The Ravelled Edges

by Nagaem_C

Summary

Following the events of the TDK case, John and Sherlock have returned home from Chicago. They carry between them a newly begun romantic relationship, blossoming within a friendship familiar as breathing...although that friendship has been buffeted, in recent years, by secrecy and silence.

Greg has come home, as well, trusting that the strength of his love for Anna Clark will easily bridge the ocean between their homes, and eventually bring her back to him in London. Once she returns to join Greg and their friends, he's confident that he'll be able to win her over and cement their relationship.

But nothing is ever simple, exactly, where these four are concerned...

Notes

This story picks up a few weeks after A Thread to Hold, and will move forward from there - in largish jumps, at first - until things start to really get rolling. Chapters will successively alternate POV through the four main characters: John, Greg, Sherlock, Anna.
John stood before a picture window in a large, lavish and unfamiliar house, waiting patiently for Sherlock to finish his detailed sweep of the victim's parlour and summon him along to another room. The weather was grey and drizzling, the sort that always drew him to introspection, and today he found himself with much to think on.

It had been four weeks since Chicago. Four weeks. Four hazy, happy, confusing, long, and incredibly awkward weeks.

After the night-long flight back from the States, and then the interminable early morning cab ride from the airport to 221B, they'd been in a pathetic state: John sore and cranky, and Sherlock dreadfully overtired after his refusal to rest on the plane. Mrs Hudson had taken one look at the pair of them and tutted, chivvying them both in the door and up the stairs with a continuous stream of rhetorical questions and worried exclamations. If there had been any overt signals of the change in their status, that day, she would've been perfectly within her rights to overlook them; after all, what were a few meaningful glances between close friends?

They'd both been out of commission for nearly forty-eight hours after their return. Mrs Hudson had tottered up once with a casserole John could heat for supper, and again the next morning with a little bit of milk to tide them over; but he hadn't actually spoken to her about anything of consequence until mid-week, when he'd remembered to fish the much-abused purple scarf from the bottom of his laptop satchel. He'd made an attempt at that point—albeit a pitifully inadequate one—to explain the state of affairs between him and Sherlock; but amidst her renewed fussing over Anna's misfortune, he hadn't been sure the message had gotten across. Eventually, not being one for emotional overstatement, John had simply let the matter drop, resolving to stop worrying about it: she'll catch on eventually, he'd told himself. Surely it'll be obvious to her, soon enough?

John had remained on the crutch for four full days, hobbling about the flat periodically and grumbling about his bruised ribs. On the morning of the third day Sherlock had gone off to do the shopping, carrying a list that had been carefully negotiated: the milk, bread and other hotly contested necessities, written on scrap paper in a shaky hand. (Shaky because Sherlock had insisted John write the items down, but refused to get up from his new favourite lounging position to allow it. As it turned out, Sherlock's shins were ticklishly sensitive to the pressure of the pen.)

Late that morning, John had been balanced on his good foot, his crutch propped against the kitchen worktop, when he had become suddenly aware of a presence behind him. He'd splashed the last of Mrs Hudson's milk to the left of his mug, gasping.
"Doctor Watson. A fine morning, is it not?"

"Jesus," John had panted, spinning in an awkward grab for a towel, "Jesus. Mycroft, you startled me."

"Apparently so," the man had said, smirking and scraping the tip of his umbrella in a tiny, precise figure eight on the floor. "Apologies; my stealth was quite unintentional, I assure you. At any rate, I've merely come to offer you my congratulations. It's so much nicer, isn't it, when one can express felicitations in person?"

"Congrat—? Oh. Er. Sorry, how...?"

"Come now, Doctor Watson. It is my business to know such things, especially when the knowledge in question concerns the well-being of my brother." Mycroft had stepped forward, then, and graciously picked up John's tea from the worktop, allowing John to manage his limping return to the sofa unhindered. "Besides, surely you didn't truly believe your new attachment would remain a secret? Your body language in the baggage claims made the situation blatantly obvious."

John had gaped up at him, mortified, as he'd settled himself gingerly onto the sofa and reclaimed his mug. "You're telling me—ta—you had us watched at the airport?"

He'd waved a dismissive hand, turning it to study his immaculate fingernails as he'd stepped backwards into the centre of the room. "As it so happens, we were surveilling that terminal to watch for a certain traveller of diplomatic importance. But that's none of your concern. No, John, I simply wanted to give you my very best wishes. Although, I must confess a measure of curiosity; after all this time, such a definitive change seems quite sudden. I wonder whether the minor injuries you've sustained weren't the only precipitating factor?"

At that moment, the downstairs door had crashed open loudly and Sherlock's resonant voice had preceded him up the stairs. "Tesco's at eleven thirty in the morning is an appalling crush of humanity. You should have warned me to wait, John, it would—Mycroft?"

"Greetings, brother."

Sherlock had looked their visitor up and down, and his expression had immediately soured. "I suppose a little privacy is more than I could reasonably expect to be granted? Go away," he'd snapped, storming through to the kitchen and hastily stuffing bags into the fridge.

Mycroft had only let a freshly smug smile slither across his face. "You know what will be expected of you now, Sherlock."

"Really, Mycroft. It's been barely two weeks!" He'd swept past the man, wordlessly handing a chocolate biscuit down to John. Then he'd sat down right in the centre of the sofa, the full length of his left leg warm against John's right, and had thrown a challenging look up at the elder Holmes as if it had been an utterly natural action. It most definitely had not.

"Don't think you can escape your obligation," his brother had sniffed. "It's been far too long; and now, your changed circumstances demand it be done, as you are well aware. I shall endeavour to smooth the waters, for your sake, though you are hardly deserving of it. But do not delay too long, little brother." Levelling a stern look down his nose at Sherlock, he'd turned to leave, pausing at the door only long enough to murmur politely over one shoulder, "Good day, John."

"What the hell was all that about?" John had asked, brushing crumbs of the unexpected biscuit from his shirt. "What obligation?"
"It's nothing. And I don't want to talk about it, it's not important," Sherlock had replied brusquely. With that, he'd crossed his arms and thrown himself into a sullen sulk that had lasted for hours, although he hadn't shifted from the spot he'd chosen at John's side.

A flurry of motion reflected in the window glass brought John's attention suddenly away from his memories, and he turned to look.

"The killer was an unexpected visitor, but was known to the victim," Sherlock began, striding energetically from the other end of the lavish parlour. He directed his next statement to John's left, addressing a new arrival. "You're looking for a woman, no taller than one hundred sixty centimetres, with a penchant for clove cigarettes. She either lives or works in a place with three dogs, one of which is a Lhasa Apso, and she will have recently attended a culinary school course on knife work."

The recipient of this rapid-fire stream of deductions tossed her curly head and snorted in disbelief. "And just how do you get a culinary course out of this bloody mess? Ridiculous! You're reaching, Freak. You're still trying to see just how far you can pull the wool over our eyes, aren't you!"

John noticed his left hand clenching, and made a conscious effort to release it.

"Sally, Sally. As always, your incredible cynicism blinds you to the obvious." Sherlock was calm and collected, looking down on her with impassive eyes as he stepped closer.

"What's obvious is that you and your pet doctor shouldn't be permitted to crawl all over these crime scenes! Mark my words, Freak, you won't have the run of this city forever."

He's so calm, thought John, like nothing she says upsets him at all. He held himself perfectly still at Sherlock's side, drawing a silent, slow breath and visualising the clean air filling him to his toes. If Sherlock wasn't upset, there was no reason to take this needling seriously. They'd had as much and worse from Donovan before, so why did John feel so on edge?

Sherlock didn't so much as glance his way, although John was hyper-aware of the man's fractional smile as he shifted his weight slightly forward. "I rather think I've proven myself valuable. If nothing else, I've saved the Met from countless embarrassments due to poor training, prejudicial bias, and lack of basic observational skills—and you'd know about at least two of those, wouldn't you?"

Standing frozen between Sergeant Donovan and his partner, balanced on the knife edge between stillness and shouting, John found a sudden realisation ringing a clear peal in his head. She doesn't know about us. And he's clearly not volunteered it. Does he mean it to be a secret? Sherlock was holding himself poised and angled away from John in a way that sent two clear and separate messages: to Sally it said "don't notice him, eyes on me", and to John it said "don't get involved." John gritted his teeth and watched, forcing himself to obey the unspoken request.

"Don't you worry," Sally said next, tilting her head and baring her teeth in a hard smile. "You'll step a foot wrong sooner or later, and the Chief Superintendent will finally start asking the right questions again. Getting rid of the psychopath and his live-in? Trust me, it won't be a hard sell the second time 'round!"
No; the calming techniques weren't working. John could feel heat rising at the back of his neck, and fingernails prickling into his palms. Neither of the other two appeared to be paying him any attention. Just one more nasty smirk from Donovan would change that in a big way—and there it is. That's it, I've HAD it!

Just as he opened his mouth and drew breath to fire off a blistering comment of his own, Greg Lestrade appeared in the doorway behind them.

"What's all this now? Donovan, what've I told you about winding Holmes up?" The DI's voice firmly interrupted the building tension; he stepped in between them and faced his subordinate down.

"Sir, I just—"

"I don't wanna hear it. Go find Patel, and help him finish interviewing the household staff." She opened her mouth again, but he cut her off with a curt gesture before she could get another word out. "Do it, Donovan."

For one brittle moment Sally stared at him, her lips pressed hard together; finally, she glanced just once at Sherlock before wisely retreating.

Greg watched her go, and once they were alone he turned with a tired sigh. "Sorry about her. I think she's stressed about family stuff, y'know—she's been lashing out a bit the last two weeks since I've been back. I'll talk to her about it," he said, running a hand over his salt-and-pepper hair as he threw John an understanding and apologetic look.

Raising an eyebrow, Sherlock regarded the older man silently. Then he turned with a small nod, utterly unruffled, and began to repeat his string of deductions for Lestrade's benefit.

John remained at the window when the other two men began a circuit of the room. As Sherlock pointed out transferred dog hairs and unique spatter marks, he began a fresh breathing exercise, relaxing his hands deliberately and trying to make sense of his violently protective reactions...and the signals Sherlock had sent to prevent him acting on them.

Honestly, they hadn't yet talked about whether they'd tell anyone outside their closest friends. And while John wasn't certain he minded the idea of telling the world—shouting it to the rooftops had felt fairly attractive, at certain moments over the past month—he knew it would just give people like Sally more ammunition for petty attacks. So, was Sherlock's apparent reticence merely a protective measure specific to their environment? Or was he truly not inclined to let people know?

Or...does he think that secrecy is what I want, still?

Rolling the last of the tension from his shoulders, John set aside his worry and moved to catch up to the others.

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GREG: A Week In the Life

Chapter Summary

Greg's keeping himself busy; he's got his lovely Anna on the line regularly, all his friends to talk to, and neverending work to do. So why does he still feel so out of sorts?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2. GREG: A Week In the Life
(3 March - 10 March 2015)

Nine fifty-five Tuesday night found Greg in front of his bathroom mirror, checking his teeth and straightening his collar. His stomach was slightly fluttery with the anticipation that usually came with a date, but he wasn't about to go out on the town.

I suppose it's the most excitement I can expect on a night off for a while, he thought, smoothing his hair with a quick hand before jogging up the hallway. In a fit of youthful energy, he actually vaulted over the back of the sofa. Landing with a grinning thump, he reached forward to his laptop and pulled up the Skype application.

The digits in the corner of the monitor changed from 9:59 to 10:00; he took a deep breath, and held it for a long count of five. Wouldn't do to seem too eager... Blowing it out, he clicked on the request button and waited for an answer.

"Happy Tuesday," greeted the smiling face that popped up on his screen moments later.

"Happy Tuesday," he repeated, in the joking tradition of their weekly appointment, and laughed with the sheer exhilaration of it all. "You're looking beautiful this afternoon, Anna."

"Thanks, baby," she said, flicking her luminous hazel eyes demurely downward in that certain way of hers: the one that seemed to say she could hardly believe she was deserving of a compliment. It never failed to stir something deep in Greg's chest, a visceral mix of pride and protective resentment that anyone or anything could have ever caused her to feel unworthy.

He'd never told her, but he was fairly sure it was that exact look that had spurred him to impulsively ask her out, on the day he'd happened to overhear the pretty tourist being given bad directions.

Smiling at the memory as much as at the woman before him, he prompted, "What's your day been like, then?"

"Pretty good; I had a nice long phone call with Mom this morning, and a couple hours ago I finished that big commissioned piece, finally."
"That's great! Can I see?"

Anna nodded and bent partially out of the screen to reach for her embroidery project, her loose wavy hair falling across her face.

"How's Charlotte doing?" he asked as she rummaged around.

She giggled softly, straightening to hold the large twining spray of silken foliage up towards the view of the webcam. "Good, good. Robert wants to take her on a cruise vacation, but she's not sure about it."

"Whyever not? Thought you said she was crazy about the guy. Oh! That's incredible, Anna—the leaf clusters turned out beautifully! I told you aubergine accents would work."

"Next time I promise I'll believe you sooner, Greg, now I know you have such a good eye for colours! You have to give me credit for doubting, it's not as if you actually wear many..." Anna leaned over to set aside the artwork and sat back up. "Mom's problem is she still thinks her relationship with Robert has to be a secret. For them to vacation together, they'll both need to request the same time off at the library: no more secret."

Greg snorted, glancing down at his dove grey check shirt and black trousers. "Secret relationships in the workplace are rarely as secret as the participants believe," he said, then paused as he realised the implications of what he'd said.

"Speaking of which, how are they?"

"As far as I can tell, good. Better when they're at home, seems like; when it's just me around, I guess. I assume even better when no-one's around."

"So they really aren't telling anyone?"

He shrugged. "Well, they must've done, yeh? I mean, maybe it's just the Yarders who don't know. And that's their prerogative, of course; not my place to question their choice. But it's not as if there weren't enough rumours before."

"Hm. I should email John and ask him what's up. I haven't really talked to him much since the day after you flew home."

"Well, you've been busy lately, what with your online business picking up, and your fresh new social life. Still seeing Chaz this week?"

"Every other Thursday, like clockwork," she answered, her eyes sparkling. "And that's just the margaritas. I usually see him here and there during the week too, depending on his schedule; this past weekend, he invited me along to a little party at Billy's house. You remember, the paramedic?"

"Hard to forget a man you've carried a bookcase with," Greg grinned.

"Well, his wife is darling, and their two-year-old little girl is adorable. It's really been nice here, having Chaz around to help me meet new friends."

"Be sure to tell the detective I said hello, love," he said, thinking how well Chicago seemed to be agreeing with her. She seems so happy.

"Will do." Anna grabbed a glass of water from somewhere and took a sip. "So, tell me about your
day, now, and what you ate for dinner. I'm getting hungry for mine, and I need some ideas..."

Wednesday afternoon, Greg went down to Bart's carrying a small evidence bag of samples. He made his way down the familiar hallways and took the stairs down to the mortuary with a smile: it was always nice to have an excuse to come here.

Molly looked up from a clipboard as he pushed open the door to her office. "Greg, hello! I see you have some work for me?"

He grinned and handed over the sealed bag; while she checked the label and set it aside, he scanned the room. Once he was sure no other hospital employees were nearby, he stepped closer and gave her a fairly unprofessional hug. "I've not heard from you in two weeks, Mol! How was your trip?"

"Oh, it was lovely. Quite nice!" she chirped, hurrying to pull her handbag from a desk drawer and rummage through it. "I've got, erm, somewhere here—Simon and I got so busy, there was so much to see—here it is, I forgot to mail it, sorry!"

He took the postcard Molly handed him, glancing over the neat, looping handwriting filling every free area of the back. The front of the card showed a striking scene of rugged cliffs overlooking the vivid blue waters of a peaceful cove.

"So, Majorca agreed with you, then."

"Yes! Definitely. It really brought out Simon's romantic side!" She blushed prettily, straightening her lab coat. "And speaking of romance, how's it going with Anna?"

Greg scuffed a foot on the non-slip floor, looking up from his toe to meet Molly's expectant, earnest gaze. "Well, you know. We talk on the phone when we can, email here and there, and we have a standing Skype date once a week. It's not much, but it's what we've got."

"I'm glad you two are still keeping in touch, at least. I was afraid you'd be lonely."

"I'm keeping busy. Speaking of which, I should get back. Give me a call when my bag's reached the head of the queue, yeh?"

"You know I will." Molly tossed her dark ponytail back over her shoulder and sent him off with another friendly hug.

"Will this Friday ever be over?" moaned Sally, as yet another pile of papers landed on her desk.

Greg looked down at her sympathetically. "We've got a few more hours of it, Sal, sorry to break the news."
One more melodramatic sigh seemed to be enough to get it out of her system. When she looked up again, her face was composed once again into sharp professionalism, and she gestured to one of the folders before her.

"I thought you'd want to finish the report on the Neville Stronter case yourself. Why'd you give it to me?"

He grimaced, scratching at the back of his neck. "You know all the pertinent details on that one as well as I do, Sally. I've still got all the Briggs kidnapping paperwork to finish; much as I'd enjoy writing that one up,"—he'd been trying to pin those charges on Stronter for nearly a year and a half —"I do have this inexplicable desire to actually see the surface of my desk at least once this month."

Sally stood and stretched. "Well, you only have yourself to blame for it getting so backed up, don't you? Off on holiday for a whole month—why, the nerve of some people..."

