you go charging in, things could end very badly for you, and so for John. The law will not be on your side. We need to think this through. We need to plan.’

Another long pause. Then, ‘What is the address, Mycroft?’

Sighing, Mycroft consulted his notes and read it over the phone, but it was not an address on Blackwall Way. When he didn’t get a response, he said, ‘Sherlock? Still with me?’

‘That’s his home address,’ said Sherlock. ‘That’s where I am now. He’s not here. John’s not here.’

Mycroft thought. ‘You’ll not like hearing this, Sherlock, but there is nothing more you can do for him tonight. Meet me at my flat in thirty minutes. We’ll think this through together.’

***

Morning dawned, and Mycroft knew they were in for a row, unless he played his cards right. Sipping his morning coffee, he glanced over at the sofa, where Sherlock was still passed out, one arm dangling over the side, knuckles brushing his bespoke chessboard rug.

Last night had been a long and tense one. Sherlock hadn’t wanted to be there. He wanted to be out there, searching, but there was no point. The next step had to wait until morning. It galled him terribly, and he was more worked up than Mycroft had ever seen him. He paced as he talked with wild gesticulations, though getting him to say much of anything was a challenge.

Mycroft’s questions were short and to the point, but Sherlock’s answers were curt and evasive. What history did Sherlock have with Sebastian Wilkes?

Nothing, we just didn’t get on.

Why would Wilkes abduct a ward? What was he trying to accomplish?

Revenge. Money.

There has been no ransom demand.

Not a ransom. Not a ransom.

Why would John have known or not known where Wilkes lived?

He didn’t. He didn’t know.

Did John know Wilkes?

Nothing.

Did Wilkes know John? The manipulated record claims Wilkes as his host since 2025. That’s six years ago now.

Oh God, John, oh God, oh God.
But Mycroft was relentless. He refused to let Sherlock slide into unintelligible distress, and he would not tolerate his evasions. Eventually, it began to come out. Wilkes had indeed hosted John, just before Sherlock did. Wilkes had shot him. That was how John had ended up at the pound. Then the blow: Wilkes had operated a Downside, but no one knew. The police didn’t know. It was weeks and weeks before John could find the courage to tell his new host.

“What sort of Downside, Sherlock?” he asked, though he feared he knew already.

“A bordello,” Sherlock whispered with distaste.

“Good lord.”

“For five years, Mycroft. You can’t imagine . . . You should have seen the look on John’s face, when he told me of it. What little he could stand to tell me of it, that is. You have no idea what it did to him. What it cost him to speak of it. He was so afraid.”

“I’m . . . sorry. Sorry I wasn’t . . . more mindful of him. I treated him . . . poorly.”

Sherlock stopped pacing. ‘Don’t speak of him like he’s gone. I will get him back, and you can make your apologies then.’

The vengeful spirit was returning, and stoking his ire was sure to see him flee again to the streets with no viable plan and end up doing something incredibly stupid. So Mycroft had no regrets drugging his finger of whiskey and forcing the overtaxed man to sleep.

Now, he was stirring. Mycroft waited patiently, and with measured nonchalance, as Sherlock blinked, yawned to stretch his face, and flexed his toes. With a bewildered expression, as though slowly puzzling out where he was, he sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then realisation dawned as he spotted Mycroft watching him over a mug of coffee.

“You—”

‘Your assignment,’ Mycroft said, extending a folded sheet of paper.

“What?”

‘Shower. Eat some toast. Then I suspect you want to get back out there. This’—he waggled the paper—‘is your first stop.’

Bleary-eyed, Sherlock shuffled across the room and took the page. ‘Mason Brite,’ he read.

‘The Ward Patrol officer who responded to the host recall,’ said Mycroft. ‘I expect you’ll have a few questions for him.’

***

‘Yeah, I remember,’ said Mr Brite. ‘Don’t get too many host recalls, so they tend to stick out, know what I mean, Mr Lestrade?’

Sherlock pocketed his stolen credentials and ignored the question. ‘Any problems with this one?’

‘Well, the ward tried to pull a runner on me. They do that, sometimes, the troublemakers. Then we have to run them down ourselves, sedate them, sometimes, when they get fighty. That why I’m talking to you? The ward do something? Steal something? You know, it’s not my job to search them. Just transport, that’s all.’
So John had tried to run. Just the thought of it made something twist deep inside of Sherlock. He must have been so scared, and not ten minutes from his own front door.

‘Where did you transport him?’

‘Host residence. Unless specified otherwise in the recall, that’s where we always take them.’

Sherlock frowned. ‘Do you remember the address?’

‘Er . . . Somewhere in Canary Wharf, innit? Real posh address.’

‘Blackwall Way?’

‘Nah, weren’t that. It was . . . One Park Drive.’

That was Wilkes’ primary residence. But John hadn’t been there. It didn’t make sense! ‘You took him up to the flat yourself?’ he asked.

‘No need,’ said Mr Brite. ‘Host was waiting for us on the street. He just needed help getting the ward in to the backseat of his car.’

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. ‘What for?’

‘Said he had to take him to the vets!’ Mr Brite chuckled. ‘They do that, sometimes. Wards, they fight their hosts about vet visits. Try to evade them, stay away from the house during business hours, coming home only at night. So hosts issue recalls, and that’s where we come in. This ward, he must have really not wanted to get stuck with a needle. Too bad we had to sedate him! That’s him stuck at least twice in a day!’ He chuckled again.

Sherlock was finding it difficult breathing, he was so angry. All he had learnt was that this man had terrorised and mistreated John, and delivered him into the hands of a monster. Beyond that, he had learnt nothing. Nothing useful. Wilkes had recalled John to his own residence and then taken him somewhere else. To Blackwall Way? Maybe, maybe not. But even if so, there were hundreds of flats in dozens of buildings. What was he to do? Knock on each one?

Or maybe, just the one with blacked out windows?

As he started away, to hail a taxi to Canary Wharf, a text came in from Mycroft.

W has purchased a one-way ticket to Bangkok, set to depart at 0010 tonight. I suggest you don’t let him board that plane.

***

He walked up and down Blackwall Way, eyes turned to the sky. The buildings towered over him, dozens of them. He examined their windows. From what he had gathered from John’s narrative, the flat had been several storeys up. But the higher they went, the harder they were to make out with any clarity. The sun reflected brightly on their glass surfaces. It was impossible to tell with most whether there was a curtain or something more opaque blocking out the widows.

John, he thought, are you here?

There was nowhere to stand to watch the comings and goings of every front door. He needed more
eyes, and he had only two.

‘I need you to be watching CCTV up and down this street,’ he said to Mycroft. ‘I need eyes on the entrances.’

‘On it. But with your feet on the ground, it’s time to start talking to the locals.’

He did just that. He stopped people leaving their buildings: Do you remember hearing about a shooting around here about a year ago? Do you know of a man named Wilkes? Any rumours of a Downside operating in this vicinity? No, no, and what the hell kind of neighbourhood do you think I live in?

He phoned Wilkes’ office and spoke to the secretary. He was not in today, she said. He had been away on business since the beginning of the week, and when he asked where to, she asked who was calling, and he angrily ended the call.

The hours were sliding by. He felt that he was close, so close, and yet . . . Maybe he wasn’t close at all. Maybe John was not a lift-ride away. But if he was . . . If he was there, right now . . . If Wilkes or anyone was hurting him, abusing him, doing to him the things that still haunted his dreams . . . He didn’t know if he was close at all, but he couldn’t leave, not when there was the slimmest of possibilities that his leaving would mean abandoning him.

His phone dinged in his pocket.

**Heathrow.**

**Now.**

**No trains.**

Sherlock’s stomach twisted a little, and his feet rebelled. The sun was down, and he had been looking for an unilluminated square high above his head. But it was proving a fruitless visual search. He knew his next stop was Heathrow, but it felt so wrong. A step in the exactly wrong direction.

**Call me when you get in a taxi.**

Cursing himself, he walked away from Blackwall Way.

***

‘An alert: A car registered to Sebastian Wilkes was flagged on the A1203, headed west. He’s on his way to the airport, obviously. I’m monitoring the flags as he crosses certain checkpoints, making sure he doesn’t deviate from the course.’

‘How long ago was the alert?’

‘Six minutes. Tracking your location, you’re nine minutes behind him.’

Sherlock leant forward. ‘A little faster, if you please.’

The cabbie shrugged and put on the gas.

‘Are there any cameras? Any CCTV? Is John with him?’

‘There’s no way to tell as this juncture. But tracing it back, the car most certainly came from an underground garage. There’s no way you would have spotted him, standing where you were.’
‘But he was there. On Blackwall. He was definitely there.’

‘It appears so.’

‘Son of a bitch. Mycroft, I need to go back. He can’t take John to the airport, and we know he bought only one ticket. He’s left him in the flat! And now we know which building!’

‘Concentrate, Sherlock. You need to intercept Wilkes before he passes through security. You need to get information from him. Do you understand?’

‘What information? Mycroft, I hear it in your voice. You know something else. Tell me.’

There was only a brief pause. ‘The registration . . . It has been changed. Wilkes is no longer listed as host.’

Sherlock’s spine straightened like someone had jerked him upright by the throat. ‘What?’

‘There was a transference—’

‘When!’

‘Within the last twenty minutes, it seems.’

‘Oh my God! Who! Who!’

‘If I knew that, I wouldn’t have sent you chasing after Wilkes,’ Mycroft scowled through the phone. ‘There’s a block on the account. Classified.’

‘But you’re the British government!’

‘I’m just one man. I don’t have limitless clearances, you nincompoop, and this one will take some time to crack. Is that what you want? For me to take my time? Or are you going to intercept Wilkes and squeeze it out of him?’

‘Oh my God, oh my God. Is this seriously as fast as you can go?’ The cabbie glared through the rearview mirror. ‘Why would it be classified? You must have some idea.’

‘High profile individual, maybe. Celebrities often keep their wards listed as confidential as a matter of privacy. Often, high ranking police or military officers, for safety reasons. I’m researching Wilkes’ connections. Given his address, I assume he’s a wealthy man. He must belong in some fairly exclusive circles.’

Sherlock thought about all the men who had trafficked the Downside who could afford the cost of a single night or single act. John had named very few of them. Likely, he had not known who most of them were, even if there were big names among them. Politicians, business tycoons, public officials, entertainment moguls, tech giants, athletes—how many of them? Or maybe it was none of them. A new name, a new face.

Or what if—a spark of hope lit Sherlock’s despairing soul—what if the DULUGE had found him again? What if this had not been a new ward transaction, but a rescue mission? What if John was safe?

***

Heathrow was swarming, and Sherlock’s eyes were dancing. His brain was a machine, filtering out the wrong profiles and statures, the women and the children, the old men and the darker skinned. He
stood by the security line, watching and waiting.

He had arrived at the airport just two minutes behind Wilkes. He reasoned that, given the one-way ticket, he would have luggage to check. So he was confident that he had arrived at the security line ahead of him, where each passenger would have to submit to the initial clearance checks, no exceptions, no matter how much money one had in his current account.

He waited for nearly twenty minutes, and as each passed away his hopes began to sink. Then suddenly, there he was, in the midst of a crowd and looking down at his phone as he walked, trailing a black carry-on case behind him. The rest of the world went black around him, and Sherlock felt a surge of anger travel from his stomach to the tips of his fingers. He wanted to reach forward and seize his throat so hard his neck would crack like a hollowed, dried stalk of corn.

Sherlock stepped forward and planted himself firmly in front of the oncoming horde. They split and flowed around him, but for Sebastian Wilkes, who, occupied with his phone, had not looked up, not until the last, when Sherlock, unmoving, said, ‘Flight’s cancelled, Seb.’

Wilkes’ head snapped up and his feet stopped cold. His lips contorted as though he were about to swear, his shoulders twisted like he was prepared to run, but before he could say or do anything at all, Sherlock grabbed the front of his coat and pulled him close.

‘I should have killed you when I had the chance,’ he said, spit landing between Wilkes’ eyes.

Wilkes opened his mouth as though to scream for help. Sherlock was faster. His hand flew to the back of Wilkes’ neck. He turned them both around and simultaneously struck the centre of his chest, right in the sternum, just so: his breath gave out. Sherlock’s arm found its way around his shoulders and he laughed as though he were just one friend greeting another. He began to walk, leading Wilkes with a tight grip.

‘I’ll warn you not to make a scene,’ Sherlock hissed as he marched Wilkes closer and closer to the exit.

‘You’re making a mistake, Holmes,’ Wilkes croaked.

‘The only mistake I made was letting you live.’

‘And this.’

Wilkes held up his phone, the screen alight with an image. Sherlock almost didn’t look. He didn’t want to be distracted. He wanted to leave the airport with Wilkes in tow, drive him straight to Mycroft, and together, the two brothers would squeeze every last drop of information from him, like juicing a lemon.

But he did look. And what he saw changed everything.

It was a photo of John, naked but for his underwear, sat upon a bed with a blindfold around his head and a ball gag in his mouth.

His bed. Sherlock’s.

_Irene._

His shock had loosened his grip on Wilkes, who suddenly twisted away. Sherlock snatched him back, but in the ensuing confusion and scuffle, they ended up against a wall, the traffic of the airport swarming by behind them.
'Where did you get that?' he asked stupidly, because, of course, he already knew.

‘You know where. This is your flat, is it not?’

‘You son of a—’

‘Doesn’t seem like a very healthy environment for a ward.’

‘That was not my doing! Unlike you, I would never do such a thing to him! That woman—’

‘Sold it to me for insurance. That’s right. You come after me, you cause me any trouble, I leak this to the press. I go missing or anything happens to me, she’ll do it herself. Forget it, Holmes. You’ve lost. You thought you could come after me, steal my money, sully my name? I’m rubbing shoulders with some of the most powerful men in New Britain. You? You’re nobody. You’re nothing. And Tiny? Tiny’s nothing but dog meat.’

Sherlock fisted the front of Wilkes shirt in two fists. ‘Where is John?’ he demanded.

‘Not my problem. And unless you want to be thrown into a room measuring six by eight, you won’t make it your problem, either.’

Wilkes suddenly shoved him backward. The two men faced each other, breathing hard, hatred etched into every line of their faces, every muscle bracing for a fight.

‘Problem here?’

Two security officers had approached, eyeing the men suspiciously.

Wilkes dropped the phone into the pocket of his jacket. He tugged his shirt straight. ‘Not at all, officers,’ he said, controlling his panting. He looked dead on at Sherlock. ‘My friend’s just come to see me off.’

He stepped forward and embraced Sherlock. While holding his shoulders, he turned his head and whispered into his ear, ‘Final warning. Back off.’

Then he stepped back, grinning triumphantly. He took up the fallen handle of his carryon. ‘I’d better be off, eh?’ He looked at his wristwatch. ‘ Wouldn’t want to miss my flight.’

And Sherlock saw exactly what Wilkes meant for him to see. The Tag Heuer watch he had given to John. He was wearing John’s watch.

Sherlock wanted to murder him.

With a wink, Wilkes dropped his arm. ‘See you around, mate,’ he said. At last, under the auspicious eyes of the security officers, Sebastian Wilkes walked away a free man.

***

The flat was dark, cold. He could feel the absence like a knife wound, like a vacuum, like an oppressive heat and the deepest chill. John was like a ghost, always just beyond the edge of vision, impossible to see. Here and nowhere.

Sherlock wandered from room to room as if he were a ghost himself. He saw the shadows of his lab equipment tucked into corners and cluttering the surfaces of the kitchen, machines that would be elsewhere had John never come to Baker Street, machines John took as a given as he manoeuvred around them to make tea or breakfast. The dishes were cleaned and put away, organised just how
John liked it, the way it made the most sense to him. And the fridge was full, well stocked, because that was how John did things.

In the sitting room, his writing space neat and orderly, his books alphabetised, his pens organised by colour, and his laptop resting in its drawer. He took such pride in that desk and everything in it. He made lists, and kept them in a notebook. Lists of the books he had read cover to cover; lists of the movies he and ‘Mr Homes’ had watched together, with little stars by the ones he wanted to see again; lists of the museums he had visited and his favourite paintings or artefacts or in each; lists of the games he had learnt to play and little hash marks for how many games he had won beside each; lists of the people he knew and loved. He named nine, under the header ‘Friends’: Mr Homes, Mz Hudson, Mr Lestrad, Michal, Dc Stamferd, Mz Stamferd, Mz Hooper, Sunny, and the latest addition, Harry.

Upstairs, his room was likewise tidy, but lived in. The painting of Dover hung proudly on the wall beside the photographs of his old family—Lucy Watson, Harry, and himself—and his new family: Sherlock and John on London Bridge, John and Mrs Hudson feeding the pigeons in the park, Sherlock playing his violin, Sherlock and John on one side of the dinner table at Mike’s house, John holding little Hannah in his arms, all bundled and sleeping, looking at once terrified and delighted. Seeing these now, Sherlock physical hurt. He had never been one for taking photographs. Not until John. He hadn’t done and felt a lot of thing, until John.

The space beneath John’s bed was clear. He had stopped hoarding food; he had stopped hiding away bandages. He had settled, comfortably, willingly, into his home. This was his home. How dare Wilkes steal him away from it. And for something so petty as revenge? For money? To have done what he did for five years, and then to turn around and to accuse Sherlock of the same? If someone believed it . . . it was over. John would be forever lost.

The thought was unbearable.

He sat on the edge of John’s bed, perfectly still, his mind a black fog. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to find him, and he was afraid of what would happen if he did. And if he did not. Mostly, if he did not.

‘I’m coming, John,’ he whispered into the dark. ‘Whatever happens to me, I shan’t leave you in the mouth of hell.’

***

‘So he’s gone,’ said Mycroft.

The brothers couldn’t stand to face one another. Not directly. Mycroft stood at the window of his spacious sitting room and stared down at the streets below. Sherlock sat on the sofa with his head hanging low and his hands clasped together between his spread knees.

‘He’s gone.’

‘And this woman, this Irene Adler . . . What threat does she pose?’

‘The same. She was the one who took the photo after assaulting John and leaving him for me to find. She’s threatened me before. She has . . . friends in high places, let’s say. And she will do what she can to protect herself. That’s who she is.’

They fell silent. Telling Mycroft that he had failed had been bad enough. Telling him how he had failed had been pure torture. He had already berated himself for not protecting John from her before.
It had been his own fault for going to her gallery in the first place. He had only himself to blame for allowing her to torment him all these years without terminating their association. He had never imagined it would lead to this, but it was his fault, all the same. And it was John who was suffering for it.

Thinking Mycroft’s silence was judgement, he added, ‘It doesn’t matter. I will find him. And I’ll make damn sure whoever has him will suffer. No matter what happens to me, John will be safe. We will find him, and we will make him safe.’

‘Sherlock,’ said Mycroft with a sigh. ‘Some things . . . It is not a pleasant thought. But the world we live in is not a pleasant place. I’m afraid . . . I’ve gone as far as I can go with you on this one.’

Slowly lifting his head from where it hung so low, Sherlock said, ‘Pardon?’

‘There are . . . complications. Plans set in motion that cannot be—must not be—stopped.’

‘What are you saying?’

Mycroft turned from the window. His expression was pained, something Sherlock had not seen in his brother before. ‘I’ve reviewed the footage. The cars coming in and out of the garage.’ He visibly steeled himself. ‘I knew one of them.’

‘You what?’

‘There was a government-issued motorcar. It left shortly before Wilkes did. I recognised it because I use one myself. The number plate has a stamp of the Royal Arms; it’s quite distinct.’

Sherlock was on his feet. ‘One of yours? An MP? Chancellor? What? Who!’

Mycroft shook his head sombrely. ‘I’m sorry, Sherlock. I really am.’

‘Who, dammit!’

‘My direct superior. Charles Augustus Magnussen.’

It was as if the floor had fallen out from under him, or the room pitched like a boat at sea, or his knees had given out. Sherlock stumbled backward like he’d been struck.

‘He’s the Lord Commissioner of Emancipation. The right arm of the Department of Ward Social Care and Head of the Ethics Commission on Ward Welfare.’

‘Oh my God,’ Sherlock breathed, feeling ill. ‘Your . . . superior? Your boss?’

‘We all answer to someone,’ Mycroft murmured. ‘I am no exception. And Magnussen, he is . . . He is a powerful man.’

‘He is an evil man,’ Sherlock said forcefully. He was growing angrier by the second. ‘So you work for the man, is that what you’re saying? Did he send you to spy on John? Is that what all that was about? You coming around to see John, playing your little board games and interrogating him? What were you really doing? Scoping him out for your boss?’

Mycroft’s eyes narrowed. ‘Don’t be absurd.’

But Sherlock wasn’t done. ‘ Couldn’t wait to get his filthy paws on him again, could he? God! And you helped!’
‘I did nothing of the sort! What the hell are you even talking about? What do you mean, again?’

‘You know exactly what I mean!’

‘No, Sherlock, I don’t.’

‘Lord Magnussen was one of Wilkes’ clients. One of the worst. John was terrified of him.’

‘I . . . ’ Mycroft’s face had gone pale. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘You know everything!’

‘I didn’t know, Sherlock! I went to John only to learn about the Highwaymen, that’s all! He threw me out! When he asked me if I knew Magnussen and I said yes, he threw me out, didn’t say a word as to why. I presumed that, as a ward, he disapproved of Magnussen’s work on the commission. Revoking the privileges of wards left and right, it would upset any of the warded class. I had no idea John knew him personally.’

‘Knew? The man bloody raped him! More times than even I know!’ Sherlock bellowed. ‘And he has him again, he has him! Why are we just standing here? We have to get him back! If you know him, you must know where he lives. We should go there right now!’

‘Sherlock, slow down, and think. You have no idea what you are proposing. Magnussen—he’s a dangerous man. He’s a man you do—not—cross.’

‘He has John!’

‘And as far as I can tell, he has every legal right to him. No no, stop! Stop right there! What I’m saying is, this isn’t a simple matter. Far, far from it. So you cannot simply charge over there—wherever the hell there is—and demand his ward from him. You cannot kidnap him back and not expect recourse. Think, Sherlock. If Magnussen is one of the men who patronised the Downside, who broke the law to sleep with a ward, do you think he won’t protect himself against scandal? Do you think there aren’t others, men like him, as powerful as he is, who wouldn’t go to extraordinary lengths to cover up their contravention? Go after them, and they’ll denounce you for the crimes they themselves have committed. I’ll be dragged into the fray right alongside you. And what can you say or do then, when there is no evidence against them? Your best witness has flown, no one else will attest that the Downside ever existed—’

Sherlock came forward angrily. ‘John is my evidence. John is my witness.’

Mycroft scoffed. ‘The word of a ward is worth the word of a dog, as far as the courts are concerned.’

‘So what? Do nothing? Leave him to the wolves?’

‘If you will listen to me, you’ll know I’m proposing nothing of the sort. I’m only telling you that storming the castle is a sure way to keep yourself from ever seeing John again. Rome wasn’t built in a day, nor did it fall overnight. These things take time. It is an ugly truth, little brother, but a truth nonetheless. These things take time.’

Slowly, Sherlock stepped back, shaking his head. ‘You’re afraid.’

‘Damn right I am.’

‘Why?’
'Because I have been fighting this fight longer than you have, and I know what these people are capable of. It wasn’t just what happened to Redbeard. It wasn’t just the tragedy that befell Mum and Dad. I’ve seen those who oppose them suddenly . . . disappear. I know the lie that is Norway. All that I have done, everything I have worked for . . .’ He closed his eyes, shook his head. ‘The stakes are too high, for all of New Britain, for me to risk all that I’ve worked for. I’m not there yet, but I’m close. I cannot be seen to aid you. Not in this. I need you to trust me, Sherlock. Just this once.’

‘But—’

‘Go. Save John.’ He nodded sharply. ‘And leave the rest of the world to me.’

***

He felt defeated. Impossibly, he was even more helpless than he had been just twenty-four hours ago. Back then, believing John to be at the mercy of Sebastian Wilkes had been an intolerable thought. He hadn’t fathomed the possibility that it could be worse.

Mycroft was right. He needed to think. There was a solution to this, there just had to be. As he walked home, he considered every possible avenue: maybe it was as simple as proposing a deal, a business transaction, and Sherlock was willing to spend every last penny he had and then some; but it was not a realistic course of action at all. Magnussen had no need of whatever little fortune Sherlock could scrape together, and the awful truth was that in the eyes of men like Wilkes and Magnussen, John was a problem. He would not simply be turned over.

His mind was overwrought with fear and despair, and he could not think. Despite his every impulse forbidding him from doing so, he needed to rest his brain. He would force himself to sleep, and come morning, he would be refreshed.

He tried not to think about where John was tonight, or what he endured.

_Forgive me, John_, he thought as he put the key into the front door of 221.

‘Sherlock, oh! Oh!’

Hearing him come in, Mrs Hudson, who appeared to have been waiting for him on tenterhooks, hurried out of her room and met him at the foot of the stairs. He was on the cusp of feeding her some empty words about how he was getting closer, that John would be safe and home again soon, but before he had the chance, she was talking in a panic.

‘I know you said no police, and I’m sorry, Sherlock, I didn’t know what else to do. It’s about John, isn’t it?’ She glanced up the stairs.

‘The police are here?’ he said, worriedly.

‘Just upstairs,’ she whispered back, as though to minimise the damage. ‘Won’t leave.’

‘Not Lestrade?’

Dare he hope?

She only shook her head.

‘Go home. I’ll handle this.’

‘I’m sorry—’ she began.
He squeezed her shoulder. ‘It’s fine. It is what it is.’

Setting his jaw and bracing for a fight, he carried on upstairs. There, he halted in his own doorway. Sally Donovan was waiting for him.

He didn’t have time for this.

‘Forgive me for not inviting you to sit for tea,’ he said tightly, stepping aside to leave the exit free and clear. But the constable didn’t move her feet. She was looking past him, back toward the stairs, expectant.

‘I don’t much fancy ending up in A&E,’ she retorted. ‘Where’s John?’

‘Sleeping.’

‘I don’t think so. I’ve been here three hours already. Now it’s past curfew and you come home alone. Where is he?’

*Three hours?* He looked at her properly. She wore plainclothes, not her uniform, so she wasn’t on the clock, and some of his desk things were out of order, so she’d been occupying herself by rummaging through his personal property. But not on official police business? He could get her arrested for that.

But he didn’t have an answer ready for her. Her little trespassing violation would be nothing up against citing him for failure to report a missing ward. Or sleeping with one.

She walked to the desk. ‘Your landlady brought up the post. I guess it’s been accumulating. I couldn’t help but notice this one.’ She picked up a torn envelope and extended it to him.

She had been reading his mail? Sherlock snatched the envelope away from her. To his consternation, he saw that the return address was from the WSC Services. He dug out the letter and read it quickly.

*Dear Mr Sherlock Holmes:*

*Our records indicate that you are currently not performing your hosting duties as a free citizen of the State of New Britain. It is incumbent upon you that you register for the care of a new ward within 30 days of the issuance of this letter. Please be advised that any failure to register a state-approved ward before the specified deadline will result in a fine, and your name will be submitted for lottery.*

*Respectfully,*

‘Did you get rid of him?’ she asked, her tone a biting accusation.

His head snapped up. Why was she here? She was no longer a Ward Patrol officer, had no affiliation with WSC. She hadn’t seen this letter before coming here. So why was she here?

‘What is this, a wellness check? Not your division, Sally. Tell me why you’re really here.’

She stood hands akimbo, chewing the inside of her cheek and shaking her head, but not at him. It seemed a gesture meant for herself, a silent chastisement for something she was about to say or do. When she next spoke, her volume was so low Sherlock almost didn’t make out the words, and but for the shape of her lips on her final word, he would have missed it entirely. ‘You asked me,’ she said slowly, ‘about the Highwaymen.’

Sherlock stepped fully into the room and closed the door fast behind him.
‘Say that again,’ he said.

She looked nervous. The open door had been an escape route. ‘You heard me.’

‘I want to hear it again.’

Closing her eyes, she breathed, steadying herself. She opened them again and said, more clearly this time, ‘I stand on the Highway.’

All at once, his brain was awakened and firing on all cylinders. He crossed the room and took her by the shoulders. ‘This isn’t a trick,’ he said. ‘You’re really one of them. You’re a Highwayman.’

‘We are called the DULUGE.’

‘Oh my God.’ He was squeezing her shoulders now, as though he couldn’t believe she was real. ‘I found you.’

She quirked an eyebrow. ‘Is it a victory to “find” someone who sought you out first?’

‘I’ve been skirting the edges of this one for ages, but the DULUGE have been like a visual hallucination, a shadow and a shiver just out of sight, out of sunlight. Oh my God, you’re one of them. Sally.’

‘Calm down, you look a mess.’

‘You have to tell me everything. Who are you people? How many of you are there? Who’s in charge?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I’m a cog in a wheel, not the watchmaker.’ She sighed, exasperated. ‘Look. I’m not supposed to be talking about this. Not to you, not to anyone. So what I tell you . . . I tell you in absolute confidence. Because . . . you are an ally. Am I right?’

He nearly shouted, but caught himself. ‘Damn right I am.’

She sniffed, but it ended in a smile. A small one. ‘The DULUGE is an underground network composed of undercover agents. There may be dozens, or hundreds, of us. I don’t know, we can’t see each other.’

‘Its mission?’

‘Freedom. That’s the ultimate objective. Not the welfare of wards: the eradication of them. Destroy the programme, you free its prisoners. Then they can no longer be called prisoners, can they? But it’s a goal that cannot be accomplished with a single act. On a smaller scale, we . . . intervene on the behalf of individual captives.’

‘Captives.’

‘We don’t call them wards.’ She fixed him with a hard stare. ‘That’s not what they really are.’

‘Go on.’

‘We mean to liberate all of them. But until it can be accomplished on a grand and permanent scale,
we prioritise. We look especially for those in dire circumstances, those who aren’t going to make it unless drastic measures are taken. We act to get them help, or to get them out. Some of us are the Brains, those who plan and coordinate. Some of us are the Hands, those who act, intercept. Some of us are Feet, walking the Highway, guiding toward the light. Some of us are the Ears, listening for dangers from those who would infiltrate our numbers or hamper our efforts. Some of us are the Eyes, watching carefully for signs of suffering, and reporting back.’ She indicated herself. ‘That’s me.’

‘And you don’t know the Brains. The Hands.’

‘I don’t even know the other Eyes. We are discrete from one another, for our own safety and others’. I can’t give you names. I don’t have them. When one of us gets caught, the rest of keep our heads down.’

‘How do you communicate?’

She folded her arms across her chest. An unconscious but protective gesture, Sherlock observed. He indicated that they should sit. It would be more comfortable for them both.

‘There’s an app. It’s called The Lamppost. Anyone can find it, download it. To the uninitiated, it functions as a weather app. But if you have the right access, the right codes, it’s a messaging system.’

She pulled out her phone and showed him. The icon was modest in its design: a grey background with an old-fashioned lantern-shaped gas lamp in the centre.

‘When the Eyes see something suspicious, they post what’s called a Flare. The Hands investigate and report. The Brains concoct a plan of action. The Flare is visible for only a short window of time and then self-destructs and becomes irretrievable. To me, at least. All I know is what I have on my end of things. I am seldom ever contacted, because I am not a Hand, nor a Foot, nor any of the agents who take action. I am only an Eye.

‘But last week, I was checking the Flares in London. Another Eye works as a Ward Patrol officer. He wrote that he responded to a runner alert, along with five other officers. The ward they caught said his name was John and that whoever had issued the alert was not his host. They captured and sedated the ward and returned him to the host who was waiting with a car to take him to the vets. The incident disturbed him. Something felt off, he said, and he Flared it for others to investigate.

‘Like I said, I’m not a Hand. But I was suspicious, too, and couldn’t get the Flare out of my mind, even after it had disappeared. John is a common enough name, but not among wards. So I looked up your ward registry, and that’s when I saw you weren’t hosting anyone at all, let alone a ward called John. I sent a Flare of my own, then, to add fuel to the fire and prompt further investigation, if it was not already underway. I didn’t know it for sure, but it seemed to me that John was in danger. Today, I received my first Torch—an assignment. To talk to you, and ascertain whether yours was the John we are looking for, and whether the threat of danger is real. Tonight, I am both Eyes and Hands.’

Sherlock sat forward to the edge of his chair, urgency in his voice. ‘It’s real. The danger is real, Sally, and I want in. Make me a Highwayman, an agent of the DULUGE. Help me save John.’

‘That’s not how it works. I have no such power. What I need you to do—to help John—is tell me everything you know.’

So he did. He spoke candidly, more candidly than he had with Mycroft, about who Wilkes really was and what John had suffered at his hands. He explained his own part in inciting the man’s ire, and of the woman who had presumably orchestrated the plot and provided material for blackmail. But when he mentioned Lord Magnussen, Sally, who had been listening with rapt but stoic attention,
suddenly flinched.

‘What?’ he prompted, excitedly. She knew something.

But she was on her feet. His heart plummeted, afraid she was going to pull the same shit as Mycroft and say that she could no longer be involved.

Sally Donovan surprised him once again.

‘Come with me.’