They shared a tired chuckle.

"Come on, let's see if they've put up a fresh pot of coffee in the staff room," Greg suggested. "If we walk away, maybe the piles'll look smaller when we get back, yeh?"

She scoffed at that, but followed him willingly down the hall; entering the little kitchenette, they found Beverly Gartner at the sink, scrubbing out the inside of a battered aluminium travel mug.

"Inspector Lestrade, Sally; good afternoon," greeted Gartner in her usual businesslike tone. She stepped off to the side, grabbing a ragged dishtowel from the worktop.

"You can call me Greg," he told her, mildly, as he'd done many times before. The blonde detective sergeant seemingly couldn't be convinced to address anyone outranking her by first name, but it didn't make her any less friendly.

Sally turned to the other woman once she'd poured her coffee. "Bev, I caught a glimpse of Marty's wife down the shops the other day. She's looking good! How far along is she, now?"

Bev smiled at the mention of her partner's impending fatherhood. "Seven months. I think Martin's starting to get nervous." She leaned forward, as if imparting a serious secret to the two of them. "He told me they've found out, it's to be a girl."

"That's marvellous!" commented Greg, carefully pouring his own cup. Unbidden, fourteen year old memories of holding his niece Sophie for the first time sprang to his mind, surprisingly vivid, distracting him from the rest of the women's conversation.

When he came back to himself, he and Sally were already halfway back to his office. He turned, sensing with some embarrassment that Sally had just been speaking to him. "Sorry?"

"I said, what're you doing tonight after work, Greg? You've been pretty easily distracted. Looks to me like you could use some company."

Greg sipped at his coffee to cover a little smile. It really wasn't a bad thing that he'd begun making an effort recently to be better friends with Sally Donovan outside of work. Abrasive as she could be, she'd proven time and time again that she could read him like a book; and after all these years, she never exploited nor made light of the family connection that tied her indirectly to his ex-wife Tracy.

"All right. I'm game," he eventually answered, shrugging and dipping his head as if to concede
Sally's victory in an important and hard-fought battle. "Smythe's work for you?"

"Perfect. A few pints is just what you need, to get things off your chest." She nodded in satisfaction, then reached out and gave him a friendly little shove towards his door. "Now, let's get back to it, so we can actually make it down there at a reasonable hour. These files won't close themselves," she quipped as she turned away to carry her coffee back to her desk.

Greg woke up, mouth fuzzy, and groped blindly towards the bedside table. His text alert noise had seemed far louder than usual; it had startled him awake with an unpleasant jerk. His hand finally closed on his elusive phone, and he brought it up close to his face, trying valiantly to focus his eyes on the bright light of the screen.

Out of town, today. -JW

He groaned, licking dry lips and gathering his wits about him to slowly compose a reply.

I needed to know this before 8 AM on Saturday? -GL

Last time he took a private case outside London, you chewed us out for not warning you, remember? Just a heads-up, mate. -JW

Christ. Greg kicked away the tangled sheet around his legs, lurching to stand unsteadily and pad up the hall to his bathroom. After the hours he'd spent with Sally at the pub, he'd come home and succumbed to a bit of ridiculous self-pity. Peering at his bloodshot eyes in the mirror of his medicine cabinet, he reviewed his memories with a guilty wince: nearly a whole bottle of ridiculous self-pity.

Yeah, OK. Sorry, bit hungover. It's my day off, so fingers crossed London won't need any of us three today. Where's your case? -GL

Exchanging his mobile for the bottle of mouthwash on the vanity, he resolved to make up for it today. I'll go out for a run, that'll make me feel better. All right. He nodded firmly at his reflection and spat, then started the water to wash his face. As he waited for it to warm up, the phone chimed again.

Near Liverpool. We're already on the road, I've no idea if we'll need to stay the night up there either. Will keep you posted. -JW

You're letting him drive?? Best of luck to you, friend. On the case and in the car. -GL

He insisted! It won't be as bad as all that, will it? -JW

Greg stood back from the sink, grabbing a towel to hold against his dripping face, and laughed out loud when he looked down to read John's last text.
Much of the next few days passed in a haze, bringing seemingly endless work, but nothing of great note to hold Greg's attention. Sunday was all right, but Monday wore him down; he caught himself beginning to monitor his personal email account a little too often. When the unchanged inbox window seemed to magically pull itself up yet again while he lunched at his desk, he closed the whole program down with a silent growl.

_Damn it, Greg, just leave it!_ he commanded himself, spinning his chair away from the computer.

He ate the rest of his sandwich while silently staring out the window at the buildings across the road. It was frustrating almost beyond words to feel this way: so bloody young, and not in the good way either. So what if he hadn't heard from his girlfriend over the weekend? _She had a life before she met you, and she's still got one now. And you've got a life, too, or hadn't you noticed?_

He'd been honest with Sally, the other night, nursing his second pint with her in a little booth at the back wall of the pub.

"I've got good days and bad days, y'know?" he had said, staring into the brew as if it had held the secret to keeping his head above water. "Sometimes it's just fine. But some mornings I wake up and it's like I've lost a bloody leg or something, I just can't stop thinking about it."

"You miss her," Sally had replied. "It's not a bad thing."

"It hasn't even been seven weeks! I'm just—" He'd released an explosive breath with a shake of his head. "I'm not cut out for this, Sally. I don't know how to handle it anymore, at my age."

She'd snorted in laughter, taking a swig from her own pint. "Stuff the whining about your age, for starters. God, Greg, love isn't only for the young!"

_Love isn't only for the young,_ Greg repeated to himself, now, brushing a stray crumb from his trousers and turning from the window to bin his sandwich wrapper; _but it certainly does test your youthful endurance._

He rubbed his hands roughly over his face, and then brought them down in a sudden resolution: _I'm not gonna check again. In fact, until tomorrow night I'm not gonna check it at all! I'll open my email up at nine fifty, and ring her up at ten, like always. And that'll be fine. Yeah._

Freshly determined, and finally feeling somewhat in control of his erratic emotions once more, he stood and gathered up a few files he was ready to turn in.

He gave the dark computer screen only one more lingering glance on his way out of the office.

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Chapter End Notes

Friendly reminder: the backstory behind Greg and Sally, as well as a lot of Sherlock's backstory that will be referenced later, can be found in my one-shot series: [The Sewing Box](#). It's not mandatory reading, but it might make a few of the little references I throw
in a little less confusing. ;)

"Almost ready?" Sherlock called up the stairs.

There was a thump and a clatter overhead, a bit at odds with what John was meant to be undertaking; with a slight frown, Sherlock postulated that he had reached up to pull a box from the top shelf of his closet, but had lost his grip on it. *Ah, his good dress shoes. Of course.*

"Yeah, almost, just a minute," came John's reply at last, filtered through distance and a closed door.

More odd noises ensued—*hopping about on one foot while putting the shoe on the other; now, hopping on the shod foot while performing the same comical feat on the other side*—and then a muffled curse and scrape. This, of course, denoted John's panicked search for the little box in which he habitually kept his dog tags and the cufflinks he'd been gifted upon graduating med school.

*It's in the back of your socks drawer,* thought Sherlock, but he did not volunteer this information; John's bedroom was large, but not filled with enough in the way of belongings to make the search terribly difficult. Besides, there was no constructive reason to admit he knew the contents of John's socks drawer.

He was just about to call up again when the bedroom door opened, and his partner appeared at last on the upper landing.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, intent upon fastening the burnished silver link at his left wrist. "It's been a good long while since I've brought all this out. You're certain I need to be in a tux? I feel a bit—"

John looked down to where Sherlock waited in his own immaculate tuxedo, and the words died on his lips. They stood at either end of the stairs, staring at each other silently for a long moment, before he swallowed and weakly finished his sentence: "—ridiculous."

Sherlock consciously lifted his own jaw closed, working frantically to regain command of the English language. After a few more stunned seconds, he cleared his throat. "You look, er, fine, John," he managed. *Did I just hear my voice crack? For God's sake!*
Smiling uncertainly, John began to descend, holding his companion's gaze until their faces were level with each other. "So do you," he murmured, reaching out one hand and brushing just the tips of his fingers against Sherlock's arm; blinking, he gave a self-conscious shrug. "So, um, time to go?"

"...Yes," replied Sherlock, shaking himself to action. There would be plenty of time later to review this particular memory, at his leisure; for now, they'd best not be late.

In the cab, John fidgeted with the knees of his tuxedo trousers and shifted his weight in his seat incrementally, three times per minute on average. Formal wear was certainly not the doctor's forte, and the tailoring of this ensemble he'd had stored for years at the back of his closet, though marginally adequate, could be much improved. *It's no wonder he's uncomfortable*, thought Sherlock, with a slight pang of regret for putting him through this evening's ordeal.

Amazingly, John hadn't asked many questions about the purpose of their outing tonight; Sherlock had remained taciturn when he'd laid out their plans, and had frankly expected far more resistance to the very idea of being dragged to a formal dinner. Had their places been reversed, Sherlock would *certainly* have resisted. For his own part, he found it a silly ritual, needlessly overblown. The best he could hope for was that the whole farce would be over and done with quickly, and as smoothly as could be reasonably expected.

John snuck another glance across at him, licking his lips in that maddening, unconsciously suggestive way of his; Sherlock noted a twitch in the blunt fingers of his left hand.

"I certainly hope this will be worth the effort," said John, the words almost startling in the heavy silence of the cab.

He was struck with a jarring sense of disorientation as he tried to fit John's words into their intended context. It seemed, for a moment, as if John already knew what this evening was about, even though Sherlock had remained taciturn when he'd laid out their plans, and had frankly expected far more resistance to the very idea of being dragged to a formal dinner. Had their places been reversed, Sherlock would *certainly* have resisted. For his own part, he found it a silly ritual, needlessly overblown. The best he could hope for was that the whole farce would be over and done with quickly, and as smoothly as could be reasonably expected.

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"I hope so, too," he agreed, guardedly, biting at the inside of his cheek and fighting the urge to take John's hand for the sheer reassurance of it.

The seven-minute trip was over almost too quickly for him to finish gathering his thoughts, and the pair of them soon stepped out onto the curb before The Ritz London. Sherlock glanced over to gauge his friend's reaction to their destination—*somewhat intimidated, but still fairly trusting; good*—and moved ahead to lead their way in. "Ready?"

"Wait."

Sherlock halted, two steps away from the door attendant, and turned back questioningly.

John beckoned him back over to the side, tucking himself behind one of the arched columns slightly away from the path of the hotel entrance, and stepped up close to murmur, "I don't know
what's in store tonight, but I'll be kicking myself if I don't take advantage of this opportunity at least once before it all gets started." Leaning in, he gently grasped one satin-edged lapel and drew the taller man down into a brief kiss.

It took a near-monumental effort for Sherlock to pull back before his brain short-circuited entirely; and when he did, he could only gaze down at the other man in stunned silence.

Smiling, John patted the mused lapel back into place. "Right. Now let's find out about this job, eh?" he said, looking calmer than he had since four that afternoon.

"Party of four: Holmes," instructed Sherlock, and the maître d' nodded. They were led into the grand restaurant, and escorted beneath elaborate chandeliers and frescoed ceilings to the far end of the lushly appointed dining room. Their table at the northern wall was overshadowed by a large gilded sculpture of Neptune, trident and all, that loomed to draw the eye distractingly away from the distinguished older couple already seated there.

"Oh, Sherlock! It's lovely to finally see you," exclaimed the woman, standing; her silvery hair was pulled into an elegant chignon, and she wore a jacketed dress of blue and violet sequins that agreed with her pale eyes.

This is it, thought Sherlock. From the corner of his eye, he saw John turning his attention with some difficulty from Neptune. He banished a lingering image of Mycroft's insufferable smirk from his mind, and gestured to present his companion. "May I introduce Doctor John Watson."

John wore a polite, attentive smile as he stepped forward, offering his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Madam..."

"Miriam. You should call me Miriam, please, I won't stand for formality. I get quite enough of that from my sons," she said, taking his hand in both of hers and patting it. "And this is my husband, Clifton."

The man stood unassumingly to his wife's right, having risen a bit stiffly—his back's troubling him a bit, noted Sherlock—and he moved in to shake hands at his cue. "You can call me Cliff, if you like. But I won't be a stickler. Mr Holmes is just fine, too," he told John, with a kindly chuckle.

Sherlock watched, transfixed, as something indefinable passed over John's face; his cheeks paled and slackened, and his brows twitched, but he recovered his aplomb within mere seconds. "Ah. Yes. Um, I'm sorry, but could we just have a moment? Excuse us, please. Just—just one moment."

His hand closed upon Sherlock's elbow, urging him with subtle force towards the corner of the restaurant floor. As soon as John had pulled them both out of the line of sight of the table, he rounded on the other man, his face thunderous.

"What the hell, Sherlock," he hissed. "Am I actually to believe these are your parents?"

There was no point in dissembling any further. Sherlock nodded, wary of the colour suffusing his friend's cheeks.

"This is some—No. No, this is a pretty extreme set-up to go to for an All Fools' Day prank. Come
He gripped John's upper arms and leaned in close. "No! I'm sorry, John, but it's no joke. These are my parents. Really."

"I thought we were meeting posh clients for some new case! And you let me believe that!"

"I never told you what to believe," retorted Sherlock, a bit defensively; "I simply failed to fully explain the details, and you never asked."

"This, this is what Mycroft was on at you about after we came home, isn't it? For God's sake!" John caught himself getting louder, and moderated his tone back to a harsh whisper, glancing at a few nearby diners who were beginning to show interest. "I'm not prepared. You've never even told me you had living parents, and then you bring me here with no warning? What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"Just eat dinner. Be yourself. It'll be over with soon enough." Sherlock shrugged, helpless in the face of John's entirely justified indignation.

"Shit," muttered John, searching Sherlock's eyes; and again, barely audible, "Shit." He drew a deep breath and released it.

"All right?" Sherlock asked, tentative, pleading wordlessly: You can berate me later, all you like; just, for now, can this be okay? His companion was silent a second more, then twitched a spare, military nod. "All right."

Out of vague remorse, more than any true desire to socialise, Sherlock took the reins of the conversation when they returned to their seats. He fielded a few questions from his mother regarding their recent cases, and recounted a severely annotated version of their trip to America. By the time the sommelier had come and gone, and the first course had arrived at their table, John was looking a bit less green; he turned to speak to Mr Holmes between appreciative bites of lobster.

"Sorry about earlier. I have to admit, I wasn't quite prepared tonight for dinner at The Ritz."

Sherlock's father answered, smiling, "Pomp and circumstance, eh? Flair for the dramatic, the both of them." He made a gesture with his head that encompassed both his wife and son. "In the end, we're just along for the ride, you and I, aren't we?"

John looked as if he wasn't sure how to respond to that. Sipping at his glass of wine to cover a mildly mystified expression, he turned next to Sherlock's mother.

"Now, Mrs Holmes. I'm sorry: Miriam. Please do forgive me for not insisting on meeting you both much earlier. It's unforgivable, I'm afraid," he said, shooting a sidelong glance to Sherlock that underscored his last phrase.

Though vicious, it had been a subtle look, and meant only for Sherlock's eyes; but of course Miriam was observant. "Surely it's not as bad as all that, John; I daresay Cliff and I keep ourselves hidden away in the country so much of the time that the opportunity could hardly have presented
itself before now." She tilted her head affectionately towards her son, sending Sherlock a twinkling look that gave her next sentence a double intent of its own. "And knowing our dear Sherlock as I do, I'd be frankly astonished if he didn't at least attempt to convince you he'd floated into existence on a mysterious empty boat!"

Sherlock returned an offended glare, but his father began to laugh; his bright eyes crinkled with mirth. "Oh, Miri my dear, did you just liken our son to Sceafa?"

"I do listen to all your stories, love," she replied. "And sometimes, I even manage to keep the names straight between all the gods and heroes. It's only fair, dearest; you still put up a brave face and listen when I start rattling off theorems over tea."

The look John directed at his companion during this exchange clearly communicated pleasant bafflement.

Leaning in close, Sherlock provided a succinct explanation under his breath: "My father is a Classics scholar; my mother, a once-renowned mathematician. John—I am sorry."

He hadn't meant to say that last. Not yet, anyway; not in front of them. He straightened and turned away at once, snatching up his fork and taking a large mouthful of the food before him without any thought for tasting it. Unforgivable, he says; and perhaps it is. Could I possibly have handled this any worse? He choked down another bite, and then another, caught up in his own self-recreminations to the extent that he failed to follow the conversation that continued at the table.

"Sherlock?"

Swallowing, he became aware of John's voice a split second before he felt the light touch upon his left knee.

"Mm," he responded, not raising his head.

"He asked you a question," John said, and he sounded quietly amused.

Now Sherlock did look up from his salmon, to confirm that John, indeed, wore a smile. A small one: note the touch of hurt and anger present around the edges. But a genuine smile, all the same. He spoke across the table without pulling his gaze from the blue eyes he loved so well. "Yes, Father?"

"I was saying, your mother and I were thinking of coming back to the city, weekend after next. Miri's made a special order at Harrods that will need picking up, and there's a play running we'd like to see. We wondered if you might be free?"

The next three seconds encompassed an entire non-verbal discussion, sparking between him and John in subtle movements of their eyes and tiny facial tics.

Well? What's your answer?