***

‘Give me two minutes,’ said Donovan, leaving Sherlock standing in the middle of her sitting room lit by a single dim lamp standing in the corner. She disappeared down the hallway and entered a bedroom. He listened carefully to the creak of the door and a soft, feminine murmuring as Donovan roused someone from sleep. Moments later, she returned, and in her wake was the woman he had briefly met before, Janine, pulling a dressing gown up her arms to cover bare shoulders as she blinked into the light.

‘Sherlock Holmes,’ she said. ‘To what do I owe the midnight disturbance?’

He spotted the tattoo on her arm, just beyond the hem of her sleeve as she pushed her unkempt dark hair from her eyes to take in the measure of him.

‘You’re a ward,’ he said.

‘And an agent of the DULUGE,’ said Donovan sharply. ‘Sit, both of you. We have to talk.’

They pulled chairs to face each other.

‘I mean no offence,’ Sherlock said. ‘I suppose it didn’t occur to me, upon our first meeting.’

‘Because I didn’t take your coat or offer you a cuppa?’ She smiled bitterly.

‘Because you looked me in the eye and laughed in my face.’

‘Hm. And that’s new for you, is it? A ward that doesn’t scrape and fawn?’

‘Yes, in fact. John, he . . . His spirit had been broken, long before I knew him. It’s been delicate, painstaking work, trying to piece that together again. I should hope very much that one day . . . he’s as free-spirited as you seem to be.’

‘I’m still a captive,’ said Janine, no longer smiling.

‘And she’s had her own demons to overcome,’ said Donovan. To Janine, she said, ‘I brought him here for a reason. I want you to tell him about Charles Magnussen.’

Janine blanched. In a blink, she had become visibly upset. ‘The hell?’ She looked at Donovan with hurt and accusation in her eyes.

‘His John was kidnapped last Wednesday, and is now in Magnussen’s possession. Please. I know it’s difficult. But this is what we signed up for. What you know could help us save him.’

Janine huffed angrily and covered her face with her hands. Sherlock wanted to apologise and spare her, but he couldn’t bring himself to excuse her from saying what he needed her to say. He looked to
Donovan for some signal as to what to do, only to find her waiting patiently.

At last, Janine lowered her hands. ‘Charles Magnussen is a disgusting snake of a human being,’ she spat. Then her story began:

‘I was born into captivity, like most of us are, I guess. I was warded to a family until I was thirteen years old. They decided to move to America, and they couldn’t bring me with them. That’s how I ended up with him.’

‘Where?’ asked Sherlock. ‘Here? In London?’

She frowned. ‘Mr Holmes, in the four years he kept me, I never left the flat. Not once. I don’t remember arriving, and I don’t remember leaving. I couldn’t tell you where it is if I tried. All I know is that it is here, in London, very high above the streets.’

‘Four years.’

‘His flat—if you can call it that—is massive. Four storeys, that I knew about, the entire storeys, no other flats or neighbours. He had rooms and kitchens and loos and a pool and gymnasium with a badminton court and exercise bikes and a track, an entertainment room for guests and a sauna, everything you could think of, everything you would ever need. And I wasn’t alone. I was one of at least a dozen wards at any one time. Some of them were there to cook or to clean or to tend the flowers and potted plants or clean the pool or do the laundry or the shopping. Everyone had a job. Some could come and go as they pleased. Not me, but some. But when we wards were indoors, we all had to wear white. From head to toe, white.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows pinched together. ‘Why?’

‘He liked things clean. Pure, and clean, and untouched, except by him.’ She shuddered, and her hands began to rub together like she was cleaning them under a running tap. ‘My job,’ she continued, but haltingly, ‘was as his . . . plaything.’

Sherlock’s eyes closed. He bit down on his tongue so hard he drew blood.

‘Me and some of the other girls. All . . . untouched, when we first arrived. We shared a room. We each had a bed. We were each relieved of any duties—no work, not even to lift a broom—but to bathe and primp and . . . come when called.’

‘He had a different girl every night,’ said Donovan. ‘Rotated them like shirts. And when one wore out . . .’

‘Four years,’ Sherlock whispered.

‘I lasted longer than most,’ Janine said softly.

‘Then what? He just . . . sells you off?’

‘And risk incriminating himself?’ Donovan laughed without humour. ‘He’s a scoundrel. Not an idiot.’

‘He would bring in a doctor,’ said Janine. ‘The doctor would declare you incurably ill, or dangerous, or in some way medically delinquent. Then he cleared you for Storage.’

Sherlock gasped. He looked between the two women, a thrill of panic coursing through him. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘I thought you’d never been. I thought you didn’t know what goes on there.’
‘I don’t,’ said Donovan. ‘Neither of us do.’ She nodded to Janine. ‘Go on. Tell him what happened.’

‘Four years, like I said. I was seventeen, and I wanted to kill myself. I’d seen so many girls come and go, some young like me, but not all. Some were older. Every shape and size, every colour. He liked variety.’

‘Any males?’

She shook her head no. ‘Never. Not while I was there, anyway. Didn’t think he fancied the males. When it became too much for me, when I couldn’t take it anymore, being treated so . . . pitilessly. I started to insult him. I called his body grotesque and his performance pathetic. Anything I could to stir him to anger. I wanted him to choke me to death, or beat me until I blacked out and died in a pool of my own blood. Really I did. I wanted to die. Instead, he slated me for Storage.

‘He didn’t take me himself. Instead, he sent me with a servant. Not a ward, a free person, like a bodyguard. He has an army of those, too, to keep the captives in line. I left the flat for the first time since arriving, and I was terrified. I was taken to a train station with travel papers and put on a train with my escort. The train started moving. I don’t know how long it was—an hour maybe, and London far behind—when I asked to go to the loo. He took me there, and stood guard outside. I . . . I don’t know how I managed it, looking back. I don’t know if I could do it again. It was a moment of opportunity, unplanned. But when I finished and opened the door, his back was to me, and I saw he was talking to someone else and not paying much attention. So I didn’t tell him I was finished. I turned in the opposite direction, and I walked down the carriage and out of sight. Down another carriage, and another, and I just kept going until I reached the end of the train, and one more door, and the door was unlocked. I stepped outside, onto a platform, and from there . . . I jumped.

‘I landed badly. I was hurt. But what could I do, what would happen, if I was spotted fleeing the train? So I hurried to a bramble of bushes and hid myself. And then after regaining my breath, I moved to another hiding place, and then another. I slept outside in the cold. I ate from bins and whatever scraps were thrown to the dogs. I kept myself moving, constantly afraid, having nowhere to go, and not knowing what would become of me. It was weeks before I was spotted.’

She smiled sadly at Sally Donovan, who picked up the narrative.

‘I was twenty-one years old,’ she said, ‘a newly minted Ward Patrol officer. And I did my duty. I picked her up, put her in the back of my patrol vehicle, and deposited her in Ward Shelter and Holding Facility.’

Sherlock nodded sympathetically. ‘And how long was it before you came back for her?’

‘Twenty-four hours.’

They shared a look of, what was that? Amity. Solidarity. Sherlock felt more understood now, and by Sally Donovan, of all people, than he had by anyone, Mrs Hudson included.

‘She was very poorly. Broken wrist, broken ribs, starving half to death. It was a long time before she was healthy again, and longer before she fully trusted me.’

‘You were on Ward Patrol, after all,’ said Janine. ‘But honestly, I felt warmly toward you from the start, even if I couldn’t show it. You were a woman. After all those years being abused by a man . . . It was good for me to be with a woman.’

‘In any event,’ Donovan continued, ‘it was a very long time before she opened up to me about what had happened to her, and even longer before she named the man who had abused her. I was already
feeling conflicted about things where wards were concerned, but having Janine here clinched it. I needed to get off the hell off Ward Patrol. And let me tell you, that’s easier said than done. Eleven years of petitioning, that’s what it took."

‘And when did you join the DULUGE?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Somebody had noticed me, somewhere along the way. They watched me for twenty-four months, they said, to determine my character and loyalties, and to gauge my utility. It wasn’t long after I picked up a ward from a bus station, and returned him to his host, that someone reached out to me. I was informed who they were, what they did, and was invited to join. I didn’t hesitate a moment. That’s when I became their Eyes. I learnt that they had been watching John, too. There had already been one attempt to get to him, but it had failed. The agent sent to lead him down the Highway had been found out. They got to him.’

James Sholto, Sherlock thought. ‘Who got to him?’

‘Who do you think? Highwaymen are enemies of the state. The crime is treason. The punishment?’ She looked him hard in the eyes. ‘Execution.’ She cleared her throat, looking uncomfortable. ‘The Brains were making plans for a second attempt on the ward, on John, but I never heard about it, and next I knew anything at all . . . well, I saw him with you. That didn’t seem right to me. As far as I was concerned, he should have walked the Highway by then, so it seemed something had gone wrong. But Eyes report; we don’t ask questions. Communication isn’t as open as we’d like. It’s too dangerous. So I stick to my role, and Janine to hers. We are both Eyes.’

‘They let wards become agents?’

‘Why shouldn’t they? Wards have more stake in the mission of the DULUGE than anyone. They should be allowed to fight for themselves. And to help others along the way, as they can.’

‘But you didn’t send Janine down the Highway.’

‘I offered,’ said Donovan, regarding Janine with admiration. ‘She wanted to stay and fight.’

They fell silent. Sherlock thought of John. And he thought how, if he had only remembered John’s story better, he would have thought of the night Donovan had found him at the bus station. She had returned him to the Downside flat. She knew where it was all along. And he hadn’t thought to ask her for help. If he had, Sherlock would have found him days ago, before he fell into Magnussen’s trap.

‘I need to save John,’ he said. Beseechingly, he turned to Janine. ‘But I don’t know where he is. Anything you can remember, anything at all. You said the flat was in a tall building, very high up, yes? Do you remember what you saw through the windows? If you could describe the view, I might be able to figure out the part of the city, at the very least.’

But she was shaking her head. ‘The security there is airtight. No one gets in. No one gets out.’

‘That’s not why I brought you here, Holmes,’ said Donovan. ‘You don’t stand a chance in hell getting into that building.’

‘But—’

‘Magnussen won’t keep him there. From what you told me, John is a liability, a problem to be got rid of, and I guarantee he won’t wait long to do it. No. You’re not storming the castle. We need to get you on that bloody train.’
“Alone in the Sky”

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains acts of violence and violation. Proceed at your own discretion.

She didn’t expect to see him, honestly. Not in public, not in her gallery, and not since things on his end had unravelled so spectacularly. What had it been, a year since that particular well had dried up? But here he was, strutting through the door like he owned the place and tossing back a stray lock of hair while tugging the gloves from his fingers.

‘Irene, darling, it’s been too long.’

She frowned. ‘Sebastian.’

‘Lovely, that.’ He nodded to the tryptic over her shoulder. ‘What is that, a Pollack?’

‘Damien Hirst. Please tell me you’re here to buy.’

He flashed her his over-whitened teeth. ‘Aha, I do have a business proposition for you. Shall we . . . ?’ He waffled on his feet, ready to retreat to the door with her for a walk-and-talk in the city, but equally as prepared to stroll through her gallery.

She anticipated an unpleasant exchange, one unsuitable for public display. So instead, she led him to her office for privacy. She wasn’t altogether happy to see him. She had always found him rather irritating, more so as of late, and was certainly not inclined to enter into another fiduciary arrangement with him. Not after the last one.

‘First things first.’ He unbuttoned his suitcoat and without invitation sat himself on her crescent art deco sofa. He crossed a leg over and stretched an arm across the back cushions. ‘A confession: I was an unsavvy business partner, last time. I made mistakes. I made allowances. And in the end, I lost control. My failing. I own it. I’ve learnt better. For instance, I shouldn’t have gone with the first twink I saw. Next time, I’ll do my homework.’

‘Next time.’ Her eyebrow lifted sceptically.

‘I understand the business now. I didn’t then, I was a novice, but now, I know what to look for. So I’ll be on better footing, right from the start, right at the selection process.’

‘You want back in.’

‘I want to be a partner. No advances, this time, nothing to pay back, and no subsidiaries. Full partnership.’

She laughed.

‘I’m serious, Irene. The money I pulled in before, for five years and using just one twink? It was substantial. Think what I could do with two, four, a baker’s dozen. I know the market for twinks, better than you do, that’s not your niche. But the two of us working together? This venture would be worth millions. You’d be crazy not to go in with me on it.’
'You’re so confident, why not do it yourself?'

'For one, I’m technically not allowed to host. Not for another four years. But I thought, if you were in on the game and hosted on my behalf, what with your credibility as a philanthropist, I’d cut you in on some of the action. As partners, it’s share and share alike, eh? I manage the ward and the day-to-day, but I give you a cut of the business. You would manage other things. Like, say, security. And real estate.'

Again, she laughed. ‘Someone to keep your wards in line so you don’t have to shoot them, you mean.’

Though his smile didn’t lose an inch, his jaw did tighten. She had stung him with that one. But he was recovering.

‘Like I said. Mistakes.’

‘Your history with the business does not commend yourself to me, Seb. One ward, one colossal mistake. Will you make it a pattern? You can convince the authorities that a ward shot himself only once.’

He sniffed. ‘It’s not like he died.’

Irene was prepared to launch into the host of other reasons she would never partner with him. For one, she didn’t need him. Her business was operating flawlessly and was in no need of expansion. Besides, a Downside could grow only so large before it risked certain exposure. And in any case, he was rubbish at management. Frugality was one thing, but penny-pinching? Like a good horse, wards required a certain level of care and doting to ensure longevity, not to mention a proper diet, and from what she had heard, his ward had deteriorated in value so far that he probably wouldn’t have lasted much longer anyway, regardless of getting shot. Quality, that was what she valued. Loyalty. She took excellent care of her wards, and they all respected her authority, without question.

But she didn’t say any of this. At his last under-the-breath comment, her thoughts became sidetracked.

‘What did you say?’

He shrugged. ‘What? I said, it’s not like he died.’

‘Who?’

‘The ward.’

‘The ward you shot?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘You said he was gone.’

‘Right. They wouldn’t let me keep him. Jesus.’

‘So he’s alive? What happened to him? Where is he?’

Wilkes threw up his hands. ‘What does it matter? He got shot, they fined me for ward endangerment, and he landed himself in a pound. End of story. Nearly.’

She was aghast. ‘He wasn’t sent to Storage?’
‘I know, right? That’s what I thought would happen!’ He huffed, throwing himself back into the sofa. ‘Little fucker worms his way out of it, somehow. And you’ll never guess who he ended up with, of all the tossers in London. Old friend from uni. Sherlock Holmes.’

Irene was never one for histrionics. She prided herself on an even temper and cool reaction to even the most unpleasant of people. But when she heard the name Sherlock Holmes, she felt as if her blood had literally frozen in her veins. Wilkes’ Downside ward, the one called Tiny, who had serviced countless red-blooded Britons on her own referral, had been the self-same John she had used as a carrot to prank Sherlock about his undefined sexual preferences. How the hell did that happen?

Her mind was racing. Wilkes’ clients—they hadn’t been random buggers off the streets. These were prominent socialites! These were influential statesmen! These were some of the most powerful people in New Britain! All it would take was for just one of their faces to appear on the telly in Sherlock Holmes’ sitting room, and the ward would blab. It was possible—risky, but possible—that if the ward’s host had been just some ordinary bloke, it wouldn’t matter, no one would listen, and the potential spark would flicker and die. But this ward lived with Sherlock bloody Holmes! And who was Holmes’ brother, but the enigmatic and suspicious Mycroft Holmes! With the right kindling, that spark could become a firestorm.

Letting that ward live had just compromised everything. The government was in the business of looking the other way when it came to Downsides of a particular variety, but the public wouldn’t be. If the press got hold of this? If Irene and her clients were exposed? Not only would it be an end to their professions and their livelihoods, but to their very freedom as well.

And all because of one ward. Sherlock Holmes’ ward.

‘Get out.’

Wilkes shook his head, puzzled. ‘What?’

‘Get out of this place, right now, I can’t stand to look at you another minute.’

Warily, he stood up from the sofa. ‘Irene—’

‘Not a word. Don’t say anything, don’t do anything. Your stupidity may very well land us all in prison.’ Finally, a look of proper fear entered his eyes. Good. He needed to understand that this was serious. ‘I’m going to clean this up. So until I contact you again, you keep your nose clean and don’t talk to anyone. And don’t you even think about starting up another Downside. And oh-ho, how you’re going to owe me after this.’

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From what she had gathered, Sherlock was, what was a fitting word? Fond? At least. He was fond of his ward. He bought him expensive gifts and was violently protective. Whether the affection could be described as that of a parent for a child, or a boy for his dog, or a pining lover, she couldn’t say with any certainty. But she had made the mistake of underestimating Sherlock before, and she wouldn’t gamble again that he would be anything less than furious if she came at him directly. She would, instead, come at him slant.

She had always been the surreptitious sort. She knew how to get things done. The tools of her trade included knowing the right people. That, and knowing what they liked.

To remove the ward entirely and cleanly, she required the assistance of someone with a mind as
conspiratorial as hers.

Upon receiving her message, Lord Magnussen invited her to his private club in Central London. She was escorted to a salon where she found him lounging in a leather wingback armchair, swirling a snifter of cognac. ‘Pour you a drink?’ he asked without rising.

‘You’ll want another,’ she said, ‘once you’ve heard what I have to tell you.’

She laid it all out cleanly and concisely, dispensing with her usual delicate diction. She had no fear of being overheard in the private salon, but even so, it was well known that what was spoken in the Diogenes Club was safe within those impermeable walls. Besides, half the men in here were her clients.

He listened with little outward interest and did not interrupt. When she was finished expounding on the problem, he nodded and sipped at the snifter.

‘That ward. Quite the specimen. I knew him frequently. An unusual fuck for me, a male, but I rather enjoyed him.’

‘Is that what you’ll say to the magistrates during your deposition?’ she asked drily. ‘Or to the BBC?’

‘It shan’t come to that. We’ll dispose of him, and that will be that.’

They spent the evening planning, working through various scenarios, discarding impractical solutions, and landing on a course of action.

It would begin with an abduction.

Carefully orchestrated, of course. It just so happened that Irene knew the records keeper—a man who worked for the Registration Department—whom she would persuade to alter the records for the ward, erasing Sherlock Holmes as the current host and reinstating Sebastian Wilkes, who would, on the record, be absolved of the ward endangerment charge. It would appear, on paper at least, that he had never been relieved of his hosting duties to JW6462-11. From there, it was just a matter of transferring registration to Charles Augustus Magnussen, champion of ward welfare and philanthropic host. Then, all it would take was a favour from Magnussen’s most trusted medical professional. Before long, the ward would reach its final destination, and their problem would be over.

There would be holes, of course, Sherlock being the largest of them. He would, as a matter of pride, put up a fuss. He would attempt to present evidence contradictory to Wilkes’ paperwork and expose those holes. Unless, of course, he could be dissuaded. Blackmail was inelegant, but effective. But if he persisted nonetheless, it would be fine. By careful design, all the forged documents would trace back, not to Irene or Magnussen, but to Wilkes. The record keeper would testify that it was Wilkes who had bribed him to change the records. The bank statements would prove it. An offshore account would reveal an excess of funds suggesting his ongoing shady dealings. Magnussen, engaging in a legal transaction, would claim he had bought the ward in good faith and walk away with clean hands.

Sebastian Wilkes, they said to one another, had proven himself too great a risk. And in their business, they had no choice but to neutralise all risks. It was necessary, then, to set him up to take a fall.

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It was happening again.
His new host frightened him. This place frightened him. Nothing would make him want to return to Mr Wilkes, but at least with Mr Wilkes, he knew exactly what to be afraid of, and how badly it could hurt. But once again, he was stepping into the unknown, and as things always went, what was unknown was always worse. Always. So as he laboriously climbed the stairs on shaky legs, each step sending shocks of pain through muscle and bone and skin, he thought, not for the first time, how much better it would be to fall and crack his head and never feel or fear anything ever again.

‘Right. So. This is it.’

He tried to keep from trembling as his eyes roved hesitantly around the room. He just wanted to shrink away, become smaller and smaller until he was nothing at all. But he couldn’t help but look. There was so much to see. Tall windows with light streaming through, books stuffing the wall of shelves and a standing in towers around the room. His host stepped around them, talking in mild tones right now, but he knew how quickly a mild voice could turn to wrath. Already he had heard the sharp edge of it, in the short time they had been together: the impatience, the annoyance, the displeasure. One wrong word on his part, one wrong act, and how soon would he come to know the man’s rage?

Then, with heart-stopping alarm, he spotted something in the room. A human skull.

‘Friend of mine.’

He was strange, his host. From his name to the way he fluttered around his flat like an excitable bird. In those early days, his host didn’t spend much time in the flat, if he could help it, leaving early and returning late and yelling at his ward for his mistakes, like how he bathed wrong and how he ate wrong and how was such a bad sleeper. His voice boomed when he was angry, and sometimes the ward thought his host was on the verge of striking him. But he never did. Why didn’t he? Why did his host not give him a name, but make him choose one himself? Why did he put such a nice, soft bed in the ward room, and the wardrobe and clothes and nice things? Why did he allow him to use the host bathroom? Why did he get so upset that he had been shopping for ward feed, when he was a ward? Yes, his host was indeed strange. And strange had always been frightening.

It wasn’t until that night, in late December, that the ward felt something different. He couldn’t explain it, then, because he didn’t have the words. He felt warm in a place deep inside he couldn’t name, a place that had never known such warmth, or light, or . . . lightness. That music. A bad man could never make such beautiful music as what Mr Holmes made with that violin. It was like his soul was singing. That meant only one thing could be true. Mr Holmes was a good man.

John couldn’t believe it. He’d found one. A good man was his host.

But already, the thought haunted him. How long would he be allowed to stay?

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The flat was enormous, and he felt small, like he’d been swallowed whole by a gargantuan beast. There were no outside walls. Rather, they were made of glass. A solid wall of windows, looking out and down, far down, to the city below. The floors were as white and shiny as porcelain, and everything in sight seemed to be made of steel, glass, and white stone.

John followed behind his new master, marched along by the one they called the Colonel. Neither of them spoke, neither to him nor to those they passed, who wore white, head to toe, like him. Who were they? They stood stock still, as though at attention, as though John were part of a procession or parade, a spectacle to be gawked at, then whispered about. But Lord Magnussen paid them no mind. He walked with purpose, through the house and up a flight of stairs, higher than the lifts would ride,
and into a large bedroom with another long wall of glass and sleepy, twinkling London beyond.

‘That'll do, Colonel,’ his host said, walking to the window, hands clasped behind him. John watched his expression in the reflection of the window, and saw that Lord Magnussen was watching him.

The Colonel left, and the door clicked softly closed.

‘Come and see,’ he said.

Keeping his distance, John warily drew nearer the window and his own frightened reflection.

‘Beautiful, isn’t she?’

John’s neck was stiff. His eyes slid left, watching Lord Magnussen stare straight across to the dark horizon.

‘I can see all of London from up here. From every corner of this house, look out of any window, and it’s London, London, London . . . She can’t hide from me. I know her. Every inch. Every dark, warm crevice. She’s mine. I own her. All of her. I like to watch her, while I fuck one of you against the window. You can watch her, too, and think to yourself, *I’m a part of all that*. That’s me. And when that happens, you simply . . . transcend.’

John wanted to turn and run. But there was nowhere to go. An errant tear tracked down his cheek.

‘I’ll call you Tiro.’

Lord Magnussen closed the distance between them. He gripped John’s chin and lifted it. He bent closer. John’s pulse began to race, but his fear rooted him to the floor. Then Lord Magnussen’s long, worm-like tongue was dragging up the side of his face, slowly, drinking up his tears and leaving behind a slimy trail of saliva. He squeezed his eyes shut. *No. No no, not this again.*

But his back was being pressed to the window and he was caged on all sides by the lofty figure of his captor. A hand encircled his throat, and a mouth lowered onto his, lips fighting with his lips, a tongue like a dagger seeking entry, harder now, more insistent, pressing, pushing, shoving, and it wasn’t just Lord Magnussen, but John now, too, pushing, shoving, and with a shout, he thrust his arms forward, and Lord Magnussen jumped back.

Lord Magnussen’s eyes were wide with astonishment, and he touched his bottom lip delicately. John tasted blood in his own mouth. Only then did he realise he must have bitten him.

‘How dare—’

In one step, and with cobra speed, Lord Magnussen came at him, grabbed him by the throat, and slammed his whole body up against the window. John tried to gasp, but could only flail, his hands scratching the arms that held him, and his feet scrambling for purchase, but only his toes touched the floor. Then suddenly, Lord Magnussen released his throat, seized his shoulders, and spun him around.

John made an aborted cry, but the fist gripping his hair at the crown smashed his face into the glass.

‘Wilkes said you’d gone wild. Wayward. Seems you’re in need of some re-education. Tell me, *Tiro*, what are you?’

‘I’m a w-ward, sir.’
‘And what am I to you?’

His panting breath fogged the glass. ‘L-lord Magnussen.’

‘What am I to you?’

John’s hands were splayed on the glass. He squeezed his eyes shut. ‘N-nothing.’

‘Your host, you imbecile. I am your host.’

‘No, sir, no, this is a mistake, sir, you were tricked, this isn’t right! Mr Holmes is my host, Mr Sherlock Holmes! Mr Wilkes stole me, he had no right, he lied to you, this is wrong, all wrong—!’

‘Quiet.’ Lord Magnussen cupped the back of his head in his large, splayed hand, and held it tight to the glass. ‘We’re going to do things like before, which means you’ll be quiet. Tremble all you like, but keep your mouth shut.’

‘I said no!’

John threw his elbow, and though enervated, the force of it driving into Lord Magnussen’s side was enough to make the man release him. He darted away. The room was expansive enough that Lord Magnussen could not reach him, not without chasing him, which John knew instinctively he would not do. Men like him, powerful men, they commanded, they didn’t hunt.

‘I’ll call for my man,’ Lord Magnussen said with a sneer, ‘and he’ll put you in your place.’

‘Call for your man,’ John challenged, ‘and tell him to feed me, like a proper host would do.’

Lord Magnussen’s eyebrows shot up in surprise at his cheek. Whatever he had designed to say, whatever retribution he had in store for his recalcitrant ward, was held in waiting.

‘I’ve not eaten in four days,’ John said. ‘I am dehydrated. I am tired. I require food, water, rest. If you are my host, as you claim, then you will care for me as one. That’s your duty, is it not, Lord Commissioner?’

Lord Magnussen lifted his chin and regarded him from the other side of the room. Sliding his hands into his pockets, he stared, and against his better judgement, John stared back, wondering what would happen next.

‘Sebastian Wilkes never did treat you right,’ said Lord Magnussen. Then he cocked his head and called, ‘Colonel! Come!’

Almost at once, as though he were waiting with an ear pressed to the other side of the door to listen, Colonel swung the door open abruptly at stepped inside.

‘Take him to the kitchen. Feed him.’ He held up one finger to John. ‘One night, to recover your strength. But you will sleep here tonight. This is your bedroom now, Tiro.’

The Colonel sharply indicated the door, and John, hardly daring to believe he was being allowed to walk out of the bedroom, made at once for the exit. He half-expected it to be a trick. Any second now, he would be pulled back and punished for his boldness. But Lord Magnussen had already turned his back, to look again at the lights of London.

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John sat a large table on a low bench that made him feel like a child, spooning cream of mushroom
soup into his mouth. He felt ill. But then, this was how he always felt after long periods of hunger. His stomach muscles were disused and threatened to reject the nutrients he was now forcing into it. He would have trouble digesting. He knew that. So he had asked for something light, something easy on the stomach, non-acidic. The Colonel, though, was no cook, and he wouldn’t let John make anything for himself. He summoned the cook, an old ward called Fool, who opened a tin of cream of mushroom soup and heated it on the hob before exiting without a word.

The adrenaline had begun to recede, leaving him shaky, jumpy. He could scarcely taste the food. But the panic of earlier had also ebbed, leaving him with a clearer mind and the ability to take stock of his situation and the place he now found himself. Still, it seemed impossible. He shouldn’t be here. This was a nightmare from which he kept trying to wake. He had escaped Lord Magnussen only temporarily, and if he didn’t wake soon, he didn’t believe he would be so lucky the second time.

He longed for home, for Baker Street, in a way he had never longed for Dover. Because Baker Street was real, and it was close, so close, and if only Mr Holmes knew how to find him! His dear Mr Holmes, his real host, his truest friend. A dark thought festered in the back of his mind, one too ugly to consider: that he had seen the last of Mr Holmes. That he would never again see that smile that appeared on Mr Holmes’ face first thing in the morning when they saw one another, or those strange but captivating verdigris eyes that lit up when he had an idea. He feared he would never hear that deep baritone speak his name a thousand different ways: John, come and see this! and John, have you seen my mobile? and John, oh John, how clever of you.

What if Mr Holmes had given him up as lost, and no one was coming? Another chapter in his life had closed, never to be reopened.

No. It’s not true. Mr Holmes will come. He will come. He loves me. He will come.

But how would Mr Holmes find him? A detective needed clues, clues he could put together like a puzzle, clues like breadcrumbs he could follow through a pathless wood. What clues would lead him here?

The Colonel didn’t watch him eat, but nor did he leave the kitchen. Instead, he stood at the pantry, eating crisps from a bag, biscuits from a box, and olives from a jar. Now, it was jerky from a canister. He chewed loudly, open-mouthed and without comportment, belying the classiness of the suit he wore. But then, everything about him belied the truth underneath, and John found himself daring to speak.

‘Do you remember me?’

The Colonel’s head turned sharply, as if only now remembering that he was not alone in the kitchen.

‘I know your face,’ John continued. ‘It’s been a long time, but I remember it. You were a fighter. Best there was. I mopped blood off your face after your brawls, a few times. Once, I helped you relocate your shoulder.’

The man looked at him, hard, and John wasn’t sure if he would get angry or deny everything. Then he let out a breath and said, ‘Wobble.’ He snorted. ‘A clown, weren’t you? Don’t recognise you much without all the . . . ’ He circled his own face, meaning the makeup.

‘My name is John.’

‘Not what I heard.’

‘Well, that’s what it is.’ He lowered his spoon to the bowl, trying not to feel cowed. ‘They called you
the Colonel, even back then.’

‘Yes. What of it?’

‘They call you that now. But . . . you weren’t wearing bracelets. Back in the garage. You’re not a ward.’

‘Not anymore.’ The Colonel set the canister on the table and turned to the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water.

‘You were emancipated?’

The Colonel nodded and sucked down the water.

‘H-how?’ John stuttered. ‘When?’

‘Five years ago. After a fight. I was knocked out cold. Two missing teeth, broken nose. Brain damage, they suspected, but I was all right. When I woke up, there was Lord Magnussen, standing over my bed. Seen the fight, he said. Liked what he saw. So he bought me outright, brought me here, fed me up, and helped me get strong again. Then he gave me a job.’

‘This is a Downside?’

The Colonel snorted. ‘We all have jobs. Haven’t you noticed? We all have a purpose. Fool cooks, Rooster cleans, Flora shops . . . We all have jobs. Mine is to keep the others in line.’ He pointed the water bottle at John. ‘That includes you.’

‘But you’re not a ward anymore.’

‘Nope. Got emancipated last spring. Last one, so I heard.’

‘Then why are you still here?’

The Colonel looked at him like he was stupid. ‘Where am I supposed to go?’

They stared at one another, and John felt something he had trouble naming. It was a particular kind of sadness for this man, not because he was hurting, the way a ward hurt, but because he didn’t have to be here, and yet . . . he did. Pity, thought John. He felt pity.

Suddenly, though, the Colonel looked away, uncomfortable, and that discomfort turned to anger. ‘You’re finished,’ he declared. Then he snatched up the bowl of soup, only half gone, and threw it into the sink where it clattered loudly, soup splattering the sides of the sink. ‘Now to bed.’

He grabbed John by the scruff of his all-white shirt and half-marched, half-dragged him back to the bedroom. Lord Magnussen was gone. And when the Colonel, too, left, he locked the door behind him.

***

John stood at the window, palms and forehead pressed to the glass, imagining the world below rising to meet him. If there were no glass, he could just . . . step forward. Easy as that. One step, and a rush of wind, and then nothing at all. Like meeting a bus, or falling from a bridge. Water meeting itself.

He was alone in the sky. The nearest building stood several storeys shorter than this one, and the tallest was too far to see any inhabitants, just a square of yellow light, or black. He had spent the night alone, wanting to reach through the glass and be seen. But all he could do was turn the light off
and on, off and on, like a ship sending a distress call, a marooned sailor sending up a flare. But no one responded. He doubted anyone even saw.

It was mid morning when the door opened. His stomach clenched in fear, his last meal—the half a bowl of soup—already a distant memory. Lord Magnussen had returned, and with him, a stranger with a black leather bag, like Dr Stamford’s. A doctor?

A new host meant a new medical evaluation. He knew that. With Mr Holmes, it had been the vet’s, with Mr Wilkes a doctor in a back room at the arena, the same one that had cleared him for Ward Sport. So he shouldn’t have been surprised, and the fear was normal by now. But this time, right from the start, from the way the doctor looked at him and the way Lord Magnussen did not, something felt off, and the dread in his stomach unfurled like smoke that threatened to choke him.