God no, of course I don't want to go. And you don't, either; trust me.
They're your parents; don't be a dick!

But what if there's a case? A case, John! He twitched his eyebrows upward to emphasise the argument he hoped his companion understood as he intended.

If there is, so be it, but as of now, there's not. This appeared to be John's final word—or, glare—on the topic.

Huffing a petulant sigh, Sherlock turned to his father. "There's no guarantee that we won't be busy with work. It's hardly possible to commit to our availability,"—glancing back over, he caught the edge of a freshly hardened stare—"but certainly, I suppose I can't rule it out. Check with us again, closer to the date." He forced an approximation of a gracious smile to move his lips.

It seemed like an eternity before the two of them returned at last to 221B. Breathing a quiet sigh of relief, Sherlock toed off his good shoes just inside the sitting room door, loosening his tie simultaneously.

John ascended the stairs behind him slowly, the tap of his patent leather footfalls as weary and muted as if he moved underwater. He had remained unexpectedly silent in the cab, leaving Sherlock quite off balance: a lecture, an argument, an interrogation would all have been perfectly in line with expectations, but silence was an entirely different matter.

Silence reminded Sherlock all too clearly of his misstep in December: the impromptu hypnosis incident which had been punished by two full days of mute, seething anger. Much had happened since then, and on the whole he knew their friendship—their partnership—to be in far better standing. Now, however, a trembling tension wound itself tight in his gut as he crossed the room to stand before the fireplace. It wasn't because of the rich food he'd eaten.

A bit not good... he thought, turning to see the other man follow him into the room.

John's chin was tipped down, gaze dragging the floor, one hand tugging at his collar ineffectually. He took only four steps in, then stopped, dropping both hands to his sides.

Sherlock's mind lurched into frantic motion, analyzing the posture in an attempt to predict the next move. Still, he found himself frozen in place, unsure what to expect, when John raised his head at last.

"You ridiculous man," said John, his voice soft.

"What?" He doesn't look angry. Why doesn't he look angry?

"All this time I've known you..." He took a step closer. "All the singularly awful things you've said and done, over the years, and all your incredible brilliance..."

Sherlock remained still, confounded, as John advanced again. Is he chastising me, or complimenting me?

"All the secrets of your supposedly chequered past: the horrid things I've gathered from Greg's little hints, and the things I sit and worry over not knowing, to this day..." One more measured step
brought him within arm's reach.

No, not complimenting me, surely...

"And it turns out that you, Sherlock, you come from two of the most ordinary, well-adjusted, sweet people I've ever met." Now John had stepped up so close he had to tilt his head upward to meet Sherlock's eyes; all this time, his words had remained gentle and evenly paced. The tuxedo-clad army doctor was the very embodiment of unwavering calm.

By contrast, Sherlock felt as if his innards were vibrating. His lips parted, but he couldn't find words.

"Now, clearly," murmured John, leaning up on his toes, "this proves the existence of a higher power with a sense of humour."

"I fail to see that proof," Sherlock breathed weakly, just before smiling lips touched his own.

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Chapter End Notes

* Sceafa was an ancient Lombardic king in English legend. According to the story, Sceafa appeared mysteriously as a child, coming out of the sea in an empty boat.
ANNA: Here's To Margarita Night

Chapter Summary

Every other Thursday, Anna meets Det. Chaz Garvey for Mexican food and friendly conversation. This week, their talk gets her thinking a little harder...

4. ANNA: Here's To Margarita Night
(2 April 2015)

The music was loud inside El Vasquez Restaurant, but the small booth in the back corner made a comfortable and private retreat. This was the sixth Thursday evening Anna had eaten here in the past eleven weeks; she no longer needed to study the menu.

"Guadalajara Special, and one chile relleno," she told the waiter, who nodded and moved away.

Her dining companion finished his text message and set his phone aside. "Sorry about that," he muttered. "I can't seem to get a night off without at least having someone check in with me on something. At least they don't need me on a crime scene."

Smiling, Anna nodded at the large glasses between them on the table. "It's a good thing; you've already put down half of that, and I have no desire to skip my own dinner just to make sure you get somewhere safely!"

Chaz grimaced. "You would, too, wouldn't you? That'd be a shitty thing for me to do to you. And if you keep hanging out with me, it's practically bound to happen sometime."

"Well, I don't know about your other friends, but I have no problem with that. And even if I did, I've got a pretty good reason to get used to dealing with the wacky schedule of a homicide detective."

"Ha! I guess you do, don't you?" He tilted his head to one side, and his white-blond hair fell softly over his forehead. "It's funny how that works out."

She lifted her heavy margarita glass in a toast. "To strange coincidences, and reunited friends," she said, and he leaned in to clink his drink with hers.

It was striking how different Chaz Garvey seemed when he was off duty. His posture loosened along with his collar; he let his hair come free of its slicked confinement, and the pinched, cool alertness drained away from him somewhat, relaxing the little creases around his blue eyes. In the weeks since they'd reinstated their college friendship, Anna had become accustomed to his ingrained habits of compartmentalisation, and the way he used those techniques to deal with the stress of his job. He scheduled time with his friends on a regular, strict rotation, and during those set times he allowed himself to relax almost completely.
Watching Chaz unwind after a long day brought Greg frequently to Anna's mind. She recalled his ruggedly handsome face, and the way she'd known it to shift instantly from open, almost boyish sweetness to an aura of such startling intensity and competence...I wonder which face he's wearing right now, she thought, with a glance at her phone's clock. Hm, I'm sure he's sleeping already by this time...

"You're thinking about him again, I can tell," said Chaz, on a swig of his margarita.

"Guilty as charged."

"So when are you going back over?"

Anna took her time before responding. She placed a precise lick at the rim of her glass, concentrating on meting out the salt crystals there in perfect proportion to the number of sips in the drink. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I told everyone maybe late spring, early summer. I haven't really thought about it too much."

"Well, 'late spring' is right around the corner. You know you're going to have to give it some thought pretty soon."

"Ugh, I guess. I just...I don't know how fast I should jump back into that. I'll think about it later, all right? For now, let's order you another round, and you tell me about this new guy you met."

Chaz hummed into his own drink as he slurped the last bit down. "Well now, I don't know if I'm going to pursue anything there. He seems nice enough, but..."

"But you're still not over Rita dumping you?"

He shrugged. "And it's not so easy to get past worrying that someone at work will get wind of it."

"I get that, I do. But are they really prying into your personal life as much as you think they are?"

"Well..."

"You can't tell me there are no gay police officers in Chicago. And I find it just as hard to believe that you could be the only bisexual on the entire force, really."

He grunted. "I don't think I'd know if I wasn't."

"That says something, right there, doesn't it? If you're not hearing your colleagues talking about other officers' sexualities, what makes you think they're talking about yours behind your back? Be as careful as you feel you need to be, Chaz; don't do anything that makes you uncomfortable, but don't you dare stop yourself from pursuing something outside of work that might make you happy."

Their food arrived before he could formulate a reply to her advice; he used the distraction of dealing with the waiter to turn the conversation back on her.

"You said 'that' before," he pointed out, gesturing with his forkful of chicken enchilada. "You don't want to jump back into 'that'? What's the deal?"

Anna considered, and eventually told him, "I moved pretty fast, getting involved with Greg. Now that I've got some distance, it just seems like it would be a good idea to take my time and think
about it."

"Uh-oh. I sense some of the old, traditional Anna Faber cold feet, here..." At her surprised look, he chuckled. "Come on, this doesn't seem the least bit familiar to you? I remember two separate occasions when I had to talk you around before you broke up with David for no good reason."

"...Three," she mumbled into her glass. "Liz stopped me the third time."

"Oh yeah, Liz...Lizzie Biancardi! Wow, she was a trip. Whatever happened to her?"

"She still lives in Columbus; she's single, teaching yoga and being generally awesome." Anna grinned. "I talk to her all the time. Should I tell her you said hi?"

"Please do! But stop grinning like that. If she's anything like I remember her in college, you know we're totally not each other's types."

That got an honest laugh out of her.

They ate in companionable silence for another minute, but Anna was aware that she needed to get back to the topic at hand. She knew Chaz, and he was an investigator to his core: he would keep pressing the subject until she told him what he wanted to know.

"It's more than just cold feet about being in a relationship," she finally explained. "There's a lot I have to take into consideration. The distance, the money it takes to visit, wrangling the visa situation, leaving my possessions behind, the fact that spending time with him would separate me entirely from my family and friends..."

"Okay. Those are all valid points," said Chaz, reaching out to accept his fresh margarita glass from their waiter. "And even though I catch you mooning over Greg on a regular basis, it seems like you do enjoy living here."

"I do! And a lot of that's thanks to you, really—you helped me get to know the area, and you've introduced me to good people—I really feel good about the little routine I've got going."

He nodded, magnanimously accepting her thanks, and stated, "The pressure's off."

"Sorry?"

"With a faraway boyfriend, the pressure is off: you don't have to concern yourself with looking for someone to date, or worry about people hitting on you if you go out. You get to say you're taken with complete honesty, which stops people who know you from worrying over you being single now that David's gone...and then you can go home by yourself and feel entirely justified in enjoying your solitude."

"You make it sound sort of duplicitous."

"Well, I'm not saying it's a bad thing. But it's convenient, isn't it? And not just for your social life. You have total freedom to mourn David in peace, and wallow in whatever messy emotions you want to. Then, when you have it out of your system, you can call up Greg and get all the
reassurance and adoration you want."

"Adoration? You should probably drink a little slower," Anna laughed.

"Don't be stupid. He does adore you. Jesus, if you'd heard his voice when he called me that night, or seen his face when he came barreling out of that taxi..."

He didn't need to specify the night to which he was referring. It didn't take much to bring back her own memories of her kidnapping; her lips tightened, and she brushed the knuckles of her left hand underneath her chin reflexively. "Fine, yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't get too many chances to see him in a normal situation, and that was the most memorable experience I had of him; it kinda stuck with me. But either way, you know I'm right. He's totally crazy about you."

Later, when Anna unlocked her door and entered her house, she didn't turn on any lights. Instead she hung up her jacket, dropped her handbag, and walked straight over to sit on the little window loveseat which had once been nearly the only seating in the front room.

Chaz is probably right, she thought, twisting the bracelet around her left wrist. He doesn't mean it in a bad way, but I'm probably taking advantage of this situation for my own benefit. She considered the routine she'd fallen into; here in the cozy Cape Cod that Andy had willed to her, she could hide away from everyone and everything, spending hours or even days immersed in the creation of her embroidered works of art. She had regular contact with family and friends, mostly by phone and email—if she needed time to herself, all she had to do was let calls go into voice mail. And thanks to the rigours of Greg's work and the six hour time difference, she could count on most of her contact with him to be brief and fairly casual. The exception, of course, was their weekly Skype date. But I always know exactly when that's happening; if I'm in a mood, I have plenty of time to get my head on straight before he calls.

Sighing, Anna stood up and walked through her dark, silent home to the bathroom. She flipped the switch to turn on the pretty nightlight plugged in next to the mirror: a handcrafted bee of blown glass which she'd bought last month because it reminded her of Sherlock. The small, golden yellow light illuminated her face gently, pooling warm shadows around her eyes and cheeks. She stared at her reflection for a long minute.

Am I holding myself back on purpose? she wondered, going about her basic nighttime ablutions in the dimly lit room. She'd had a long term commitment that had been ended suddenly by unexpected death: wasn't it understandable that she might be reluctant to get deeply involved with someone else? Even someone as great as Greg Lestrade, so honest and kind, devoted to his loved ones and his work in equally breathtaking measures...When I'm with him I feel like I want to throw everything else out the window and just be with him. But the longer we're apart, the more I want to back up and think rationally about it. Too rationally, probably.

Her dilemma was becoming clearer the longer she lived in Chicago, and the worst part of her indecision was that it apparently wasn't nearly as private as she had believed. If Chaz can tell this easily that I'm having doubts, is it something Greg has been seeing, too? The thought of hurting Greg in that way, unintentionally and silently, sent a stab of pain through her that left her suddenly
breathless; before she could second-guess herself, she hurried to retrieve her phone from her bag. She dialled as she padded back down the hall with it, and by the time the second ring sounded, she was curled in the centre of her bed in the dark.

"Anna?"

At the sound of the gravel-edged voice in her ear, it felt as if a knot loosened beneath her sternum. "Hey, Greg," she sighed, clutching a pillow close.

"What's wrong, love?" He sounded wary, obviously unsure whether to prepare for bad news.

"Sorry, I didn't even think to check the time. Nothing's wrong; well, not like that. Is this a bad time?"

"I was just getting ready for work. I have a couple minutes before I need to be on my way," he answered. In the background, Anna could hear little noises, a clink and a quiet sizzle; the familiar, comforting sounds of his morning routine in the kitchen. Coffee and a fried egg on toast.

"I haven't even slept yet," she said, laughing a little at her impulsiveness. "Stupid time zones. Chaz said to tell you hello, by the way. Look, Greg—"

"Yeah?"

She swallowed around the hard lump in her throat. "I just needed to tell you that I love you. That's—that's all."

"Darling, I love you too. And I don't care what time it is, you can always call me. Day or night, you know that. What's going on, out there, really? I know you've been out having drinks, but you're not generally one for random late night calls."

"I was just thinking about how I hadn't been talking to you about my next trip out...I don't know...look, I just don't want you to think I don't want to come. You know I do, right?" She bit her lip, realising that her speech patterns were a clear sign she was still a touch tipsy.

Greg made a little noise in his throat that she couldn't put a facial expression to. "I know you do, yes. There are a lot of factors involved; I truly don't expect you to just drop everything to fly over. It's—fine, love."

Anna wanted to take his words at face value, but she'd heard the slight hesitation, and it hurt. "No, it's not fine. I haven't been entirely honest with you, or with myself. And I don't doubt that you can tell I've been having second thoughts about things. Chaz could tell, for goodness' sake, and you're a smarter detective than he is."

"Ta, sweet, but let's just keep that between us, shall we?" He sounded like he was trying hard for levity. She didn't let herself take the easy out he was offering her.

"I have got some things to work out for myself. I haven't been giving them the attention they deserve, and that's unfair to you. I can't stand thinking I might be hurting you, honey, and I want you to know that I'm going to try harder, okay?"

"I—okay. Okay. Love, are you crying?"


"Oh, no. No, Anna, don't cry. Please? 'S all right, I know you don't mean it. It's all tied up in David,
innit? Darling, it's perfectly understandable."

She sniffled, burying her face into the pillow briefly. "See? You *do* know everything."

"I don't," he told her firmly. "But what I do know for certain is that you deserve the time and space to work it out, and that I'm not going to expect any more from you than you're ready to give. I promise, love, I'll be here for you; whatever you need of me, you'll have it, I swear."

"Oh, Greg. What did I do to deserve you?"

"That's my line," he said, his voice fond.

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John's afternoon out shopping with Miriam Holmes brings some intriguing topics to light.

5. JOHN: What You Don't Know
(11 April 2015)

There wasn't a case on, as it turned out, when Mrs Holmes eventually called to schedule the planned outing. However, Sherlock had gone and given himself the next best excuse. John blamed himself for absentmindedly forgetting about the tentative plans until long after Sherlock had covered their kitchen in petri dishes; he should have been watching for just this sort of evasion, should have seen it coming days ago and put his foot down.

"Really, Sherlock?" he asked, exasperated.

His partner dropped his pen on his notebook, reaching out blindly with his right hand without raising his head from the microscope. "Really. The experiment has reached a critical stage, John. It needs constant monitoring through this final phase, or the results will be entirely worthless. Unless you would rather I scrap my efforts and begin again."

The thought of enduring another six days of progressively multiplying cultures, preventing his effective use of anything but the kettle and the sink, was too much. John pressed the heel of his right hand into his eye and heaved a deep sigh. "Right. Right, of course. How much longer do I have to live like this, then?"

Sherlock's hand was still outstretched, opening and closing; with a start, John realised that he wasn't reaching out for a piece of equipment. Stepping closer, unsure if he was really interpreting the gesture correctly, he extended his left hand and joined it with Sherlock's.

With a slight, satisfied smile, Sherlock squeezed his acquired prize gently, and finally answered. "The last piece of data will be recorded exactly eleven hours and nineteen minutes from now. Cleanup should take me approximately three hours, after which I shall require some time in which to collate and extrapolate the results."

"All right..."

"But," said Sherlock, giving one more soft squeeze to John's hand, "I do plan to eat and sleep immediately after cleaning up, and leave the data phase for tomorrow." With these words, he moved his head at last and looked over, meeting John's eyes solemnly for three full seconds before returning his attention to the experiment.
John recognised this statement as the gift it was intended to be: both an acknowledgement of John's continual wish that he take proper care of himself, and a sort of apology for trashing their kitchen and for leaving John to do this alone. He was momentarily speechless, overcome by affection.

When the minute ticked over, Sherlock let out a tiny "ah!" and quickly disengaged his hand, snatching up the pen once again to jot down a new line of shorthand notes.

Stepping back out of the way with a smile, John murmured, "Okay. Takeaway it is tonight, then; I can bring home something that'll reheat well for you. I'll give your parents your best wishes, shall I?"

"Mm. If you like," replied his partner, rapidly losing interest in anything but the work before him.

John opened the door and stepped out onto the pavement just as a sleek black car pulled up to the kerb.