‘Tiro, come,’ said Lord Magnussen.

He didn’t move.

‘This one’s a little belligerent,’ Lord Magnussen said to the doctor.

‘No matter,’ the doctor said. He came forward himself, smiling. Holding the bag in front of him with both hands, he cocked his head and said, ‘I’m not here to hurt you. I only want to help. To make sure you’re good and healthy, yeah?’

John’s breath quickened. His eyes darted between Lord Magnussen and the doctor, and suddenly, words were spilling from his mouth like water from a spigot.

‘I’m in danger, sir, I’m not supposed to be here. Mr Holmes, Mr Sherlock Holmes—he’s my proper host. I was stolen, and this man, he’s hurt me before, and he means to again. Please, you have to help me, you have to tell someone!’

‘Oh dear,’ said the doctor, his eyebrows rising into his hairline. He half turned to look over his shoulder. ‘Lord Magnussen, I think he’s worse than you feared.’

‘You think so, doctor?’ said Lord Magnussen with feigned concern.

‘Delusions, hysteria, I’m afraid it’s not looking good at all.’ He sighed with mock pity. ‘Best do a full examination, though, to get the whole story. Clothes off, little one, and let’s take a good look at you.’

They made him strip down, the white clothes cast aside, every stitch, and to John’s dismay, Lord Magnussen sat himself in a chair to watch. He felt the tremor in his hand, long inactive, begin to act up as the doctor performed his tests, and touched his skin, and made him bend over, stretching out the time and touching him more intimately than any doctor ever had. And as he did, he spied, in the corner of his eye, the Lord Magnussen rubbing his own thigh, his own crotch, staring with precision focus. He thought he would faint from terror.

Then it was over. The doctor bade him dress. On shaky legs, he walked to the bed where his clothes had been tossed, and there, beside the doctor’s bag, he noticed the man’s mobile.

The doctor was making final notes on his tablet.

‘Sir,’ said John, and he looked over his shoulder at Lord Magnussen, ‘may I dress in the bathroom? I’d . . . like to wash.’

He knew Lord Magnussen liked clean things.
Lord Magnussen waved his fingers in disinterested permission. The doctor began to relay the results to the host.

Heart throbbing, John gathered his clothes, tucking the mobile among the bundle. He walked slowly, desperate not to attract notice, steadily, straight for the door to the loo. He closed it behind him with a soft click.

The moment he was alone, he scrambled for the mobile, and almost cried when he discovered the screen unlocked. Frantic, he tapped the app for the phone, but then he froze. He didn’t know Mr Holmes’ number. Not by heart. He had always just selected his name from his address book, one of the few he had collected. He thought, maybe he should call the police? But the police would be just like the doctor, just like Ward Patrol! They didn’t protect wards, not wards like him. They wouldn’t believe him at all if he said he had been kidnapped. Lord Magnussen had the paperwork and everything! What was he to do!

Then he remembered: the website. Mr Holmes’ website. The Science of Deduction, he remembered it! Quickly, he pulled up an internet browser and with shaky fingers tried to type:

*the siense . . .
No.
*the ciens . . .
No!
*the science of de . . . duc . . sh . . tion!*

There it was! He tapped, and flicked his finger frantically around the screen until he saw it: *Contact me with an interesting case*. He clicked that, too, and waited in mounting frustration for the page to load.

From the other side of the door, he heard the doctor say, ‘Have you seen my . . .?’

There was a comment box where Mr Holmes’ clients could leave a message.

‘That little sneak!’

There was no time, not time! What could he say!

Footsteps rushing toward him. Two men at the door.

His fingers cramped, his vision blurred.

The door crashed open. They found him still naked, curled over on his knees in the corner, trying to type. With a shout of rage, the doctor snatched his mobile away, and Lord Magnussen dragged him from the loo.

***

He was fed, but his jaw was sore and his nose was swollen, so it hurt to eat. He was watered, but not regularly, and his lips were chapped and throat dry from thirst. He was made to bathe, but not alone: the Colonel stood guard on the other side of the foggy glass. Then he dressed again in fresh white clothes (the bloody ones were taken to be laundered) and returned to the bedroom and was locked inside, awaiting nightfall when his host would return.
‘Take your shirt off.’

John stood on the far side of the room and refused to move a muscle.

‘Don’t defy me, Tiro. Take off your shirt, and lie on the bed.’

‘I do not answer to that name,’ said John. ‘It is not mine.’

It was Tuesday night. He had been away from home not even a week, but already Baker Street was feeling like a dream. He had little to hang on to to convince himself it had been real. All he had left was a name. And he wouldn’t give it up.

Lord Magnussen was displeased. ‘Your name is Tiro, and you are mine. Take off your clothes, or I will tear them from your body.’

‘That’s illegal, sir,’ John said evenly.

‘Not in my house.’

‘Are we so high above London here that the law no longer applies?’

‘Tiro,’ Lord Magnussen said sharply. ‘Don’t give me cheek, or I’ll make you wish you didn’t have one.’

‘I’m just curious, sir, I like to learn. Sir, what does emancipation mean?’

A flash of anger shot across Lord Magnussen’s face, livening his eyes and curling his lip. For such an odious man, John had never seen such naked hatred from him before. A thrill of terror rolled through him, but it was like electricity, and he was humming and alive.

‘Does it mean realising that wards aren’t dogs and shouldn’t be kept on leashes or locked in cages? Or does it mean lashing them to a bed and having a go, because you’re the dog, and you’re randy, and you can’t control yourself?’

Lord Magnussen’s face had turned a dark purple.

‘I think it must be the second one, because you’re the Lord of Emancipation, and I’ve only ever known you to be the dog.’

‘Colonel!’

As before, the Colonel was in the room in an instant.

‘Punish the little fucker.’

John watched as the Colonel’s muscled tightened at the shoulder and his hands balled into fists as he stalked forward. He was a large man, as tall as Mr Holmes but thicker, as dark as Mr Holmes’ in features but without the light glowing from within. It had been there, once upon a time. John knew because he had seen it. But it had been beaten out of him long ago.

He ducked, avoiding the first swing at his head, and as the second came hurtling toward him, he shouted, tucked his chin, and gave the Colonel his forehead.

For a moment, the world went dark, and when he found his bearings, he realised he was on the floor, half on his knees, half on his hip, bracing himself with his hands. His forehead stung with the blow, but it was the Colonel who was screaming.
Mr Holmes was right. His forehead was strong bone. And with it, he had just broken a man’s hand.

***

The night he had first been introduced to Lord Magnussen, John had learnt an important truth about the man. He liked it when his wards were afraid. Clean, untouched, and afraid. But back then, John hadn’t understood what he meant. Not like he did now. A fearful ward was submissive and could be controlled. That was where Lord Magnussen found his power. And a population full of fearful wards made him the most powerful man in the country.

John was still afraid. But if he pretended to be brave, if he just acted unafraid, Lord Magnussen had no interest in him. He wanted a submissive and fearful ward. So John refused to be either of those things.

On Wednesday night, Lord Magnussen returned, and though he was even more bruised and broken than the night before, John continued to defy him. This time, when he was told to strip and lie in the bed, he hung by the window and said, ‘Call me John.’

‘You’re walking on dangerous ground, Tiro. Your time here is nearing its end, but if you don’t obey me now, I’ll have you beaten, I’ll have you starved, I’ll—’

‘Mr Holmes always called me John. Mr Holmes never hit me. Mr Holmes shared his table with me. Mr Holmes taught me the constellations and systems of the body and told me I was made of the same atoms as the stars. Mr Holmes—’

‘Enough about your Mr Holmes.’

‘Mr Holmes gave me a watch, and a globe, and a home. Mr Holmes knew my birthday. Mr Holmes played the violin—’

He got more of the same, but from a Colonel whose heart just wasn’t into the beating. Or maybe it was just that his dominant hand was in plaster. John endured. He’d known worse. And ultimately, this was his choice. Between being beaten by a man who was just as caged as he was and submitting to a monster, he would choose the beating every time, and proudly. In a way, it felt like victory.

***

On Thursday night, Lord Magnussen returned. John prepared for more bruising and more blood. He had spent his lone hours practicing Mr Holmes’ boxing moves, so maybe tonight he would land a few punches and cause a few bruises of his own. He knew he couldn’t win, not up against a man like the Colonel, who really had been the best fighter in the games. So yes, he fully expected defeat. Just the not the way it finally came.

‘Tiro, I’d like you to meet someone.’

John turned, and through the open door, he saw Lord Magnussen escorting by the hand a young girl. Twelve, maybe thirteen years old, a slight thing with long, straight brown hair falling over shoulders and covering her breasts—if she had been old enough to have any. Like John, she wore complete white. She looked lost, and terrified.

‘This is Cici.’

No. He couldn’t do this. It was unfair, it was wrong. As if the girl’s fear were John’s, he felt himself begin to tremble, his heart to burst.
‘She’s unspoilt. Untouched. You know how I like them. You know how I like to be the first.’

The girl didn’t know where to look, and closed her eyes, as if she could hide herself.

‘Tonight, if you continue to refuse me, she will be my prize.’ Magnussen stroked the top of her head. ‘Tiro. I do not beg. I never have. Nor do I force myself. But I’ve grown weary in my patience, and I’ll not be denied one more night. Do you understand?’

John’s mouth ran dry but his eyes burned wet. ‘Don’t touch her,’ he whispered.

‘Eh? What’s that, Tiro, my lad? I didn’t quite hear you.’

‘Let her go.’

‘Why? What will you give me?’

John knew then that the game was over. He couldn’t let him do that to her, nor to anyone, and Magnussen knew it. So he had been caught, like a fox in a trap, and there was nothing he could do, no more battle left to fight. He’d lost the war, and become the spoils of it. And by his own word.

‘Me,’ he said.

‘Say it again.’

John bit his bottom lip so hard he almost drew blood. But the pain steadied him enough not to cry, and though his voice quivered, he said, ‘Leave her alone. Please. Take . . . take me.’

Gripping the girl’s shoulder, Lord Magnussen advanced toward him, eyes dark and mouth moist. ‘If you resist me, if you complain, if you displease me in anyway . . .’

‘I won’t, sir, I won’t.’

‘. . . I’ll take her anyway. And I’ll lash you to a chair and make you watch.’

‘I . . .’ He felt like he might faint. All the blood was draining from his head and pooling in his chest. It was like his heart was drowning, gasping to rise to the surface of a stormy sea and gasp for air. But he was being pulled under. He couldn’t look at the girl, who was crying. He looked Lord Magnussen in the eye. ‘I won’t fight,’ he said, breathless.

Lord Magnussen turned the girl around and sent her back toward the door, where the Colonel stood waiting for her, to take her away. Before closing the door after her, the Colonel gave John one final look. It was the same one John had given him days before, one of pity for a fellow prisoner, but cold and resigned for a fate they shared.

***

It seemed the morning would never come. Like dawn was a thing of yesterday, now extinct, and John would never see the world again in light.

But beyond the massive windows, cool grey rays pierced the wall of clouds on the horizon, out there where the Thames flowed to the sea, and sliced between John’s parted eyelids, burning the blue of his irises as though snuffing out their colour. The world remained grey.

Behind him, movement. He was himself curled at the edge of the mattress, knees hanging off, one bruised wrist dangling. He couldn’t move farther away if he tried, not without falling off the bed. He feared more was coming, but he had no more strength in him brace for it.
A large hand on his sore shoulder, fingers squeezing him like putty. And a hot, putrid tongue licking him from jaw to temple. Still, he did not move.

Nothing more happened. Lord Magnussen rolled in the opposite direction. The mattress tensed, then relaxed as he stood, and John heard him dressing. A zip, a buckle, fabric shrugging over shoulders, the clip of shoes.

‘Dress quickly,’ said the man. ‘You leave in twenty minutes.’

He was alone.

Slowly, moving his aching muscles with great care, John pushed aside the covers and looked down at his naked body, marked high and low with deep purple and angry red. When he spread his thighs, he could see the faint imprint of a hand amid scarlet, irritated skin. He had nearly forgotten how bad it could be. Something inside his funny little head had muted those memories, a promise that it was never going to happen again. And here he was. A casualty of that lie.

He clasped a hand over his bruised lips and squeezed tight his eyes, trying not to let the hysterical sobs break free.

_Mr Holmes . . . you promised . . . You said I was safe . . ._

On shaky legs he stood, and gritting his teeth against a deep inner pain, he footed his way to the bathroom where he found folded clothes. Not white. Brown trousers, a blue jumper, and a grey jacket. On top of it all, identifying bracelets.

Where was he going?

He showered, and drank the water from the spout. He dried and dressed, and when he stepped back into the room, the Colonel was waiting for him.

‘Shoes are by the door.’

They were loafers, like the ones he had worn at the pound. He put them on.

‘Where—?’

‘I’m your escort. Stay close.’

They walked together to the lift, passing the other wards in white, including the little girl, who sat on the sofa next to another female ward, watching him with wide, frightened eyes.

As the lift doors slid closed, John said, ‘I’m not coming back, am I?’

‘No.’

‘The pound?’

The Colonel didn’t answer.

‘A new host?’

Again, he was met with silence. It could mean only one thing. Lord Magnussen had taken what he wanted from him, only once, and now . . . he was disposable. Unwanted. Unplaced. There was only one place for a ward like that: Storage.
A surge of panic awoke in him. Next moment, he twisted toward the Colonel, beseeching him. ‘You have to do something to save that little girl. You can’t let him take her. You can’t let him touch her. Please. Please, you have to try. He’ll take her and ruin her, and what hope will she have then? Please! Don’t let her become like us!’

The Colonel’s arm shot out with lightning speed, and he slammed John into the side of the lift with his unplastered hand, pinning him at the chest.

‘Not us,’ he spat. ‘I’m not some stoneless twink, you get me? I am free.’

Just as suddenly, he let John go, but spun to face front again, like a soldier at attention.

John put a hand over his chest, trying to breathe. The lift had nearly reached its sublevel destination. ‘But you’re here,’ he said. ‘You work for him. Colonel, don’t you see? You’re as trapped as you ever were.’

The lift doors opened again. The Colonel seized John’s arm in a vengeful, vice-like grip and marched him forward, into another garage, and toward another black car. He shoved John into the backseat where Lord Magnussen awaited him.

‘A send-off,’ said Lord Magnussen, rubbing John’s thigh as the Colonel got into the driver’s seat and started the car. John tried to move away, but Lord Magnussen put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer, a hand still on his thigh. ‘I’ll miss you, in a way. Which is to say, I’ll miss this. You were one of a kind, Tiny. Tiro.’

John was too choked to utter his true name in correction. It belonged to a better time, a better place. It belonged to a better man.

‘On your way, Colonel. And keep your eyes on the road.’

As they began to roll, Lord Magnussen took John’s hand and placed it on his crotch. ‘Once more, with feeling.’

John snatched his hand away, but it was all for naught. Suddenly, Lord Magnussen had a hand on the back of his neck, and he was dragging his head downward, dragging the zip downward. John struggled, twisted, kept his lips sealed, even as Lord Magnussen was exposed.

The car pulled out onto the busy streets and into full day. But behind dark windows, the world was blind to John’s plight.

Tight fingers pinched his nose, cutting off his air. A massive hand held him down. He felt like he was under water, drowning, drowning. He hoped to pass out, maybe to die. When he thought he could suffer no further degradation, when he believed himself stripped of all dignity and worth, there was always another insult. He was weak. The world was strong. He gasped, and surrendered, because what more could he do? He had lost the fight long ago.

***

The car slowed in front of King’s Cross Station and pulled to the kerb. Lord Magnussen finished cleaning his hands with a lemon-scented moist wipe and tossed it to the floor of his otherwise pristine inner cabin. John had only the sleeve of his jacket on which to clean his mouth.

‘Get him ready,’ said Lord Magnussen with a tiresome sigh. He didn’t look at John. He looked disinterestedly out of the window instead.
The Colonel put the car in park and stepped around, pulling open the door on John’s side and climbing in. He had with him a collar. Not the one from the catalogue. This was not designed for wards at all, but for dogs: a brown leather strap with a buckled, affixed to a thin lead. John sat still while the Colonel fitted it to his neck.

‘You have the travel papers?’ said Lord Magnussen, still not looking. He was examining his fingernails.

‘Yes, sir. And his commission papers.’

‘Very well. Report back tomorrow.’

The Colonel gripped the lead in his good hand and hauled John out to the pavement, but he kept him close, and the lead fell slack so no one could see. The door closed. A new driver, who had evidently been waiting for the car to arrive, now took the driver’s seat, and just like that, Lord Magnussen was gone.

‘They say you’re a runner,’ the Colonel said to him. ‘Not this time.’

He showed John a collapsible baton hanging on the inside of his coat.

‘Now, we walk. This doesn’t come off. When we’re on the train, you sit close to me. You don’t talk to anyone, you don’t even look at anyone. Got it? Look.’ He stepped close, so close John couldn’t look up, even if he had had the strength to do so. ‘All this? Your miserable life? It’s almost over. Take some comfort in that, at least. It’ll all be over soon.’

They walked toward the station, old yellow brick and towering arched windows. John was numb, empty. He didn’t feel the pavement beneath his feet, or the leather around his neck. He thought of Harry. At least she was safe. At least she was happy. She would never know what had become of him—no one would—but in the greater balance, maybe it wouldn’t matter. She lived a good life, with a good host. She had been spared the horrors of a life despised, a life unloved. He hoped she would not think ill of him, leaving without telling her goodbye. He hoped Mr Holmes would still visit her. Mr Holmes . . .

Mr Holmes. Why didn’t you find me? You can do anything. You said you were my friend, but . . . did you not love me after all?

He had not doubted his Mr Holmes, not once. Not until this very moment, as he and the Colonel passed into the station, and the din of voices turned to mush inside that massive hollow. He realised that, all along, while languishing in the old ward room and fearing Mr Wilkes’ return, and while suffering under the ravishing might of Lord Magnussen, he had still believed Mr Holmes would come. Mr Holmes . . . his friend . . .

But the devastating truth of it was, he was alone. As before, he was all alone.

They stopped at the checkpoint. The Colonel presented his travel papers. He surrendered his black flexiglass bracelets for white ones. Cleared to travel, they were permitted entrance.

Holding his arm, letting the lead hang slack from around John’s neck, the Colonel walked him past the ticket counters, the waiting benches, the coffee counters. He marched him on until they came to the escalators, and down below, the platforms to where people gathered, awaiting their trains, and the tracks below even that. Maybe there was still hope. Maybe, as the train approached, rolling forward, thousands of tonnes on steel wheels, he could step toward the track . . . and fall . . .

The Colonel’s mobile rang. He pulled John away from the escalator, allowing traffic to pass by
unimpeded, and dug into his pocket for his phone with his awkwardly wrapped hand. The other still gripped John by the bicep. But when the din of the station was too distracting, he dropped John’s arm to plug an ear. The lead was attached to his wrist.

John couldn’t hear the conversation that followed, and he didn’t care. He turned back to stare at the platforms and the tracks, and the bodies swarming like beetles, all of them with places to go and things to do and families and friends who would miss them for the short time they were gone. A train was approaching. Too late. He wouldn’t have a chance to fall as it entered the station and covered the tracks. He watched as it rolled closer, imagining, nonetheless, how quick it would be. Maybe it wouldn’t even hurt.

And then . . . he saw him. A trick of the eye, he first thought, or a vain wish made visible. But no. Not a trick. Not a hope. A billowing black coat, pushing frantically through the crowd, head twisting this way and that as if looking for something . . . or someone. Rushing down the platform, moving further and further away. John knew him—the sharp silhouette, the frenetic gait, the untamed hair—but he was disappearing, further and further away.

Away.

His heart was beating again. He hadn’t realised it had stopped. His breath was sharp in his chest. He had to do something, and quickly, or all would be lost. John turned to look at the Colonel, to see if he was being watched. The Colonel saw him looking, saw the brightness in his eyes, and his own widened with the threat to behave.

John did not heed the warning.

He flung himself at the railing overlooking the platform. The lead tautened, and the leather tugged at his throat. But before he could be pulled away, before he could be stopped, he filled his lungs, leant far over the railing, and cried out so loud the pigeons took flight and the din of voices throughout the station fell to a hush:

‘SHERLOCK!’
King's Cross Station

There was a back entrance, through Mrs Hudson’s flat. The egress was legally mandated in case of a fire and led to an alley behind the row of flats. Barely an alley. It was an access point for maintenance and repair, not pedestrians. But it was how Sally Donovan slipped unnoticed into 221 Baker Street. There was no CCTV in the back alleys, and it wouldn’t do to raise suspicions if anyone untoward happened to be monitoring the comings and goings of Mycroft Holmes’ little brother.

‘They’ve made me the Hands,’ said Donovan, accepting the readied cup of tea from her erstwhile rival. ‘Officially. I suppose you can say I’ve been promoted.’

‘Excellent,’ said Sherlock, forcing a grin.

He didn’t look well, but Donovan could hardly blame him. Doubtless he’d scarcely slept. But he was restless, if his bouncing foot was anything to go by. It was a wonder he didn’t slosh his tea all over his trousers, which, she noted, he hadn’t changed out of since yesterday.

Now it was Monday, and she had called in sick at the Yard. She had spent the day instead reporting —through discreet channels—all she knew about John’s abduction and his captor. For the first time since her induction as a Highwayman, someone had come to see her, a flesh-and-blood someone, and she had been granted permission to speak to Sherlock and reassure him that a plan was in formation, and execution would be rapid.

‘There’s been a development,’ she said. ‘We are monitoring John’s status. Apparently, sometime this afternoon, he had his medical evaluation, the one mandated for all newly acquired wards. His results were positive for derangement, a class-A incurable, and he has been cleared for Storage.’

‘Derangement!’ Sherlock shouted angrily.

‘It’s rubbish, we both know that,’ Donovan said, though she sympathised with Sherlock’s disgust. ‘But we also knew that this was in the plan all along, didn’t we? A host can’t just get bored or annoyed with a ward and request transference to Storage. No host has that kind of power. For one, there has to be just cause. So Magnussen needed to have a reason, and it looks like he colluded with a doctor to get it done. Just like he did with Janine. But let’s be honest, this is good news.’

‘It means John’s on a timer, and we can intercept him on the train.’ Sherlock nodded, as though to assuage himself, but he looked little placated. ‘How soon?’

‘Janine said the girls—herself included—were always sent away on a Friday. They left from King’s Cross. We are working off that intelligence.’

But Sherlock was shaking his head adamantly.

‘No. No, not good enough, no. That’s five days away.’

‘Four. Today is over.’

‘And Janine’s story happened over a decade ago. A decade! Sally! You think nothing has changed in all that time? You think Magnussen is that predictable?’

‘I had my doubts, too, but I am not the Brains. They know more than I do. I’m only communicating to you the plan. On Friday—’
Four days, five days, however long it is, what happens to John in the meantime, then? Is Magnussen just going to leave him be? Or is he going to strip him down and tie him to a bed and . . .’ Sherlock covered his mouth with a fist, looking like he was going to be sick. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet, choked. ‘I promised him. That he was safe, that he’d never be hurt again, I promised. And now . . .’

Seeing him like this, in such a state she had never imagined of him, her own eyes burned and blurred. Memories of her long, painful conversations with Janine resurfaced: endless nights holding her in her arms while she sobbed her confession, countless days reassuring her that it was all over and that it had not been her fault, untold hours researching how to help her heal. And with time, she had. It was impossible, though, to communicate that to Sherlock. Not right now.

Still, she tried to help by way of distraction. ‘Friday means we have four more days to strategise, to make an airtight plan. It’ll be all right, Sherlock. This is what the Brains do.’

He was little comforted. ‘They already made an attempt to save John. And they failed.’

She sighed, penitent.

Suddenly, Sherlock was on his feet. ‘Thank God this time around you have me.’

‘Now hold on a minute, Holmes,’ she said, rising to join him. ‘I’m permitted to keep you in the loop, as the higher-ups have determined you are friendly to our cause, but you’re not an operative.’

‘Not a Highwayman, you mean. Not an inducted one, at least. But let’s get one thing straight. John is my cause. I’ll fight for him to the bitter, bloody end. If this doesn’t work, you will write him off as just another failed attempt. If we get caught, I get caught, and the rest of you fade back into the background like you never gave a damn to begin with.’ Seeing her offence, he waved a dismissive hand and continued, ‘I get it. You can’t risk exposure. Believe me, I’ve already suffered the lecture. John is just a pawn on the board, and if you need to sacrifice him to win the game, that’s exactly what you’ll do.’

‘We’ve not given him up as lost,’ she said. ‘We won’t.’

‘Then let’s get to work. Since we began this tedious conversation, I’ve come up with six strategic ideas for interception. Seven. How many do you have?’

They continued to talk. Or rather, Sherlock did. His mind was a wonder, she couldn’t deny it, and he spoke so quickly Donovan herself lost breath. He made her promise to share everything he was saying with her people, made her promise no fewer than five times, made her repeat it all back to him. At last, both parties exhausted, she announced that she had overstayed her time there and needed to get back. He nodded curtly.

So Sally Donovan left, sneaking out the way she had come, and Sherlock sat numbly in his chair, across from John’s. What he wouldn’t give to see John sitting there again, to hear him ask questions and see his eyes light up with new knowledge. He longed to make John tea, to ask him about the latest book he was reading, to suggest a game of draughts, to laugh about, well, anything. Anything at all.

He sat for hours. Eventually, he pulled out his phone, scrolling without purpose to occupy his hands while his mind was on business of its own. It must have been muscle memory that took him there, to the website he had been neglecting for days. There were dozens of new and unread messages. Without thinking, he clicked, scrolled, skimmed. But his hands and brain were brought back into alignment when he reached the bottom, newest message. Two words. Not even a full two, from
First, it was just a matter of exposing the anonymous sender’s IP address, which was simple enough, and with basic software Sherlock was able to narrow the location to the whole of London. Not very helpful. But he was convinced that the message had somehow come from John. It perhaps wasn’t very logical. Anyone might have begun a message and accidentally hit send. But then, to leave it unfinished?

He reasoned that the message had been sent in haste. Why haste? A time limit, a need to rush, because . . . because the writer was afraid of being caught. So. The writer of the message was not allowed to be on a computer. Or on a phone. But he’d managed to get hold of one. Not his own, clearly. And . . . if the writer had been acting hastily, then there would have been little consideration for capitalizing the first word, not unless it was autocorrected that way, in which case . . . phone was a more likely candidate. And . . . the writer might have provided more useful information, like an address, unless he didn’t know where he was, or panic left him to do nothing more than cry for help. And . . . it was someone in trouble who had reached out to Sherlock, and not to the police. That meant something. It meant that, if the message really was sent from a phone (and Sherlock believed himself correct on that deduction), then the choice to go the cumbersome route and find his website rather than call him or the police was because there was a distrust of the police, and no access to Sherlock’s number. This was John. This had to be John. He was crying for help and Sherlock had no way to answer. He was out there, alive, suffering, and Sherlock was helpless to save him.

He sent Donovan the IP address. Her access was evidently more useful than his own, having access not only to police resources but also to the Brains. She responded in under an hour. The message had been sent from a mobile, as he had suspected, belonging to a Mr Karl August, a physician.

‘My guess is that he’s the one who marked the package for removal,’ Donovan said. Her voice came faintly through the phone, and she was speaking in code.

‘That’s fits the timeline,’ Sherlock responded. ‘The notice was delivered Monday afternoon, when the records changed. Do you have an address for him?’

There was a long pause. ‘No. And don’t go looking.’

He drew in a breath to retort. If August had been with John, then he knew where Magnussen lived, and it was just a matter of squeezing the information from him! But she cut him off before he could rant.

‘You’ll compromise the operation. We don’t give them a heads-up, or they might move the package before we’re ready. Keep to the plan.’

It was only Tuesday.

He had begun to call the operation All Hands on Deck. It was exactly what he insisted on: Hands.

‘Three locations,’ said Sherlock. ‘King’s Cross, Paddington, Victoria. I want Hands at each, no fewer than a dozen, and Eyes, no fewer than twenty pair, and why are we not involving the Feet?’

‘We can’t have the whole network in train stations,’ Donovan griped.
They were standing on a street corner, sharing hot chips from a funnel of newspaper. She was on duty, technically, and he was on his way to King’s Cross, having just come from Paddington.

‘I’ve plotted out strategic locations for each member, and I want you to disseminate John’s image, keeping in mind that they may have him disguised. Hat, glasses, maybe oversized clothing, but they’re unlikely to change his height. He’s five-six’—he flattened his hand and held it up to just under his own chin—‘and small of frame, you’ve seen him . . .’

‘We’ve already sent a flare,’ she said.

‘Operatives will need to blend in, of course. But there needs to be a signal if someone spots him, a way to mark him and follow him so we can intercept him before he gets on that train.’

‘The Brains have been devising strategies on that point.’ Donovan popped a chip. Chewing on one side of her mouth, she spoke through the other. ‘Earpieces for that many operatives are impractical, we’re not secret agents. I mean, we are, but . . . you know. We’re not CIA. So they are trying to come up with something effective, practical, but surreptitious—’

‘Simple,’ said Sherlock. He adjusted the baseball cap on his head. For all the hours he was spending in train stations, scouting and scanning, it wouldn’t do to look like Sherlock Holmes. ‘Mobiles. Everyone uses them, there’s nothing at all suspicious about it. You spot him, you lift your phone to take a photo with the flash. Other Hands, other Eyes, they’ll know to look for it, they’ll see the operative and the direction he or she is facing, and it will be like an arrow pointing at the target. No one else will even bat an eye.’

‘That . . . could work.’

‘Of course it could. It will.’

‘Where will you be?’

‘King’s Cross. If your intelligence is accurate, that’s the most likely place they’ll take him. I want you at Paddington, as that seems the next most likely location. If they take him to Victoria, well.’ He sighed. ‘One of the Hands will have to board the train and send a flare to let us know which one.’

‘This will work, Holmes.’

‘Yes.’ He had thought of everything. As long as everyone was in place, as long as each cog in the wheel turned just right, they would find John. The Brains were ninety-percent confident (their own words) that the transfer to Storage would take place on Friday. But in case they were wrong, if there was even a one percent chance that they were mistaken and John was moved sooner, Sherlock was going to be there.

Which was why he was on his way back to King’s Cross.

Wednesday ended, quiet as a sunset.

***

Mrs Hudson wasn’t sleeping, that much was clear. Her worry kept her awake and drove away any appetite, and it was only on Sherlock’s insistence that she ate anything at all. He was growing weary of assuring her that everything would be all right. He wanted to believe it, and kept telling himself the same. But this week had felt like a year, a whole year of distress and fear. He wanted it over. He wanted John home.
He was finding it harder and harder to put off Harry. She kept calling. He kept lying. By now, he was sure she suspected something was wrong. She was no fool. She cared about John. Sherlock couldn’t bear to tell her that he had lost him.

Lestrade called. He had been trying to get hold of John, too. Michael had been asking after him, but he wasn’t answering his phone. Sherlock wanted to tell him everything. He couldn’t. There was too much at stake, and Donovan, every time they parted, reminded him that any word to anyone, even the most trustworthy of friends or family, could compromise the entire organisation, let alone the operation. He would not compromise John. So he lied to Lestrade, too.

Molly texted. Would they like to come over? Have dinner? See the baby? He put her off. *Another time*, he promised. *Soon.*

He fantasied about ways to kill Sebastian Wilkes. He couldn’t help it.

And he wanted to call Mycroft. His thumb hovered over his brother’s name on his phone several times, but each time he stopped himself from pressing the button. He had his battle, and Mycroft had the war.

Like a branch floating down an unmoving river, time floated by at an agonising pace.

Thursday felt like it would never end.

***

It was Friday.

King’s Cross Station was positively bustling with activity, a veritable hive of commuters and tourists and weekenders, rushing about like drones or standing infuriatingly still and in the way. The station swelled with a cacophonous hum. Bags rolled, phones jangled, people laughed, machines buzzed, and over the PA system, train arrivals and departures were announced in a echoing voice that sounded like a woman speaking inside a tin. Timetables flashed overhead, long queues formed at the ticket lines, and in the middle of all the chaos stood Sherlock.

He was standing as though with arrow cocked and bow drawn tight, tensed and alert. His eyes darted in search of his quarry. He knew where stood each of the Hands, each of the Eyes. They were outside of the station, watching the cars and pedestrians and marking the entrances. They were below the station, spotting the turnstiles. They were on the platforms, as though to wait for an incoming train. He watched. He waited. Since before six o’clock in the morning, he had been there. He had his phone in hand, in case Donovan should contact him from Paddington, or announce that it had gone down in Victoria. But so far, nothing. It eight o’clock, and nothing. Nine o’clock, and nothing. Ten o’clock, and . . .

From the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of light. His head spun and he waited for a second. Nothing.

Three minutes later, in the other direction, another flash. His head snapped. Then there, in the distance toward the platforms, a second flash answering the signal of the first.