Mycroft's, of course, he thought, twisting his lips. He probably arranges a car for them every time they come into London. Giving a self-conscious little tug to his neat maroon jumper, he approached the vehicle as its rear door opened.

"John, dear, good afternoon," called Mrs Holmes from the otherwise empty backseat. "Cliff would be with us today, but his lower back's been paining him, poor thing. I insisted he should stay home this morning."

"Then it looks like it'll just be the two of us, I'm afraid. Sherlock's in the midst of some complicated experiment and I couldn't pull him away." He shrugged apologetically, ducking his head to slide in.

"Psh, I knew he wouldn't come," she said, leaning towards him candidly and patting his knee as the car began to move.

"Did you?"

"Of course I did! I know my son. An afternoon of shopping with his mother? I might as well have asked him to go out to a pub and sing karaoke." She smirked approvingly as the mental image had its intended effect on John, quickly breaking the atmosphere of formality. "I wanted a chance to get to know you better. I hope you don't mind my little deception."

As they rode on towards their destination, Miriam Holmes continued a steady stream of friendly chatter, and John took the opportunity to study her. Her ensemble today consisted of a stylish pantsuit, with a long, draping jacket that sported a tasteful abstract pattern in shades of mulberry and green. She seemed a far more comforting and motherly presence now than she had in sequins and heels, although she was most certainly nothing like John's own mother had been. Miriam was briskly logical, with a refreshing sense of humour that reminded him of Sherlock's less guarded moments.

I like her already, decided John, smiling at her dry, witty account of her husband's incredible propensity to lose small items. It's really a shame Sherlock never mentioned his parents earlier.
As a rule, John shopped for new clothing very rarely, and when he did he usually chose the fastest, most economical way of filling his needs. Entering the massive, stately edifice of Harrods and joining the milling crowds inside put him distinctly on edge, but the woman beside him was unflappable and obviously in her element. She led him confidently through the crush of casual shoppers and tourists in the main halls of the ground floor; soon, they approached a service desk in the Men's Tailoring area.

John stood quietly behind her as she dealt with the sales assistant, turning his head in all directions to take in the warm, sleek décor of marble, leather and polished wood. The atmosphere in this department was far different than what he remembered from the last time he'd been inside this building. It had been years ago, now—Jeanette dragged me here to find a Christmas gift for someone. Her mother? Her sister? Something for a dog? No, wait, she wasn't the one with the dog, he thought with a slight grimace. Though the memories of the shopping trip and of the girl were fuzzy, he distinctly recalled begging off to join Sherlock somewhere before she could pull him into the Men's departments.

"Lost in your thoughts, dear?" asked Miriam, turning from the counter to face him.

"Oh, er, sorry. Just enjoying the interior design," John said, straightening to a pose of near-military attention before realising and consciously relaxing himself a bit.

She smiled. "The Bespoke Alterations department is quite good here. I find it well worth the trip into the city for a quality gift, and with Mycroft's forty-fifth birthday near at hand, I needed something special."

"Ah yes, of course," hummed John.

The sales assistant reappeared bearing two stacked boxes; he laid them out on the counter, and opened them for Mrs Holmes's perusal. The smaller box held a set of fine monogrammed pocket squares, marked elegantly with three small initials and one large—"MRCH".

_Two middle names_, John noted, mildly curious; he didn't think it proper to comment, though, so he simply made a mental note to ask Sherlock later.

Miriam exclaimed in pleasure as she folded open the tissue in the larger box. She lifted out a custom-tailored waistcoat faced in luxurious charcoal wool, threaded with a subtle pattern of violet and indigo. Turning the piece of clothing over in her hands, she spoke as she fussed over inspecting each seam and smoothing the fine fabric with her fingertips. "I had his lovely assistant provide me with the measurements, discreetly of course. She's terribly competent, you know: helps him with all manner of things, and always responds to my messages with exactly what I need. When it comes to managing Mycroft, I've come to quite rely on her."

"Ah. Anthea, right?" John thought back to the last time he'd seen the aloof, attractive woman.

"Hmm, no, I'm sure that wasn't the name...No matter." Smiling brightly, she handed the waistcoat back to the sales assistant. "It's perfect. Go ahead and wrap it up for me, please."
After the bespoke items had been repackaged, and handed over to John to carry, Miriam led the way to the lower floor, where the more casual men's clothing was sold. "I'd like to look for a few things for my husband, as well, since we're without him today. His birthday isn't 'til early June, but I don't often get to go shopping anywhere nice without him by my side."

"So you're not looking for something custom-made?" They emerged together from the stairwell, and into an expanse of clean white marble full of colourful clothing displays.

"No, no." She glanced over her shoulder at him, smiling. "In order to get Cliff to dress up at all, I have to arrange fantastic formal events. The Ritz; I insisted. He'd wear cozy jumpers every day of his life, if weather permitted it. Nothing like my Mykey—"

John stopped walking in surprise. "I'm sorry, 'Mykey'?"

"Well, yes, his name is a nod to his father. Clifton Michael Ambrose Holmes. Of course Cliff didn't want me to name the boy directly after him, so I gave it a bit of the Baroque." She chuckled. "It suits him, after all."

"I suppose it does," he responded after a moment, and they moved on into the sales floor.

"Still, it's a mother's prerogative to nickname her children, and I'm not ashamed to say I take advantage of it. The few times a year I get to rile Mykey up with that are a true joy." Miriam's eyes twinkled. "Now, Sherlock on the other hand, I never quite found a nickname that stuck for him. Since he'd already decided so early on to eschew his given first name, I suppose I always felt he'd nicknamed himself."

John turned from the rack of shirts he was browsing, staring at the woman in surprise. "His first name isn't Sherlock."

"No," she said, and laughed. "Oh, he does keep that secret close to his chest, doesn't he? It's William, and he'll likely never forgive me for telling you."

Pulling his eyebrows down from his hairline with some effort, John tried to imagine Mike Stamford introducing him to William Holmes. Will Holmes? Bill? Billy? The idea was too ridiculous to contemplate. "My, my," he eventually managed in response.

There was quite a lot of display area in the lower level, and it seemed that Mrs Holmes was intent upon browsing through it all, peppering the displays of shoes and trousers with aimless little anecdotes of her sons' youthful pastimes. As he listened attentively, John shifted the bag containing Mycroft's gifts to his other hand, and realised how thirsty he was becoming.

"I'm sorry I didn't invite you up for a cup of tea, before we left Baker Street," he said. "I wasn't kidding about the experiment, though: it's taken over every surface in the kitchen, and as of this morning it had actually begun to migrate into the hallway." A thought struck him. "Have you ever even been inside, Miriam?"
"Oh, I've seen the flat, dear. You weren't there at the time. Well, to be honest, neither was Sherlock. I gather that you were away staying with a relative, for a week or so early on..."

The meaning of her words hit him in the gut like a hard punch. "Oh."

"Yes, well. I came in with Mycroft to sort through a few things, and deal with a bit of paperwork with the landlady. Negotiating to keep the flat paid for through Sherlock's absence, however long that would be, though of course that's not exactly what we told her."

"You knew? What am I saying, of course you knew. You weren't at the funeral, were you? I—hmm." John took a few steadying breaths to calm himself. He wasn't angry at her, truly, but thinking back on the early part of those three years without warning was still a shock to his system.

Miriam continued speaking as though he hadn't interrupted. "I confess I was a mite curious about you, at the time; someone so obviously important in my Sherlock's life, how could I not be? But under the circumstances, it was best..."

John's jaw worked convulsively for a few seconds; for the life of him, he couldn't find an appropriate, polite response to make.

She levelled an assessing look at him around a display of overcoats; after a short silence, she moved breezily on to a new clothing display, and with it changed the subject from that of Sherlock's absent years.

"Couldn't stand living in the city, myself. So close, everyone all packed together like sardines? I personally don't understand how anyone can stomach it. And that flat of yours. Neighbours either side, walls thin as paper, and your landlady below as well; I imagine the pair of you certainly have to keep quiet, don't you? Although, maybe that room on the upstairs is separated enough to give you two some privacy, at least."

"Oh, we don't—" We don't sleep together!

"Don't what, dear?"

He couldn't bring himself to say that; instead he shrugged, and reached out to finger a folded jumper on the nearest display shelf. "The walls aren't actually all that thin," he assured her, thinking of the bullet holes in their sitting room.

Miriam crossed to a rack hung with fine cashmere scarves and began browsing through them, continuing to natter on in a frank tone. "Well that's a relief, anyway. Sherlock's enthusiasm always has run to the loud and emphatic. So it was with playing pirate in the garden; so it was with applied chemistry; so it must surely be in the bedroom."

John had to duck his head and turn away to hide the flush that sprang up on his cheeks. Her blithe, carefree statement didn't seem to have been any sort of calculated dig for information. Rather, it simply seemed a well-meaning assumption, on the part of a woman who seemed to share just a hint of Sherlock's tactless manner. Still, it caused a diffuse flare of indignation to rise in John's belly.

He doesn't—what? Doesn't want to sleep with me? Do I actually know that for certain? John frowned. We haven't exactly discussed it. He likes to kiss sometimes, I know that. He's gradually becoming less averse to touch in general, I suppose. But, sex? John found himself wanting very badly to contradict Mrs Holmes, to disabuse her of these notions she had of them as some normal, passionate couple. The problem was, he didn't know what words he might actually use to describe them instead.
"I see I've worn you out," came Miriam's voice from behind him; his intense thoughts had caused him to stop following her entirely for long moments. "Come, John, let's ring me up and be done here. There's a lovely Venetian café on the third floor, and we're rather near the elevator already. We could certainly do with that cup of tea now, wouldn't you say?"

Caffè Florian, on the third floor, was casually ostentatious in much the same way as the rest of the massive department store; here, the design ran to gilt-framed mirrors and ornate golden accent panels set into the walls. They sat across from each other in two deep, barrel-shaped chairs of black leather. Though Miriam was not a short woman, the high curved sides of the chair seemed to swallow her up briefly as she settled back into it, and John was quietly struck by the undeniable fact of her age in a way he had not yet been to that moment. The illusion of fragile vulnerability was dispelled only a second later, when she straightened up and gestured to the approaching waitress; she ordered tea and pastries for both of them without asking what John would like, and he cheerfully agreed with her perceptive choices.

John was feeling a bit overwhelmed, and was faintly relieved to sit in pleasant silence for a few minutes; Mrs Holmes pulled out her phone and fiddled with it, presumably giving notice to either their driver or the woman John knew as Anthea.

When their tea was served, she immediately tucked the phone back into her beaded handbag. With a serious expression on her statuesque face, she folded her hands neatly on the glass-topped table and leaned forward, fixing John in place with eyes unnervingly like Sherlock's.

"I like you, Doctor Watson," Miriam began. "You're kind, and personable, and reasonably intelligent; moreover, I feel you've been very good for my son, on the whole."

He nodded gratefully to acknowledge her compliment and sipped at his tea, sensing that it was the wrong time to speak.

"I really do like you, and so it seems almost unnecessary that I say this... But I've never had this opportunity before where Sherlock is concerned, so I'll not hesitate to say it anyway." Mrs Holmes pulled herself even taller in the seat, and now John was the one feeling swallowed in his chair. "If you break my son's heart, John Watson, you shall see exactly how monstrous I can become; and I am not a woman to be trifled with. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," said John, and he meant it fervently.

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The knock came just as Greg finished washing up his plate from lunch. Hurriedly twisting the tap off and drying his hands, he strode up to the front of his smallish flat and undid the chain on the door.

"Jeans and a Clash T-shirt? I can't believe my eyes," said Sally by way of greeting, looking him up and down intently.

Greg gave himself a curious glance as he stepped back to allow her in. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing! I just don't think I've ever seen you out of your shirtsleeves." She smirked. "You've been holding out on me."

"Pshaw. I'm nothing that special." He walked away to return his dishtowel to the sink, and heard a low whistle following behind him.

"No; you've definitely been holding out on me."

"For Christ's—Sally!"

She laughed at his discomfiture, leaning casually against the doorframe of his kitchen with her arms crossed. She was dressed more casually than he'd ever seen her, as well; but there was no way he was going to say a word about that, now.

"Right then," he said, with a sheepish grin. "Thanks for coming by. Want a beer before we get started?"

"Love one."

After some basic pleasantries, and then a few minutes of discussion regarding their current caseload—neither of them was all that great at leaving the job at work—Greg smacked his hands
together and rose from the sofa. "Okay, I can't put it off any longer. It's time I show you the
disaster zone."

"Come on," chuckled Sally as she stood to follow him. "It can't possibly be that bad."

Greg didn't say anything to that; he simply led her down the short hallway and opened the door to
his storage room.

They both looked in silently for a long moment.

"*Jesus, Greg.*"

"Did I mention I'm buying you dinner after this?"

"Greg, you might be obligated to buy me jewellery after this," she breathed, reaching up to gather
her wild curls into a ponytail.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I know it's bad. Take it under advisement: this is what
estrangement and divorce does to a man."

"It makes him a bloody packrat?" She threw him a sidelong look before bursting into a grin.
"Kidding! I've seen worse, sad to say. At least it's just one room; Hannah and I helped her mate
Sam with his whole flat a few years back, and that was a nightmare."

"God, *this* shite through my whole flat? I can't even imagine."

"Yeah, you're a pretty tidy bloke, aren't you? Come on then, only way to help it is to dive in." She
picked her way into the center of the room and surveyed the wreckage, hands on hips. "Lemme
guess, you always *meant* to straighten this up as you went along..."

"...But it was too hard," Greg agreed. "It was stuff from our home, stuff from our *life* and I just
couldn't bear looking at it."

"And then, later, the bigger things."

He nudged a bulging cardboard box aside with his toe as he stepped in. "Yep. That wasn't 'til Tracy
was selling the house, and the divorce was almost completely through. I'd had the flat for awhile
by then, so of course I already had my own sofa, and chests of drawers."

"And a headboard?"

He didn't bother to look at the handsome carved bedstead he knew was tipped up against the far
wall. "Got a bed. Different size. I've no use for something that fancy, anyway."

"Mm. It is pretty. What size is it?"

"King," he grunted, shifting a stack of books. "Why, you have designs on it?"

"Eh, mine's a double." She was quiet a moment. "Okay, point me in the direction of your bin bags.
We're gonna need a couple empty boxes for sorting, too..."
It was slow going, at first; they had to shift some unsorted boxes into the hallway, just to gain enough breathing room to properly begin sorting out others. Thankfully, Sally was incredibly methodical and patient. If Greg had tried tackling this task on his own, he knew he'd have given up within the first hour, and probably gone off to get himself roaring drunk and forget about it. *I still might get drunk later*, he thought, staring down at an old photo that had fallen out of a book, *and I'm probably on my way to it already right now. But at least with Sally's help, I'll be ready for the furniture collection service tomorrow.* He deliberately crumpled the photo and shoved it into the half-full bin bag nearest him; his friend gave him a look, but didn't comment.

They chatted sporadically as they worked, and in the easy silences between, they listened to music filtering down the hall from Greg's stereo system. After a while Greg found himself quietly studying her profile. Sally wore a look of peaceful concentration, and her whole manner here was so much more *pleasant* than it had been just two days ago. He'd had to practically drag her and Sherlock apart, yet again. It wasn't so worrying, he supposed, except that it seemed to Greg that he was the only one of them really seeing John's reactions. He considered silently until Lou Reed became Depeche Mode, and then steeled himself to ask.

"So what's with you tearing into Sherlock again lately?"

Sally ducked her head and rolled her shoulders in a defensive shrug. "I dunno. When I'm stressed it just—comes out, you know? Holmes brings out the worst in me, it's like a pressure valve opening; it's like I can't help it." She pursed her lips, next, glancing at Greg. "But he *lets* me. I mean, he gives as good as he gets, but that's only fair, yeh? He can take it, and we've both heard it all before. It doesn't even upset him—and he knows I'm rarely serious with it, these days. It's just old habit."

"It's a bad habit. And I've told you so. He may seem able to handle it—* But John's gonna come over apoplectic, one of these days.* "—but I don't like it, Sal."

"Sorry, boss."

Greg sighed. Here she was, sitting cross-legged with him on the floor of his spare room, hip-deep in papers and books, and she was calling him "boss," which she never did. It didn't sit well. He stood silently, rubbing his lower back, and went to the fridge for more beer.

When he returned, he resumed his position with a small grunt and offered her the second bottle he'd brought. "Are you gonna tell me about it, then?"

"About what?"

"About what's got you stressed enough lately to let Sherlock have it."

She frowned at the papers in her hand, hard enough that her chin dimpled. Eventually she stuck out her bottom lip and blew a long breath up across her face, propelling one curl into the air like a flag.

"It's my Mum," she confessed. "She was diagnosed with MS in the middle of December. About a week before you went on your holiday, actually."

"Christ, Sally. You never said anything! How bad is it?"

"Good days, bad days. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, I know you've been trying to get it out of me since February, haven't you?" She laughed, but it was a breathy, unpleasant sound. "On good days, I don't have to worry. On bad days, Dad or Hannah texts me, and I can generally handle it. On bad days when Sherlock's up in my face—well."