*My God, my God*, he thought. He picked up his feet, darting, dodging, headed straight for the light, but his eyes were dancing wildly from point to point, looking for more lights, looking for the small figure of a man under guard.

Had it been one of the Highwaymen? Or something else?
He stood at the top of the escalator, looking down, searching for more flashes, for a fair head. But the platforms were crowded, and despite his sharp eyes, he couldn’t filter out the distractions in throng.

But there! At the end of Platform 8, another flash! Was he there? Had a Hand or an Eye spotted him? Had the signal been sent?

Sherlock raced down the escalator, pushing past backpackers, parents holding their children, and businesspeople until he reached platform. A train was approaching. Was that it? The train that would bear John away? The train that went to Storage?

On the lower level, he could no longer see the end of the platform, not for the press of bodies, those eager to board. Heart racing, he searched. He was here, he had to be here. Quickly, quickly! Before the train arrives! Before those doors open! Before he can disappear inside! John, John! I can’t see you! John! Where are you? I’m coming, John, I’m—

Suddenly, as though the air itself were rent in two, a cry tore through the broiling commotion of the station and stopped his heart.

‘SHERLOCK!’

His feet skidded on the platform. Silence fell like a curtain. The echo of that cry swirled around him even as he spun, as though in slow motion, to face back the way he had come. It sank into his heart and reverberated in his bones. His name. That voice. The two had never before combined, but in its union was the fulfilment of a promise, a resolution and triumph, and yet . . . it was filled with such utter desperation as to bring Sherlock nearly to his knees.

‘John,’ he whispered.

Then louder.

‘John!’

He began shoving his way back, eyes searching frantically, but he could not see from where the cry had come. He shouted aloud, ‘Where did it come from? Where!’

The people, ordinary people, saw his panic, heard his question, and they began to point. Up. Up the escalator. They held their fingers, guiding him onward as he pushed past them, hysterical, desperate. ‘John!’ he called.

The up escalator on the left was filled with bodies, but the down escalator only sparsely so, so he went right. Panting, rushing, dodging and leaping, he raced up the down escalator, faster, higher, until he burst to the top, and there, to his right, he saw a gathered crowd, a ring of onlookers, phones aloft and recording something in the middle of the ring. Sherlock saw, from that centre, and black baton rise into the air, and fall. Rise, and fall. And with each landing, a shout of pain.

He shot through the bodies, shoving them aside, and then, at long last, he saw him.

John lay curled on the ground. His hands were raised over his head and his knees were tucked close to his chest. His neck was pinned to the floor where a boot stood on a lead attached to a collar. The boot belonged to a man standing over John, wielding a baton, striking, striking with abandon, with rage, striking ribs and hips, legs and arms, and with each blow, John recoiled and cried out.

Sherlock felt his heart shattering like crystal.

He didn’t know why he did it. Even years later, he wouldn’t be able to say why he didn’t attack the
man raining blows down upon his friend, why he didn’t rush forward and grab him at the shoulders and fling him to the side, or with fists and teeth tear him apart. Logically, it was precisely what he should have done.

But he didn’t. Instead, Sherlock thrust himself into the fray. He threw himself on top of John’s body, wrapped himself around his back, and covered him like a blanket, trying to protect every part. He shielded John’s head with his own and squeezed his arms around John’s arms and became his second skin, so when the next blow fell, it fell on him. He did not wish for the striking to stop but thought only, Strike me instead. However long the assault would last, it would be he and he alone who would bear the pain of it.

He grunted as the baton smashed against his shoulder, bruised his back, collided with the bones of his wrist. It was everywhere, all around him. He tightened his hold. Somewhere in the chaos of pain, he felt a hand slide into his.

Then suddenly, everything stopped.

People shouted. Whistles blew. Sherlock didn’t move a muscle, only to open his eyes and see the feet moving around him, uniforms and police officers’ feet, creating a barrier between him and the gathered spectators. Below him, John didn’t move either. Their faces were pressed together, cheek against cheek, and when John blinked, he felt the wet eyelashes flutter against his own temple. He felt John’s fingers curl around his own.

Abruptly, someone grabbed his shoulders and began hauling him away. He squeezed John’s hand, but he couldn’t hold on, and suddenly he was on his feet, two officers holding him up by the arms as though to steady him.

‘All right there, mate?’ one said to him.

Dazed, Sherlock looked around. The attacker had been tackled to the ground, his arms pulled around his back and cuffs slapped to his wrists. They were just now dragging him to his feet. An army of phones were just beyond him, continuing to record. And John remained curled on the floor, unmoving.

‘Help him,’ Sherlock said. ‘Someone . . . Someone call an ambulance. He’s hurt.’ He knew it was true. He had sustained comparatively few of the blows—his own pain receptors were flaring their angry signals to his overwrought brain—and John had got the worse of it.

‘That ward is deranged,’ the attacker declared. ‘He’s been cleared for Storage, but he was acting out, acting wild. Was going to throw himself over the railing! I’m his minder, I’ve been authorised by his host to—’

‘I am his host!’ Sherlock shouted.

A female officer was approaching John, turning him over, and coaxing him to stand. She held onto his elbow as he lifted himself to his feet. He was shaking, anyone could see it, and from his collared neck hung a dog leash. Seeing it, seeing the overall state of him, the gathered crowd gasped and made disapproving murmurs, holding their phones even higher.

‘His name is John,’ Sherlock said, his voice choked with emotion. ‘He was kidnapped and illegally sold. Go on, ask him. He’s mine, ask him!’

‘That’s a lie,’ the attacker said. ‘I am here at the behest of Lord Magnussen. Charles Augustus Magnussen, Lord Commissioner of Emancipation, and I have never seen this man’—he nodded
curtly at Sherlock—‘before in my life.’

Furious, Sherlock dug a hand into his pocket and withdrew his wallet, and from his wallet his host ID card. ‘There! See?’ he panted. ‘That’s me, that’s my ward: JW6462-11.’

_Look at me, John. Please look at me. It’s over, you’re safe, I’m here._

‘Scan his tattoo,’ one officer said to another.

They went for John’s left sleeve.

‘His neck, it’s on his neck,’ Sherlock said.

‘As of this morning,’ said the attacker, ‘this ward was the property of Lord Magnussen.’

Another murmur passed through the crowd. It was gauche to call a ward _property._

They had to remove the collar to scan John’s neck. While they fumbled with the buckle, John stood perfectly still, despite the laboured breathing. But his eyes lifted. And they locked onto Sherlock’s. Sherlock stared back. _It’s over, all over. You’re coming home._ He wanted to rush over and hold him, and say how sorry he was that he hadn’t done better by him. He wanted to brush the bruises away as if they were no more than smudges of dirt. Those bruises. They weren’t fresh. The contusions from the beating he had just suffered would take another hour to blacken, but _those?_ They were days old. _God, John, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I didn’t find you sooner. What else did you endure?_

He wasn’t the only one who noticed. ‘His face,’ one onlooker whispered to partner. ‘Good God,’ said another.

One officer showed the screen of the tablet to another. ‘Cleared for Storage,’ she said.

‘No!’ Sherlock tried to move forward, but an officer grabbed his arm and held him back. ‘I will host him, I will host him. You can’t send him if to Storage is someone is willing to host him!’

The officers exchanged glances, trying to decide what to do. Sherlock wanted to scream. But he didn’t want to make things worse for John. John, who stood quiet in the storm, still watching him with wide, anxious eyes amidst a cloud of bruises, relying on him to make the nightmare go away, to make everything all right again and take him home. He looked nowhere but at Sherlock.

‘This is a legal matter,’ one of the officers finally stated. ‘You’ll need to sort it out with the courts. In the meantime, the ward comes with us.’

The two officers gripping the attacker’s elbows twisted him around and began to march him toward the exits. Next moment, the female officer put an arm around John’s shoulders to steer him away. With a flash of panic, John looked back. ‘Mr Holmes?’ he called. He reached out a hand wearing a white bracelet, but the officer kept him on. ‘Sher . . . Sherlock? Mr Holmes?’

‘It’s okay, John!’ he shouted, his own hand reaching back. ‘You’ll be home really soon, I promise! I’m bringing you home!’

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Something had happened.

The footage went viral within the hour. Within twenty-four hours, all of Britain knew the name _John._ Anchors on every news station in the country led the hour with the top story of the day. The BBC
was unusually animated:

‘… A ward of the state called John was attacked today in King’s Cross Station whilst undergoing a host transfer …’

SkyNews: ‘… Viral footage shows the brutal beating of the ward already in progress. What instigated the attack has not yet been released, but what’s got everyone talking is the moment when a free citizen, Sherlock Holmes of London, enters the fray. Look here.’ The footage paused, and when it played up again, it was at half speed. ‘Mr Holmes throws himself on top of the ward to protect him from the bludgeoning instrument …’

Guardian Live: ‘… The perpetrator, we now know, is an emancipated ward named Colonel Moran. Now, to be clear, Colonel is not a military title but the former ward’s first name; his surname was assigned at the time of emancipation. We have also learned that Mr Moran was in the employ of the Lord Commissioner of Emancipation himself, Charles Magnussen, and it was Magnussen’s own ward who was the victim of this assault …’

Daily Mail TV: ‘… Up and down the country, Britons are stunned by the public beating, with early polls indicating that 87% of viewers were upset by the footage. Additional poll questions turned out the following results: 38% said such corporal punishment was acceptable if merited, 44% said all punishments should be kept private, and 55% agreed that is was unacceptable in any circumstance, which has reignited the debate on acceptable punishments for adult wards who misbehave …’

BBC: ‘… Guardianship of the ward is currently in dispute. This is shaping up to look like a long, drawn-out custody battle …’

The court had to make one decision quickly: what to do with the ward whilst the feuding parties made their applications to the court, retained the services of solicitors, and presented their arguments before a magistrate.

Initially, the answer seemed obvious, and the ward with registration number JW6462-11 was removed to a Ward Shelter and Holding Facility in Central London. But after two nights there, staff determined it would be best to move him. Everyone from reporters to activists to the petitioners themselves tried to see him, like he was a spectacle in a zoo. The shelter staff were overtaxed in dealing with the onslaught of attention, and for the ward’s own security, he was removed the magistrate’s court and kept there in a holding cell.

This was where Greg Lestrade found him.

He spotted John through the small window of heavy steel door with a double lock. He looked small sitting on the edge of a cot, hands folded on his lap, staring at the floor. Lestrade had viewed the footage—hell, all of England had viewed it; it seemed to be on constant loop on the telly—and so he wasn’t surprised by the black-and-blue face, but he still winced seeing it in person, and his own face stung in response.

He had come on Sherlock’s behalf. As one of the disputing parties, Sherlock himself was not allowed anywhere near John, and he was at this very moment dressing-down his new solicitor for not securing a timelier court date. He was going mad not knowing what had become of John and begged Lestrade to intervene, actually begged. There was little Lestrade could do, legally speaking. But his station did afford him the advantage of getting inside the courthouse.

The door screeched open, and John’s eyes snapped up, but only his eyes. The rest of him remained
perfectly still, though braced, as if in a defensive position. But when he saw who it was, the tension melted away, and his whole head lifted, eyes wide and inquiring.

‘Mr Lestrade?’

‘Hello, John,’ he said, trying to smile. God, he was still trying to wrap his head around all of this, not only the alarming footage of the attack, but more significantly, all that Sherlock had told him, and what more he had implied. Lestrade had shouted at Sherlock for not calling the police at the very start—though now he understood his reasons—and he meant to help in whatever limited capacity he could. This wasn’t exactly his division, though, and he was not on assignment. But he had to come. Michael had cried himself to sleep last night, worrying after his new friend.

John looked past Lestrade’s shoulder. ‘Mr Holmes? Is he . . .?’

‘Not allowed to see you.’ Seeing John’s face fall, he rushed to say, ‘For now. There are some things he needs to work out, but . . . How much have they told you about . . . all this?’

‘Nothing, sir.’

‘Nothing?’ Why the hell not? So what had John been imagining was going on out there, beyond these walls, where all the world was talking about him? It was sickening enough they were keeping him in a cell; they didn’t have to treat him like a prisoner. But Sherlock’s lobby to at least put him up in a hotel or with a surrogate host had been denied. It’ll all be straightened out soon enough, they kept promising, but what the hell did that mean? By Christmas? Before the new year? Before the one after that?

John shook his head. ‘Tell me?’

Lestrade opened his coat and sat with John on the cot. ‘Sherlock is fighting for you. Fighting to get you come home. But there are . . . complications. Lord Magnussen, he’s petitioning to have you returned to him.’

John’s eyes went wide with fear. ‘That’s wrong. He doesn’t want me. He was sending me away! He was sending me to Storage!’

‘Trust me, we are doing everything—everything—to make sure that doesn’t happen. You will go home. With Sherlock. It just might take some time.’

But John was stuck on the thought of returning to Magnussen. ‘He doesn’t want me, he doesn’t, he was sending me away!’

Lestrade didn’t know how much to tell him. All he wanted to do was reassure him, not fill his mind with doubts. He wished Sherlock could have come to help him navigate these waters. He knew John so much better than Lestrade did.

But he had to try. ‘Lord Magnussen’s reputation is on the line,’ he said carefully. ‘He’s a prominent man, especially when it comes to ward affairs, so to be accused of mistreatment . . . Let’s just say, he is building a defence. He gave a press conference today and said he was acting on the recommendation of a doctor who assessed you as, well, incurable. He said you were harming yourself and showing signs of mental instability, and that was the only reason he agreed to send you to Storage. Now he’s claiming he wants a second opinion, and he wants to keep you safe and well cared for and—’

John was shaking his head emphatically, ‘No, sir, no. They hurt me. They— they—!’
‘Let me finish. It boils down to this: Two parties are naming themselves your proper host. Both have legitimate claims. Now they need to prove it. Sherlock didn’t do everything right, legally speaking, and he needs to answer for it. As it stands, the accusations against Lord Magnussen are unproven, and he appears to have legal rights to you. But, but!’ He saw the look of shock and horror fill John’s eyes and needed to reassure him. ‘But the courts will hear defences on both sides, and part of that will be arguing for who can provided you with a better home environment.’

‘Not Lord Magnussen, not him,’ John said tensely.

‘Of course not. But it has to be proved in court. That’s the way things go. The trouble is, courts don’t hear the testimonies of wards. So we need evidence of a different sort. Witnesses, if we can find them, and hard evidence. Something scientific, measurable, verifiable. Sherlock is working on that. But he wants me to ask you something. Something not easy to talk about. Did . . .’ He took a deep breath. It was hard to ask this question of the living. In some ways, it was just easier to work with corpses. ‘This past week in Lord Magnussen’s flat. Did . . . did he himself assault you? Did he . . . What I’m asking is, did he . . . rape you?’

John froze, petrified. A long moment passed before he could respond: a subtle nod, a hollow stare.

Lestrade wanted to reach over and touch him, comfort him in some way, but he felt clumsy and intrusive. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said softly. Then, ‘When they took you from King’s Cross, John, were you seen by medical staff?’

‘They’—he stopped to clear his throat, but his voice still trembled—‘they gave me an ice pack for my . . . ’ He touched the bruised side of his face. ‘And paracetamol. Made sure nothing was broken.’

‘Did they take photographs of your body?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Did they ask whether you’d been sexually violated?’

John’s hands twisted together. ‘No, sir.’

Unprofessional bastards. That was definitely a violation of protocol. It was just like Sherlock had feared. It likely meant they were under instruction to provide only minimal care. The question was—and was it really a question?—whose instruction was it?

‘Okay. John, the first thing I’m going to do when I leave today is send someone in here to take photographs of all your injuries, okay? We need a record of that. And I’m also going to have someone take a statement. It’s inadmissible, but it’ll give Sherlock something to work with. I’d do it myself, but because I know you, I need to recuse myself. I’m not even supposed to be the one talking to you now. But I’m going to send in a doctor to look you over, make sure you’re okay. Okay?’

‘I tried to tell the doctor,’ said John, wiping away a single tear. ‘He said I was delusional.’

‘Then he was a quack,’ Lestrade said, trying to keep his anger in check.

‘I don’t want . . .’ John squeezed his eyes shut, his head shaking back and forth.

‘Go on. It’s okay.’

‘I don’t want people looking at me. Touching me. I don’t . . .’ He stood and turned away, hiding himself from even Lestrade, as best he could.
‘I understand, John, but . . . you understand, don’t you? We need to make sure you’re okay. And we need to prove . . . That is, we need evidence that Magnussen is a very, very bad man.’

Though John’s back was to him, Lestrade could see that he was covering his mouth with one hand, an arm holding himself around the middle. This whole situation just felt so surreal to Lestrade. This ward, the man—by all accounts, he seemed like such a good man. Lestrade hadn’t thought much of him, in the beginning. More than anything, he had been perplexed by Sherlock’s selection, and his unusual treatment of him. Bringing a ward to a crime scene! But since summer, since actually sitting and talking with him, he had grown quite fond of John. How could such a thing have happened in his past? How could all this be happening now?

‘Sir?’ said John, without turning.

‘Yes?’

‘Mr Holmes taught me things about his work. Detective things.’

Lestrade didn’t know where John was going with this, or what it had to do with the matter at hand, but he encouraged John to continue all the same. The shakiness had gone from his voice. Now, it was steady, if soft.

‘He said sometimes people leave things behind, parts of themselves. Like hair, skin, blood. DNA.’

‘Yes.’

‘It doesn’t have to be fresh.’

‘No.’

‘It can be . . . dry? Days old?’

‘Yes. It can be years old. Years and years.’

Slowly, John drew the zip of his jacket down, and beganshrugging it from his shoulders. Lestrade stood, puzzled. ‘What are you doing?’

John turned around, holding the jacket out for Lestrade to take.

‘Evidence,’ he said.

***

The day after Mr Lestrade left, John was visited by two strangers who identified themselves as Ward Social Care workers. They were all smiles. They held out their hands, leading him out of the room, down the hall, and into an empty room with a single table and a large mirror that filled an entire wall. He asked if they were going to be asking him questions and taking photos, like Mr Lestrade had said. Though some were fading, many of his bruises were still quite dark, and he was still in a fair amount of pain, so maybe that would be useful, to prove what needed to be proved. He had steeled himself, too, to talk about the bad things that had happened, the really bad things, in as much detail as they needed, if it meant he didn’t have to go back there. He had lain awake on the cot all night, thinking about what he would say, how he would say it, and repeated it over and over in his mind so that when the time came, it would be easier to get the words out.

‘We’re here to ask you some questions,’ they said. He nodded, licked his lips, and prepared himself. ‘Were you ever touched inappropriately’—he parted his lips and drew in a breath—‘by Sherlock
Holmes?’

He gasped sharply.

‘It’s okay,’ they said, ‘you can say it.’

He shook his head, he spoke the word no, he tried to name other hosts, but they were standing on the wrong path and refused to be moved.

‘Did he ever hug you when you didn’t ask to be hugged?’

‘Did he ever take you inside his bedroom?’

‘Did you ever lie on his bed?’

‘Did he ever undress you?’

No, no, no, no! It wasn’t like that! It wasn’t what they thought, nothing like they were saying! Not Mr Holmes! Not like that!

He tried to tell them, he tried to argue, but he was agitated, and they didn’t like that, they wouldn’t listen. They kept asking, asking, and were not listening to a word he said because his words were all wrong, not the words they wanted to hear. He got angry. He shouted. They warned him to behave, or things would go badly for him. They called him unstable, and when it became too much to bear, when he couldn’t stop himself, he lost control and hit himself in the side of the head. Then they said he was becoming violent. They returned him to his cell, and when they left, they were all frowns.

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‘Mr Holmes?’

He shot to his feet the moment he had heard the screech of the lock, and his next impulse, in seeing the man walking through the door, was to back away. But in this tiny, tight holding cell, there was nowhere to go.

Mycroft Holmes tutted. ‘Not even a window,’ he said. ‘This is quite unacceptable.’

It was like Mr Holmes was in the middle of a conversation with someone John couldn’t see.

‘How do you pass the time?’ Mr Holmes was looking around the cell and discovering there was nothing to look at. ‘No newspaper, no books, nothing of the sort?’

‘No sir.’

‘Are they feeding you well?’

‘They are feeding me.’

Mr Holmes sighed. ‘Come with me.’

Last he had seen Mr Holmes, they had played a game of Diplomacy together, shortly before John had disinvited him from the flat. He worried that the man was still sore about it. More troubling, however, was John’s belief that this Mr Holmes had sympathy, not for him, but for that great man Lord Magnussen. In any case, the last time he had left, he had been tricked.

‘I’m quite all right here, sir,’ said John.
‘No, John. You’re not.’ Mr Holmes appraised him from head to foot, an inspection John had endured from him before. This time, however, there was a softness about him that John didn’t understand. ‘You’ll not be anything close to all right until you’re back on Baker Street. I need your help to make that happen. So please, come with me.’

It was the mention of Baker Street that did him in. Maybe he could learn something of Mr Holmes—his Mr Holmes. Maybe this Mr Holmes even had a message for him, or would be willing to deliver one. Maybe he had paper in that briefcase he carried and would let John write a letter. Maybe a couple of letters. Maybe yesterday had been a mistake and WSC realised they had got it wrong and Mr Holmes had come to set everything to rights.

Mr Holmes led him down the hall, past security guards, and into a small room with a long table. There was no mirror. Instead, beyond the table stood three large windows. Mr Holmes closed the door behind them.

‘It’s dark,’ John commented as they sat across from one another on the end of the table.

‘It’s nearly midnight,’ replied Mr Holmes. ‘I don’t suppose you have any idea of the time, either.’

John touched his bare wrist but didn’t answer.

‘The first thing I want you to understand,’ said Mr Holmes, ‘is that I am not supposed to be here. I’ve come at night to avoid scandal. Neither Sherlock nor Lord Magnussen is to have any contact with you, as it would be seen as unduly influencing the outcome of the hearing. My familial relationship to Sherlock and my professional association with Magnussen make me an especially problematic visitor. But, as I am about to be guilty of greater subterfuge than this, I decided to risk it. No one knows I am here, and I will kindly ask you not to mention it.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said John. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Two days ago, you gifted a certain detective inspector with your jacket. That jacket has been taken to a lab, and while we wait for those results to come back—and I think we both know what the results will be—we must make the best use of our time so that when they do, we strike while the iron is hot.’

‘I still don’t understand.’

‘Your story is being rewritten even as we speak; we need to take back the narrative.’

‘I—’

‘Lord Magnussen is the very embodiment of government corruption and human deplorability. You know it better than anyone, though I know it quite well myself. He’s a rapist, John, and a slave master, and he’s not the only one.’

Opening his briefcase, Mr Holmes extracted a black binder. He set it on the table and slid over to John. He removed one more item: a small pad of stickers, little red dots, twenty-five on a page.

‘I’ve been waiting for this for a long, long time, John, but I need your help. If I’m going to expose these people, I need to know who they are. As many as you remember.’

‘As I remember . . . ?’

‘Open the binder.’
John lifted the cover. Beneath, page after page of names and faces under lamination.

‘That, John, is a list of all every MP, past and present still living, and those who work for them. It’s every magistrate and judge, every mayor and councilman, and every influential businessman, socialite, celebrity, and athlete I’ve had my eye on for two decades. I want you to look at these faces, and when you recognise one, mark it with a sticker.’

‘Recognise,’ John whispered to himself. His breath had shallowed, his throat had gone dry. ‘You mean, if I . . . if they were one of Mr Wilkes’ clients?’

‘Precisely.’

He let out a rush of air.

‘I know this is difficult,’ Mr Holmes continued.

‘But you’ll . . . believe me?’

‘I know you’ve been hurt, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry the system has failed you so grievously. I can’t go back and undo that. What I can do . . . is bring it down from within. I’ve been waiting for my chance. Your evidence? That is my chance. It is irrefutable, or will prove to be. And you can help me now to clinch it.’

John was ponderous. ‘What happens next? When you’re in charge, what do you do?’

‘I have no desire to be in a position of power. I only mean to disrupt the power as it is, and let others dismantle it.’

‘It?’

Mr Holmes cocked his head in surprise. ‘Why, the Ward Social Care Programme. All of it. It needs to be abolished, every part.’ He lifted his chin, almost as though in challenge. ‘Don’t you think?’

John stared at him in wonder. He had never heard anyone talk like that, ever, in all his life. He reached for the stickers, and began to make his marks.

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There were daily editorials in the paper, blog posts, video rants, and the comments sections were filled with hundreds, sometimes thousands of angry Britons:

*People who treat their wards like animals should be put down like animals!*

*honest, bruv, we all have our days when our shitty wards just make us go mental on them, my question is, what he do?*

*I don’t get it. Why was a ward at the train station to begin with? If he were gon to Storage, why they fighting over him now?*

*Just another male ward looking for attention when it’s the females we need to be worrying after. Why aren’t we talking about all the abuse the females suffer? It’s a thousand times worse than this, and you all going boo hoo about some troublesome male ward who was probably trying to run anyway.*

*I heard he’s a runner, but even runners don’t get hit like that.*
Neither party should get him. He should go to someone else entirely. I’ll take him, treat him good.

I was so upset when I saw what happened to that poor ward. You fuckers are heartless.

Why did it take so long for someone to intervene? What that Sherlock guy did was exactly right. I’ve never seen anything like it before, someone throwing himself in the line of fire to protect a ward, but it’s what we should all have done, and all those people, standing around with their phones and doing nothing. Shameful.

They should just send him on to Storage and forget the whole thing. Get yourself another.

I made £10,000 last month working from the comfort of my own home! Click on the link and learn how you can more than triple your income!

Maybe we should bring back emancipation for wards like this.

While the public was hashing it out with limited information and a hefty dose of presumption, investigative journalists were reaching conclusions of their own:

London – The conscience of the nation was pricked last Friday when videos were posted online of the unrestrained beating of a ward (Reg. No. JW6462-11) at King’s Cross Station whilst en route to the Permanent Shelter for Unplaced Wards, having been declared incurable by reason of self-harm and delusion, and being no longer fit for a host. Monday next, some ten days after the incident, the fate of the ward will be decided before the Court of Ward Welfare in London.

Despite JW’s designation for the Permanent Shelter by a medical professional, two parties are vying for returned custody, each a former host to the ward in question: Lord Charles Magnussen, Commissioner of Emancipation and notable proponent of ward welfare, and Mr Sherlock Holmes, a consulting detective with New Scotland Yard. Mr Holmes lost custody of JW when he failed to report him as missing on December 2. According to Holmes, JW was wrongfully issued a host recall by a previous host of JW and a former associate of Mr Holmes, Mr Sebastian Wilkes, a finance trader with Shad Sanderson. It is unclear what motive Mr Wilkes would have had to allegedly abduct the ward, nor does the accusation explain why Mr Holmes neglected to report it to authorities. Undoubtedly, these are among the questions the Court will pose to Mr Holmes during the hearing. Mr Wilkes, however, is reportedly abroad and has offered no rebuttal to the accusations lobbed against him. It is unclear, at this time, whether he will be subpoenaed or, if charges are filed against him, whether he will be extradited back to London.

Meanwhile, Lord Magnussen maintains that he acquired JW in good faith and has presented issuance papers as proof. Lord Magnussen, it is well known, has been an adamant proponent of ward safety and wellbeing for the whole of his career. According to public record, he is currently host to nine wards in London and fifteen at his estate in Sussex, a number far exceeding his civic duty. In the past, he has hosted up to thirty-two wards at one time, earning him the reputation of a humanitarian throughout Britain.

Mr Holmes, by contrast, has hosted two wards since coming of age, the first an inheritance ward, who expired approximately one year ago, and the second this latest, whom Mr Holmes failed to report as missing.

The Court of Ward Welfare will determine which of the two parties is better suited to serve as host to the unplaced ward.

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‘My flat, here in the city, is two storeys, three-thousand square feet, containing every amenity imaginable.’

Lord Magnussen stood in the witness box, and he was so tall that his head was nearly level with the magistrate’s, who sat on his bench, presumably but not demonstrably above all. He wore an immaculately tailored dark grey suit, and in speech and comportment held himself aloft as the stateliest man in the room.

‘And your flat is home to multiple wards, is that true?’

To Sherlock, the hearing felt like a spectacle. Historically, no custody hearing had ever attracted such attention, but that video had done a number on the viewing public.

‘Was that your people?’ Sherlock asked Donovan. The DULUGE, he knew—it was his suggestion, after all—had been armed with mobile phones.

‘Some of them,’ she answered. ‘Not all. Not most, in fact. Those were the British people.’

‘You sound excited.’

‘Aren’t you?’

It was hard to feel anything but fear these days.

No cameras or video recording of any kind was permitted inside the courtroom, but a box for the press lined the back wall, and outside, a swarm of reporters awaited details to pass along to the ever-curious public. The respective solicitors were present, but not to give argument, only to provide counsel. Only the magistrate would be asking the questions, interrogating both parties as to their claim to the ward, and ultimately deciding: one, whether the ward would be granted to either; and two, whether any more serious charges would be filed. If they were, the matter would become the concern of a higher court.

‘Oh yes,’ said Lord Magnussen, ‘I have made it a personal mission to provide for the greatest number of wards I can. The wards who I bring into my home often come from less fortunate, even lonely, circumstances. But there, among other ward kind, they find a family. They receive first-rate healthcare, are well treated, pursue interests, are industrious. In short, they thrive.’

The magistrate was an old man with a balding pate, unsteady jowls, and severe frown. He was an impossible man to read. He spoke dispassionately and took notes with a shaky hand when the witness answered. ‘With so many wards already under your care, why did you choose to take on another?’

‘I confess,’ said Lord Magnussen, smiling softly, ‘I had not intended to. It was something of an instinctive reaction. You see, I met his host, Sebastian Wilkes—that is, who I was led to believe was his host—at a private gallery event. Mr Wilkes seemed to me an upright, if not overtaxed, professional young man, and he made complaint of the ward in his care, stating that he was having such difficulty with him that he feared he would have to send him off to Storage.’

‘Did he elucidate on the difficulty he mentioned?’

‘He was vague, and perhaps I should have pressed him on the matter. He led me to believe the ward was undisciplined and unscrupulous. My own impression was that Mr Wilkes simply had not made time or effort to set the ward to rights, and I believed he would do better in my own care. Before I had even finished this thought, I was offering to take on the burden of the ward, whom I believed I could help. As I’ve said, I paid the registration in good faith: I believed Mr Wilkes was his legitimate
host, and my intentions to rehabilitate the ward were pure.’

‘You had had experience with this sort of ward before?’

‘Much experience, over many years.’

‘And what was your impression of the ward once you acquired him?’

Lord Magnussen frowned, shaking his head pitiably. ‘He was unwell. It was instantly apparent.’

‘Unwell in what way?’

‘I believed he had been abused. He had bruising on his face, which was the most apparent, but during his medical examination, the doctor discovered contusions all over his body. Of temperament, he was a nervous fellow, twitchy and untrusting and, well . . .’

‘Lord Magnussen, if you suspected abuse of the ward, specifically by Mr Wilkes, why did you not file a report with Ward Social Care?’

For half a second, Lord Magnussen appeared flustered, but for only half a second. ‘I had intended to. In fact, I had intended to confront Mr Wilkes myself, and question him in my official capacity as Lord Commissioner. But allow me to be honest: I doubted my suspicions.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Because of what I witnessed. The ward, in my own home, almost immediately engaged in self harm.’

‘How so?’

‘He struck himself. With his own fists, and with whatever he could get his hands on. He threw himself into walls. He beat his own head into the floor. It was startling, disturbing. When my man tried to restrain him, to keep him from hurting himself, the ward’s violence only escalated. He broke my man’s hand, in fact, as you can see for yourself, and to which my doctor and witness can testify. The ward was plainly dangerous.’

‘So you suspected that the ward’s poor condition upon arrival was self-inflicted?’

‘Absolutely. Then I understood Mr Wilkes’ complaints. I consulted with the doctor, and ultimately, regretfully, determined that the course of action Wilkes had original meant to take was the correct one.’

‘You consented to send him to the Permanent Shelter.’

‘I did. For his own sake. And for the sake of my other wards. He had proved himself dangerous, and I couldn’t risk him harming them.’

‘Then, sir, why would you now wish to resume custody? If you believe JW is dangerous, why not consign him to the state, or even to Mr Holmes?’

‘Two reasons: one, in my shock at his behaviour, and under counsel of a medical professional, I believe my decision was made in haste and without consideration for a very important factor.’

‘What factor?’

‘That the self-abuse, the mental deficiency, and the disrespect for authority may very well be the
result of past traumas, and he needs help, specialised help, that I, with all my resources, will be able to provide. He can yet live a calm, peaceful existence, with me. And two, I now believe that the trauma he experienced”—he nodded to the man sitting with clenched fists at the defence table—‘was at the hands of the very Mr Holmes who wishes to reclaim him.’

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‘I wish to start at the end: Mr Holmes, why did you not report your ward as missing on December 2 of this year?’

It was all Sherlock could do to be respectful as he gave his answers to the magistrate, and not turn his hateful eye on Lord Magnussen. How he had endured the man’s testimony he couldn’t say, and would never be able to. He hated the man more than he hated anyone, more than he hated Wilkes. The man was a shark. That flat face, those dead eyes. That’s what he was, a shark. He had dealt with murders, psychopaths, terrorists, serial killers. None of them turned his stomach like Charles Augustus Magnussen.

‘Two reasons,’ said Sherlock. ‘But first this: I acknowledge my neglect to report his disappearance was poor judgement, and I regret it. With the aid of law enforcement, I might even now be at home with him, and Sebastian Wilkes would be behind bars. But at the time, I believed reporting it would cause only trouble for John.’

‘You are reminded, Mr Holmes, to refer to the disputed ward as JW.’

‘Apologies. I believed I would cause trouble for JW. As the court knows, he has a history of running, a justifiable one, I might add, if you would only hear his story, and I feared another tally to his record would result in his removal to Storage. I couldn’t stand to see that happen. I was confident I could find him on my own, which was my second reason. I am, after all, a detective. But like I said, it was folly, and I own that. It does not follow, however, that I am unfit to be his host. I mean only to protect him.’

‘And exactly how long have you served as host to JW?’

He was feeling host and itchy. It was not Sherlock’s custom to wear a suit and tie. Far from it. Ties were stodgy and Mycroft, and he hadn’t worn one since attending an uncle’s funeral when he was seventeen. It had become a point of pride. But the solicitor had insisted. Lord Magnussen would be wearing a tie, and Lord Magnussen already had the respect of the courts by virtue of his lofty title. Anything Sherlock could do to elevate himself into a respectable, reliable, non-eccentric host of equal quality was exactly what he needed to do. For John, he would do anything.

‘A year December 2,’ Sherlock answered.

He made a point to maintain eye contact with the magistrate, and not let his attention wander to the villain sitting at the table, or the public beyond. The one person who should have been in attendance, John himself, was not permitted to attend the hearing. His being here might unduly influence the proceedings, his solicitor had explained. A show of preference, an emotional outburst, anything at all that might cause a distraction in either of the plaintiffs or any attempt to persuade the magistrate was strictly disallowed. Sherlock decidedly disagreed with this rationale. If anyone’s preference should be taken into account, it was John’s. But the state didn’t trust the mind or heart of a ward.

‘How would you describe your residence, Mr Holmes?’

As Lord Magnussen had done the day before, Sherlock began to lay out the details of 221B. He knew comparisons were already being drawn in the magistrate’s mind. His home was nowhere near
the size of the grandiose penthouse Magnussen had described, but there was still plenty to commend it. John had his own room, which was well outfitted and comfortable. John had his own key and could come and go as he pleased. Yes, they shared a bathroom, but each was afforded privacy.

But then the questions deviated from the ones that characterised the interrogation of the Lord of Emancipation.

‘Have you invited JW into your bedroom, Mr Holmes?’

Sherlock kept himself still, unruffled, although he knew where the line of questioning would go from here. He had prepared for this. Mentally, he had prepared. ‘My bedroom was not forbidden territory,’ he said.

‘Have you invited JW into your bed, Mr Holmes?’

‘No.’

He had changed beds with John for a couple of nights, that was all. They hadn’t shared a bed. That was what the question implied. So he answered no and did not count himself a liar.

‘Mr Holmes, you are aware of the testimony and evidence that suggests your relationship with your ward had crossed a line—’

‘Yes, and I would like to address that—’

‘—and ventured into the unseemly.’

‘And I have allegations of my own to—’

But the litany of allegations kept rolling out:

‘You have been seen intimately embracing your ward on a public street. If that is what you are willing to present to the public, what goes on behind closed doors?’

‘ Witnesses claim to have seen you and the ward holding hands while running away from an altercation in a restaurant. Is that not unusual, Mr Holmes?’

‘You have an anti-social behaviour order against you for an incident involving your ward that occurred on July 7 of this year. Do you believe this models good behaviour for a wayward ward in your care?’

‘You have a history of drug abuse, do you not, Mr Holmes? Are you sober now? How long have you been sober?’

‘The court has here a doctor’s report of public record with respect to an injury sustained after a fall down the stairs. Mr Holmes, do you have a temper?’

He did. He could feel it rising. It didn’t matter what he answered, how rational his answers or how calm his manner—they kept coming, accusations of the vilest nature, and the magistrate wasn’t listening, wasn’t letting him explain in full. And he was ignoring—simply ignoring!—the true devil in the room!

‘John fell down the stairs because his malformed ankle gave out. I resent the implication that I pushed him. My temper,’ he said evenly, ‘is for the cause of justice. What I am seeing here, today, is not justice, not for John. And I will say John, because that is his name. I didn’t give it to him—it is
what he calls himself, and I will *respect that*. John is being denied justice by this court because he has no voice in it. If he had, he would *tell* you how he has suffered at the hands of men like Sebastian Wilkes and, yes, the “estimable” Lord Magnussen. He would tell you—’

‘Mr Holmes—’

‘—that those bruises you saw on his body, all over his body, were *not* self-inflicted. He is *not* delusional. I have known him to be a bright and curious and thoughtful man. More than that, he is the bravest and kindest and . . . *wisest* human being I have ever had the good fortune of knowing. And if you would only give him two minutes’ attention, if you would only let him speak for himself, you would know it, too.’

Following this diatribe, the courtroom fell silent. The next question was not immediately forthcoming as the magistrate regarded him with an inscrutable air. Then:

‘Mr Holmes, do you love this ward?’

Sherlock stared, nonplussed. It was not a question that had been posed to Lord Magnussen. He swallowed hard and answered in truth. ‘More than my own self.’

‘Are you *in* love with this ward?’

This was dangerous ground to walk, a veritable minefield. He had sworn to tell the truth, a thing he had not feared until this moment. ‘Your Worship,’ he said, ‘I would never hurt him, not in any way. I would never take him to my bed, because that *would* hurt him, and because . . . yes, I do love him. John is my family, and I love him with all my heart. I thought . . .’ His heart was pounding, his fingers shaky. He balled his hands to keep them still. ‘I thought that was the whole *point*.’

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It had been an emotional and gruelling day. Sherlock felt frayed at the edges and deflated in the middle. Obsessively, while the magistrate retired to his chamber to deliberate, he reviewed the whole proceeding in his mind. Over and over, he heard Lord Magnussen’s sycophantic testimony, the lies lobbed at him and John both. He heard himself, arguing a cause to deaf ears, unable to present hard evidence to support his claims, unable to give full testimony of what he *knew* John had suffered at Magnussen’s hand. Why hadn’t the DNA tests come back yet? Did Magnussen know about the jacket? Had he somehow intervened? Suppressed it? It was as he feared all along: the system was rigged against them from the start. Lestrade should never have let the jacket out of his sight. He should have asked Molly to perform the tests herself. He should have leaked the evidence to the papers. He should never have said he loved John. He should have, should have, should have . . .

The magistrate returned, and the courtroom quieted.

‘The testimony I have heard today,’ he began, ‘from both Lord Magnussen and Mr Holmes, has left me disquieted. Both men accuse one another of abuse against this ward. Both men argue for the superiority of their respective domiciles, and of their own hosting suitability.’

Oh God, Sherlock thought. He could practically hear the words before they were delivered. The magistrate would determine that in the presence of doubt, neither would be a suitable host for John. He would go to a third party. Or he would be sent for evaluation, and ultimately, he would be sent back to that train. Oh God, Oh God . . .

‘And I find myself dissatisfied. Therefore, I have decided not to render my decision at this time. Instead, I will adjourn this hearing until tomorrow. At that time, though highly unusual, I will hear
from two more witnesses: the emancipated ward, called Colonel Moran, who has been arrested on battery charges; and ward Reg. No. JW6462-11. This court is adjourned.’
The TV didn’t sleep, and neither did Harry. When all the lamps went out, only the telly and the fairly lights on the Christmas tree still glowed, and when Mr Wright kissed Harry’s forehead good night, she barely murmured a good night in return. She was wrapped in a blanket on the sofa, a mug of tea cooling in her hands, waiting for news.

‘Darling, go to sleep,’ said Mrs Wright, petting her head from behind the sofa. She reached over her niece’s shoulder and took the mug out of her hands.

‘No.’

‘It’s gone midnight.’

Harry made no answer. The remote lay on the armrest, untouched for hours. She had already discovered that BBC broke stories before any other channel, and so on BBC it would stay.

‘Nothing will happen until morning. Get a few hours, at least, love. You can get up bright early, before the session even resumes.’ When met again with a wall of silence, she tried one more tactic. ‘I’m sure he’s sleeping now, too.’

‘He’s not,’ said Harry.

‘I’m sure he is . . .’

‘He’s not, Auntie. How could he sleep tonight, knowing what he must do tomorrow?’

Ten days earlier, she had been preparing dinner for the family when she first saw the footage, but she didn’t comprehend it at first. All she knew was that there had been some sort of attack at a train station in London. There was always bad news out of London, so nothing of particular interest. Then, she learnt that it had been a ward, one of her own, who had been the victim, and that was when her attention was piqued, and she set aside the cheese knife and turned to face the telly.

It was Mr Holmes she recognised first, as the security officers pulled him off the curled body on the ground. At first, she thought Mr Holmes was the attacker, which alarmed her. The camerawork was shaky—handheld mobiles—and in her surprise at seeing Mr Holmes, she almost did not register the broken face of her dear little brother, John. Her scream brought Auntie Charlotte running, thinking Harry must have chopped off a finger while preparing dinner.

Later that day, Mr Holmes called her. She was beside herself crying and had to pass the phone back to her aunt, who spoke to Mr Holmes for some twenty minutes. Auntie Charlotte relayed all Mr Holmes had told her, about a former vengeful host and a kidnapping and Mr Holmes’ repeated assurances that all would be well in the end. She understood now why John had been unreachable, why Mr Holmes kept putting her off. He had been looking for his lost ward. She felt like she was shrivelling up inside, like the edges of burning paper, for that was precisely what John had been to her for far too long: a lost ward.

She watched every second of footage online she could find—on her auntie’s laptop when she found the videos blocked on hers—a dozen times at least. She read every article in every paper that printed even one word about John, and she refused to turn off the telly. When the hearing was announced, she was awash with relief, believing the courts would sort it all out and that John would be calling her that very night to explain that it had all just been some grave misunderstanding. But then, the reports: the magistrate was undecided; he had more questions, and he wanted to question John.
The media went into a frenzy. Some decried the order as illegal. More knowledgeable commentators explained that, while not illegal per se, questioning wards in a courtroom was bad practice. Wards couldn’t be relied upon to give truthful testimony. Ever since the twin cases, both occurring within the same year in 1976, when one ward, possessing a bitter and vengeful spirit, spun outrageous lies against her gracious host with the aim of seeing the woman in prison; and when another obsequious ward told lies of a different sort, fabricating all manner of witness statements and alibis to ensure that his arsonist-murderer host did not see the inside of a prison cell. In either case, the public outcry had been that too much credence had been offered to ward testimony, and because of it, the wrong verdicts had been rendered. Since then, ward testimony of any sort in any kind of case had been disallowed in trials and hearings, though not—strictly speaking—by law.

What was the magistrate doing?

And for that matter, what were the public to make of the testimony already proffered? People were tallying up the points, weighing one host against the other, and arguing their results. Lord Magnussen was clearly the frontrunner, some said. He was rich, obscenely rich, whereas Holmes’s income was unpredictable and suspect; Magnussen held an important position in the British government, whereas nobody really understood what a ‘consulting detective’ even was; Magnussen’s flat was grand, richly furnished, boasting every amenity imaginable, whereas Holmes occupied a comparatively tiny flat that didn’t even claim a ward bathroom! With Magnussen, the ward would have the company of other wards, whereas with Holmes, he would be alone. The answer was obvious.

But then, there was this: the edited footage. Posters had zoomed in, cropped, highlighted, and slowed down the various videos from the train station. There was Sherlock Holmes, in a bewildering display of defence, falling upon the ward to save him from the blows of the baton. There, in the shadow beneath both their bodies, someone had spotted it, the two hands coming together, the host’s and the ward’s. And when officers pulled Mr Holmes off, the last thing to part were those same two hands. Then, there was the footage of the ward himself. While the crowd buzzed around them, the hosts argued, and the officers debated, the ward’s eyes remained locked on Sherlock Holmes. No one could describe the expression. Amazed, some said, while others claimed Needy and Hopeful and Yearning and Telepathic and Smitten. Sherlock Holmes had declared his love of the ward in the courtroom, but the nature of that love was as debated as anything. The meaning of that look, likewise. The one thing that did not stand in question, however, was to whom the ward looked. That was as clear as crystal.

‘Things will turn out all right, Harriet,’ said Mrs Wright, sitting beside her niece.

But her words were hollow assurance, and Harry could not stem the flow of tears. ‘What if they don’t, Auntie?’ she cried. Mrs Wright gathered her into her arms. ‘If they send him to Storage, if the Lord Commissioner takes him back . . . What will happen to him then? I’ve only just found him. How can I stand to lose him again?’

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Earlier that evening, one of the officers poked his head into the cell. ‘You read?’

John, who had been lying on his back, studying the cracks in the ceiling, propped himself up on an elbow. ‘Yes?’

‘Got some letters here for you. Sergeant says there’s no sense in holding them any longer.’

He stepped into the room, and John saw he was holding three large stacks of envelopes, each bound
by an elastic band. ‘Lights are on for another hour,’ he said, passing them over. Then he left.

At first, John was perplexed. What were all of these? Letters? From whom? His heart skipped a beat, thinking one might be from Mr Holmes, or Harry, but after a quick flip-through of each return address, his heart sank. These were all strangers. That only added to his confusion. Who would be writing to him?

But he was excited. For days and days now, he’d had nothing at all to read, and he felt like his brain was getting stiff, like an unworked muscle. This hour was a gift. So he began to read, and he was stunned by what he read. They were letters, all addressed to him and calling him John, letters of support and encouragement, wishing him well, hoping for the best. They were from all over the country, and a few from abroad—New France, America, Japan—all of them saying they were thinking about him, praying for him, and threatening to throw a fit if things didn’t turn out well for him.

I’m writing my MP . . .

If they send you to Storage, I will personally drive a lorry over the judge . . .

Ever since seeing the video, I haven’t been able to sleep. That might have been me. Tomorrow, it might very well be me . . .

Wards. Some of these letters, a dozen at least, were written by other wards. He marvelled. He wept. He wished he had a pen and could write back.

Then he came to this one:

It was a white envelope, nondescript but for the instruction on the flap:

To whom it may concern, please read this letter aloud to the ward

Curious, he tore a finger through the seal.

Dear John,

I’m not sure this letter will be welcome, and I understand if it is not. Though I fear it is far too little, far too late, I feel compelled to offer an apology. I can’t help but feel it is my fault, and the fault of my family, that you ever found yourself in that train station. I’m so sorry for what happened to you there. Words can never make up for it, I know, but I offer them anyway, in the hopes that, in time, I might be forgiven for the cruelty I inflicted on you as a child.

You are called John now, and I am happy you have such a good name. I would be happy to believe that you have forgotten you were once called Twitch, though I doubt you could possibly forget. My older brother and I used to tease you relentlessly. No, I suppose tease is not the right word. Torment. That’s what we did. I knew it then, and I know it now. The way we treated you, a child, was unconscionable, from how we talked to you, and didn’t talk to you, to the jokes we played and the way we bullied and belittled you. It was wrong. I was wrong. You didn’t deserve such unkindness from those who were supposed to be your family.

I look back on the boy I was with disgust, and I have long lived with the shame of my actions. I am an adult now, as you are. I have a family of my own. My wife is a good woman, and she has made me into a better man. I have two sons of my own, and a ward their age, and every day I try to treat him as a son, too, as true as any, as if I can make up for the way I treated you.

My parents are both passed. Mum died of heart failure, Dad was struck by a car. Wendell took his
own life five years ago after losing his battle with depression. Goldberry was cleared for Storage when she began to lose her memory. I’m the only Hastings left, and I’m afraid my legacy will be that of malice. As you can imagine, we didn’t do much better with the ward who replaced you. I’ve lost track of him now, and I mean to apologise to him, too, if I can find him.

I was both thrilled and appalled to find you, John. At last, I have a chance to say I’m sorry. I had hoped your life had improved after leaving us, but what I saw shows me that you are still suffering at the hands of those who were supposed to do better by you.

I have put in an application to become your host, if the magistrate judges the contending parties to be unsuitable. That is, if you would have any desire to return to me. I don’t want you to wind up in Storage. I promise, I am not the same person as that kid from twenty years ago. I would do well by you. My family would love you. You would be welcome with us, all the days of your life. I have no expectation of a reply to this letter, and like I said, I understand if you are displeased to hear from me again. Your feelings against the Hastings surely run very deep. But just know that I deeply regret my actions and any lasting impact they might have had on you, and I am willing to do whatever I must to make things right.

Your brother,

Peter Hastings

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They had turned out the lights, but John couldn’t sleep. Only hours ago, they had brought him dinner, and he had had no appetite. He was thinking more thoughts at once than he had ever thought before. He was feeling more emotions than he thought he could contain. Come morning, he would be taken into the courtroom and interrogated by the magistrate. ‘He’ll ask you some questions,’ the clerk had said, ‘and you’ll answer truthfully. Easy enough, yes?’ But it didn’t seem easy at all. What kinds of questions? Who would be listening? What if he said something wrong? He was always saying the wrong things, and being punished for them, even when he thought he was speaking the truth. Only Mr Holmes had ever listened. Only Mr Holmes had known when to stop asking.

Easy? Nothing had ever been.

Be brave, John. Be brave.

The lock screeched. John, lying on his side facing the wall, began to turn, when suddenly he felt himself pinned at the shoulders to the concrete slab that served as a cot, and the bright light of a torch burst through the dark, shining in his face and blinding him.

‘Don’t move,’ a deep voice hissed at him.

He froze. His eyes streamed against the brightness of the light, beyond which all was black. He could not see the faces of his attackers.

‘Listen carefully. Tomorrow, at the hearing. Say one word against Lord Magnussen, and you’ll get what’s coming to you. Say one word that incriminates him, and there’ll be a blood-letting, you got me?’

Be brave!

John trembled and nodded.

‘What will you say tomorrow?’ asked the other man.
‘Lord Magnussen n-never hurt me.’

‘What else?’

‘Lord M-magnussen was a good host.’

‘Make them believe it. Because, Tiro, if you don’t?’ A dark hand reached around his throat and squeezed. It lasted only a second. Then the light disappeared, the footsteps retreated, and the locked screeched again, closing him in. He shot upright to sitting, holding his throat and gasping for air. Black spots swam before him in the sudden absence of light. He curled over his knees, still gasping, wishing to be strong but feeling like he would break. He grasped his hair in both fists and trembled. *Why can’t you be brave!* 

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The courtroom hushed as the doors opened and two security officers escorted the prisoner to the witness box.

Colonel Moran was a tall man with a torso like a triangle and a face like a Doberman who had lost its pack. He was shackled at the wrists but wore a suit and tie, the bestowal of Lord Magnussen, Sherlock surmised, now observing him properly. He had at least seven stones on John, which made Sherlock’s fingers curl so tightly his nails left deep imprints in his palms. His own bruises had faded, but he was stillsmarting himself from the blows of this man’s baton.

‘State your name and occupation,’ said the magistrate.

‘Colonel Moran. I am Lord Magnussen’s man.’

‘Being a man is not an occupation. What is it you do for Lord Magnussen?’

The Colonel, so-called, turned his head toward his former host as though beseeching help.

‘Mr Moran,’ said the magistrate, ‘you will look at me, and me alone. You will address me, and me alone. Are we clear?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘You are in a court of law, and in this court, you have sworn to tell the truth. Do you understand?’

The Colonel nodded.

‘Speak up, Mr Moran, so the court can hear.’

‘I understand, sir.’

‘Very well, then let us try this again, more slowly. You have been in Lord Magnussen’s employ for how long?’

‘Since spring, sir. Beginning of May.’

Sherlock frowned. He was sitting slightly behind the Colonel, who faced the magistrate, and could see less than a quarter of his face. The man looked straight ahead, but his skin around the temples had begun to shine. He was nervous. His address lacked defiance and his tone was docile, quite unlike what he had expected of a man who could wail on a helpless ward like he had.

‘And before that?’
‘Before that’—his upraised chin fell a few degrees—‘I was warded to Lord Magnussen, sir.’

‘But you were emancipated.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And you stayed with your former host?’ The magistrate frowned. ‘Are you aware that an emancipated ward is required by law to depart his host’s residence and provide for himself?’

‘I do not live in Lord Magnussen’s flat anymore, sir. I have my own place.’

‘Indeed? Where?’

‘A bedsit, couple tube stops away.’

‘And how many hours a week do you work for Lord Magnussen?’

The Colonel pursed his lips, looking trouble. He dipped his head, and Sherlock observed his fingers tapping air, one at a time.

‘You’ll answer the question, Mr Moran.’

‘I am trying to count them, sir.’

‘Try it this way: how many hours a day do you work?’

‘All . . . all of them? Twenty . . . four?’

‘You work around the clock?’

‘I work when I am needed, sir. I work hard. I am a good worker, no complaints or nothing. I am glad to work.’

God, Sherlock thought, he sounded just like John, so desperate to please, to get it right, to be worth something to someone. He stole a glance over at the opposing table to where Lord Magnussen sat, reclined in his chair, hands folded in his lap. He looked like he had just swallowed a lemon.

The magistrate, too, looked displeased, his first show of actual expression, either hot or cold, since the hearing began. ‘What is your wage?’

‘Rent.’

‘Pardon?’

The Colonel spoke slower this time, as though becoming aware that he had said something wrong. ‘Rent, sir?’

‘Your employer pays your rent?’ At the witness’s nod, the magistrate balked. ‘Are you saying that you earn no wages?’

‘I haven’t need of any.’

‘So your employer pays your rent, pays for your food, pays for your clothes, and pays for all other necessities. You do not manage any of your own money.’

‘Yes, sir, he is a very good boss, sir.’
The magistrate kept a very straight face, but his pen was moving quickly on the page in front of him.
‘And what is the nature of your work?’

‘I manage the wards in Lord Magnussen’s care, sir.’

‘What do you mean, you manage them?’

‘I . . . manage the discipline in the flat, sir. According to the statutes and guidelines of the WSC, sir, and for any at-home infraction, sir, I keep the peace, sir, for the welfare and happy state of the wards residing there, sir.’

He said this all very quickly, and in the manner of one who had memorised his lines.

‘Do any of the wards in your care require a firm hand?’

‘All the wards are very well-behaved, sir. Only Tiro gave me any trouble. He was a violent ward, sir, and he broke my hand when I attempted to placate him.’ He lifted his plastered right hand as proof.

Placate, thought Sherlock, is not a word native to this man’s vocabulary. He’s definitely been coached.

‘How did that happen, precisely, this breaking of your hand?’

‘The ward was hurting himself. He had thrown himself at a window. I grabbed him to stop him, I overbalanced, and we fell. He got up first and stomped on my hand.’

Sherlock didn’t know how much of this was true, if any of it. John would not have hurt himself like that. But the thought that he had been responsible for breaking this man’s hand did cause the corner of his mouth to turn up. Quickly, he schooled his expression, lest the magistrate notice his pleasure and misread its cause.

‘And it was this violence that prompted Lord Magnussen to agree to send the ward to the Permanent Shelter?’

‘I was not involved in that decision, sir,’ said the Colonel.

‘How long was the ward in residence before this decision was made?’

Two elbows planted on the table in front of him, Sherlock leant forward, listening closely. The timeline was not in dispute. The records were pretty plain with respect to when John had been registered and when the request for Permanent Placement had been submitted. The magistrate would not have forgotten it, either, so there must have been another purpose to the question.

‘Erm, it was . . . a day or two. I’m not sure.’

‘That’s pretty quick, wouldn’t you say?’

The Colonel murmured his response. ‘I don’t know.’

‘How much did you observe of the ward in that time?’

‘. . . Only a little.’

‘Why is that? If he was posing a threat, if he was constantly a danger to himself, why weren’t you on him around the clock? That was your job, wasn’t it?’
'I . . .' He turned his head again toward Lord Magnussen, but at the reprimand from the magistrate returned facing front. His shoulders lifted with a long inhalation. ‘Tiro was unhappy. Not . . .’ He floundered a little. ‘Not dangerous.’

‘Oh?’

‘Didn’t seem like it. To me. When he talked to me, he was . . . polite.’

‘You talked with the ward?’

‘Only a little.’

From the corner of his eye, Sherlock watched Lord Magnussen shift in his seat. His hand came down on the armrest, as though bracing. Clearly, this line of questioning had not been anticipated, let alone planned for. Maybe he hadn’t even known his man had shared a private conversation with his stolen ward.

‘What did you talk about?’

‘Nothing much. Only . . . well, we had . . . known each other from . . . before.’

Yes, Lord Magnussen was definitely itching now. His hand turned into a fist around the edge of the armchair. Even Sherlock was amazed at this unexpected revelation.

‘Did you now?’ said the magistrate with interest. ‘When?’

‘I . . . I don’t think I should be talking about this.’

‘Why not? You’re a free man, Mr Moran. Aren’t you?’

For a long moment, the silence in the courtroom stretched out as the magistrate—and all attendees—held their breaths and waited for an answer. At last, the Colonel spoke.

‘Am I going to prison, sir? For hurting the ward and the free man?’

‘That is a decision for the crown court. This is a civil hearing. But I can tell you this: Even if you are found guilty of assault, the judge will weigh many things in making a decision: the severity of the crime, your level of culpability, any past convictions, and the victims’ statements. Prison time is a possibility, not a foregone conclusion. You may, instead, be fined and given a community order. I hope this has all been explained to you.’

‘If I don’t go to prison, I will go back to work for Lord Magnussen?’

The magistrate frowned, a little sadly. ‘That’s up to you. There is no law whatsoever to force you into anyone’s employment.’ A pause. ‘Do you wish to return to work for him?’

The Colonel didn’t answer.

‘Please answer the question, Mr Moran.’

‘I . . . I don’t . . . I think I’d rather go to prison, sir.’

The courtroom couldn’t contain its murmuring; it roiled like a storm until the magistrate restored order. Sherlock, however, was riveted on the reddening face of Lord Magnussen. By contrast, his beard had never seemed so white.
'Why is that, Mr Moran?' asked the magistrate.

'Because, sir . . . I don’t want to hurt wards anymore. I shouldn’t have hurt Tiro. I don’t want to hurt Cici. I don’t want to take any more wards to Storage. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I am to do. I don’t know . . . what I am . . .'

The Colonel couldn’t hold himself together any longer. He bowed his head and cried.

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Beyond the courthouse, and so beyond the notice of either magistrate on the bench, the two claimants sat at their tables, the witness in the box, the press in the gallery, or the ward in the holding cell, a news story was breaking. The excitement in the reporter’s voice was scarcely disguised.

'Scientists at the Metropolitan Police Forensics Science Laboratory have just confirmed that a jacket—the one worn by the ward JW, seen here on the viral footage from December 12—has been tested and found to have trace amounts of semen on the sleeve. A DNA test reveals the semen tested as a positive match for Charles Augustus Magnussen, Lord Commissioner of Emancipation, and host to the ward in question. All public servants, like all private citizens and warded persons, have their DNA on file as a matter of record, and while a warrant is required for scientist to match evidence to a private citizen, neither public servants nor warded persons are permitted such legal protections.

'The test results were leaked within the past hour by an anonymous source, but we can confirm these results are accurate. Lord Magnussen is, at this very moment, sitting in a hearing regarding the custody of the ward and is not, as far as we know, aware that such testing was even taking place. What the police will do with this information is yet to be seen, but almost certainly they will wish to question the Lord Commissioner about just how his semen ended up on the ward’s jacket . . .'

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When they led Colonel Moran away, it was because he was in no state of mind to answer any more questions. His face was puffy and red, his eyes brimming with confusion and fear. What had he said that he ought not to have said? What would become of him? Surely, Sherlock was not the only one in that room who felt the man’s anguish. He had stumbled into a crisis of conscience, a crisis of self, witnessed by an entire audience of critical observers, not least of all the man who had caused it.

Sherlock glared at Magnussen from across the aisle, revolted that they shared the same air. He felt very differently toward Mr Moran at that moment than he had only an hour prior.

The magistrate excused himself to his chamber, but he had not excused the room. So there, they waited, wondering, reflecting. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. The gallery was growing restless. Their whispers were increasing in volume, to the point that, if he concentrated well enough, Sherlock could make out and follow half a dozen conversations at any one time. Some were sympathetic to Moran; others were put off by him; others still questioned why he had been interrogated at all. No one mentioned Lord Magnussen. He was, after all, still in the room.

Then, the magistrate returned, and the room hushed at once. He resumed the bench, nodded to the officers in the back, and the double doors were opened. Everyone twisted in their seats to see it: the ward, JW, being escorted into the courtroom.

He was straight-backed and square-shouldered. He had taken care with his appearance, inasmuch as he could. His hair was neatly parted and his shirt—a soft blue chequered collared-shirt Sherlock didn’t recognise—was buttoned all the way to the chin and carefully tucked into his trousers. Sherlock had seen this before. This was what John did when he was steeling to say something important, but difficult. He held his arms straight down at his sides, but his fists were balled. He
looked dead ahead, seeing no one, not even Sherlock, though Sherlock tried to catch his eyes, if only to communicate *I'm here*. They marched him directly to the witness box, and left him there.

*You can do this, John. This is the last stretch, then we go home.*

Sherlock shot one more look at Lord Magnussen, who, since the Colonel had been led away, had regained mastery over his expression.

At the prompting, John swore an oath to tell the truth, and the magistrate began.

‘That oath you just swore to, JW, means that you will tell the truth, and only the truth. Okay?’ The magistrate spoke as one would to a child, his tone a little pitched, his words a little slowed, and with simple words. ‘It doesn’t mean that you tell me what you think I want to hear, or that you say something false to protect someone.’

‘I know what truth means,’ said John. ‘I can spell it and everything.’

Sherlock gasped though his nose, and behind him, the courtroom tittered. The magistrate frowned. The pitch dropped instantly.

‘Are you being cheeky?’

‘Not at all, sir,’ said John, unruffled. ‘I say that only because I am proud of it. You see, just a year ago, I couldn’t spell at all. I couldn’t read or write even my own name, which is John, by the way. But now, I read whole books, and I can write almost anything. I owe that to Mr Holmes.’

Sherlock expected immediate censure. John had come out of the bullpen kicking, and while Sherlock was puffing with pride, he was also bracing for backlash. Surely, the magistrate would not appreciate this as he did.

‘That’s quite impressive,’ said the magistrate without intonation. ‘But also *unusual* for an adult ward to be entirely illiterate.’

‘None of my previous hosts took any care for my education, sir. Mr Holmes does.’

‘Your records indicate a rather long list of previous hosts.’

‘Yes sir. Seventeen, before Mr Holmes.’

A soft grumble of reaction rippled through the gallery.

John raised his voice over them. ‘Seventeen hosts, sir, who cared not at all for my education, or health, or happiness. It’s Mr Holmes who cares. He’s been the only one, sir. The *only* one.’

‘JW,’ said the magistrate, a note of warning in his voice, ‘of course you are not stupid. This hearing is to determine which of these two men can provide you with the *best* home, including environment, resources, and overall competence in caretaking. Clearly, you yourself have a preference, which is normally not taken into consideration. Ward loyalties can be manipulated. So I want *you* to consider, as I make *my* determination, that you will find it difficult to compare a whole year with Sherlock Holmes to one week with Lord Magnussen. You do not yet know for yourself that Lord Magnussen’s residence would not be, in the end, a better fit.’

John’s chest swelled with a long breath. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he stated, ‘You are working with an incomplete data set, sir.’
Sherlock couldn’t help it this time: tears of pride sprung to his eyes, just to hear him say something so beautiful.

‘Am I?’

‘I have known Mr Holmes for a little over a year now, as you say. I have known Lord Magnussen for over six years.’

The gallery instantly voiced its surprise. But it hushed quickly: everyone’s attention was riveted, and no one wanted to miss a syllable.

All but one man.

‘My lord,’ said Lord Magnussen, rising to his feet, ‘you have instructed the ward to tell the truth, but in less than a minute, I am already hearing lies! I never met the ward before this very month! I would like to renew my objection in admitting the testimony of a ward—I fear he intends to slander me!’

John was undeterred. ‘It is true Lord Magnussen fears what I have to say. Or he would not have sent two men into my holding cell last night to threaten me into silence.’

‘Absurd!’ Lord Magnussen decried.

The magistrate ordered him back into his seat and to hold his tongue. To John: ‘That’s a serious allegation, young man.’

‘I’ve got worse.’

‘Tell me about this threat.’

‘Two security officers came into my cell in the middle of the night. They pinned me down, shone a torch in my face, and said that if I spoke ill of Lord Magnussen, there’d be a blood-letting. My own, I presume.’

‘Preposterous,’ Lord Magnussen spat.

The magistrate ignored him. His eyebrows pinched together, and he leant into the bar. ‘Who were these men?’