Greg's memory flashed on the last few times his DS and his consultant had been haranguing each
other, and he was struck by the contradiction he'd been seeing in Sherlock's behaviour. The man had antagonised her relentlessly, and willingly taken everything she'd dished out—but (unlike John) hadn't seemed measurably upset or affected by the exchanges. *He knows, doesn't he? He's known the whole time and he's allowing it on purpose,* thought Greg, taking a long, fortifying swig from his bottle.

It was edging into early evening, now. The trash had been dealt with; the papers and books were mostly sorted; the photographs, framed artwork and odd knick-knacks had been divided up into categories, and a large collection of donatable goods was now organised to go. The spare room wasn't bare, but it was definitively no longer a death trap. He'd called up his favourite takeaway delivery, and placed a generous order for them both. The only task left before dinner was to carry out the large furniture pieces he'd scheduled with the collection service for removal.

Greg had shoved the furnishings of his living room aside to make temporary space for the extras. First, they shifted the two chests of drawers, lugging them carefully up the hall. Even empty, they were awkward and heavy; he lost his grip on the first one and narrowly missed his toe.

Carrying out the bedstead components was harder, not in terms of size or weight—between the two of them, they could manage the task quite well—but it held an emotional heft he wasn't quite ready for. Touching the carved whorls of that headboard, and seeing the places where hands had gripped and worn the wood smooth, so many times over so many years...

"All right?" asked Sally, bouncing the weight of her end on her knee to adjust her grip.

Greg had no idea what was showing on his face; he cleared his throat and deliberately tried to wipe his expression clean. "Huh. Yeah-yeah, sorry. Okay, we're gonna put it up against the wall to the right of the door..."

"Yep. Move it," she huffed.

Fifteen minutes later, after some prolonged tilting, hefting and cursing, they manoeuvred the powder-blue sofa out of the hallway at last. It was with a profound sense of relief that Greg lowered it to the carpet: in the morning, the removal crew would do the rest. He'd never have to touch the damned thing again.

Sally dropped her end of the sofa with a thump, and turned in place to catch her breath. The photo frame displayed at eye-level on the curio shelves caught her eye; she picked it up to study it, brushing stray ringlets from her eyes with the other hand.

"This is her, yeh? Your Anna?"

Greg straightened up, tugging at the hem of his T-shirt. "Uh-huh, that's her. That was taken at her Mum's house, Christmas morning. Bloke on the right's her middle brother Justin."
"You both look very happy."

"Mm, yeah. That was a real good day," he replied, with a faraway little smile.

Sally replaced the frame on its shelf and turned to face him. "I noticed you hadn't been talking about her, today. Everything okay?"

He felt the smile drop away. "What? Yeah, sure, 'course it is."

"Well, now I definitely don't believe you."

"Look—" His chest suddenly felt as if it had a weight pressing down upon it; he took an abrupt step backward, stepping over to his own displaced sleeper sofa. "I was trying to spare you, Sal, for one thing. I know I get off on tangents when I talk about her. But anyway, all this today, it wasn't about Anna. All of this,"—he gestured around at the crowded living room—"this was about getting over Tracy, getting her out of my bloody head, and you know it. I needed to do it for me. Not for Anna."

"I don't disagree," said Sally mildly.

"Hello, I don't even know if—"

"If what?"

"She might not come back." He choked into a near-whisper at the last words, sick at himself for daring to say them out loud.

"God, Greg. Really?" Sally looked shocked, which he supposed wasn't surprising. She'd never met Anna, never made any assumptions beyond seeing how besotted he'd been since October.

The wave of emotion was rolling over him, sudden and sharp; he turned abruptly from her and sat down hard on the sofa, studying his clenched hands. "About two weeks ago, she phoned me up out of the blue at six in the morning, and basically outright confirmed everything I'd been trying not to notice in her calls. She's got doubts, she's having second thoughts—she feels real bad about it, sure, but she's gotta think it all over."

"Okay..."

"An' the worst part is, I get it. I fucking understand, right? What I'm expecting her to do—that's huge. More than most people ever do for love. Anna's a widow, she's only just figuring out how to be on her own, and here I am bein' selfish an' lonely an' stupid..."

"It's not stupid, Greg," Sally told him softly, but he continued speaking right over her.

"She's got it good, in Chicago, y'know? Nice little house, pretty neighbourhood, she's reunited with one of her best friends from university...When I talk to her, she seems so—happy." He sniffed and squeezed his eyes shut. "We've Skyped twice since she told me she was thinking hard, and talked on the phone three times. I dunno, I kept thinking maybe she'd tell me she was setting a date to visit...but no."

"Did you ask?"

"Fuck, no! I'm not that much of an arsehole. I tell Anna I love her, I tell her I miss her, I promise her I'm here for her, but I fucking swear I will not pressure that woman. This is her decision. An' if—" His voice broke, and when he resumed it was soft and hollow: "If I'm losing her, then at least
I've done right by her while I could.

There was a short silence, and then a tentative arm came around his shoulders.

"You're a good man, Greg," murmured Sally. "Hang in there."

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SHERLOCK: Scheduled Maintenance

Chapter Summary

Every third Monday, Sherlock cleans house. But there are certain rooms he still has trouble sweeping out...

7. SHERLOCK: Scheduled Maintenance

(20 April 2015)

The small sounds of Baker Street had always held a tidal flow.

Sometimes Sherlock lay in stillness for hours and let the pulse of the city sink into his bones, let it spread and stretch until it became the framework upon which he built a higher plane of thought. Sometimes he simply listened to observe the pull and rush of the passing traffic, noting its changing rhythms purely for themselves, for the sure comforting knowledge of them. Tonight, he listened to unlock his memories.

Before Moriarty, Sherlock had felt entirely in tune with his city, and most especially with Baker Street. He had once postulated that, having been hypothetically unconscious and insensate, he could awake blindfolded inside 221B at any given moment—and yet would be able to pinpoint within three minutes the season, day of the week and approximate time, purely through analysis of the ambient sounds outside.

Of course, this theory had never been tested prior to his leap from St Bart's rooftop. There was little chance it ever could be tested in any meaningful sense—it required, after all, an implausible and fantastically unrealistic set of conditions—but, now?

Now, Sherlock was no longer so sure of himself.

It had been ten months since his return to London: ten months since he had begun the long process of explaining himself, abasing himself, and regaining acceptance in the hearts of those he esteemed. He'd returned to Baker Street a wholly changed man, and had unwittingly attempted to fit himself directly back into his old place in life. He had not expected difficulty; or, if he had, he hadn't expected it to come predominantly from within his own mind.

There had been a period of weeks, early on, during which Sherlock had despaired of ever feeling at home. His hair had been dyed back to something like its original deep brown; but it was too short, and its texture was still rough and dry. He wore his old suits and shirts again, but they fit too loosely in the waist and too tightly in the shoulders, as if he were an impostor playacting in a costume meant for someone else. Even the taste of tea—a sense memory upon which he had fixated, in isolated boltholes too numerous to count—should have been comforting, but had instead been unfamiliar and disconcerting in those initial days. Adding to these discomforts the volatile, unpredictable anger of his flatmate, the clingy mothering of his landlady, and the inexplicably
mournful eyes of his Detective Inspector at their every meeting...it was little wonder that Sherlock had felt the very sounds of the street outside to be harshly alien.

Slowly, over the course of those initial three months, the pain of readjustment had lessened and given way to the pain of longing—achingly similar to a pain which had grown to follow him around the world, except that this hurt stood in the constant proximity of its object. Sherlock had lain and listened to the traffic intently, night after long night; he had stood in the centre of his Mind Palace and tried to use the hum of tyres and hushing purr of engines as a tool, to carve out space in a chest which seemed too full and small.

And then a stranger had been added to the mix, remarkable in a wholly undistinguished way: an outsider who saw Sherlock without superimposing the image of his corpse across his face, who had accepted him at once without assumptions or expectations based on his past, and who therefore had clearly seen what he'd been hiding. She had brought his unwilling sentiment to the surface, convincing him at last to make the confession that had changed everything.

After her first intercession, that change had not necessarily been for the better. Over eleven weeks, Sherlock's uncertain optimism had dwindled, allowing doubt to worm its way in alongside his ribs like a sharp splinter; but Anna had returned—more accurately, they had all three returned to her—and then things had suddenly fallen into place, all at once.

The time since that overwhelming New Year's Eve had shifted something beneath Sherlock's skin. He wasn't yet sure what, exactly, had changed. He only knew that the world felt polarised, too bright and too dark by turns. In so many ways, he felt that his existence continued to hinge upon some unseen, inevitable consequence: that the other shoe would drop, eventually, and that everything he had would be taken away. This feeling of nameless dread was nothing new. He had felt it a few times before he'd ever met John; he had felt it often after moving into 221B with the doctor, and it had gripped him quite strongly in Dartmoor. He had run hard to escape it for three years, for it had grown into the fear that nothing he did would prove enough to keep those he valued safe. And lately, on quiet nights like this, while the growl of passing lorries carried him gently into self-reflection, that fear took a few very distinctive forms.

"Sherlock."

Jerking half-upright with a startled pull of breath, he opened his eyes to see John's compact silhouette in the doorway to the kitchen, backlit by the hanging fluorescent tube.

"Sorry," John said, taking a step into the room, his face still cloaked in darkness; "didn't know you were that deep. I thought you'd heard me a minute ago."

"You asked me something?"

"I just wanted to know if I should leave that curry to sit out, if you'd be wanting to have some later. I know you don't like it as much when you reheat it cold from the fridge."

"Mm." Sherlock gave this a moment's thought. "Thank you, but no. I'm not hungry tonight."

"If you're sure." He half-turned, and hesitated. "I'm off to bed."
"I can see that."

"Right. D'you..."

"What?"

There was a long silence. "Nothing. Goodnight, then, love."

"Goodnight, John," he murmured, easing his head back upon the small pillow and refolding his hands beneath his chin. He watched through lowered lashes as John's shadow moved across the kitchen.

The fridge door thumped closed, and then the kitchen bulb clicked off, leaving the front room in near darkness. Sherlock waited and listened until John's footsteps had made it to the room overhead, shuffled about a bit and ceased with a muted creak of bedsprings.

I hope he doesn't have nightmares again tonight, he thought, frowning. Another occurrence would make it three nights running, by Sherlock's count. He understood that John was reluctant to admit his problem, even after their week in America had established that there was at least one way to ameliorate the symptoms. There must be a limit, though, and three nights is too much. I'll have to insist, tomorrow, if he will not ask me himself. Why does he not simply ask?

Biting back a sigh, he put those worries aside and resettled himself. If there were to be a nightmare, it would not occur until after John had been asleep for at least seventy-five minutes. He had plenty of time to begin his usual process, now, without fear of being interrupted.

Every third Monday, barring an active case or other complication, Sherlock's habit was to sit up alone late at night and perform his maintenance.

He'd first adopted the memory organisation technique of the Mind Palace in very early adolescence, though it had taken him years to master it and refine it into the highly functional system he used now. The greatest drawback in the use of the memory rooms had always lain in the excess detail gathered by his eidetic faculties...and so by necessity he had learned deletion, experimenting with various depths and frequencies until he'd eventually found the most efficient way to handle the endless influx. As it stood now, the process was fairly straightforward, streamlined over many years into a comforting ritual: controlling the clutter of unneeded information kept his senses sharp and ready.

One by one, Sherlock noted and closed away the extraneous inputs of the room: the gently muffled ticking of the old Regulator clock Mrs Hudson had hung in the hall to the right of their sitting room door...the tangy scent of leftover curry, still lingering faintly in the air even after John had put it away...the light pressure point near his left elbow, where two back cushions of the sofa made a seam. The rhythm of the street outside had already been fully internalised; he was ready. On to it, he thought, his eyelids fluttering once as he sank down into the neat corridors of his mind.

Pull forward, analyse, categorise: file, moderate, or delete.
Pull forward, analyse, categorise: file, moderate, or delete.
Pull forward, analyse, categorise: file, moderate, or delete.
The minor annoyances of the past weeks and the details of Mrs Hudson's idle gossip were quickly shuttled away. The endless minutiae of useless news items he'd gathered were sifted and checked over, searched for possible connections, and then blurred or wiped away entirely. All of the city passersby whose unimportant faces had burned themselves pointlessly into his crowded mind were methodically dealt with, as per usual. Then, finished with his routine work, he moved further back, as had been his habit of the past ten months' sessions.

Begin with one.

He stood in the centre of a dark, unloved room. No smooth floors of pale wood, no rugs or incidental furnishings finished the space: only short expanses of grey painted wall marked off the spaces between featureless metal doors. Each bore a plain paper tag, similar to those typical of file cabinet drawers, labelled with a word or two in a plain hand.

Sherlock took a deep breath. Begin with one, he repeated, and turned a slow circle, choosing a tag at random. Las Vegas. A suitable candidate, relatively minor, no scars. It should be simple. Now, remove it.

He concentrated on the blank door and the memories closed behind it.

The two blonde women in the basement laundry. One attacked me from behind as I subdued the other.

Careful and determined, he initiated his mental procedure for full deletion. After all the steps were complete, he wiped back over the area a second time, to thoroughly rub out any lingering stains of the events. The paper marker turned to ash and blew away; the door shimmered and became somewhat indistinct.

Satisfied at last, Sherlock set his jaw and stepped forward to crack open the door. The space should be clean and empty, now.

The laundry was below Circus Circus. I kicked the second assassin in the head to end the combat before cuffing them both to a structural column for retrieval by local authorities. I never found out if she survived the injury...

"Damn it all!"

The uncharacteristic curse was loud in the darkened room as Sherlock propelled himself upright and off the sofa.

"What more can I do?" he muttered under his breath, pacing in a tight circle. "I've done it chronologically, I've started with the easiest episode, I've started with the most traumatic, I've used random selection. I've even tried doing them all simultaneously. I've doubled the usual procedure, even tripled it!"

Fifteen attempts since June, and fifteen abject failures. Everything else works perfectly, the same as always. I don't understand why I can't be rid of these things!

He became aware of pain, and realised he was pulling hard at his hair with both hands.
Growling, he snatched up the nearest distraction to hand—moments later the room filled with the atonal squeals of tormented violin strings. Riding the wave of his frustration, Sherlock gave no thought to the time; he simply let the dissonant scrape of his bow express his feelings.

"Everything all right, Sherlock?"

He continued to saw away angrily, grinding his teeth in time with the harsh, violent strokes, glaring sightlessly out at the street.

"Hey! Sherlock!"

This time, the voice reached him. He whipped around, dragging his bow in a final clashing scream over the strings, and saw John standing in the doorway. By the glow of streetlamps filtering in the front windows, he automatically noted the relevant details: Arms crossed. Eyes half-closed. Hair mussed. Frowning; I've woken him from sound sleep.

Sherlock dropped his arms, letting the instrument dangle at his side. "John. You were sleeping."

"I was, yeah. And half the street probably was, too. Dare I ask what's got you so upset?"

"I... I can't control my own mind, he wanted to say. He simply couldn't. "I'm sorry, John."

His friend paused; the shadowed planes of his face shifted in the dim light. "It's all right, you know. You don't have to tell me. I don't tell you, when I—"

"You could," Sherlock broke in softly. They stood quietly across from each other; Sherlock timed three breaths with the quiet ticking of the hall clock. An empty lorry clattered past.

John broke the silence. "S'pose I could. Don't need to, tonight." Giving in to a large yawn, he stepped over to his chair and sat down.

"You're not going back to bed?"

"You're not putting away the violin," he pointed out.

Sherlock hadn't even noticed he was still clutching it; he looked down in mild surprise. "I will. Of course I will. You were sleeping."

"I don't mind. Now that I'm awake I think I'd like to just sit and relax for awhile. If that's okay with you."

"You...want me to play."

"If it helps with whatever bothered you, yeah. Just—play something a little more pleasant, maybe? It's two thirty in the morning, after all."

He studied his companion silently. John was like a pale, smeary glow in the low light, bare feet poking out below his dove-grey flannel bottoms, his white T-shirt rumpled and stretched out at the neck. Even his hair looked lighter than usual, when contrasted to the surrounding darkness. Angelic, Sherlock's mind supplied, apropos of nothing; without analysing the impulse, he stepped close and carefully bent forward to touch his lips in a slow press to John's cheek.

John smelled like toothpaste and clean sheets. His face shifted softly against Sherlock's mouth as he smiled.

Stepping back, Sherlock raised his arms into position and began a soothing Mendelssohn sonata.
Anna's best girlfriend has driven up for a visit, to commemorate a very important date.

Chapter Summary

8. ANNA: Save the Date
(18 April - 21 April 2015)

"Coming through!"

Anna stood back from the door and gaped as her friend trundled up from the front walk, heavily loaded down. "What the heck, Liz? I thought you were staying for a long weekend, not moving in!"

"Oh, I didn't tell you I ran away from home?" Liz turned and looked at her over the top of her dark sunglasses. "Kidding, geez! It's just a few extra things," she laughed, dumping her armloads of bags in the centre of the living room.

"A few extra things..."

Liz ran a hand through her dark blonde curls, surveying the pile. "Well, that bag there is from your Mom, I guess it's clothes and stuff; and that paper bag there's from her too. She sent me up with brownies!"

"Mm. That's nice, but it only explains about a third of this mess."

"I just thought you sounded way too stressed out and sad the last few weeks, Anna-bear! So, I brought up my Super Emergency Makeover Kit—"

"Oh god."

"—and that bag has fixings for my special pasta salad, and that one has fixings for piña coladas. Oh yeah, and this bag here is for you too; I brought you a really sweet new yoga mat!"

Anna crossed her arms and tried to keep a straight face. "So you're planning a nice full weekend: you're gonna fatten me up, liquor me up, paint me up like a hussy, and then we'll do sun salutations together. Sounds like a blast..." She broke into a wide grin and leaped forward to grab the woman in a fierce hug. "Thanks, Lizzie!"

She patted Anna's back, and kissed her on the cheek with lips that smelled like coconut. "No problem, hon. Mood improvement is what I do best! It's a girlfriend's most important duty."

"You just want to make sure I regret moving up here, don't you? I already missed you loads, you know," said Anna, scooping up the bags her friend had pointed out as destined for the kitchen.
Liz followed her through the house, stretching her slender, toned arms overhead to shake off the six hours' drive. "It's okay. I was thinking about moving on from Columbus too, actually."

"Really? You weren't kidding about running away then?"

"It wouldn't be running away, Anna. I'm a free spirit! I'm tired of being locked down. It's a great town and all, but I need something new. I've actually already put in my notice; I didn't want to let myself chicken out once I'd decided."

Anna put the drink mix in the freezer. "So you're going to quit teaching at the studio and find a new city to rule. Where do you want to go next?"

"I'm considering the Philadelphia area. I got good vibes when I went through there last Christmas on the way to Vicki's place."

"So, not quite your old New Jersey hometown..."

"But close enough to visit more often, yeah. She and Marissa have been a lot easier to get along with, lately. I thought it might be nice to participate in the family stuff a little more, for a while."

"That'll be a change. I was pretty surprised you even spent Christmas out there!"

Liz snorted, rummaging in the fridge and helping herself to some orange juice. "It turned out a lot better than I expected. They've mellowed out, y'know? It must be—" She broke off talking suddenly as they both heard a knock at the front door.

"I'm not expecting anyone besides you," said Anna, returning to the front of the house. When she opened the door, she saw a smiling man carrying a clipboard and a cardboard box with a protruding mass of transparent green plastic wrapping.

"Flower delivery for Ms Anna Clark? Sign here please..."

After Anna had signed her name and thanked him, she turned back into the house; Liz excitedly waited just behind her. "Ooh, let's see it, come on!"

She carried it to the dining room table to unwrap the packaging. The two of them together lifted a pretty glass vase from the box, and then Anna removed the plastic to reveal the bouquet: vivid tiger lilies mixed with red and white roses.

She stepped back from the table, the tips of two fingers pressing at her lips as she stared at the pretty blooms.

"Oh, these are beautiful," enthused Liz, leaning over to sniff deeply and brush her hand over a soft cloud of baby's breath. "You didn't look at the card, Anna, here you—what's wrong?"

Anna jumped as if she'd been shocked. "Nothing." She took the tiny envelope from her friend's outstretched hand. "He remembered."

"Looks like." Liz tilted her head. "That's not a bad thing."

"No. No, of course it isn't." I barely even mentioned this date to him, she thought, fumbling at the paper flap. Inside, in the neat faux-cursive font of the florist, the message read:

To Anna. We both love you very much, now and always. Yours, Greg
Hours later, they'd already made good on many of Liz's promises for their weekend. The leftovers of the decadent pasta salad were stored in the fridge, enough for a second day's lunch. Now they sat cross-legged on the sofa together in their pyjamas, tropical drinks close at hand, watching *The Breakfast Club* with only a fraction of their attention while they faced each other and talked.

Liz held Anna's right hand still on her own raised knee, carefully applying dark red polish to the nails. "You could've called him."

"I texted him a thank you. He was working, we only text while he's working unless there's an emergency." It was an excuse, but it was at least *mostly* true.

"Hm. Are you going to call him later?" She skilfully painted the pinky with two smooth strokes and released Anna's hand.

Anna leaned over and grabbed her drink, passing it carefully to her painted hand before giving over the other. "Yeah, probably..."

"What is the *deal* with you, Anna? I know today's a hard day to handle, but you're acting really strange."

She frowned. Today would have been her seventeenth wedding anniversary. Much as she appreciated her best friend's purposely timed visit, with its variety of enjoyable distractions, she knew that the reasons behind her melancholy went deeper; and, apparently, Liz could tell, too.

"You and Chaz both," she muttered. "I can't get a damn thing past you."

"Of course you can't. So, give up trying, would'ya? Save a girl some time."

Anna had a hard enough time explaining the reasons behind her upset to herself; she had no *idea* how to put it into words at this point. Her brows lowered and closed in on each other as she thought.

Liz sighed, drawing the polish brush over Anna's thumbnail and correcting a tiny slip with a quick scrape of her own manicured nail. "Come on, hon. It's me, okay? You can tell me anything. We've been through a lot."

"I know." Her nails done, Anna reclaimed her hand. She drew her own knees up in front of her on the sofa and took a long sip of her piña colada. "You remember the week before my wedding..."

Liz twirled one fluffy curl between her fingers. "You mean when I had to sit up with you all night convincing you not to panic and call it off? Pretty sure I'll never forget that. God, Anna, you're not about to break up with him?"

"...No?" She entertained the idea, for a split second, of not having Greg in her life—and her stomach dropped immediately. "No. No, I can't," she said, shaking her head vehemently enough that her fine brown hair swept into her eyes and caught in her lashes.

"Well, that's something anyway," Liz said; she leaned forward and gently brushed the hair away from Anna's face for her, so that her handiwork wouldn't be ruined.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Lizzie! I know how much I love him. But I just can't stop
thinking about the reasons it shouldn't work, and how hard it'll be to get myself untangled if it goes wrong. I get that it's silly...."

"It's not silly. You're trying to be cautious, and that's not bad. But you're letting yourself get hung up in the negative. You've gotta let go of that, honey."

Anna looked from her still-wet nails to her friend's earnest brown eyes. "I really wish you'd been in Columbus for Christmas. It'd be so much easier to talk to you about Greg if you could've actually met him."

"Yeah," Liz agreed, "I was kicking myself that I missed out on that, for sure. Especially after that super-hot story you told me when we were driving up here that first time!"

As she blushed, Anna thought back to her distorted memories of that strange road trip from Columbus to Chicago. She'd been fresh off the plane from London, and jetlag had combined with her fragile emotional state—having been separated from her new love and on the way to her oldest friend's funeral—to make her fairly free with her words. Probably a little bit too free.

"Um. Yeah, well, he would've got a real kick out of you, too, Liz," she managed with a chagrined smile.

When Anna emerged from her bedroom the next morning, she realised within moments that she didn't need to tiptoe. Liz was clearly already up for the day: the comforting aroma of coffee wafted down the hall, and as she got closer to the front of the house, Anna could hear the muted clicking of laptop keys.

"Morning, sunshine," chirped the svelte, tanned blonde from her seat at the dining room table. Her hair was piled in a messy topknot, and she wore a stretchy workout top paired with a saggy, threadbare pair of varsity-style sweatpants that Anna recognised as a relic from their university days.

"You already made coffee, you wonderful, wonderful woman," yawned Anna in reply, tightening her bathrobe around her as she padded past to pour a cup.

"I am wonderful. And you know why?"

"Hm, is it because you didn't ask me to get up for a sunrise yoga session with you?"

Liz laughed. "You would've loved it, don't lie. But I'll let you slide 'til after breakfast." Turning her computer on the table, she beckoned Anna over. "No, I'm wonderful because I'm reconnecting with my family!"

"Okay...I have to say, I'm not quite following that..." Anna leaned in to peer at the screen. "Who are you emailing with?"

"This is my great-aunt on my father's side, Celeste Biancardi. Zia Celeste still lives in northern Italy, and she's invited me to visit for a few weeks, starting near the end of May."

"That sounds nice for you, hon. I don't see what that has to do with me, though?"
"Well, I was thinking, a nice long trip to Italy might be just what I need to clear my head...but it could be so much nicer than that. I've always wanted to see London, you know."

"Wait, are you suggesting we—"

"Go together, yes! I can stay in London for a week, and then take a train to Italy; look." She was clicking through the tabs she had open: rail travel information, airline websites, a calendar. "You're nervous to go back, so take me along as a companion. Not only will I finally get to meet this man of yours, I'll be on hand to rescue you if anything gets awkward, and by the end of the week I'll be able to give you my full, unadulterated opinion on the whole thing. What do you say?"

Anna sat down next to her and was silent for a minute, scanning over the flight schedules Liz had chosen. It looked like she had found a combination of flights that would get them to London for hundreds of dollars less than the options Anna had been looking at.

"These flights are only about three weeks away," Anna pointed out; but the objection was half-hearted at best. The idea of returning to London with a close friend by her side was becoming more appealing by the second, and Liz's bouncy, fizzing excitement was contagious, as usual.

Liz grinned, jumping up and grabbing her empty coffee mug. Her energetic voice rang brightly off the surfaces in the kitchen as she spoke from out of sight. "That's plenty of time to make arrangements and get our visas in order, if we both get on it right away. C'mon, Anna-bear! Do you wanna do this with me, or not?"

Anna looked up at the vase of flowers in the centre of her table, and smiled.

" Heck, yeah. It sounds like a perfect idea," she answered.

At about five minutes to four on Tuesday, Liz was capping off their four day girls' weekend by fussing over Anna's hair and makeup in the bathroom.

"Keep it simple, Lizzie, geez! I don't want to look too dolled up!"

"There's no harm in looking extra nice for the person you love," replied her friend, leaning back to judge her work before swooping back in with the eyeshadow brush.

"But he's not here. You'll make him think I'm on my way out to a nightclub as soon as we hang up!"

"What, we're not? I hear the Tuesday afternoon scene is killer." Liz responded to Anna's peeved look with a giggle and a deftly wielded hand mirror. "Oh, hush, it's not so bad. See? Here, put on this lip gloss and it'll be perfect."

"Huh. Okay, I like it. You've gotta show me that trick with the eyeliner..." As she applied the mandated gloss, she pulled her phone from her pocket to see the time. "Crap, only one minute! Is this top okay? Okay. Um. Just give me a minute before you jump in, all right?"

More giggling followed Anna up the hall. "You are too cute! I won't say anything 'til you introduce me, but I'm not gonna miss seeing his face when he picks up." Liz stationed herself off to one side
of her chair, clearly within view of the webcam, and refused to be shooed.

Right on time, the beep signalled the incoming chat. Here goes, Anna thought, shifting in her seat as she tried to dispel her last-second nerves.

"Happy Tuesday, love!"

And just like that—her nervousness was gone, melted away before Greg's bright, beaming smile. "Happy Tuesday, baby. Thanks again for the flowers the other day."

"It wasn't weird? I was afraid it would be weird," he said, scratching the back of his head self-consciously.

"Well, there's not exactly a Hallmark card for acknowledging your widow girlfriend's wedding anniversary, is there?"

His face went through a quick series of uncomfortable-looking contortions on the screen.

"Seriously. Greg, it was fine. It was really good. Thank you."

He sighed and gave her a relieved little smile. "It's bloody brilliant to see you again, Anna. Been a rough sort of week, here..."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, well, work was keeping us busy. One of the sergeants in the Serious and Organised division just went on paternity leave, and it left a team shorthanded, so we were picking up slack. We had a couple nights that ran pretty late. An' it didn't help I wrecked my back a bit cleaning up that room in my flat last Wednesday," he admitted.

Anna tutted in sympathy. "Ouch. Sorry sweetie. But hey, I know you've been wanting to get that done for a while, right? I'll bet you—oww!" Her arm was suddenly smarting from a hard pinch; she and Greg appeared to be equally surprised at the reminder of her guest's presence.

"Okay, I take it I'm supposed to introduce you to Liz now," Anna laughed, scooting over onto the right side of the seat.

"Ah, it's a pleasure," Greg told her, looking a little embarrassed that he hadn't had eyes for anything on his screen but Anna. "I've heard nothing but good things about you, Liz. To be honest, I was a bit disappointed we weren't able to meet at Christmas."

Liz grinned as she sat down and leaned in. "Same here, on both counts! Which is why I'm really happy about the news we've got to tell you today..."
JOHN: An Open Procedure

Chapter Summary

A peaceful weekend is shattered by bad news, and John does his best to cope...

9. JOHN: An Open Procedure

(7 May - 8 May 2015)

The afternoon was warm and quiet. Sun filtered in bright streamers through the curtains, picking out rich mahogany highlights in the edges of Sherlock's curls. He was occupied with an update to the Science of Deduction website; everything about his bearing was poised and still, except his fingers. They flew in intermittent rapid bursts, making the muted clatter of the keyboard almost the only sound in the room.

Earlier, John had planned to organise a few things around the flat, taking advantage of the peaceful mood. He'd thought it a simple task, and had begun with cheerfully determined purpose. The soporific hush had led his mind to wandering, however, and now he was crouched in the corner of the living room, looking for a particular volume on Norse mythology and history he recalled owning from his university days. He remembered that there had been an interesting section discussing textiles and decorative tradition, and a recent chat online with Anna had brought the topic back to his mind. Now, with her arrival just over a week away—Greg had been glowing with anticipation on their last pub night—John had decided to try and find it for her.

They heard the downstairs door open and close, followed by a tread upon the stair.

"Mycroft," muttered Sherlock at once, raising his head from the computer with a faint grimace.

John heard it too: the distinctive, precise rhythm of the footfalls, accompanied by the synchronised tap of the ubiquitous umbrella. He stood, abandoning his search through the teetering stacks of books piled before their overflowing shelves, and began to brush dust from the knees of his jeans as their visitor entered. "Afternoon, Mycroft."

"Yes," replied the man, walking two steps into the room and stopping short.

It wasn't the expected response to such a greeting, and from Mycroft's lips it practically shouted of distraction and upset: John had never known the man to be less than precise in his observation of formal niceties, however cuttingly he might deliver them. John's hands stilled mid-swipe on his thighs, and he glanced in a reflexive motion towards his flatmate.

"What is it now?" demanded Sherlock. He said it in his typical imperious fashion, but rose promptly from the table to face his brother; the words were a gesture that served to maintain their normal habit of mutual antagonism, but the action was a clear confirmation of John's instinctive alert.
Mycroft remained still a fractional moment longer, then visibly gathered his usual armour of polite ritual about himself. "Sherlock. I've come to inform you of news regarding Father. He saw his doctor yesterday for pain in his lower back and midsection; they've now confirmed an abdominal aortic aneurysm."

John cast his mind immediately into his textbook knowledge. He understood the implications. Stepping forward to join the others near the centre of the room, he asked, "Not ruptured?"

"No, but it's grown to nearly six centimetres. Immediate action was advised."

Sherlock had gone rigid, frozen across from his brother in an uncomfortable tableau; the hard edges of John's voice cut into the swelling silence. "Have they decided on an EVAR procedure, or open surgery?"

Mycroft inclined his head a fraction in John's direction, his eyes still on Sherlock. "In Father's case, his specialist has elected to perform an open procedure; the aneurysm is too close to his renal arteries to allow the use of a stent."

"How soon?" was John's next terse question. His thoughts were already racing ahead, plotting likely surgical scenarios and tabulating the average recovery rates. He saw from the corner of his eye that Sherlock had still failed to move a muscle, but he knew it was unnecessary to sugar-coat his reactions on his partner's behalf. Assess the situation first. I can explain it to him later, if he needs me to.

The shelves of 221B boasted a wide range of medical texts, and only something like half of those belonged to John; it was entirely possible that Sherlock would need no instruction on this topic.

"He checks in late tomorrow morning; the operation should be underway by two." The elder Holmes had his cool blue eyes fixed upon the younger, assessing the lack of visible reaction that was almost tantamount to gnashing of teeth. Seeing that he was unlikely to gain a verbal response, he finally turned to John, pasting a thin, diplomatic smile across his lips. "His vascular surgeon will be Professor Frederick Wu, currently consulting at Saint Bartholomew's. All arrangements have been made at that location. I trust we shall see you?"

"Of course," John affirmed without hesitation. "We'll be there, of course. I've met Wu; he's a very good choice," he added, more to reassure Sherlock than anything else.

"I am aware."

The next hours had crept along in a steady blur; a few carefully chosen questions had been enough to assure John that Sherlock did, indeed, have a ready grasp on the ramifications of his father's diagnosis—and that he was less than willing to discuss it. The aneurysm, a localised ballooning of the abdominal aorta, was most common in men around Cliff's age, and most often presented with no symptoms; rupture was a major risk, with a high mortality rate. As John brushed his teeth the next morning, he thought back on the details Mycroft had reported: Mr Holmes had seen his doctor for back and abdominal pain, two of only a few infrequently presented symptoms of the dangerous condition. He'd been experiencing back pain last month, too, I remember Miriam mentioning it. It may have been a symptom of this the whole time... Shaking his head, he spat into the sink and wiped a towel over his frown. All in all, it was a very good thing that Mr Holmes had seen fit to go
in to his GP when he had. An aneurysm grown to such a size was courting disaster, and a rupture would likely have meant death within minutes.

John hadn't slept well. The relative isolation of his upstairs bedroom had never been much of an issue for him—quite the opposite, in fact, on many an occasion—but during the previous night, the hallways and the flight of stairs separating him from his partner had seemed a tangible, malevolent force. There had been no noise from downstairs; neither nervous violin nor the thumps and quiet mutters of agitated pacing had reached John's straining ears. Nevertheless, he had continued to listen hard for any sign that he might be needed.