‘I couldn’t see their faces, owing to the light in my eyes, which I’m sure was the point. But I know their voices. I bet they didn’t count on that. I’ve been held in this courthouse for over a week. I know the names, faces, and voices of every security officer on any shift. I’ve a good memory for things like that, sir. When you don’t know how to read, you rely a lot more on memorising those kinds of details. They didn’t disguise their voices, so I recognised them both.’ He turned around and pointed straight to the back of the gallery at the officers flanking the double doors. ‘Officer Sanders and Officer Patel.’

The courtroom erupted into cries of shock and outrage. The officers in question looked stunned, then angry, and began to shout denials. In the chaos, while the magistrate shouted for silence and other security officers tried to re-establish order, John took advantage of facing the gallery to look to Sherlock. He didn’t smile, he didn’t nod. But Sherlock read the resolution in his eyes, the almost reckless abandon that, to hell what happened next, if he was going down, he was taking the world with him.

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The courtroom doors were still closed to the outside world, but the outside world did not stand idle.

‘... reminder that no decision has yet been rendered. The court requests that the public stop submitting applications to host the ward.’

‘Now, more breaking news on the Ward JW affair: Accusations lobbed against Charles Magnussen for inappropriate relations with a warded person do not end with the Lord Commissioner. In fact, fifty-seven men and nine women, all prominent figureheads, have likewise been accused of sexually violating the very same ward over a period of some five years while the alleged victim was warded to a Mr Sebastian Wilkes of London, illegal proprietor of what is unsurprisingly being described as a Topside-Downside bordello...’

Meanwhile, even as the story broke, police were riding the lift to the very top floor of a very tall building. Below, a bevy of WSC officers waited for their turn. They were there to remove every ward from Lord Magnussen’s residence, and remand them to temporary hosts until a full investigation could be conducted. Even more police were en route to Lord Magnussen’s Sussex estate. News editors all over the city debated whether to adopt the term scandal or corruption in the headlines. Wards up and down the country sat glued to their TV screens. Some MPs were on the phones with their legal teams, even as others were speeding their way to Heathrow, not yet knowing they would never clear security. And half a world away, a British man was being escorted out of a five-star Bangkok hotel in shackles.

Unflappable, and seemingly oblivious to the fires erupting all across the country, Mycroft Holmes lifted a phone in the deserted Strangers Room of the Diogenes Club and ordered the tea trolley.

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‘My lord, this is outrageous! I object to these proceedings! I object on the very same grounds as I did yesterday: a ward’s testimony cannot be relied upon!’

‘Lord Magnussen—’

‘His accusations have no basis in fact. To accuse two perfectly innocent men of such scheming, to smear their names as a way to smear mine, it’s utterly reprehensible behaviour, and I am appalled that the court is entertaining it.’

‘I will ask you, once again, to take your seat—’

The two officers, Sanders and Patel, had been removed from the courtroom. To be detained? To be questioned? To be sent home to wait for it all to blow over? Sherlock had no idea. All he knew was, they were gone, the gallery was up in arms, and it had taken a full ten minutes for any semblance of order to be restored. Even so, Lord Magnussen was beside himself with fury. His dignified comportment was crumbling, his carefully constructed mask of cool confidence had slipped, and he was on a tirade.

‘He means to discredit and slander me, and is exercising astounding feats of imagination to do so. My lord, the ward has this past year lived with a man who is brother to one of my own staff who despises me—a thing I was entirely ignorant of, by the way, when I paid good money for him. What lies were spoken in that household against me, from the start? What picture of me was crafted that has inspired such hatred of me in this ward? How have they conspired together to defame my good name? This cannot be tolerated in a court of law. He lies, my lord, he lies and perverts the course of justice by concocting such fantastically false accusations!’

‘Am I to understand,’ said the magistrate, his patience wearing thin, ‘that you wish to withdraw your
petition to reclaim him, and cede him to Mr Holmes?’

The Lord Magnussen blinked. ‘I... n-no...’

‘But why should you want him, if he is all the things you say he is? A liar and a conspirator, among other things.’

‘To shut me up,’ said John, still in the witness box. ‘I should have thought that obvious.’

‘This hearing is a farce! To give any credence to his lies makes a mockery of this court. I’ll not stand for it. My lord,’ cried Lord Magnussen, ‘you have before you testimony enough, my own and Mr Holmes’, to render your decision. Your decision should have been rendered yesterday. Any further delusions and fabrications and confusions presented by Mr Moran or this warded person only serve to muddy the waters, and—’

‘Lord Magnussen,’ roared the magistrate, ‘if you cannot control yourself, I will have you removed from the courtroom, and in your absence I will still hear the testimony of the witness. Is that what you wish? Choose now: excuse yourself, be removed, or be silent.’

Chest heaving, Lord Magnussen’s mouth contorted like a fish out of water. There was nothing he could say. Object, and ejected. And what terrible words would be spoken of him in his absence? How then could he launch a proper defence? Sherlock refrained from smirking, but it was at great strain on his self-control.

‘I insist that I be allowed to defend myself against any slanderous lies this witness might spew,’ he said at last.

‘That is your right. But it is my courtroom, and I decide the order of things. Now take your seat, and be silent.’

Lord Magnussen tugged his suitcoat straight again. Then, slowly, he sank back into his chair. The magistrate returned his attention to John, who, through the course of all of this, had stood stalwart and unmoved.

‘Are you prepared to continue, JW?’

‘I am.’

‘And you understand that it is an offence to lie to a court magistrate?’

‘I have told no lies, nor shall I.’

‘You say you have known Lord Magnussen for six years.’

‘Yes.’

‘But he was never your host, not until this month.’

‘No.’

‘Tell me, then: under what circumstances did you come to know him?’

Sherlock’s heart was pumping blood so fast he thought it might rupture. He could only imagine what John’s was doing.

‘I was warded, then, to a man called Sebastian Wilkes. He had bought me on the black market in
Pimlico, where I had been warded to a man called Ernst Crider, who ran a Downside for ward sport, where I endured nightly humiliations for approximately fourteen months . . .’

‘Ward sport? In Pimlico?’

‘Yes sir. I was not a fighter. I was . . . entertainment. But one night, Mr Wilkes bought me, took me to an empty flat, and—’

Sherlock shifted in his seat, wishing he could reach across the table, across the room, and into the witness box to hold John’s hand. You’re okay, John. You’ve got this. You said it to me. One more time, and it’s all over.

‘Mr Wilkes himself ran a Downside,’ said John, ‘and kept me there, all alone, and at the mercy of men who . . . who would pay for the pleasure of . . . having sex with a twink. Lord Magnussen’— John faltered, and behind him, Sherlock continued his vain attempts at telepathy. John swallowed, took two long breaths, and lifted his chin—‘Lord Magnussen was Mr Wilkes’ first client, and the first man ever to rape me.’

‘Lies,’ Magnussen seethed between clenched teeth while the gallery rumbled with gasps and whispers.

The magistrate ignored him. The lines of the old man’s face deepened with his frown, creating trenches and crevasses through the distressed and weathered skin. ‘This is . . . a very grave revelation, if true.’

‘I wish it were not,’ said John, his voice sounding strangled. ‘But I lived it for five years, sir. It’s true.’

The magistrate made a note on the page in front of him, but even after his pen stopped moving, he didn’t look up for several seconds. He seemed to be contemplating his next questions carefully.

‘Mr Wilkes is not present to defend himself against this allegation. Do you have any proof that this Downside existed?’

John thought. ‘I can give you the address. The windows are still boarded to block out the light, to keep anyone from seeing what went on in that flat. I can show you the bullet wound in my shoulder, from where Mr Wilkes shot me, on the day I tried to tell someone what he was doing to me. The floorboards in the ward room are newer than those in the rest of the flat because the blood stain wouldn’t come clean and he had to replace them. A year ago, I took photos of my body, to show the police the bruising and damage done to me, but Mr Wilkes found those before I could show anyone. I don’t know whatever became of them. But the clients, some of them took photos, too. Somewhere out there, maybe some still exist. I don’t know what other proof I can offer, except my word.’

The magistrate tapped his pen, still frowning. ‘The matter of a Downside is for the crown court, not a magistrate’s court.’ He paused again, looking troubled. ‘These accusations require police investigation, and any charges can be tried only in criminal court. Any convictions or punishments must likewise be managed by a higher court. However . . .’ He seemed decided. ‘The purpose of this hearing is to determine whether either of these claimants is a suitable host, and which, if either, should have claim on you. Therefore, I will let you, JW, make your case. You have a preference, do you not?’

‘I do, sir. I wish to live with Mr Holmes.’

‘Your preference is noted. So first. Tell me of your history with Charles Magnussen.’
John nodded once, as though in slow motion, and from where he sat behind and to the left, Sherlock could see the cord of muscle in his neck bulge. He was literally bracing.

‘I did not know his name, all the time I worked for Mr Wilkes, though he was a frequent visitor. He came at least twice a month, sometime twice a week. Mr Wilkes only ever called him my favourite guest, as a joke, I think. I was afraid of him. I believe that is why he kept coming back. He told me on the day I first met him that he liked us scared, and that he liked to be the first. So I know, sir, that there have been others. Maybe many others, probably those he has hosted himself—’

‘JW, please speak only of that which you know for yourself, from your own experience. You may tell me only what you have seen and heard for yourself, not what you suppose.’

‘Then, sir, I know for myself that he is a bad man. A very bad man. He . . .’ John took a shuddering breath. ‘More times than I can count, he made me strip, touched my naked body, hurt me with his own two hands, and had sex with me. And I could never say no. He raped me. Again, and again, and again, and Mr Wilkes let him, and I could never say no.’

Sherlock couldn’t see John’s face, not from this angle, not straight on. But he saw the bead of a tear capture the courtroom overhead lights, and it shone as it tracked down his cheek.

‘I tried. When Mr Wilkes stole me off the streets and sold me Lord Magnussen, I believed it was because he wanted to . . . he wanted me again, for himself, for his own enjoyment. And I tried to fight it. For several days in a row, I resisted him, even when he sent his man after me, to punish me for saying no. I fought back. I even broke his man’s hand. But then he brought in a girl, a young girl named Cici, and he told me . . . it was me or her.’ He sniffed and scrubbed under his eyes. ‘I couldn’t let him take her,’ he whispered. ‘I gave in.’

When it seemed that John was unable to continue, the magistrate gently prodded. ‘To be clear, JW, do you mean to say that Charles Magnussen sexually assaulted you in his own flat just two weeks ago?’

‘The night before the train station,’ John choked. ‘And again, in the morning, in the car, on the way to the station.’

Sherlock felt like he was on fire. His eyes were burning, his throat felt scorched, his heart was ablaze. He forced himself to remain in his seat, lest he launch himself across the aisle and take Lord Magnussen by the throat. The bastard, the utter, reprehensible, inconceivable bastard. He barely felt the damp on his own cheeks.

Suddenly, the hideous voice cut into the silence. ‘I deny and roundly refute these accusations,’ said Lord Magnussen. He spoke steadily, and without the passions of earlier, almost indifferent, as though John had claimed to have seen Father Christmas and no one could possibly take him seriously.

But before the magistrate could reprimand him for talking, John said forcefully, ‘I gave my jacket to a police officer.’

There was a beat. ‘What was that?’ asked the magistrate. Sherlock started in his seat.

‘The jacket I was wearing that morning. It has Lord Magnussen’s semen on it. I gave it to a policeman as evidence of what he had done.’

Lord Magnussen shot to his feet. ‘This testimony is outrageous! How dare you listen to it, Your Worship! The police have accused me of nothing! I have not consented to any testing!’

The magistrate didn’t miss a beat. ‘This may bode very poorly for you, Lord Magnussen,’ he said.
‘How will you explain semen on the jacket of a ward in *your* care?’

‘It cannot be mine! It might be his own!’

‘I am a cas,’ said John, ‘as he well knows.’

‘Then Colonel Moran’s!’

‘He was driving the car while Lord Magnussen assaulted me,’ said John.

‘I’ve heard enough. Lord Magnussen, I have no power to issue an arrest warrant against you. But I told you repeatedly to keep silent until I addressed you, and you have consistently violated the order of this court. I therefore find you in contempt of court, and I will have you removed immediately.’

‘Your Worship!’

But the magistrate had spoken. Two security officers came forward to remove him.

‘I have proof!’ Lord Magnussen cried. ‘Photographic proof that *Sherlock Holmes* has abused this ward, proof that *Sherlock Holmes* has sexually assaulted him!’

‘Tell it to the judge,’ said the magistrate with a dismissive wave.

For the second time, it was several minutes before the gallery could settle down and the hearing proceed.

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Under escort, Lord Magnussen had barely taken two steps outside the courtroom when he was stopped cold by a wall of officers from the Metropolitan Police.

‘Charles Magnussen,’ said a detective-inspector in plain clothes, stepping forward, ‘you are under arrest on suspicion of ward endangerment, assault of a warded person, aggravated sexual assault of a warded person, and conspiracy to commit abduction of a warded person. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.’

They cuffed his hands together, spun him to face the exit, and marched him toward the courthouse doors, beyond which gathered a mob or reporters, protesters, activists, and voyeurs. Like ravenous wolves to their prey, they were all eager to see him.

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The magistrate, for the first time, looked upon the ward in the witness box with a sad sort of half-smile, saying, ‘I believe we are coming to the end of it. So now, at the last, is there anything you wish to tell me of Mr Holmes, before I render my judgement?’

John wiped his eyes with a sleeve. ‘My lord,’ he began, ‘I have somewhat more to say.’

‘Say on.’

‘Sir, I have been a ward . . . all the days of my life. I have had . . . nineteen different hosts. While in their care, I have been’—he gasped for air, if only to have breath enough to speak his next words—‘starved, ridiculed, beaten, belittled, mutilated, ostracised, and tortured. I have slept in filth and on a cold hard ground for weeks and months at a time. I have been called stupid and ugly and worthless,
and it was all true. When I have disobeyed, I have been harshly punished. When I have acquiesced, I
have been beaten, still. When I ran away from my tormentors, I was blamed for running. When I
stole food to eat, I was called a thief. My name has been impermanent. My battered and famished
body has gone unseen. My wretchedness has been assumed as my normal state. I have been both
stolen and abandoned, blamed and punished for crimes I did not commit, exploited for my labour and
despised for simply existing. All that time, I have had not one soul to call my friend. Until Mr
Holmes.

‘He saw me. He saw an unnamed man and gave him the dignity of a real name. He saw a starved
man and fed him. He saw a frightened man, and made for him a place of safety. He saw a lonely
man, and made of him a friend. Mr Holmes doesn’t see a mere ward. He sees . . . a man without
limitation. I came to him illiterate, and today I can read and write, because he has taught me how. He
has taught me about the solar system and the oceans, about anatomy and chemistry, about history and
literature. We go to museums and parks. We play games and cook meals. We listen to music and
dance. With him, I am intelligent and strong. With him, I am not afraid anymore. I sleep warm at
night with a full belly. I’m happy. I’m . . . home. Mr Holmes, he’s my friend. He’s my . . . family.’

‘And it is your desire,’ said the magistrate, ‘to go home to your family.’

‘Yes sir,’ said John, nodding emphatically.

Behind him, Sherlock heard sniffling, and whispers. Sherlock’s heart was throbbing so violently he
thought it might burst.

‘What you have described to me,’ he said, ‘is just and proper. This is the love of family. And I want
to be clear on something. What Lord Magnussen has been accused of is a perversion of the
relationship between host and ward, or free person and any ward. What we should have is the love
of brother for brother, or father for son, or friend for friend. We understand, do we not, that love
between ward and host is not the love reserved for lovers. Hosts should not feel such affection, and
wards cannot. Yes, what I see you feel for Mr Holmes, and what I have heard Mr Holmes express
for you, that is appropriate love. Anything more would be perversion.’

The magistrate laid down his pen. ‘I am sorry,’ he said, ‘for the things I have heard you testify of
today. That you were ever made to suffer them is not, in my eyes, a consequence of being born, for
we must all endure the trials of a mortal existence. Rather, it is the failing of a programme that should
have done better by you. I am sorry you were left unprotected. Were it in my power, I would order
all the wrongs done against you be rectified. As it is, my powers are limited to this court. So I will do
what I can for you. JW—John—it is the finding of this court that Mr Sherlock Holmes henceforth be
named your rightful and proper host, and that your permanent residence as a ward be 221B Baker
Street, London. Mr Holmes, the ward is yours. That is the order of this court.’

With that, the gavel fell.
The Grating Roar

The Lord Commissioner of Emancipation had been arrested for his crimes committed against a warded person, and he would not be the last. Over the following days and weeks, as evidence of conspiracy to occlude the existence of a Downside in Canary Wharf emerged, dozens of prominent Londoners were indicted for violating ward protection laws. It was shaping up to be the largest scandal of the Ward Social Care Programme since the CFCA was written into law.

The Metropolitan police would be described by media outlets and others as merciless, implementing a no-holds-barred campaign against all illegal actions taken by any and all who had even the smallest hand in the scandal. The government, it was reported, was decimated—in the strictest, most literal sense of the word. One tenth of MPs were arrested or resigned in protest, or out of fear of accusation. As for the Department of Ward Social Care and the Ethics Commission on Ward Welfare, their decapitation left them in shambles. The Prime Minister, Alistair Spell, appointed, as interim Commissioner, one of the few men in that department left standing, a Mr Mycroft Holmes, whom few in the public arena had ever heard of. When asked what his first act would be as the interim Commissioner—a microphone being shoved into his face as he walked to his car—he answered only, ‘I’m on clean-up duty.’

But before this appointment was issued, before the bevy of arrests were made, before an inbound plane from Bangkok could land on British soil, and before the newspapers could print the whole of the ward’s unprecedented testimony or dissect its meaning, the ward called John returned home.

They were advised to wait. Advised was a generous term. The crowd outside the courthouse was an unknown entity, they said, whose frenzy was unpredictable. Did they approve or disapprove of the decision? Would they swarm the ward? Would they riot? No one could say, and they couldn’t guarantee John’s safety if he walked out the front doors.

Sherlock was none too pleased. John was free to go home, and yet they were making him stay one more night ‘for his own protection’. So Sherlock said he would stay, too. But they had no accommodation for him and would not put him up in the same holding cell as his ward. They sent him home to wait. Meanwhile, they said, they would leak a rumour that the ward had already been transported to Baker Street, and caution that anyone—reporters, activists, or otherwise—caught lingering outside of 221 would be cited for trespass and harassment. Once the coast was clear, John would receive a personal escort back to his host’s residence.

Sherlock spent the evening on the phone, first with Harry, then with Lestrade. Mrs Hudson bustled around him, hanging last-minute festoons and fairy lights, occasionally wiping away tears and saying things under her breath like, ‘So wonderful, a miracle, so wonderful.’ Normally, she spent Christmas with her sister Mona, but this year, leaving Baker Street wasn’t even a thought in her mind. John would come home to a flat dressed for the season. Still, Sherlock was anxious, and until he saw with his own two eyes John standing in the centre of the room on his own two feet, there would be very little Christmas cheer to go around.

‘I want you personally to bring him home,’ Sherlock said as he paced the sitting room. Mrs Hudson was adding baubles to the small tree she had set up in the window where Sherlock usually played his violin. He wouldn’t let her touch John’s corner of the room.
‘That’s the plan,’ said Lestrade. ‘And I was there during his medical exam. Got him competent doctors this time around, a whole medical staff. They’re taking their job seriously.’

‘Who is with him tonight?’

‘Constable Donovan.’

‘Thank God. All night?’

‘All night, Sherlock. I promise you, I give you my word, nothing bad will happen to him. He’ll be back home before you know it.’

‘Can’t be soon enough.’

The night was long and quiet. He left the telly dark because he couldn’t stand the news reports, or the commentaries, or the superficial analysis of what had been one of the most critical and exposing days of John’s life. They didn’t know him. None of them knew what he had been through, what he really had been through. Even Sherlock, who had the fuller story and who had lived with John long enough to see the detrimental effects of a lifetime of abuse at the hands of so many different hosts, couldn’t fully comprehend John’s life before Baker Street. And he had no possible way to know what would come next, for either of them.

At dawn, Sherlock was showered, dressed, and waiting at the window when Lestrade called and said they were on their way, twenty minutes. The street was clear but for the usual foot traffic and occasional car or bus. He counted the minutes, every second of them, until, at nineteen minutes and twenty-three seconds, he watched as two cars slowed to the kerb, and the second he recognised as Lestrade’s.

He spun in place then hurried to the door and down the stairs, calling to Mrs Hudson as he flew to the front door. She was just as primed as he and was on his heels and onto the pavement just as Lestrade was pulling open the back door of the car.

Then there he was, with no courtroom between them, no blows raining down on them, just there, close enough to touch, to hold.

Mrs Hudson reached him first, throwing her arms around John’s neck. ‘Oh, my boy!’ she cried. ‘You’re home! You’re home!’

John slowly lifted his arms around her tiny back, but, Sherlock observed, he seemed . . . dazed. He didn’t smile, his eyes were vacant, and he moved as though through water. When she pulled back, she cupped his face in her hands and beamed up at him, seemingly oblivious to his disconcerted state. He stared at her like he barely knew her.

Let’s get him inside, Sherlock thought, and let him rest.

Fortunately, Lestrade seemed to be thinking along the same lines. ‘Best not linger on the pavement,’ he murmured. ‘Food for the vultures.’

He meant reporters, photographers, voyeurs. Who knew where they were perched?

‘Thank you, Greg,’ said Sherlock. Mrs Hudson had put her arm around John’s back and was leading him inside. For a moment, he stared after them, sensing something amiss. But Lestrade regained his attention.

‘I suspect this is just beginning, really,’ he said. ‘You’re his host, that’s finalised. But oof.’ He let out
a low whistle. ‘With Lord Magnussen under arrest—’

‘Mr Magnussen. If he keeps his title after all this, I’ll eat my coat.’

‘Damn straight. With him under arrest, we’re under enormous pressure to ensure his conviction, which means my guys are working double shifts collecting evidence, interviewing witnesses, the whole kit-and-caboodle. And he’s lawyering up like he’s assembling an army.’

‘You’ll need to interview John again, won’t you?’

Lestrade nodded. ‘Not me, but someone. I don’t know if he’ll have to testify in court, but yeah, he’ll have to give a full statement. It’ll be rough, Sherlock. Giving that kind of statement, they’ll want details. They’ll question everything, and not just in connection to Magnussen. They arrested Wilkes, too. That’s five years of testimony. And if they go after others—this Downside in Pimlico, for instance—and any other names that come out, they’ll ask him about that, too. You’re looking at weeks and weeks more of this. You’ll need to be there for him.’

‘I am.’

‘Oh. One more thing.’ He reached inside his suitcoat and pulled out an envelope. ‘A present, for John. From Michael. I’m told—he passed it over, but before releasing it, he said, eyes to the sky like he was recalling something verbatim from memory—‘that John is not to open it until Christmas, as it is a Christmas present, and one does not open Christmas presents before Christmas.’

Sherlock chuckled and took the card. ‘I’ll put it on the tree, then.’

‘Don’t worry about any of this for a few days, yeah? It’s Christmas. You two—you three—enjoy the holiday.’

‘Give Michael my best. Let him know John will be just fine.’

They shook hands and mumbled happy Christmas to one another, then parted. Sherlock turned back to the flat, took a breath, and hurried inside.

‘. . . didn’t even have a tree last year, did we, love?’ Mrs Hudson’s voice floated out from the sitting room as Sherlock approached. ‘But I said to Sherlock, this year, we absolutely must have a tree.’ She spotted Sherlock over her shoulder, her hands holding onto John’s arm as he stood centre of the room, staring at the lit tree, barely seeming to register that Sherlock had returned. ‘I had hope in my heart, every day, that you’d be home by Christmas, and look at you!’ She squeezed his arm, smiling up at him. ‘Here on Christmas Eve! Sometimes, I do think there is someone watching over us.’

‘Mrs Hudson . . .’ Sherlock said.

‘Tonight, John, don’t even think about lifting a finger. I’m making us a proper Christmas meal, I’ve got it all planned. Beef wellington, roasted potatoes, steamed greens, and a bread pudding, how does that sound?’

‘Very good, ma’am, thank you,’ said John softly.

‘I think John would like to rest,’ said Sherlock, equally soft.

‘Of course!’ said Mrs Hudson, her ebullience not to be dimmed. ‘John. So pleased you are home. So pleased.’ She kissed his cheek. As she moved toward the door, however, and passed by Sherlock, they exchanged worried glances.
When her footsteps had faded, Sherlock took a step closer, but John didn’t turn.

‘John?’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said John. ‘The tree.’ He reached out and touched one of its needles, as though confirming it were indeed plastic. Not real.

‘Well, you know Mrs Hudson.’ He came to stand at John’s side. ‘She insisted. Didn’t think I was up to the task.’ He grinned down at John, but John made no response, not so much as a quirked lip or subtle nod. It was like he was in shock and couldn’t feel anything. Sherlock wanted to touch him, to pull him in and just hold him until he was sure John would be all right. But something instinctively told him that doing so would be a very bad idea.

But from this vantage point, he was in a much better position to observe the fading bruises on John’s face, against a cheekbone, along the jawline, disappearing into his hairline. They were a light brown and would be gone in another day or two, but where the skin had broken and scabbed would take a little longer. The skin cells were desiccated and scaly, a testament to the poor medical treatment he had received while in custody he didn’t deserve.

‘Were you hurt badly, sir?’ asked John.

Sherlock started. Quite unaccountably, the sir stung like a bee. ‘When you were taken? I—’

‘When you found me in the train station, and the Colonel struck you with his baton.’

‘I suffered few blows,’ he said. ‘And I would have gladly taken more, if it meant they didn’t fall on you. John—’

‘Thank you for finding me.’

‘Do you . . . want to talk about . . . ?’

‘No sir.’

The words were spoken, not with force, but with finality, such as Sherlock had never heard from John before.

‘Are you hurt, John?’

John said nothing.

‘You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to,’ said Sherlock, ‘but I’d like to at least give you some cream for your skin. Your face.’ He indicated. ‘It will help.’

Still, John said nothing, and Sherlock took his silence for acquiescence. John followed him into the kitchen and sat at the table while Sherlock pulled out the emergency kit and rummaged for a tube of cream with aloe vera. It wouldn’t do much, just soothe the skin, but Sherlock didn’t know what else to do, and he wanted to help. While Sherlock washed his hands at the sink, John sat rigidly in his chair, hands folded together on the table in front of him, eyes staring at nothing at all.

If he was honest, he had been hoping for something else at John’s return, and he felt guilty desiring it: a warm embrace, declarations like the ones he had asserted in the courtroom, tears of joy. This unresponsiveness, this coldness—it frightened him. What John had endured over the last three weeks . . . Magnussen, that bastard, what if it had broken him? What if they were back where they had started? The distance that he had fought so long and hard to close was back, and it felt wider than
ever. What was he to do?

Sherlock pulled the chair to the corner to sit closer, and he unscrewed the cap, watching John from the corner of his eye, but John hadn’t moved a muscle. His breathing was even, but it reminded Sherlock of that first day when John had sat long hours in his armchair, careful not to move, lest he awaken the deep pain in his mouth from the pulled tooth, and he had been too scared of his new host to ask for more painkillers. There was pain in there, deep down, that he was fighting to master. And what soothers could Sherlock offer? Sadly, he squeezed a dollop of cream onto a finger, a poor remedy for superficial cuts, not chronic, abiding pain.

He reached for John’s face.

John gasped loudly and flinched, recoiling violently from the outstretched hand.

Sherlock snatched his hand away, quickly rubbing his finger clean on a tea towel. Then they stared at each other, each in shock. It had been so long, so long, since that had happened, since John had reacted in fear of Sherlock, as if Sherlock would hurt him, as if he couldn’t tell the difference between this host and all the others. A shadow out of the corner of his eye, and John came undone in the flat he now called a home. This is what they had done to him. In only a matter of days, they had broken something inside of him that had learnt to trust, reconditioned him to expect only pain, and transformed him back into what he had once been. Sherlock quailed inside. How could he fix this? How could he heal the damage? How—?

Suddenly, John’s hand shot out and grasped Sherlock’s, pulling it back to his face. He flattened the fingers and pressed Sherlock’s open palm to his cheek like a cradle, and held it there firmly with both hands. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, just feeling, craving touch. Sherlock didn’t dare breathe. John was burrowing his face into his hand, forcing a caress, but it was ungentle, an act of defiance, a way of refusing to fear Sherlock’s touch. Wilkes was not allowed to make him fear his friend again. Magnussen had no place in this house. It was a statement as much as a cry for help, and Sherlock meant to answer. But before he could reach out with his other hand, John abruptly dropped his hand, and with the loud screech of his chair, he was on his feet. His eyes swam with tears. He spun away, toward the door leading to the stairs, but he caught himself on the doorjamb.

He was gasping for breath, doubled over in pain, propped up only by one hand on the door frame. He couldn’t look at Sherlock. He couldn’t open his eyes at all. But his mouth was stretched open, trying to speak. And at last, after a mighty struggle, the words came:

‘I love you!’ he sobbed.

The words, like razor blades, tore from his chest and ripped through his throat. He clutched at the front of his shirt, squeezing, as though his very heart were in severest pain. Sherlock shot to his feet, but at this sudden movement, John turned and fled. He ran up the stairs to his bedroom, and below, Sherlock heard the door bang closed.

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Sherlock didn’t go after him.

Honestly, he didn’t know what to do. His heart broke for John. What he had just witnessed he could barely describe, let alone explain, and if he couldn’t do it, how could he expect John himself to express what he was going through? All he knew for sure was that the last thing John needed right now was an intruder. He had sequestered himself in the safety of his room, to think and do and feel in private, and Sherlock, as much as it pained him, would not violate that sanctuary. Not unless, and not until, John invited him in again.
This was going to be more difficult than he imagined. In the panic of losing him, the frenzy to find him again, and the struggle to reclaim him, Sherlock had given little thought to what would come next. Perhaps the assumption had deserved little attention: that things would go back to normal, that they could pick up exactly where they had left off, with his lessons and outings and easy conversation by the fire, all the while avoiding his own feelings for John for fear of how they might hurt him. So the realisation was a trying one—there was no going back. They needed to find a new normal. Sherlock just didn’t know how to get there, or what demons they would have to fight along the way. One thing he promised himself, however: that John would not fight them alone. He would be there, as much as he was needed, every step of the way.

And surely, John would want him there? He had declared to the magistrate and so to all the world that he wanted to come home to Baker Street. But Sherlock had failed him before. He had failed to keep him safe when it mattered most. Perhaps John felt betrayed. It was impossible to be betrayed at all but by someone you trust and love . . . Love. Those words . . . Did John mean them? They were delivered as a painful confession as though he knew they were forbidden. Or perhaps it was because the emotion itself was only newly formed and so frightening in its foreignness. But maybe it wasn’t so foreign. He had been loved by his mother, and loved her in return, and he carried that over a lifetime. He loved Harry, even if he didn’t know how to frame it with words. So was it so hard to believe that he could love Sherlock, too? They were family. He’d said so himself. So why were those words so hard for him to say? Why did they feel like they had come from a deeper, more tender place?

John was still in his bedroom when Mrs Hudson showed up in the middle of the afternoon, bearing the unbaked beef wellington to rest in his refrigerator until ready for the oven.

‘A nap,’ said Sherlock when she queried after John. ‘Well deserved.’

‘Poor dear,’ she said under her breath. She looked up at Sherlock with wide, nervous eyes. ‘Am I doing this wrong?’

‘Doing what wrong?’

‘You’ve known, haven’t you, about the things they’re reporting on the news? The things that happened to him with . . . his last host and all?’

He nodded somberly.

‘I had suspected something bad, but nothing like that, not a Downside, I— I don’t know what to do, Sherlock. It tears me up inside, thinking what he’s been through, what that oaf did to him. But do I act like nothing happened? Do I pretend that I’m in the dark? Do I treat him more gently? All this.’ She pointed to her Christmas festoonery. ‘Is it too much?’

‘It’s wonderful, Mrs Hudson,’ he said. He took her shoulders and pulled her close, wrapping arms around her and resting his head atop hers. ‘We love him. As we have always done. That’s all I know for sure what to do.’ He sighed. ‘Right now, we follow his lead. If he wants to talk, we’re here for him. If he needs space, we’ll give that to him, as well.’

When the beef wellington went into the oven and Mrs Hudson started on the potatoes, John reappeared. He had changed out of the clothing he had worn at the hearing (and apparently overnight) and dressed in his own jumper and trousers. He walked into the sitting room as though he were holding himself together. Sherlock didn’t know how else to describe it. The ever-present limp was less pronounced, but as though it were under tight control, not as though it had improved. John smiled at Mrs Hudson, and nodded at Sherlock, but these actions, too, were a carefully constructed façade, an act, an endeavour to appear . . . normal. Almost, they seemed a petition that he be treated
as normal, too.

‘Dinner’s in the oven, dear,’ said Mrs Hudson, peeling potatoes.

‘I can help.’

‘Nonsense, it’s well in hand! You and Sherlock have a sit. Maybe put the fire on. Kitchen’s warm, but Lord knows it doesn’t reach the sitting room.’