After his brother's departure, Sherlock had quickly erected a wall around himself, turning what had been a pleasant, companionable afternoon into a tense, silent wait. As the evening had dragged on, John had repeatedly attempted to draw his friend into conversation. But no matter what he said, or how he tried to provide small comfort, Sherlock had simply huffed and turned away, eventually shutting himself into his bedroom. Faced with such obvious unhappiness, and left with nothing at all to do about it, John felt helpless. He'd exchanged a series of texts with Greg, explaining the situation and venting his upset a bit, in an attempt to release the building pressure of his inaction; he knew, however, that Sherlock had likely sat up all night, silently winding himself even tighter.

All I can do is be here, he told himself eventually, deliberately squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin to confront his own tired reflection. If he needs anything else from me, he'll ask. Surely.

John checked his watch and frowned. Emerging from the bathroom, he called out on his way down the hall, "It's time to go, Sher—"

The other man already awaited him at the door, ready in his coat and scarf. His face was utterly expressionless.

The waiting room for the surgical suite at Barts was large enough to provide space for two or three families, but this afternoon it was almost deserted. John suspected Mycroft's involvement, somehow, but he was somewhat disinclined to think of it as a selfish gesture: having seen the way Sherlock had behaved towards the few nurses and orderlies they'd seen so far, he rather thought it a favour to the hospital as a whole.

Cliff had been somewhat subdued, but still alert and full of his cheerful, gentle wit, when their group had seen him off to his final surgical prep. After he had been wheeled away, Miriam had turned to her elder son, taking his elbow and speaking in a matter-of-fact tone. "I can't possibly stay here for seven hours. Hospitals never fail to make me anxious, and this is simply not the time. Mycroft, you'll escort me to supper; and then we shall retire to your home and wait in comfort. You're of course welcome to accompany us, Sherlock, John?"

Sherlock, unsurprisingly, had staunchly refused the offer to join them. As he had submitted reluctantly to a hug and kiss from his mother—a sight that John had certainly never thought to see—Greg Lestrade had appeared at the waiting room door.

Thankfully, the DI's relative position had been such that Sherlock couldn't see his faintly disbeliefing smirk. John had caught his eye and nodded a greeting; as Miriam and Mycroft took their leave, Greg had held the door for them and followed them out, exchanging quiet words.
It had been almost half an hour since their wait had begun, now. John slumped forward in one of the uncomfortable seats, resting his forearms on his knees and morosely studying his clasped hands. At a noise, he looked up to see that Greg had returned to the waiting area.

The older man stood before him and looked down at him with arms crossed. "John. You two should find somewhere to be...not here." His voice was quiet and stern, but not unkind.

John sighed and rubbed his hands over his head, standing tiredly. "You know he won't go."

"I'm not saying to try to get him to leave, I know that's a lost cause. 'D' hall behind the Path lab, or somewhere in the upper floors maybe, yeh? Surely you know a good place, between the two of you. There won't be anything to hear for a long while yet..."

"I know it. But how'm I supposed to keep him distracted?" They both looked across the waiting area to where Sherlock was pacing a frenetic circle around a small block of the blue-upholstered chairs.

Greg smiled grimly, reaching down to the seat behind him and lifting his folded overcoat to reveal the small rectangular cool box underneath. "Here. Take this, drag him off somewhere, and try to get him to relax."

It was red with a white lid, quite similar to the cool boxes frequently used for samples in Pathology but, thankfully, clearly not marked for biological or chemical use. Cocking his head quizzically, John leaned down to crack the lid and peek inside. Wrapped sandwiches, and a bag of crisps, and underneath...

"Six-pack of Heineken and two chicken butties, best I could do on short notice. Go on now, take it."

"You're a good friend, you know that?"

"Damn straight, I am. Don't you forget it, either."

John actually laughed, at that; it felt unfamiliar, already, though it had been only just over a day since this had all begun.

"Greg, will you be..."

"Staying here?" The DI nodded. "Yes. Stay somewhere with cell reception; you'll hear from me straight away if there's anything to report. It's likely Mycroft won't bring Mrs Holmes back in until at least seven."

He glanced back at Sherlock, and shifted his weight from foot to foot. It was tempting, and unarguably a good idea to get Sherlock away from the waiting area awhile; but he was still reluctant. It seemed wrong, somehow, to expect Greg to sit in this place, waiting on news of someone who was no relation.

Greg interrupted his thoughts. "Hey, it's no problem. I've got nowhere to be. I know you'd do the same for me, John."

"You're right. And you can hold me to that, Greg. Thank you."
They sat side by side on the floor in the empty hallway John had chosen, backs against the wall. Their positions mirrored each other, feet spread wide and knees raised before them.

"I am beginning to understand why Lestrade sent us away," murmured Sherlock eventually, ostensibly calmer now than he had been in the past twenty-four hours.

"It probably has something to do with your complete inability to be around other people today. I'm actually surprised you're letting me stay anywhere near you." John took a swig of beer and studied his friend from the corner of his eye.

Sherlock heaved a sigh. "You're upset with me."

"No—not exactly. You have a right to be stressed out about this, and we all handle stress in our own way. But your dad's in good hands; you can trust me on that."

He made an indecipherable noise, and reached over to pull a bottle of his own from the cool box, to John's surprise. He cracked it open and drank down a full third of it before speaking again. "I found myself caught up in consideration of the possible complications. It was...difficult to move past that."

"So you're feeling a bit more confident in Professor Wu's surgical skill, now?"

"You were not concerned, John. If there were truly cause for me to worry, I would have noticed the telling signs in your behaviour. I may be inclined towards strong reactions, but I would be remiss if I failed to take our relationship into proper account."

"Well."

Our relationship, John repeated silently, recalling his outing with Mrs Holmes. What, exactly, does that entail, according to you? He sipped slowly at his bottle as he tried to organise his thoughts.

He had given the matter a fair bit of consideration since that day at Harrods, but had been unable to figure it out. It seemed as if Sherlock had been giving him mixed signals over the last few months. John had no problem with keeping an even keel, simply enjoying the basic closeness that was still so new for them both...but every now and then he caught a smouldering look in Sherlock's eyes that seemed to hint at the expectation of more. Though he'd hinted at edging things forward in response to what he thought he'd sensed, the reactions had been lukewarm at best, and more often almost dismissive; John had willingly backed off each time, afraid to upset their fragile balance.

Sherlock spoke again, after a time. "I have to say, I was somewhat surprised that Lestrade made such an effort to be present this afternoon."

"He hasn't got a lot to occupy his attention, I suppose. Slow week for cases, and Anna doesn't fly in 'til next weekend."

"I had noticed that Lestrade had been exponentially more distracted over the last few weeks."

He took another long draught. "I'm curious. In your opinion, would you attribute the intensity of his distraction purely to romantic doubts, or would you say that prolonged frustration of refreshed sexual urges is more to blame?"

John looked sidelong at the man by his side, trying to judge whether he was actually being serious. He certainly didn't expect Sherlock to be all that interested in their friend's relationship issues.

"Well?"
"Er..." What's he doing, conducting some sort of experiment? Trying to gather advance information on Anna's behalf, maybe? I gather the two of them exchanged advice on a few occasions...

"Surely you recognise that our partnership affords me ready access to a knowledge base outside of my own experience. I've taken advantage of that before, John."

"I suppose so, yes, but—"

"Considering the change in our status, I assumed that I could expand my inquiries into more personal topics, where I feel my experiential knowledge is lacking. As I am asexual, it should come as no surprise that I choose to defer to your expertise in such matters as this." He shrugged, his long neck loose and eloquent. "If you don't feel comfortable with that, I could always ask Lestrade to satisfy my curiosity himself. I feel you might consider that inappropriate, however..."

"Fine, yes, all right!" John did his best to come up with some sort of response, even as his mind raced in circles around the word that had been so casually tossed in. "I suppose I wouldn't rule out the sex thing entirely. But in Greg's case I'd have to guess it's down to something specific. D'you remember, three weeks ago? Something happened, I'm sure of it."

"Ah, yes..." Sherlock drained his bottle and reached for another. "Two events within that week, I should think. Unrelated, but both tied closely to the concept of self worth. Hm."

There was a brief silence; John shifted his seated position and considered his next move. All right, you heard it: he said 'asexual,' that's an opening, yeah? Go ahead, ask him. You've got to discuss this shit sometime. John opened his mouth and steel ed himself to speak...then snapped his jaw shut, long seconds later, with an aggrieved grimace.

"...Nope. Too damn British," he muttered.

Sherlock actually snorted and bit his lip on a wide grin, shockingly.

"Wanker," John returned, breaking into a slightly embarrassed smile.

"No. Not really."

"Wait—what? Really?"

"Nope." Sherlock popped his lips hard on the "p", twisting the neck of his beer bottle between his fingertips, pale wrists balanced on his knees. "Not if I can help it. Very, very rarely."

"Huh." Taking a long swig to finish his own bottle, John rested his head back against the wall and idly studied the ceiling. "You're not kidding then."

The detective drank, then tipped his head towards John with a raised brow. "Not in the slightest."

"Well, it's all fine. I mean, um." He brought the bottle up and stared through the green glass. "You might've made that a bit clearer to me a little sooner, though. Just a thought."

"What, and save you the trouble of worrying about it?"

"Yes, actually."
The second beer was gone, and John was beginning to wonder if he should have eaten first. The pleasant humming beginning to rise in the pit of his stomach made a fair counterpoint to their loose, wandering conversation; Sherlock's bass rumble echoed down the deserted corridor, skipping from topic to topic as the whim struck him. All things considered, it seemed that Greg's strategy had succeeded in distracting the man from the surgery still in progress elsewhere in the hospital.

When Sherlock fell briefly silent after a while, John braced himself for the topic of Mr Holmes' procedure to return; he was unprepared for what broke the quiet instead.

"You could always find a new girlfriend, you know."

"What?"

"You have needs, John. I won't be able to satisfy them; it's only logical that you should find a way to fulfil them." His voice had taken on the persuasive, scientific tone he tended to use when he was dead set on something ridiculous.

"Are you mad. You wa—" John checked himself on the word. "You manky git. You still really think I'm going to just leave you and go find someone else, like all of this, between us, is just..." He trailed off, vexed beyond the capacity to finish the thought.

"You're bisexual; I'm asexual. We have what we have, but you could go elsewhere for more. It's not a problem, John."

"I'm bi, yes." And wasn't that strange, saying it out loud as if it were nothing; as if it had been open knowledge between them from the beginning. As if a few so-brief experimentations in his youth, and the silly crush he'd had on his commanding officer those few uncomfortable weeks, had been enough to convince John he truly wasn't straight. Truth was, it hadn't been until after Sherlock's leap that he'd reluctantly admitted it to himself. Saying it out loud felt like popping a bubble; he repeated it to taste the word on his tongue. "I'm bisexual. But I'm not at all interested in other people! And I already told you what I wanted from you. Weren't you listening?"

"I always listen to you," sniffed Sherlock, taking another swig of beer.

John shook his head, grinning despite himself at the outright ironic humour in that statement. "Right, but you just don't believe me, is that it?"

There was a long silence at that. When Sherlock spoke again, his voice was subdued. "It seems so very illogical."

Sighing, John set his empty bottle next to its counterpart on his left side, then tipped an open hand to his partner. By the time Sherlock took the hint and passed him a third Heineken, he had gathered his thoughts enough to respond.

"I understand that you see a discrepancy between my past behaviours and my current ones," he admitted, cracking the cap off. "There's no precedent for this—it's certainly nothing like any relationship you've seen me in before."

"Mm. True."

"I don't know how many times it will take me telling you this before you believe it, Sherlock, but I'll try to be as plain as I can this time. Are you listening?"
Sherlock turned to meet his eyes directly, giving him a look that managed somehow to be simultaneously expectant and frustrated. \textit{I just told you, I always listen}, it said.

John felt one corner of his mouth twitch upward; schooling his face back to seriousness, he reached over to rest a hand on Sherlock's arm. "I want only what you want, and only in the way you want it. I want to give you exactly that. And now that I know where you stand on things, well, I think it'll be a lot easier for me to do."

"But what about you?" The moonstone eyes were searching his, now, twitching back and forth over John's face as if expecting to find evidence to belie his statement.

"You love me?"

A light flush rose on Sherlock's cheeks. "Yes."

"That's \textit{all} I need. Everything else is transport," he said, deliberately drawing the words out.

His partner blinked, and blinked again, and then smiled. He covered John's fingers on his arm with his own, and squeezed.

John's stomach attempted to do a triumphant little flip; with the sudden relief of the tension he'd carried, he realised he was ravenous. "Christ. Give over one of those sandwiches, would you?"

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Sitting on his own in the waiting room, Greg takes some time to think back on the past.

10. GREG: With Watchful Eyes

(8 May 2015)

Greg had waited in his fair share of hospitals, over the years. He'd seen a wide range of institutions, from the childhood summer he and his brother had been brought to see Mémé Éveline à l'hôpital in Toulouse, to the awful, blurry weeks of his mother's illness, to countless victim interviews and the aftermaths of various work-related incidents. There was a quiet sort of art to it, he supposed: remaining alert to the surroundings while neatly disconnecting oneself completely from them. In the incredible hush of this nearly empty waiting area, without other nervous strangers nearby sending their worries into the air around themselves like a palpable fog, Greg found it easy to wrap himself in a drifting, peaceful calm.

He did try, at first, to occupy his wait with thoughts of work; it had been a slow week, however, and he knew that Sally had things well in hand. Then, he ran yet another check through the things he needed to do at home: try as he might, he couldn't find another item important enough to add to his list. When Anna and her friend had told him about their plans two weeks ago, he'd leapt into action immediately. He'd performed a major deep-cleaning on his entire flat, and the place was sparkling now—surely cleaner than the day he'd signed the lease. As well, he'd sorted out as many loose ends as he could in the office: all of the various small accounting duties he tended to save up, for slow days at work and filling in empty hours. He didn't foresee wanting to spend any excess time at the Yard, over the next few months.

That line of thought, of course, led him straight back to Anna herself. Greg had been trying harder not to dwell on her absence, since he'd nearly broken down before Sally. It had been a massive relief when she'd given him a date, at last; a lifeline he'd latched on to, something to give the days meaning once more.

*Whoa there,* he said to himself, taking a mental step back from his musings. His internal voice was beginning to sound a little over-the-top, again. *Am I really, truly that lost without her?* The serenely quiet room, backed by the distant, reassuring hum of the hospital, was giving Greg a sense of relaxed clarity he rarely experienced. He resolved to take a clearer, more objective look.

Greg concentrated on seeing himself as he had been the previous August. He'd been officially divorced at that point for almost exactly two years...and for the most part they'd been two long, bleak years indeed, with Sherlock long dead and John practically a shell of the man he'd known. It wasn't just the yawning emotional chasm at Baker Street that had made Greg's life so grey. As much heartache as she'd given him, he had to admit that he'd relied on Tracy to provide the comfort
in his workaday existence; everything in his life that wasn't his job had touched her, in one way or another, for over nineteen years. *Four dating, two engaged, then thirteen married. No—eleven, I should say. It shouldn't count after she made me move out, really, should it?*

He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably and shifted on the small upholstered chair, focusing on the middle distance as his mind was thrown back far further than he'd intended. He reviewed the string of humiliations, the shouting matches, the confrontations and apologies and the spiralling cycle that had culminated in his finding the flat in Shepherd's Bush. He remembered each and every one of the crushing moments when Sherlock had pointed out signs of Tracy's infidelity over the years, and all of the gut-churning hours when he'd sat alone in the dark and thought about how it was all his fault. They'd always been a fiery couple, he and Tracy: they'd had their issues from the start, he knew, but fierce little rows here and there and there were a small price to pay for the intense passion in their relationship. Or so he'd thought.

They'd been on the outs for a month, he recalled—one of the first really big fights—when he'd met John Watson for the first time. These days, now that Douglas Bosch and his wife Kara had been away together on their anthropological work for the better part of five years, and most of the others in his old social circle had shown their true colours and sided with Tracy, Greg relied on John's solid, unassuming friendship in ways he never could have predicted back then. *Funny, innit? My best mate today never even knew me as anything but unhappily married.*

So he'd heeded Sherlock's tactless, painful warnings, though he hadn't been above trying to mend things at first. Even after he'd moved into his own flat, he'd been open for quite some time to the idea of reconciliation—because what was his life, after all, without his sweet little spitfire?

*It was work, was what. And then Sherlock was gone and so was my job, for a while. God, that was hell.* Greg swallowed a sigh and fast-forwarded through his crowded memories: appealing his suspension, mourning the detective, and trying to help John get through it as best he could, all while handling the shameful details of executing the divorce. Finally he brought himself back up to the summer he'd originally set out to remember, two full years later.

His second summer as a divorced man had begun in the same vein as the one before: as heat had risen in the streets of the city, Greg had used the seasonal rise in crimes of passion to distract himself from the utter lack of passion he felt for his own life. He'd kept his head down and thrown himself grimly into the work, with little more than a passing glance at the dozens of sweet young couples he saw each day, flushed and dizzy with love in cafés and on the Tube. If he'd longed for the companionship of a woman at all, it hadn't registered in more than the fuzzy half-remembered dreams that he'd rinsed down the plughole with his morning showers.