While Sherlock knelt at the hearth, pulling out firewood and arranging logs in the fireplace, he noticed John approaching his armchair. He placed a hand on the headrest and slowly dragged his fingertips along the folded blanket. Sherlock could almost hear the echo of those words spoken what felt a lifetime ago. *This is my chair.*

Once the fire caught, he joined John in sitting, but with some degree of nervous anticipation. This was where they had talked about a great many things, from Sherlock’s earliest cases and John’s latest questions to discussions of literature and science. But it was also the scene of John’s first confession. He wondered if John was thinking about that now.

‘Mr Holmes, if I may ask,’ said John.

Sherlock tried not to wince. ‘Anything.’

‘What will happen to the Colonel?’

Sherlock’s dominant eyebrow lifted. ‘Did you hear about his testimony?’

‘I heard he would be testifying,’ said John. ‘Not what he said.’

Smiling sadly, Sherlock said, ‘He was on your side. You should know that. He spoke against Magnussen.’

‘He did?’ John looked amazed.

‘That, my man, is corroborating testimony. The magistrate was very interested in what Mr Moran had to say.’

‘What did he say?’

Sherlock spent the next half hour reviewing all that had taken place in that courtroom, answering John’s questions and telling the story of the Most Admirable Magistrate (Sherlock’s new moniker for the man). He explained, too, the aftermath that he himself had learnt of only last night: that Magnussen had been arrested, along with many others, that Mr Moran’s arraignment date had been set. John said little, expressed little, but Sherlock could tell he was listening intently. The only time he reacted at all was when Sherlock mentioned that Magnussen’s flat had been raided, and all the wards removed. He closed his eyes and lowered his head into his hand, overcome.

Sherlock gave him a moment. He tried to understand what John was thinking, what he was feeling. ‘John,’ he whispered, leaning forward. ‘I need to tell you . . . how sorry I am . . . for all that happened. I promised to keep you safe, and—’

John’s head snapped up and his eyes flashed. ‘Don’t,’ he said sharply.

Mrs Hudson announced dinner. They sat together, as they always had, with Mrs Hudson at the head and Sherlock and John across from one another. As they arranged themselves, Sherlock’s feet
accidentally knocked against John’s, and John flinched, pulling his legs away and holding himself straight and stiff in his chair. He kept his eyes on fixed to his plate. Sherlock felt miserable and cursed his lanky limbs.

It was a wonderful meal, but a quiet one. They all felt the unease. Mrs Hudson, bless her, did her damnedest trying to keep a conversation going. Sherlock complimented the meal, the perfectly cooked wellington and sumptuous potatoes, but John seemed to be shrinking into his chair, like he couldn’t wait for the meal to be over so he could disappear again. He had always been so polite, excessively so, but he uttered not one word of compliment or thanks to Mrs Hudson. He took small bites and had trouble swallowing.

They were back—the evil spirits Sherlock had believed he had exorcised. Maybe they had never left, only quieted down, and all it took was one spiteful monster to summon them forth again. How naïve of him to think them vanquished.

‘I’ll do the washing up,’ said John suddenly, rising from the table with his half-eaten plate.

‘Oh no, dear,’ said Mrs Hudson. ‘I’m happy to do it. You rest—’

‘I’m not a guest!’ John bellowed, the plate clattering back to the table. ‘You clean up after guests! I’m family!’ He panted, his jaw jutting out in anger. ‘Right, Mr Holmes? Is that what I am?’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock, breathless, looking up at John in wonder and fear. ‘Of course, you are. You’re our family.’

‘Then let me do the washing up. Let me be normal. Let me be almost like you.’

He grabbed the plate again, and his half-drunk glass, stormed from the table. Seconds later, the dishes crashed into the sink and the tap turned on.

Mrs Hudson reached for Sherlock’s arm and squeezed. I’m sorry, she mouthed. She shook her head remorsefully, tears brimming. He clapped a hand on hers.

‘It isn’t you,’ he whispered.

She smiled through her tears, but it looked more a like a wince. She patted his hand. ‘I should go. He needs you right now. Not me.’

He wished she hadn’t said that. He didn’t know what to do, and he didn’t want to do it alone. But she was already standing. She left behind her plate and the sliced wellington she had worked so hard on, and slipped out the door.

Sherlock cleared the table. He put the uneaten food back into the fridge and left the unwashed dishes beside the sink where John worked. But John was fixated on his work, his hands submerged in bubbles, scrubbing, scrubbing, and he didn’t look up or pause or given any indication that he noticed Sherlock at all. His jaw was set, his mouth a straight line.

They would talk, Sherlock decided. When the chores were done, he would ask John to sit and talk with him. He didn’t know what he would say, but he had time to figure it out. Mrs Hudson had used a lot of pots, pans, and plates.

So he retreated uncomfortably to the sitting room, and that was when he spotted his violin.

Mrs Hudson had moved it to make room for the Christmas tree, so it wasn’t in its usual place by the window, which was why it attracted his notice now, lying against John’s writing desk. Even as he
moved toward it, and opened the case, and tightened the horsehairs of his bow, he heard the tune in his head, a joyful melody in three-four time he had been composing in his head for many weeks now. That was sometimes how it happened for him. Composing was an act of the mind before it was ever a note on a page or a singing string. This one, he realised as though at long last, was for John, the song he heard in his head whenever he thought of him, or remembered fondly something he had said or done, the song that started up in the back corners of his mind whenever he planned ways to make John smile. John’s song. But he’d never heard it before. Not outside of his own mind. Perhaps now was a good time.

He placed the violin beneath his chin, positioned his fingers, and began to play.

The melody came slowly, at first, his fingers working to find notes and tunes he had only ever imagined. But before long, they were moving gracefully along the strings, the sweet song of a gentle waltz lifting into the air. He paced as he played, arms bearing up the instrument as a man did his dance partner, turning slowly, slowly. All the while, the tune floated as though on a breeze. It was kindling to keep a fire warm, water to cool a dry throat, salve on the sore.

It was on the refrain that he noticed another sound, or rather, the lack of any. The sloshing from the kitchen sink, the scrubbing, the clinking, it had all stopped. Cautiously, Sherlock carried his music closer to the kitchen, to peer inside. There, he saw John at the kitchen sink, but he was no longer doing the washing up. He was standing perfectly still, but not as one at ease. Rather, he looked to be in severest pain. One wet hand gripped the counter. The other, dripping with suds at the elbow, he had clamped over his stretched mouth, brutally, as though to smother himself, as though to trap a silent scream and keep it from escaping. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut. The hand began to shake. His knees were bent and began to tremble, and it was clear to Sherlock that, any second now, his legs would give out completely, and he would crash to the ground.

The bow slipped on the string. Sherlock tossed both violin and bow into John’s armchair in his haste to reach the kitchen. He reached John in four long strides, spun him around, and before he could fall, crushed him to his chest in a fierce embrace.

John broke. He flung his arms around Sherlock’s neck and began to sob. The water from John’s hands seeped through the fabric of his shirt. His legs could scarcely bear him up, and he clutched at the back of Sherlock’s shirt like a drowning man.

Gasping for air, like he was struggling to keep his head above the surface of a stormy sea, John cried: ‘I’m . . . s-sorry! I’m s-sorry!’

‘No, John, no,’ Sherlock said, holding him even tighter, rubbing his back, trying to soothe him.

But John could not be consoled. He cried and cried, his tears wetting Sherlock’s neck, his halting breath a thrum against his stomach as his diaphragm quivered and spasmed. Clawing at Sherlock’s back, it was as though he couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t feel safe enough. It was as though he were afraid Sherlock might let go, and he couldn’t bear it.

Sherlock’s only thought was to assure him that the storm had passed, that he had reached the harbour. ‘It’s all over, John, I swear,’ he avowed. ‘They can’t hurt you anymore. No one can hurt you anymore.’

John’s breath was ragged with his sobs. What he said next broke Sherlock’s heart.

‘I don’t believe you!’

The tremulous cadence in his voice bore with it an eternal note of sadness, and in those words, and in
that cry, Sherlock heard the roar of human misery, and not John’s alone, but of all those who suffered like helpless pebbles upon a shore, tormented by an unending crash of waves.

Even more desperately, John clung to him like he was trying to disappear inside of Sherlock, and become nothing. With bruising strength, he dug fingers into Sherlock’s back and burrowed his head into his chest, crying. But the sobs were stealing his breath, stealing his strength, crumbling whatever fortitude was left to him. The fear had morphed into panic, and his breathing became uneven, frantic. He was on the verge of hyperventilation, and his legs wobbled, threatening collapse.

But Sherlock would never let him fall. He took John into his arms completely, bore him up, and carried him to the sofa. There, he lowered him, sat with him, and pulled him back into his embrace. John trembled ceaselessly. The tears didn’t stop. He rested his head against Sherlock’s chest, the front of Sherlock’s shirt wadded in his fist. Sherlock petted his head, rubbed his back, and cried with him, and cried, for untold time, they cried together in each other’s arms, holding and being held, until there were no more tears to shed, until an enervated body grew limp and powerless, and consciousness faded because it had nothing left to give, and they lay upon the old sofa, joined, drained, John’s head upon Sherlock’s chest, his hand still fistled over Sherlock’s heart, his eyes sealed with dried tears, and Sherlock stroking his hair and the nape of his neck, wordless and sorrowful, for the world that Christmas Eve seemed snuffed of joy, and love, and light, and he lay stranded with John on a darkling plain, while outside, ignorant armies clashed by night.

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It was a dark hour when Mrs Hudson crept back into the sitting room and found her boys lying together on the sofa, John’s head tucked beneath Sherlock’s chin, elbows held close to his body, and a slack hand resting near his splotchy face. He was folded in Sherlock’s arms, and though his brow was ruffled in consternation, he slept soundly.

She moved around the sitting room, dimming lamps and putting Sherlock’s violin away in its case, but she left the fire crackling and the fairy lights aglow. When she turned around, she saw Sherlock watching her. With an almost imperceptible gesture of his head, he bid her come closer. When she did, he mouthed the word blanket.

Nodding, she retreated momentarily. When she returned, she was carrying a folded wool blanket and a pillow. She spread the blanket wide and draped it carefully over their bodies, mindful to cover John’s shoulders. The deep December night was chilled, and she could see the gooseflesh on his exposed arm and neck. Then she motioned for Sherlock to lift his head. Heedful not to disrupt John’s sleep, Sherlock lifted his own head enough for Mrs Hudson to place a pillow behind it. Before she could move away again, he whispered, ‘Stay.’

Her eyebrows rose in question.

‘If he wakes,’ Sherlock said, almost too softly to be heard, ‘it’ll be better if he sees you here, too.’

Understanding, Mrs Hudson withdrew just once more. When she came back, she bore a basket of yarn and knitting needles. She settled herself in John’s armchair and began knitting by the dying firelight. A few minutes later, from the corner of her eye, she watched Sherlock head slowly loll to the side in sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night, beyond her notice, John drifted to the surface of consciousness, but he didn’t quite breach it. He felt surrounded in warmth, and though he was not in any pain, he felt an uncertainty that caused his eyelashes to flutter open. He realised he was being held, and there was a moment’s rising panic. But in the clearness of his pre-dawn wakefulness, he saw Mrs Hudson by the fire, and in his heart he knew right where he was, and who held him, and who loved him, and
the panic drained, ceding territory to the tranquillity of sleep once more.

***

In the milky dawn, they awoke together. Sometime in the night, their hands had joined and held fast. Now, with bodies stiff from sleep, and mindful of one another’s limbs and angles, they struggled to sitting, but their hands did not part.

They did not look at one another. Nor did they speak. For a long, quiet moment, they just sat there, side by side. In the distance, church bells rang out, heralding in the Christmas morning, and still they didn’t move. It was as if something would break, or a spell would be broken, if either one of them moved a muscle, and neither wanted that. At least, Sherlock did not. The magistrate’s words were a distant but unforgotten echo, sanction and caution spoken in the same breath, and he didn’t know which side of that coin he was on. Neither did he know what John had locked away inside of himself, that he couldn’t voice. Sherlock feared, if he let go, he would never know.

Then, unhurriedly, maybe reluctantly, John planted his feet solidly on the floor, leant forward, and slowly arose. Even so, he held Sherlock’s hand, and he gripped it until he took that first step. His hold loosened. Another step, and their hands began to slide apart. Another, until only the tips of their fingers brushed against each other, and he was gone. John walked unsteadily through the door, grasped the bannister, and ascended to his bedroom. He disappeared from view.

Sherlock’s hand grew cold.

***

He heard John come down the stairs, some time later, but he didn’t stop into the sitting room. He kept on, straight on down the stairs. Sherlock, who was sitting in his chair by the Christmas tree, half-reading a book, half wandering through his mind palace like a lost child, now sprang to his feet to look through the window. But when he didn’t see John emerge onto the street, he realised that he hadn’t left the building at all, but had gone to see Mrs Hudson.

Well over two hours passed by the time he heard John again, climbing the stairs, the familiar unevenness of his footsteps causing a strange pang in Sherlock’s stomach. But again, John avoided the sitting room and carried on back to his bedroom. By this time, Sherlock had showered and dressed, hard boiled the eggs, finished last night’s washing up, restoked the fire, and texted Mycroft a happy Christmas.

And to you both.

Mycroft’s reply was short. Strangely, he wished his brother would . . . not come by, but call. Just a phone call. He found himself wanting to talk to someone. He also found himself craving information. He wanted to know what occupied Mycroft’s time, what he knew about the unfolding investigation, what hand he had had in any of it. But all of that, really, was distraction. There was a more important matter at hand for him. He just didn’t know how to manage it.

He was back in the sitting room, seated at the table with his laptop open. For an hour at least, he had been searching websites for updates, for any new news at all, but it was Christmas, and the courts were on holiday and the police didn’t exactly live tweet their progress. He thought to call Lestrade, but he held back. If Lestrade was spending Christmas day with Michael, he didn’t want to interrupt that. Same with Sally and Janine. Besides, if anything noteworthy were taking place, he had enough faith in Donovan to reach out to him directly. But again, Christmas. All of London was gathered with friends and family, and for the first time in his adulthood, he understood why, and respected that tradition. He would not intrude upon it.
He felt him, rather than heard him—a presence over his shoulder, standing in the doorway. How had he missed him coming down the stairs, quiet as a ghost? Sherlock’s heart stilled, and he debated. Let him have his peace, or turn and acknowledge him there?

Then came the soft-spoken, timid voice.

‘Sh... Sherlock?’

The fear and sorrow that weighed down Sherlock’s heart suddenly lifted upon hearing those two musical notes: John, speaking his name. He had hoped to hear it again.

He turned.

John had taken two paces into the room and stopped. Like Sherlock, he had changed out of yesterday’s clothes and into fresh shirt and trousers. His comportment was one of resolve, his mouth a soft line, eyes bright and full of purpose.

Sherlock stood. ‘Hello, John,’ he said, as if they were seeing each other for the first time since John’s return.

Would they talk about it? About last night, about what John had said, about the hearing, the captivity, the abduction? How did one begin?

‘Sir, I—’ John halted, and when he tried again, he had erased the submissive form of address. ‘I’ve been thinking...’

Sherlock loved it when John said what he was thinking. He loved him thinking. John had such a beautiful mind. He thought such beautiful thoughts. But Sherlock didn’t know, this time, what had been plaguing those thoughts, and he held his breath, slightly fearful of what he would hear.

‘The painting in my room,’ John continued. ‘It’s not real.’

Sherlock waited. He didn’t understand, and John needed more time saying what he meant to say. This was difficult for him, Sherlock could see. He would not rush him.

‘It’s beautiful. The most beautiful thing in the world, and I thank you for it. But... it’s not real. The real Dover Beach is somewhere else, far away. It might as well be on the other side of the world for someone like me. And I know it’s a silly thing. Unimportant. It’s not important to want just to look at something you can see on the telly, or in a magazine. It’s such a little thing, looking. Doesn’t matter at all.’ He looked close to tears. ‘But if looking is so silly, if it’s such a little thing, why won’t they let me do it?’

The words struck Sherlock as profound. He had no readied answer. But John wasn’t looking for an answer. It wasn’t a real question.

‘I don’t want to live like this anymore.’

Sherlock felt jolted. Fear filled him up like bile, and a protest formed on his lips.

‘I’m tired of this life. I’m tired of being afraid all the time. I... hate what’s happened to me. And I’m afraid that what happened with Mr Wilkes, with Lord Magnussen, could happen again.’

‘No, John, I swear—’

But John put up a hand, beseeching him. He had more to say and needed to finish.
‘I’m not safe. I’ll never be safe. Not really. Not like this. And I can’t keep living this way. I’m not going to make it.’ His voice was steady, but a tear rolling down his cheek betrayed him. ‘You said, once, if there was something I wanted . . .’

Sherlock swallowed hard. ‘What do you want, John?’

John stiffened, growing straighter, taller, and his chin rose. But the words came slowly, like an unfamiliar tongue. ‘I want to be emancipated,’ he said. ‘I want to be a free man.’

It was like a fire had just washed through him. In his mind’s eye, Sherlock saw a John walking the streets with no bracelets, hailing a taxi, boarding a train, going wherever he pleased, whenever. He saw John and himself running through back alleys, hot on the trail of an evasive criminal, or scouring books in the library on a hunt for obscure information to crack a case, or examining a dead body in Molly’s morgue. He saw John laughing and cracking jokes, getting annoyed or outright angry, being kind and unashamed. He saw John as he was always meant to be, free of chains, exorcised of ghosts, healed and whole. Unbidden, tears filled his eyes as he looked at John now.

‘Have I upset you?’ John asked, on the verge of being crestfallen.

But a smile was breaking across Sherlock’s face. ‘Oh no, John. I’m . . . I’m just so proud of you.’

Eyes glinting, John first stared in amazement. Then his face reflected Sherlock’s, and he smiled without restraint.

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. Let’s do it. Let’s make you free.’

It didn’t matter that the emancipation programme had been suspended. Lord Magnussen had been dethroned. Things could change. Things would change, or Sherlock would never rest, and Mycroft would weary of his bullying and do something about it just to shut him up. He couldn’t see the path forward very clearly, but the first few steps had been illuminated, and he and John would take them together. And if not toward emancipation, well, there was always a highway.

John laughed, half with relief, half with unadulterated joy. He stepped forward and made an aborted movement with his arms, but second-guessed himself. Before he could blush or feel embarrassed, Sherlock closed the distance. Laughing joyfully, he swept John into his arms. John hugged him around the middle, and Sherlock couldn’t tell if he was laughing, too, or crying, but either way, this was good. This was good. For a now, the sea had calmed, and the tide went out.

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That night, Sherlock lay in his own bed in a vain attempt to sleep. His body was tired, but his brain had some serious work to do, not least of all planning what it would take to make good on his promise.

It had been a strange Christmas. There had been little by way of merriment. He had bought no gifts, they had pulled no crackers, they had prepared no feast. Well, there had been one gift, waiting for John on the tree. Sherlock watched as he read Michael’s letter, watched the smile cross his face, and listened John’s soft chuckle. But John didn’t share. He folded the letter like a private treasure and tucked it into his back pocket. And Mrs Hudson had joined them for leftovers of last night’s beef wellington. She seemed in better spirits, and she and John grinned at each other in private moments as though they, too, shared a secret understanding.

John called Harry. For the first time, he took the phone to his room to talk to her without being
overheard, and he was gone for over two hours. Sherlock imagined they had much to say. In the meantime, Sherlock made plans for Boxing Day. They wouldn’t go out—it was, perhaps, too soon to be seen in public—but they would shop online to replace John’s wristwatch and his phone, and a few more presents, whatever he desired. They would do Christmas late, just the two of them. Because, well, this Christmas was special. John was home. He almost wasn’t. And next year, he might not be.

So entrenched in his thoughts was he that he hadn’t heard the footsteps on the stair, nor coming down the hall. Then again, John could move very quietly, when he was of a mind. But suddenly, there came a light tapping on his bedroom door.

Sherlock startled and lifted his head as John cracked open the door and half stepped into the room. It was dark in the hallway, as it was in the bedroom, but just enough light pressing through the lightweight, curtained windows outlined his frame, though his face remained obscured. John said nothing, and the question never left Sherlock’s lips. As it turned out, he didn’t need to ask. Somehow, he simply understood.

He folded down one corner of the blanket, a silent invitation. It was all John had been waiting for, what he couldn’t ask for, not with words. He closed the door, footed toward the bed, and sat down on the edge of the mattress. One breath. Two, three, four. Slowly, he laid himself down on his side, facing away from Sherlock. His head found a pillow. With gentleness, Sherlock lifted the blanket over him, but he did not yet seem at ease. After a long, still moment, Sherlock slid closer. One arm curled around his waist, holding him. John found his hand, squeezed it, and pressed it to his breast. Then he let out a long sigh. Within minutes, he was asleep. Not long after, Sherlock joined him there.
Epilogue

‘And I’m telling you, if you would listen, that it does no good to lower standards of evaluation if the recidivism rates subsequently skyrocket when we discover they are ill-prepared for independent living!’

‘Yes, but the standards you propose are so demanding that they will ensure that no ward will ever qualify for emancipation. Why then even have a programme?’

‘Exactly! Lord Magnussen suspended emancipation for good reason. It is in the best interest of all—’

‘His reason was to keep the warded class as slaves.’

More voices chimed in:

‘Oh, don’t start that hyperbolic nonsense again. It was one ward.’

‘And the programme failed him spectacularly.’

‘Not one ward. One ward that represents thousands.’

‘The Ward Social Care Programme is the jewel of this nation, the envy of the world. It may have its flaws, but that’s because people are imperfect, not the programme. Look. We take care of our disadvantaged to an extent that no other country has ever dared attempt—’

‘We treat our disadvantaged like pets, at best. That’s hardly something to boast of.’

‘Don’t exaggerate—’

‘Don’t dismiss—!’

‘Enough! We’re getting off track here. Lord Holmes, your input at this juncture would be greatly appreciated.’

At the head of the table, sitting at an angle and leaning back in his chair with fingers interlaced over his blue-and-darker-blue striped tie, Mycroft Holmes lifted his eyebrows, as though surprised to have been noticed at last.

Around the long table, eleven men and women—members of his newly formed committee—were on day three of collaborations, collaboration being a generous word. The question: whether to reinstate the Ward Emancipation Programme in its previous form, or to reform the programme, and if so, to what end. Only one thing was understood: the programme would be reinstated. It had been Mycroft Holmes’ first official act as interim Lord Commissioner, and from that he would not back down, despite the protests among his own committee.

The arguments that followed were fodder for headaches. Everyone had an opinion, and everyone believed his or her opinion was the most informed, the wisest, the most just, the most compassionate. Whereas some argued to return it to its original state, others wanted the path to independence to be more arduous to ensure readiness and competence and reduce recidivism. Yet others wanted a less burdensome path, as the last requirements had been too stringent and discouraged applications. They debated the rights of wards, the responsibilities of emancipated wards, the role of hosts, the rigor of
assessments, the problem of recidivism, and the ultimate goals of the programme and how they fit with the CFCA in vision and principle. Few agreements had been reached in three days.

Now, Mycroft Holmes, who had been listening more closely than any could discern, straightened his swivel chair to face the room and slowly lowered his clasped hands to rest on the table. The committee had heard little from him since the start.

‘Once upon a time,’ he said, ‘warded children gained independent status by right, once they were no longer children. All they had to do was reach a certain age. That age was eighteen. Then twenty. Then twenty-five. Then thirty-one. Ultimately, a ward became a lifetime designation. Why?’

They hadn’t expected the history review, and the answer came slowly from the other end of the table. ‘Wards proved incapable of caring for themselves. They couldn’t hold a job, and if they could, it wasn’t enough to make a living or keep a roof over their heads. They couldn’t provide for their own welfare, and we realised—they would always be in need of support. Therefore, independence should be offered as an exception, not a rule, which is why we created the Emancipation Provision. The bottom line is, wards failed to prove themselves to the state.’

‘Wrong,’ said Lord Holmes with the air of a disappointed schoolmaster. ‘The state failed its wards. The state treated them as pets. You said it yourself, Mr Larson. And how do you treat a pet? You feed it, exercise it, give it a place to sleep, pat it on the head if it pleases you and scold it if it does not. Seems a tidy arrangement for pet and master. But sometimes you leave the wretched creature out in the rain because you forgot to bring it in, or hit it when it misbehaves, or tease it when you want a laugh. That’s what we’ve reduced them to, and if you can’t see that, you’re either wilfully blind or an idiot. Are you all in this room idiots?’

They looked at each other in surprise and embarrassment.

‘You speak of wards as though they are a different species of human, incapable of learning and growing and being responsible citizens. But they’re no different to you or me. Any one of you, sitting around this table, has had the good fortune of never having been made a ward. No tragedy came into your life, no grave misfortune, no accident of chance. But it easily could have happened. Would you have been worthy, then, of a lifetime as a ward of the state? Forever denied the simple pleasure of walking out your own front door without donning identifying bracelets, the joy of marrying and having children of your own, the freedom to think and act and exist as you wish? The ward John, that one unfortunate ward, could have been any one of you, and don’t be foolish enough to believe otherwise. What would your life have been if you had been nothing to anybody but a family pet?

‘No, we should have treated wards as children. How do you treat a child? You nurture a child. You teach a child about the world, how to act in the world, how to live in the world. You give him skills and an education and teach him how to make good choices because, one day, that child will be an adult. You get a dog to be a companion until the day you put it down. You have a child to raise to an adult who can make his own way through life, whatever way he should wish. That is where we went wrong. We should never have raised the age of emancipation to begin with. We should had prepared the children while they were still children.’

‘It’s a nice sentiment,’ said a member on his left, ‘but one can hardly turn back time to right the wrongs of the past. If you emancipated all wards of eighteen or older today, you’d have a right mess on your hands. Where would they work? How would they support themselves? Where would they live? The problem of homelessness has been solved, for better or worse, yes? But if—’

Mycroft conceded the point. ‘It would be a disaster. Obviously. Our job is to reinstate the Emancipation Provision, not overhaul the Ward Programme. But our vision must be long-term and
expansive. Give us ten years. Give us twenty, fifty. See what we can do for our people. But for now, let us do the best we can for the wards today.’

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In a high-rise flat in Canary Wharf, Sebastian Wilkes’ hand trembled as he pulled the breadknife through the soft white bap for his sandwich. On the counter beside his elbow was a half-drained bottle of whisky. Despite himself, he thought of Tiny, and the way his hand used to shake when he was nervous. Drove Wilkes crazy. *Just control the damn thing!* he’d shouted, many times, but the weak little prick just couldn’t seem to master himself. Now, his own fucking hand wouldn’t stop shaking, and the harder he tried to keep it still, the more violently it shook.

He felt like he was trapped in someone else’s life. *This* one couldn’t possibly be his. In the last six days, he had been arrested, extradited, and charged with crimes too revolting to put into words. He’d paid the bail money—he wasn’t about to spend even *one* night in jail!—and returned to his flat, though not before surrendering his passport. He wasn’t allowed to contact his alleged victim or the victim’s host, was forced to wear a GPS monitor on his ankle at all times, and was denied access to any of his bank accounts, which had been seized by the courts for the purposes of the investigation.

What was worse, he didn’t know what the hell was going on out there. Well, no, that wasn’t quite true. He knew a few things. He knew the Downside flat was being searched; they told him as much. And he knew Tiny was spilling his guts, the little rat. Therefore, the police now knew the truth about Wilkes’ arrangement with Magnussen, including the way Magnussen had tried to throw Wilkes under the bus. And that wasn’t the only thing that had come to light.

Sitting at the kitchen table in Wilkes’ own home just a few short hours before, the detective inspector had pulled a photograph from a folder and slid it across to him.

‘We got this from your phone,’ he said. ‘Care to explain?’

Wilkes had known this was coming. The second they confiscated his phone at the airport in Bangkok, he knew what they would find, and he had been imagining exactly what he would say to cover his own arse.

It was the photo Irene Adler had sent him to use as blackmail against Sherlock Holmes. He closed his eyes. If there was one thing that they had all agreed to from the start, it was that no one, under any threat, would divulge Irene’s involvement.

‘Mr Wilkes, you are facing counts of criminal exploitation of a warded person, operation of a Downside, endorsement of rape, criminal negligence, attempted murder, fraud, robbery, battery, and the list keeps growing. You’re going to prison, there’s no doubt about that. But if you’re cooperative, if you assist police in identifying the other players in this scheme, you *may* be offered at least a modicum of leniency. A nicer cell block, for instance. Maybe a pudding with your dinner. May not seem like much now, but believe me, Mr Wilkes, in a few months’ time, and ten years down the line, you’ll be grateful for it.’

He hated that photograph; he couldn’t even look at it. When Irene had first shown it to him, his whole body had flushed with embarrassment and disgust. A skinny little man in his underpants, blindfolded and ball-gagged, it was pathetic. But as the days rolled on and the more he had looked at it, the more he had found it amusing, even satisfying. So the ward had found “sanctuary” after all! From one sex den to another, haha! He had been surprised, too, that Holmes had finally exposed himself as a sexual being, and had degraded himself with a *ward*, of all things. Wilkes supposed he wasn’t the only one who had seen the value of the ward as a fuck toy, haha!
Now, however, as the detective showed it to him in blown-up, unflinching colour, he felt sick.

He couldn’t believe he was in this mess. Irene was supposed to have taken care of it, and now Charles Magnussen was in hot water, too? While she remained free as a bird, reaping the rewards of her unchallenged profession? Oh-ho, no. No. It wasn’t fair. He wasn’t going to take the fall and leave her free and clear. She had done him badly from the start, the very start. If she had only given him the money! Instead, she had made him a party to her business. The cheat. The bitch. Now he was awaiting trial. Now he was facing a lengthy prison sentence. His whole life was in shambles. And it was all because of her.

So he gave them what they wanted. ‘Adler,’ he had said, the last time he talked to the detective inspector. The last time he ever would. ‘Irene Adler. Gallery owner. She operates the largest Topside-Downside in the country. It was all her, from the start. She set me up with the ward, taught me how to get clients. I paid her a percentage for five years. When I lost him, she found him again and did that to him. I don’t know why. To frame Sherlock Holmes, I guess. To make it look like he was fucking his own ward. Irene Adler. I can give you her address.’

He was alone now, wondering idly what would become of her.

The knife slipped through the bap, and the serrated edge sliced through his index finger. He winced and held the finger up to his eyes. For a moment, nothing. Then a thin line of red. Then blood beading through the cut. Soon, it began to drip.

*Doesn’t hurt*, he thought. *Funny, that.*

***

They took a taxi back to Baker Street.

The day had been spent at New Scotland Yard, another round of interviews, if that was what you could call them. They wanted to know everything. For four days, John answered questions about the Downside. They grilled him, looking for holes in his story or contradictions, anything a barrister might use to discredit him or in some way invalidate Wilkes’ guilt, or Magnussen’s, or the host of others they had arrested in connection to the Downside.

But John was solid. Tireless. At least, during the interrogations he was imperturbable. He proved himself a reliable, credible witness, and they were all so pleased with him, Sherlock not the least. As his host, he was permitted to be in attendance during all questioning, which he conceded to only after John indicated that such was his preference. It wasn’t easy for anyone. The details that came out were hard for John to speak and for the others to hear, even Sherlock, who had heard a version of the tale already. But John was unspiring, and he spoke the truth of his sad experience with a straight back and hard jawline. Nevertheless, the effort exhausted him, and upon returning to Baker Street, he let the walls of his guard crumble and collapsed, sometimes curling up with Sherlock on the sofa, sometimes in private upon his own bed. Come morning, though, he arose with renewed conviction, ready to start again.

Today, however, they were separated, host from ward. The police had questions for Sherlock, too, and it all started with a photograph.

Sherlock divulged everything without batting an eye. But as the questioning went on, he realised that they weren’t so much interested in pinning him as a bad host with bad associations, but rather in gathering information on the largest Downside in London, one far more profitable than Wilkes’. So. Wilkes had squealed. Sherlock deduced that they had found the blackmail on Wilkes’ phone, and he knew for himself that Wilkes was a terrible liar when put under a hot lamp.
They asked Sherlock to elucidate on his unfavourable association with this elusive criminal: What did he know of Irene Adler and her operation? How did one discover her? How did one acquire her services, make contact, make payment? He didn’t have all the answers, but he knew enough. The gallery, he said, was her Topside, so that was where they should begin.

The day at Scotland Yard ended, and Sherlock and John were returning home. Once again, John was emotionally drained, and Sherlock alongside him, wondering all they had asked of John in his absence.

In the back of the taxi, John’s hands were trapped between his knees as he stared out of the window, deep in thought. From what Sherlock had gathered from the detectives as they were exiting the Yard, today they had asked about Pimlico (host number 16) and Ward Sport. How had he ended up there, they asked, so he told them about an illegal trade from host number 15 in Hammersmith, who operated a different Downside in counterfeits. And when they asked how he had ended up in Hammersmith, he mentioned yet another illegal trade from Battersea and yet another Downside at a recycling plant. They would have to go back further still. This wasn’t just an investigation of Charles Magnussen and his ilk; it was potentially a condemnation of the entire Ward Social Care Programme.

As they slowed in front of the flat, John pulled out of his melancholy and asked, ‘They really care about Downsides?’

Sherlock pulled out his wallet and dug out a card. ‘It would appear so.’ He swiped the card to pay for the ride. ‘They’re against the law but difficult to suss out. You’re helping them crack into the network, John.’

But John seemed troubled, and Sherlock suspected why. It was hard to believe the police cared about such things now, when they hadn’t seemed to give a damn before.

They climbed out of the taxi and onto the pavement, and that was when Sherlock noticed that the knocker on the door to 221 was hanging straight. Mycroft, who he’d not seen since before the train station, was here.

He turned to John. ‘My brother is waiting for us upstairs.’ He watched John’s eyes widen, flit to the first storey windows, and return to Sherlock’s. Sherlock shrugged. ‘We could always just carry on to the library.’ He left it in John’s hands what he wanted to do, though he was, himself, quite eager to talk to Mycroft and learn why he had come.

John thought. ‘Mr Holmes will know more than the library, I reckon,’ he said and started at once for the front door. Smirking, and not a little proud of John’s fearlessness, Sherlock followed.

To Sherlock’s amazement, Mycroft had prepared tea. Not with Mummy’s tea set, oh no, he still treated that as a holy relic, but with matching cups he had found in the cupboards. There was no telling quite how long he had been there, but long enough to get the fire going and to have finished the Sunday crosswords in three different papers. My, but he was keen.

‘I have news,’ he said, passing John a cuppa first. Sherlock and John had taken the sofa, and Mycroft had turned a chair to complete the circle.

‘I surmised as much,’ said Sherlock, for he had also eyed Mycroft’s briefcase, standing unceremoniously by a leg of the table. His brother was not one to carry a briefcase about casually. It disrupted the silhouette. ‘The nature of this news?’

‘Depends on your point of view. John, set that cup in its saucer a moment.’ With a sidelong glance at Sherlock, John obeyed, and set both upon the coffee table. ‘You heard, I take it, that Sebastian
Wilkes’ court date has been set.’

‘We’ve been preparing for it with the barristers. Don’t tell me it’s been moved back even further,’ grumbled Sherlock.

‘No need. It’s been cancelled.’ John stiffened beside him, and before Sherlock could curse or throw his own teacup across the room, he finished. ‘Wilkes is dead.’

John gasped. It was good he had set down his tea. ‘Dead!’

‘When?’ asked Sherlock. ‘How?’

‘Just yesterday. Wilkes placed a 999 call from his flat. When paramedics arrived, they found him on his kitchen floor. He had taken a bread knife to his left wrist.’

Sherlock was dumbfounded. ‘A suicide attempt? I wouldn’t think that of him. He’s too cowardly to do something like that.’

‘Too cowardly to face the courts, more like,’ Mycroft retorted. ‘To lose all his riches, to suffer public shaming, to be forever branded as a ward abuser of the vilest nature? Maybe it was a moment of madness that overcame his first instinct, to shrink from the prick of a blade. In the end, though, he didn’t have the stomach for it. He panicked when he saw what he had done to himself. Tried to stem the flow of blood with a tea towel, I’m told. But judging by the half-drunk bottle of whisky on the counter, he had little hope of that.’ For John, he joined the dots. ‘Alcohol is an anticoagulant. Thins the blood, makes it less likely to thicken and clot. So little good the tea towel did him. The knife was serrated and it went deep, opened up the radial artery, and he waited too late to call for help. He bled out quickly and was dead by the time they broke down the door.’

_The fool. The bloody moron_, thought Sherlock. He barely realised he was squeezing John’s knee until he saw Mycroft’s eyes travel there. He let go.

‘I thought you ought to know before word of it hits the papers. I can’t promise the story won’t be spun some other way.’

‘He shouldn’t have done it,’ John said softly. ‘It shouldn’t have been so . . . easy.’

Mycroft gave him an appraising look. ‘No. It shouldn’t have been. The universe is not often fair. You see, some men are too gutless to face themselves in a mirror. They go jelly-kneed at the prospect of losing their freedom. Clearly, Sebastian Wilkes lacked entirely in character and fortitude, two things you, John, have in abundance.’

John looked stunned, but whether because of Mycroft’s commendation or the news of Wilkes’ demise, Sherlock couldn’t deduce. Perhaps it was both.

‘Thank you for telling us,’ Sherlock murmured. ‘I thought you ought to know. And there’s something else. Irene Adler.’

Sherlock’s eyebrows rose. ‘They’ve arrested her.’

‘I’m afraid not.’ He sighed and shook his head. ‘She’s gone underground.’ Sherlock’s heart sank as Mycroft continued, ‘One shouldn’t be too surprised. After the hearing, and what with Wilkes’ arrest,
she knew which way the wind was blowing.’

‘And I take it the brilliant minds of Scotland Yard haven’t the first clue where she went,’ Sherlock bit.

‘No one even knows when she went,’ said Mycroft. ‘She slipped away before anyone even knew
she was involved. They’re looking for her, and what they’ve uncovered in that search . . . It’s
beyond words. The extent of her Downside, the number of wards, it’s staggering, and I am not a
man easily staggered.’ He cleared his throat, perhaps considering his audience. ‘They’ve issued an
arrest warrant for her, and law enforcement up and down the country are on the hunt. Alerts have
been placed at every checkpoint, train station, and airport. It’s only a matter of time before she’s
cought.’

‘Unless she goes the way of Sebastian Wilkes,’ Sherlock murmured bitterly.

Mycroft sniffed and shook his head. ‘Let us not think on it, for now. Neither Wilkes nor Adler are
the purpose of my coming.’ He reached for his briefcase at last, and from its interior pulled a binder.
‘This week, the Emancipation Commission finally agreed on a course of reinstatement, procedure,
and execution of ward emancipation.’

John suddenly sat straighter. This time, it was his hand that fell atop Sherlock’s, where it rested
between them. Mycroft’s eyes flitted there, but again, he said nothing, and John didn’t remove it.

‘You’re serious?’ said Sherlock.

‘Official reinstatement rolls out in six months,’ said Mycroft, ‘but the ball starts rolling next week. On
Monday, we publicly announce that the Emancipation Programme will recommence, and in thirty
days we will make available the list of qualification requirements. Potential candidates can then begin
preparing their applications. Now, I won’t lie to you, John. The assessment process is rigorous. But it
is designed to ensure preparedness for independence with minimal chance of backsliding into the
Ward Programme.’

‘What do I have to do?’ John asked, nearly breathless with anticipation.

‘First, you need to understand some of the problems with the old programme, problems we had to
address and correct. Before, for instance, wards were assessed as prepared for independence based
on a two-pronged qualification: health and intelligence. But evaluators completely ignored two other
crucial factors in a successful independent: competency skills and social support. The new
programme accounts for both.’

‘What does that all mean?’ asked Sherlock.

‘I’ll leave you with a copy of the plan, but in a nutshell, the emancipation process happens in three
stages. In the first, you submit an application packet. The packet includes three important documents:
one, test scores to ensure a basic education, equivalent to the GCSEs.’

‘Tests?’ said John, his tone tinged with doubt.

‘Yes, to assess your basic knowledge in five categories: English linguistics, mathematics, history, a
natural science of your choice, and one humanities subject, also your choice. This is to ensure that
wards leaving the care of the state are on par with their fellow citizens and able to function in
common social, cultural, and workplace environments.’

John was worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.
‘The second part of the initial application npacket includes letters of support from three sponsors to vouch for the ward, one of which must agree to act as the ward’s primary sponsor, which is an advisory and supportive role. The three sponsors must reside in the district of registration, and they serve to assure the state that the ward is not only a candidate for independence but one who will have a community to which he will belong once emancipated.’ Sherlock opened his mouth and drew in a breath, but Mycroft anticipated him and said, ‘The host, who cannot serve as one of these three, must initiate the entire proceeding by writing a letter and completing paperwork giving his permission for the ward to apply, thereby recommending him for emancipation.’

‘Permission?’ Sherlock balked. ‘This all seems rather dicey. What if this new-and-improved programme had been rolled out while he was still warded to the likes of Wilkes? Wards with hosts like Wilkes won’t stand a chance!’

‘A supportive host, we believe, is critical to a successful transition. Those wards who have, let’s just say it, abusive or oppressive hosts must apply for asylum, not emancipation,’ said Mycroft. ‘If we’re being honest, wards in that situation are not likely prepared for emancipation yet.’

‘How many of those wards would even know how to claim asylum?’

‘It’s a broken system, I’m not saying it’s not. But asylum is a different department, and in need of its own reform. Currently, that’s not my purview.’

‘I still don’t like it.’

‘You’d like it a whole lot less if some of those serving on my committee had their way about it. This programme is a compromise. It’s a lot of compromises. The fact that it is happening at all is something of a miracle, Sherlock. And some of the solutions are messy because the problem itself is messy. We’ve created and corrupted a system that cannot be dismantled overnight. It cannot be done away with in a year, or ten years. Your John’—he gestured widely with a long arm—‘does not deserve all he has gone through, and deserves his freedom same as any man. But what would have happened to you’—now he looked at John directly—‘if you had been emancipated a year ago? Put out of your host’s home and onto the streets?’

John frowned, turned to look at Sherlock, then addressed Mycroft. ‘I don’t know where I would have gone.’

‘And if Sherlock put you out tonight? Say you’re granted your independence this very hour. Where would you go?’

Contemplative, disturbed, John asked humbly, ‘Would I have to go?’

With pity in his eyes and a long-suffering sigh, Mycroft said, ‘That’s what it means, John, to be your own man. That’s what the Emancipation Programme is designed to ensure. Which is why the third part of the initial application is proof of hire. A job offer. Like anyone, an emancipated ward must make his way in the world.’

Sherlock scrubbed a hand down his face. These were simple things, really. Basic living. So why did they seem so overwhelming?

‘The programme doesn’t expect wards to be able to stand on their own two feet all at once. That’s why the initial application is only the first stage. Once approved, applicants may move onto the second stage: a probationary period, lasting a period no less than six months and no more than eighteen.’
‘What is probationary?’ John asked quietly, like he was embarrassed to admit he did not know the word.

‘It’s a time to help the ward transition into full independence. During this period, the ward must move out of his host’s home and establish residence on his own. But this is London, after all, so flatshares are of course expected. Only two stipulations apply here: the first is that two probationary wards may not occupy the same flatshare, and the second states that the new residence must be at least half a mile from the host’s flat, to discourage dependency, but within the district of registration to ensure community. Because during the probationary period the ward is still technically a ward, the host must be a co-signer on the lease, and during the first three months, the host may contribute to the ward’s sustenance: rent, utilities, food. Additionally, the government stipend money will increase by fifty percent and go directly into the ward’s new, individually managed bank account, not to the host. As the ward works and earns and manages his own money, the government stipend decreases and disappears after six months.

‘This probationary period is also a learning period. Wards learn basic competency skills: how to work, how to save, how to spend, how to cook, how to clean, how to look after his new property, how to be responsible for himself and respectful of others. The ward acquires new skills, makes new connections, and makes mistakes without dire consequences, that he might learn not to make them again in future. And when he is ready, before his probationary time expires, he can apply to the third stage: final assessment.

‘In this stage, the Commission for Emancipation evaluates the ward’s suitability for independence. It includes a review of the ward’s finances and monetary behaviour; a home-evaluation; interviews with the ward’s employer, landlord, and sponsors; a thorough medical assessment; psychological review; and a final interview with the ward himself.’

‘How the hell will the state pay for all the staff it will need to conduct these evaluations?’ Sherlock murmured, but Mycroft ignored him.

‘Once the board is satisfied . . . Well. That’s it. The ward is granted independent status as a free citizen of New Britain. He can live as all free people live. He can vote, marry, procreate, emigrate, work, pay taxes, attend university . . . everything but host a ward himself. The bottom line is, the state no longer has any say at all in how he chooses to live his life.’

John nodded slowly. ‘And if . . .’ He swallowed. ‘If the ward fails one of the tests? If he doesn’t pass one of the assessments?’

Mycroft shook his head somberly. ‘A ward is allowed two attempts,’ he said, ‘after reaching the age of twenty-one, and before reaching forty.’

‘Forty!’ Sherlock recoiled.

‘I would not have put such a restriction on it myself,’ said Mycroft, ‘but like I said. Compromises.’

‘Forty?’ John echoed, daunted. For him, that was sixteen months away.

‘Mycroft, be reasonable,’ said Sherlock, pleading. He was working through calendars in his head. What if John needed a longer probationary period? Would he not be granted a full eighteen months simply because his birthday fell too early? And if the programme didn’t even begin for another six months, why, that gave him only ten month’s probationary time! And that was assuming John was even ready to make his initial application within six months from today. It was fitfully unfair. This couldn’t be his only shot at it, it couldn’t.
‘We are working in unreasonable circumstances, I’m afraid. But,’ Mycroft rejoined, ‘I have every confidence in our John here. He is intelligent, determined, resourceful, not to mention, as I have before, a man of character and fortitude. In six months, you can be among the first to make your application. Six months is more than ample time for a clever man, such as yourself, to make ready.’

Sherlock was reeling. Mathematics, English linguistics, history . . . There was so much still to teach him.

‘But no harm in getting a bit of a head start, eh?’ Mycroft set the binder on the coffee table. ‘Like I said, it’s an unofficial draft of what will be made available within the month. Think of it as an advance copy. John, Sherlock will be here to guide you and prepare you, but it will come down to you in the end.’

John dragged the binder to face himself. He licked his lips nervously and opened the front cover to the title beneath: Process for Warded Persons Desiring Emancipation from the CFCA Ward Care Programme – Initial Application, Probationary Period, and Final Assessment. ‘It’s a lot,’ he said under his breath, as though he were talking only to himself.

‘I have every confidence in you,’ said Mycroft simply. And without further pats on the head or another bolstering word, he stood and closed the top button of his suitcoat.

Sherlock stood, too. ‘Thank you for gracing us with your presence, Lord Holmes.’

Mycroft sneered. ‘None of that.’ He nodded at the binder. ‘You two have some homework to do. Best get to it, then, John. Sherlock, see me out?’

It was an unusual and unnecessary request. In any normal circumstance, Sherlock would have recoiled or scoffed, but he had a grown a little wiser and understood that Mycroft had somewhat more to say, and whatever it was, it was not for John’s ears. And so, drawing no attention to the oddity of the custom never practised by the Holmes brothers, Sherlock arose and led Mycroft out the door.

‘Let us not kid ourselves,’ said Mycroft, pulling his winter coat and scarf off the rack by the front door. He spoke conversationally, though softly, lest John somehow overhear. ‘This is still an uphill battle. He has a long, difficult road ahead of him. To his benefit, however, he has public support on his side.’ He shrugged his shoulders into the coat, and his body stilled to capture Sherlock with a hard eye. ‘Do nothing to compromise it.’

Sherlock balked. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Mycroft only raised an incredulous eyebrow, then proceeded to tie his scarf.

But Sherlock’s hackles of defence had begun to rise. ‘I don’t know what you’re implying, but I would never do a thing to compromise his chances. I only want him to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for him.’

‘Then think carefully, brother mine,’ Mycroft continued mildly. ‘As I said, the public is on his side. For now. Sympathetic outrage can be fleeting, but for now, you have allies. Nevertheless, do not presume the same can be said of those still holding power. They are embarrassed. One of their own was just implicated in the scandal of the century, and when people in power get embarrassed, they become dangerous. Don’t think they won’t do whatever they must to deflect that negative attention elsewhere. Right now, John is a hero. A ward hero, and who ever heard of such a thing? He has made them look bad. So they will take any chance they can get to sully him again in the eyes of the public. So you.’ He stabbed at the top of Sherlock’s foot with his umbrella. ‘Behave.’
When Sherlock returned to the sitting room, he found it empty. As was the kitchen, the bathroom. Quiet and sombre, John had retreated to his bedroom, leaving the binder containing the path to his freedom behind on the coffee table, unread.

There were times, Sherlock now knew, when it was best to give John time and space to sort things out on his own. This time, however, he knew that John shouldn’t be left to retreat into the darker corners of his own mind. He was discouraged. Sherlock had seen it on his face, which grew dimmer and dimmer with each passing minute of Mycroft’s visit. For John, for all he had been through, discouragement had the potential to become a poison if not expelled. So Sherlock didn’t hesitate this time. He continued his ascent up the stairs.

Lightly, he knocked. ‘May I come in?’

When he entered, John was sitting placidly on the side of his bed, facing the painting of Dover. He didn’t look distraught or anything of the sort, not like Sherlock had seen him before; but he knew John well enough now, knew every shade of his mind and his mood and his heart, that he could see beyond the carefully maintained mask of composure to know that he was greatly troubled by the things he had heard.

He softly entered the room and crossed to the bed, where he took a seat beside John. He almost followed through with an impulse to rest his hand on John’s knee. But Mycroft’s words were a worm still burrowing into his ear canal, irritating him, but arresting his hand all the same.

Instead, his consolation was verbal. ‘It’s a lot,’ he echoed, confirming John’s reaction to the binder.

John nodded sullenly.

Sherlock glanced at John’s nightstand, then indicated with a nod and waited until John followed his eyes. ‘It’s like that book.’


‘Any book. That book is made up of hundreds of pages of thousands of words of millions of tiny little ink letters, all working together to tell a story. If I had put that book in your hands a year ago, what would you have done with it?’

‘Panicked,’ said John without missing a beat, and his lips quirked upward, beginning to understand what Sherlock was saying.

‘You didn’t have the tools yet, did you? First, you needed to learn the alphabet—how each letter sounded, what each letter looked like—and that was no small feat in itself. Then, to put the letters together to form words, and to string words into sentences that make sense? John, a year ago, that was impossible, and look at how far you’ve come! You’re reading Dumas!’

‘Slowly.’

‘But you’re doing it. And it’s easier now than it was, right? It doesn’t take nearly as much concentration and effort to read a word or a sentence and understand it, right?’

‘Yeah.’ He seemed little impressed with himself.

Sherlock pressed on. ‘I don’t say this often—you may never hear me say it again—but Mycroft was right. You’ve got exactly what it will take. This road to emancipation is in no way beyond you. Not
one bit of it. We’ll find you sponsors, no problem, and a good flat, and a good job, all in good time. One step, then another, yeah? And as for the exams, pff.’ He threw a hand, diminishing the importance of them altogether. ‘Easy. You’re so smart, John. I’ll study with you. I’ll be there, every step of the way, until—’

‘Sherlock,’ John whispered, but it was enough to cut him off. John had closed his eyes, steeling himself.

‘Yes?’

‘If I’m made free’—he swallowed hard, but his voice was still strangled—‘does that mean . . . we’re not family anymore?’

_Oh._ Oh John.

‘Not. At. All,’ Sherlock answered firmly.

‘But I will have to leave Baker Street.’ With the palm of his hand, he smeared the tears leaking from his eyes across his cheek.

No longer staying himself, Sherlock exhaled slowly and put an arm around John’s shoulders. He remembered the day John had broken the antique teacup, when he had believed the accident meant he would be sent away and was overcome by terror at the thought. Sometimes, late at night, when Sherlock was cloistered in the walls of his mind palace, he could still hear John’s choked disbelief: _You mean I can stay?_ Sherlock had promised yes, always. Always.

‘I don’t know if I can pass the tests,’ John continued. ‘But if I do, I don’t know if I can make it. Out there. Alone. I . . . I don’t know if I want to.’

His head bowed. His hand lifted to cover his mouth, and his eyes squeezed shut. Sherlock’s heart broke for him. Suddenly, emancipation seemed a cruelty. Don’t apply, and be forever trapped in the system. Apply and pass, and be forced away from the only place you had ever been able to call home.

‘I don’t want to leave!’ John whispered fiercely.

Sherlock squeezed John close to his side and rubbed his arm, hoping to comfort him.

John’s hands fell into his lap with sudden exasperation. ‘Why must it always be so hard!’

‘Oh John, my dear, dear John,’ said Sherlock, stroking his head. John huffed his anger but leant into Sherlock. ‘It’s not fair. They did this to wards, we _all_ did this to wards, and now it’s up to wards to fix themselves? It’s not right at all.’

‘None of it. None of it. And even Mr Wilkes—he got away with it! Really, he did.’

‘Despicable man . . .’

‘He shouldn’t’ve got away with it, sir.’

‘No. He shouldn’t have. Do you . . . do you want to talk about . . . _it_? How he killed himself?’

John shook his head. His teeth clenched together as he said quietly but severely, ‘I just hope it hurt.’ He turned his head away. ‘I’m sorry for thinking that.’

‘Don’t be. I’m not. I hope it hurt a lot. I hope he was afraid.’
‘And I hope he thought about me,’ John said, almost a whisper. ‘As he was dying, I hope he remembered me, that I survived, and he would not.’ He looked up at Sherlock with wide, wondrous eyes. ‘He shot me, sir. He tried to kill me. I survived a bullet, and he died from a small cut?’

‘You survived a lot more than that,’ said Sherlock. ‘You may not be able to see it in yourself yet, but you’re strong, John. Mycroft saw it, the magistrate saw it, hell, all of London has seen that by now. And you know who else saw it? Wilkes. And Magnussen. And it scared the hell out of them. It scared them so bad they tried to silence you for good, and they couldn’t. No one can stop you. The biggest and baddest of them have tried and failed, and you are the one left standing.’

There was a loud silence. Then John asked, ‘Alone?’

Sherlock moved his hand to the back of John’s neck and rested it there. ‘You know the great thing about being free, John? Free people live where they want to live. They love whom they want to love. They love how they want to love. This—you and me—we are family, and no stuffy bureaucrat in a thousand-pound three-piece suit can take that away from us.’

‘But Mr Holmes said—’

‘Mycroft said probationary. Remember? That means temporary. Once you’re free, they can’t tell you what to do anymore!’

Not yet convinced, John continued, ‘And the Colonel? They told him he wasn’t to have stayed on with his old host. He got in trouble when they found out.’

‘Two things. One: Magnussen got into trouble for that one. And two: Mr Moran was on the old system. My brother is making a new one. And did you hear what he said at the last? Emancipated wards could not host. That’s it. That’s the only restriction. Other than that, the state has no more power over you than it does me, and I live wherever I damn well please.’

John grinned appreciatively through his tears, hopeful that the words he was hearing were true.

Sherlock decided to try for a bit of levity. ‘You may find, of course, that you quite like living independently, away from this dodgy old flat.’

The grin vanished. ‘Oh no, sir. Sherlock, I mean.’ He still slipped, on occasion. ‘That is, I can live quite independently right here.’ A small smile returned to his face. ‘You and me can be flatmates.’

Laughing out loud, Sherlock declared, ‘I should like that!’

John’s face was uplifted again, glowing, until a final thought occurred to him. ‘Except . . .’

‘Except what?’

‘Except . . . what about your next ward?’

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Mycroft did not embarrass easily, but he was embarrassed to be called Lord Holmes, especially by Sherlock, the nitwit. From him, it was nothing less than a dig from one who had never had any respect for authority to begin with. Nonetheless, the title came with the job, and though his was technically an interim role (as he reiterated to everyone from the media to his only living relative, in actuality), he secretly had every intention of keeping it. He had great work to do, and he could trust it to no other. Reinstalling the emancipation was only step one.
But it was supposed to have been the easiest of steps. The emancipation provision should have been uncontroversial, a bipartisan reinstallation. Instead, he had faced almost unanimous resistance. None wanted to rock the boat. No, it was worse than that. None saw the true nature of the problem. None believed that, at its core, the Ward Programme was a catastrophe. They all wore blinders, and Mycroft had yet to ascertain the best way to rip them free. What would possibly convince them that the whole system had to be dismantled?

He took the Tube back to his flat. It was not common for him to ride the Tube, but he had not taken the car to visit his brother. Though his driver was discreet, they were new to each other, and Mycroft didn’t entirely trust him. He didn’t want the trip to be logged, and he didn’t want Davenport to wonder why not. So public transport it had to be. He was annoyed by the slowness of travelling via the Underground but was unbothered by the crowds, despite how they jostled him all the way down the escalators and into the carriage. Crowds were wonderful generators of anonymity, and that’s what he needed more than anything. He doffed a flat cap (quite unlike him) and otherwise looked like any ordinary commuter, for while his name had been in every paper since his ascension, his photograph had not, and so he had no fear of being recognised as a prominent government figure doing something as pedestrian as taking public transport.

While riding, he occupied himself with a game of remapping the London Underground in his head so that it ran more efficiently. Perhaps if he had not been pressed with far more important matters, he might have pursued becoming Minister for Transport instead.

On his next visit, perhaps—if they were not opposed—Sherlock and John would be up for a game of Diplomacy, he mused idly.

When he arrived home, quite to his astonishment, the feeling of embarrassment returned, for as he moved to take off his coat, he felt the stiffness of paper in an inner pocket of his jacket, and he knew for certain that he had placed nothing there. Slowly, he reached inside and withdrew a sealed envelope.

His mind raced. First, he suspected Sherlock. Of course he did. This was precisely the kind of thing Sherlock would pull, somehow. But the scrawled Lord Holmes in tiny black ink across the seal of the envelope was not in Sherlock’s hand. He dismissed the hypothesis at once, reviewed the facts, and realised: someone had slipped it into his pocket in the Underground.

This meant three things.

One: He had been followed.

Two: He was less observant than he credited himself to be. Thus, the embarrassment.

And three: He was never taking the Tube again.

Despite himself, his heart began to race a little as he moved toward the kitchen with the envelope in hand, determined to neither overreact nor underplay the situation. He pulled a knife from a draw, and without removing his gloves, carefully slid the blade across the crease to open it. He shook out the inner page, which was folded thrice.

Setting aside the knife, and with two hands now, he spread the page flat on the countertop and read:

Abolition, not emancipation. STORAGE is the key.

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‘I want to tell you a story,’ Mrs Hudson said.
Dinner was over, glasses drained and plates cleared of food, but no one moved to leave or do the washing up. At the head of the table, Mrs Hudson had rested her elbows on the table and interlocked her fingers. She looked at neither of them, but at a distant spot ahead, as if seeing something visible only to her.

‘When I was little, just a spot of a girl, my older sister Mona gave me her doll. She had outgrown it, you see, and Hannah had her own dollies to play with. So she gave it to me. It was made of tea-stained cloth and wore a gingham dress. It had hair made of corn-yellow yarn and eyes of glass. I named her Ruby.

‘I loved that little doll. I was just a wee thing, you understand, but I took it everywhere with me. I called it my baby. But as I grew older, just a little older, and began to understand the way of the world and my place in it, I stopped thinking of Ruby as my baby, even for games of make believe. She wasn’t mine. Not really. She had been Mona’s, and I hadn’t forgotten that. So I started calling Ruby my ward. She was like me, you see. I wasn’t really Mum and Dad’s, not the way Mona and Hanna were. I was like that doll. And when I started thinking of myself as host and Ruby as ward, I started to love her less and less until, one day, I decided I hated my little Ruby and stuffed her under the bed so I wouldn’t have to see her anymore.

‘When I was eight, I saw the movie Pinocchio for the very first time. Britain had missed out on a lot of American films during the Occupation, and it was ten years after the Surge before some of them were released in New Britain. I remember lining up outside the cinema, standing in the rain, waiting for our turn to see it. I was enchanted. For weeks after, I wished on stars and prayed to the Blue Fairy, because I believed that if she could make a wooden puppet into a real boy, she could make me into a real girl. Not just Mum and Dad’s ward, but their daughter, their own blood daughter. Because that was what family was, I thought. They couldn’t really love me if I wasn’t their own. I needed to become one of them. But . . . what I can say? It’s a hard truth for all children, but for little ward children most of all, to learn that fairy tales are not real.

‘In 1993, I was emancipated. Mr Sissons, my host father, helped me pack up the room I had lived in for thirty-five years. Little had changed in all those years, and even now, when I close my eyes, I can see it: the windows were dressed with the same lace curtains, my bed was covered with the same pink-and-blue quilt. Some of my stuffed animals from childhood were still on the shelves. And from under the bed, I found the old cloth doll. Ruby. Moth-eaten and covered in dust, the old stitching loose and the cotton flattened in her arms and legs. I remembered what she had once meant to me, so I decided to keep her. Fix her up. Maybe even . . . give her to my own child, someday. I was getting on in years, but emancipation meant freedom of all sorts. I couldn’t host, but I could fall in love and marry and have children of my own. It was time to put away the bitterness and begin a life! I dusted her off and put her in my holdall.

‘I held her at night, sometimes, when I was so lonely and afraid and had no one else to turn to and cried myself to sleep. I may have been grown, but so much about me was still a child. I had to grow up fast, just to survive. In time, Frank came along, and he took me to Florida, and, well, you know all that. You both know it.

‘I had thought, in the beginning, that he and I would make a family. I would be a mother with a son or daughter of my own, and we’d be a proper family, exactly what I had always dreamed of. But life with Frank was a nightmare. Looking back, I believe it was a blessing we never did have children. Still, I can’t deny the pain of knowing that the thing you want so desperately is never to be yours.

‘When he was arrested and I was free, a new kind of free, I returned to New Britain, but I was the loneliest I’d ever been. Sometimes I would visit Hannah or Mona, sometimes the Sissons, whose health was poorly, but I couldn’t return to them, and I didn’t want them to know how badly I was
hurting. I put on a brave face, all the while hiding the frightened little girl inside. But I had money now. I bought these flats on Baker Street and became a landlady, and it wasn’t long before the same young detective who had saved me in Florida came looking for a flat in the city.’

Mrs Hudson smiled at him fondly, then reached for his face to stroke a cheek.

‘By then, I was already an old lady, but you seemed so young. You had just lost your parents in the terrible explosion at Millennium Bridge, and I could see you were hurting, as much as you tried not to show it. I hurt for you. I wanted to help. But I didn’t know how. So I tried to ease your way by doing those things I knew I could do. I cooked. I cleaned. I brought you tea. Slowly, you began to open up to me, and over time, I grew so fond of you. I came to think of you as, well, something like family.’

Sherlock nodded sombrely. ‘It’s what you became.’

‘Then John came into my life.’ She reached for John now, her hand finding his on the table and holding it. ‘And I found someone else who was hurting, someone else who needed to be loved.’ She smiled. ‘I loved you from the moment I saw you, John.’

He tried to smile back, but he was fighting a quivering lip.

‘We wards . . .’ she said, but stopped, as though she weren’t sure how to say what was in her heart. ‘The lives we lead . . . the pain we carry . . . It leaves scars. All our lives. It’s something you can’t understand unless . . . unless you’ve walked the lonely, loveless roads we have walked. But love is a curious thing. It has real power. All my life, I wanted a family of my own, and I so long believed there was only one way to make a family. I was wrong. Because here I sit, in my own home, with my boys on either side of me, as real as anything. I love them. I feel I couldn’t love you more if you were my very own sons. And that love . . . it heals me. The pain has become a memory. It has not been easy, and the road has been far too long. But here I am with my family, and I am whole.’

She turned again to John, squeezing his hand firmly.

‘My dear John,’ she said. ‘No matter what happens, no matter if the sky falls or the seas run dry, you have a family. You are loved. You are loved.’

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Later that evening, Sherlock saw her back to her flat and kissed her goodnight. Then he embraced her. He meant to thank her for all she had done for John, for all that she meant to him, but unlike her, he didn’t have the words. He held her tight and hoped she understood.

He returned to the flat, and with each step up the stairs, he drew nearer and nearer a violin sighing. His violin. Not long ago, John had asked Sherlock to play the piece he had composed for him, John’s song. Sherlock did him one better and recorded it so he could listen to it whenever he pleased. He was listening to it now.

When he entered the sitting room, he found John in his armchair, eyes closed but hand dancing a three-quarter rhythm, floating on the music’s breeze. For a while, Sherlock just watched, and he imagined that the song was becoming part of John, that his heart beat the same beat, that his skin hummed the same melody, that his bones were composed of the same themes.

Sherlock crossed the room and stood before him. He said not a word, just let John feel him there. Eventually, John opened his eyes and lifted his face, eyes aglow with wonder, with inquiry. Sherlock extended a hand in invitation. It had been a while. Not since before John had been taken. But John,
understanding, smiled, set his hand in Sherlock’s, and was lifted to his feet.

They stepped close to one another. But what started out as a dancing pose—John’s hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, Sherlock’s arm around his back—transformed into something dearer, more like an embrace. Their feet rocked back and forth in rhythm, even as Sherlock pressed his cheek to John’s. He felt John’s breath when a contented sigh breezed across his ear, felt him lean more dependently into him so that their hearts were beating as one. Now John’s arms were around his neck. Now Sherlock’s arms were holding him tightly. In perfect union, they danced together, a dance that was more than a dance because their love was more than love.

It was only when the music ended and the flat faded into quiet that Sherlock heard it. John. Speaking words almost too softly to be heard. Like the soft susurrations of a distant waves upon a short: a chant or a hymn, an affirmation or a promise, just three words, over and over, as true as the sun rising in the East, as sincere as a prayer, as steady as three-quarter time.

‘I am loved. I am loved. I am loved.’

End of Book 1

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