The third week of that June had begun with a sudden spate of hard rain. It had been sheeting down the windows of his office when Greg's mobile had rung—ten forty-two, he still remembered it clearly—and he'd picked it up to hear John on the other end, in a right state.

"G-Greg. You won't—I can't——God. You, you need to get over here." He hadn't sounded the worst Greg had ever heard him, but the trembling in his voice had been so abnormal that a shiver had run down Greg's spine.

"John? Christ, mate, what's wrong? Breathe!"
"...Baker Street," his friend had responded, after a few audibly shaky breaths.

Greg had already leapt to his feet and begun pulling on his mac. "On my way. What's going on?"

A laugh that sounded like a sob had crackled through the speaker. "You wouldn't believe me. Just get here, yeah?"

He had; he'd rushed to the garage for a department car without so much as a word of explanation to anyone, and gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles all the way. There had just been a road accident about halfway up Gloucester Place, and rather than wait for the creeping snarl of traffic to find its way through, he'd cursed and swerved into the pull-through of the nearest multistorey apartment building. Abandoning the car, he'd taken the remaining five blocks at a fast jog through the driving rain, his mind conjuring up image after horrific image to try and explain the distress he'd heard in John's voice.

When he'd arrived at last, panting and soaked to the bone, the scene he'd found in the sitting room at 221B had trumped every last one of his imaginings.

Greg wiped a tired hand across his eyes, rubbing away the floating afterimage of the waiting room chairs upon which his stare had been fixed, and chuckled softly. With nearly a year's distance on the events, it was slightly easier to find dark humour in the memory of the day they'd found out Sherlock was alive. And oh, how things had changed after that—some things, anyway. It had seemed as if the laws of the universe had been rewritten; for all that he knew it had all been an elaborate trick, he'd still seen Death undone. And if Death couldn't hold sway over Sherlock, what was I doing letting loneliness hold sway over me?

It had taken a few weeks before Sherlock's return had been made official and public, and a few more before things had settled down enough for Greg to finally call him in on a case. That first one had been tense and awkward, scattered with choked silences and grim stares—mostly between John and Sherlock; Sally and the others didn't seem to know what to think, and Greg had still been reeling over the revelation of Moriarty's threats. His second case with the pair, over a week later, had been better; Sherlock seemed to have recovered the rhythm of his breakneck deductions, and with it some of his poise.

But it hadn't been until the third case, just over ten weeks after that surreal, rainy Monday, that Greg had felt it, finally: the three of them had stood around an unfortunate corpse, and the old energy had crackled between them as if three years had been magically erased. The clues had snapped into place in quick succession, Sherlock's triumphant laugh had echoed across the warehouse, and in one perfect, synchronised moment both John and Greg had known where to look for the slinking shadow. The chase that had ensued had been exhilarating and cleansing; as he'd run with them through the alleys, he'd felt a pulse of life and warmth spreading through his bones as if the city itself was welcoming him—as if Sherlock hadn't been the only one missing, those grey years.

And when we caught the bloke at last, and he was being taken away, what was I thinking? He grinned to himself as he remembered. I was thinking, 'this'll make a great story to tell that pretty American girl I met today, over dinner; I wonder if she likes Indian...'
Greg shook himself from his thoughts and looked at his watch. *Six thirty, already.* Yawning, he sat forward, performing a few stretching twists from side to side to loosen the stiffness in his lower back. He was just considering sending a quick text to John, to check in and see that he and Sherlock were doing all right, when a soft noise from the end of the room caused him to look around.

Mycroft Holmes entered the waiting area with more grace and dignity than Greg had ever seen accomplished in pushing through a swinging door. He approached alone, a faint smile playing over his aristocratic features and fading to the barest trace of what could have been pleasure, or maybe amusement.

"Mr Holmes," Greg greeted him, standing politely and trying hard not to wince at the creak of his joints. *Oof, been sitting too long.* He extended a hand to shake. "No news so far. Mrs Holmes isn't with you?"

"My mother needed to avail herself of the facilities; she will join us shortly. I see you've been waiting alone for some time."

He rubbed his arm in a slightly nervous gesture as he answered. "Ah, yes, well. It wasn't doing Sherlock any good to stalk around here. I brought John a packed lunch for them both, and ordered him to take Sherlock off somewhere. Get his mind off it, y'know."

"Perceptive," Mycroft allowed, with a slight sniff. Plucking at his fine tweed trousers with long fingers, he lowered himself into one of the blue chairs, and Greg resumed his seat across from him.

Before Greg could consider a return to his quiet musings, the other man cleared his throat and spoke again. "I must extend my thanks once more for responding to my email, Inspector Lestrade. It was clear to me that my brother would require the support of his friends, today." He said the word "friends" as if the term was unfamiliar in his mouth: a subject well-researched and yet little understood.

"Well, I must say getting an email from the British Government was an unexpected surprise. But I didn't need one in this case, as it happens. John told me what was up; I was planning to be here regardless."

"Ah. Just so."

There were a few long moments of silence, during which the two men studiously avoided looking at one another.

"You've been fairly integral to my younger brother's life, Inspector, for quite some time now," murmured Mycroft at last. "If you'll forgive me my curiosity...?"

This brought Greg's eyes up from the floor. "What is it you want to know?" he asked, suspicion colouring his voice.

The man leaned forward, folding his hands primly over his knees. "I want to know what happened in America, to prompt a change that hadn't been close to occurring in all the time since Sherlock's return."
"Um. Well." Greg stroked the side of his forefinger across his lips and murmured, "'S'pose it happened at some point while we were helping Anna..."

"Anna Cecilia Clark, née Faber. Ah, yes. The recent object of your affections. You must be quite pleased for her impending visit."

"I am. But why do I get the sense that you've performed a bloody background check on my girlfriend?"

"Precisely because I have, of course. Come now, Inspector Lestrade, you needn't look so thunderous! It was plainy in my interest to search out information on this wandering widow,"—he smirked slightly as his words provoked a further darkening of Greg's expression—"as soon as she proved herself capable of drawing Sherlock to impromptu international travel. He asked me to expedite their visas, a quite unusual sort of favour; clearly the woman has some sort of value to him."

"That woman has value to us all," Greg bit out, resisting the urge to clench his hands on the narrow plastic armrests. He made it clear by his tone that however many people he was referring to as "us", he did not consider Mycroft part of that group. "So shall I take it as read that Anna's passed inspection?"

"Such as it is, yes. Aside from her apparently quite coincidental entanglement in multiple facets of a relatively minor international criminal organisation, my sources could find nothing that flagged any warnings. She appears to be entirely uninteresting."

That's where you're wrong, thought Greg smugly, even as part of him sighed in silent relief at the knowledge that Mycroft had found no cause for concern. Out loud, he said, "Well, I don't exactly know the answer to your question. But I do know that Sherlock seems to have come to regard Anna almost as a sister, and that she had him talking to her about his feelings for John before she left London last year. She's close with John too."

Mycroft sat back in his seat, wheels clearly spinning within his mind. "Last year? But..."

"But no, it didn't really change things until Chicago." He shrugged. "Look, I wasn't privy to what exactly happened. I only saw the results of it, the day before they flew home. Maybe Anna had another talk with one or the other of 'em? She's got quite a knack for that sort of thing."

"Does she, now," muttered Mycroft, his lips turned downward in a contemplative frown.

At that moment the swinging door pushed open, and Miriam Holmes walked in, carefully carrying two steaming paper cups. "Hello again, Gregory," she said smilingly as she approached. "I thought you might like some coffee, dear, it's so kind of you to have kept watch for us all afternoon."

"It's no trouble, ma'am," he assured her, accepting the beverage with a grateful nod.

"Well, it's appreciated. And speaking of my appreciation, I assume you've either remained here because Sherlock decided he had something terribly important to do, or you've purposely shuffled him off somewhere so he wouldn't get worked up enough to terrorise the hospital staff."

"Er. The latter, actually. But I expect he and John will be back down anytime now."

"Oh, the poor dear," she tutted, resting one slightly age-gnarled knuckle at her lips. As she lowered herself into the chair beside her son, she said, "Here, Mycroft, you take this. I'd brought it for John..."
Mycroft's mouth twisted in distaste as he gingerly received the vending machine coffee. Setting it aside on the small magazine table to his left, he purposefully molded his sour expression into something more agreeable—though clearly false to Greg's eyes—before turning back to respond to her. "I'm certain he would thank you for the gesture, Mother."

Amused by the unintentional silent comedy of the other man's actions, Greg took a long, deliberate sip of his own coffee, playing up the appearance of his enjoyment. It was, of course, only a few steps above swill, but it still beat the hideous brew they endured at the Yard on days when McIntyre took canteen duty on his floor.

Personally, Greg much preferred the coffee over in the Pathology building, here—there was a bloke who worked as a haematopathologist in the lab three doors down from Molly's, and he kept a pot of the good stuff going when he was on shift. Wonder if he's working today? Wonder if Molly is? Now that there were two Holmeses in the waiting area, the large, open room seemed particularly crowded, and his pristine calm was rapidly giving way to an antsy urge to move.

It was a distinct relief when Greg's phone began to vibrate in his pocket. It was even more a relief to see the name on the screen, when he pulled it out: he restrained the wide grin threatening to spread across his face, suddenly mindful of the sharp, attentive eyes of the British Government.

Making his quick, polite excuses, he rose from his seat and strode towards the swinging door, murmuring a pleased greeting to Anna on his way.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock's enjoying a cozy evening in...until idle conversation dredges up something much deeper.

11. SHERLOCK: What About Brewster?
(11 May 2015)

This is nice, thought Sherlock, the words slipping softly through his mind like the gentle rain gathering and spilling in fine trails down the front windows. This is...very nice.

John had fixed lasagne for their supper. It was one of the few dishes he executed truly well on his own, and it was a testament to his understanding of Sherlock's quirks that he didn't go to the trouble of preparing it too often. Frequent repetition would make it less special, and increase the chance the picky eater might begin to shun it: that was the theory, anyway, as Sherlock understood it, and he was disinclined to argue with the logic.

This evening, John had brought home a bottle of Pinot Noir from his shopping trip as well, on a whim, and had poured large glasses for them both after filling their plates. Perhaps it was meant somewhat in celebration, seeing as Father had come through his surgery well and was recuperating so far without complication; perhaps John had simply wanted to smooth out the remnants of their stressful weekend, or possibly brace himself for the week of stultifying hospital visits still to come. Sherlock hadn't taken red wine with a meal since New Year's Day, and so it was no surprise that holding the glass of deep garnet before his face had brought back vivid recollections of that evening. As if reading his thoughts, John had simply smiled at him and nudged Sherlock's toe pleasantly with his own under the kitchen table.

Once they were finished with the meal, they'd taken refilled glasses to the sitting room to pursue their respective amusements. Their already sparse dinner conversation had died down into a comfortable silence; John had taken up his laptop and curled into the left side of the sofa. After a minute's thought, Sherlock had chosen a forensics journal from one of his stacks for a little light reading. He'd ensconced himself on the other end, half expecting some objection. Instead, without a word, John had shifted in gradual stages towards the centre, and soon they'd been tucked up together as if it had been their original intention.

It was past eight o'clock now. The sun was nearly set, although their east-facing windows showed only the deepening darkness of evening through the sporadic light rain. Sherlock listened to the even, calming susurrus of John's breath, letting his attention drift along with the gentle movement as each inhale shifted the warmth of the solid shoulders against his side. He clasped his wineglass, more than half empty, in lazy, loose fingers. Nice, he thought again, and he was so unaccountably relaxed that he didn't even call himself out on the trite mental repetition.
When John spoke eventually, his voice blended seamlessly with the pattering raindrops. "Thought I saw a familiar face today, down the shops."

Sherlock opened his eyes—funny, he hadn't noticed closing them—and flicked a glance down at the top of the dark blond head. "Oh?"

It was a rather pointless bit of small talk, and surely beneath his interest, but he found himself in mind to encourage it. The sensation of John's vocalisations being transferred into his own chest through their close contact was intriguing.

"Yeah, I mean, obviously it wasn't. But there was a young woman with a little boy, and I swear they were practically the spitting image of Jacqui and Devon."

"Who—oh, yes." *Graham Brewster's daughter and grandson.* He thought for a moment, pulling up a mental image of the shy, dark-skinned girl. In his mind, the stout child at her feet flickered and changed to a round-cheeked eleven month old babe in her arms, and he dismissed them both. "I'm surprised their memory has stuck with you. They weren't a particular feature of our week away."


Blinking slowly, he explained, "I never had any contact with the ex-boyfriend at all; I simply provided information to the girl's father, and advised him on how to utilise it. The young idiot had been threatening her; said he'd call social services and get the baby removed from her custody, if she didn't take him back. It wasn't difficult to find enough evidence to discredit any possible claims he made. I never said, because it was hardly a feat. Nothing noteworthy in twenty minutes' research on the computer."

"And you only ever spoke to Brewster in the first place because you could tell where he worked," John guessed; he moved his arm from the back of the sofa and sipped his wine.

"Yes, it was obvious. Collar pin, given upon fifteen years' employment. The clear signs of his family problems made him an optimal choice for my purposes. Again, not an amazing accomplishment."

"Oh, I'd wager it was, under the circumstances. It's not like you to be so altruistic." He paused, rolling his head rearward; it pushed into the top of Sherlock's pectoral muscle, a solid weight. "Do you mind if I ask why he acted so familiar with you, then? I mean: you did a little bit of research for him, and then I gather you got him to show you blueprints in return. That's not a huge time investment, but he didn't treat you as that sort of grateful client."

The long stretch of speech had felt quite pleasant. Sherlock resisted the urge to hum contentedly; marshalling his focus, he willingly provided an answer in the hope that John would talk more. "I became his house guest for a week."

"Really. And you managed to leave him thinking that positively about you? Colour me impressed."

"I'm not sure why he agreed to take me in. I certainly hadn't tried hard to make him like me, as I solved his problem; and it's quite possible he didn't, at first." He hesitated and took a drink, considering what to say and what to withhold. "I think he felt a bit more paternal towards me, perhaps, after he had to patch me up."

At this, John sat upright with a start and craned his neck around. "What sort of injury?" he asked, his voice suddenly tight around the edges.
Sherlock looked down into worried eyes, frowning both at the change in tone and the fact that the comforting position had been lost. "Nothing so serious," he muttered. "A knife graze. I'd have been perfectly capable of handling it myself, if not for the location."

John held his gaze. "Show me."

"Must I?"

He dipped his chin slightly, and a peculiar look came over his face: something hard and commanding, that put Sherlock in mind of a smouldering fuse.

Swallowing, Sherlock moved to comply, placing his glass on the coffee table. He scooted up onto the edge of the seat, fumbling a little with the buttons of his steel-blue shirt before pulling the neatly tucked fabric from the top of his trousers and presenting his upper back.

The light brush of fingers over the scar at his shoulder blade made him shiver. "How did you get it?" asked John, and he sounded—off, somehow.

"There was a man... Verrone. He headed a branch of Moriarty's operations; rumour of my presence reached his ears, and he sent men after me. I got away, recuperated under Brewster's care. Five days later, I went after him."

There was a long silence, marked by a slow, audible exhale behind him. "You would have been better off with stitches," said John at last, tracing the jagged line once more before lifting his hand.

The moment the contact was broken, Sherlock whipped the shirt up into place again, closing it around himself defensively. "It was fine."

"If by 'fine' you mean 'no lasting muscular damage' I suppose you—hnnh."

There was definitely something different about John's voice. Sherlock remembered similar interruptions often scattering the man's words the previous June, usually preceding either a prolonged period of avoidance or a shouting fit. He began to turn around to face his friend, but then John's palm lay flat and unmoving on his back, a bright patch of warmth through his shirt. Sherlock still, uncertain.

Tense silence stretched out. The rain had stopped.

"John, I don't—"

He broke in, sounding gentle once again. "Never mind, all right? Forget about it."

Before John stood and left the room, his hand made a motion somewhere between a stroke and a reassuring pat. But still he left, and Sherlock did not find himself reassured.

Late night had brought a fresh wave of rain to quietly spatter the windows. Sherlock extinguished the lights and stood for a moment, gazing at the mottled, shifting patterns the corner streetlamp cast onto the floor. It was Monday night—the third Monday, again; the slight distress he felt at having upset his partner was not enough to dissuade him from his habitual process.
As he settled into the most comfortable position on the sofa, he considered John's reaction to the evidence of his injury. He was grateful for the doctor's sometimes single-minded focus: a careful angling of position and the quick replacement of the shirt had been sufficient to keep him from noting any of the other scars distributed over Sherlock's torso. Three years of hard living and combat under assumed identities had left their marks, and he did not intend to open discussion on them. Bad enough that I can't seem to excise the thrice-damned events, he complained silently; the very last thing I need is a fresh round of arguments to ruin the balance of things.

Putting thoughts of the disquieting incident firmly from his mind, Sherlock went about the step-by-step ritual of filtering out the sensory inputs of Baker Street and his surroundings. Soon enough, he stood at the heart of his organised mental network, ready to tackle the jumbled mess of information gleaned from his recent weeks' experiences. The familiar actions were calming, a reassurance of stability and continued poise. Even when Sherlock needed to open and enter a seldom-used room, creating a carved tinder-box on the coffee table between the red sofa and armchairs, before his parents' crackling stone hearth—a place to deposit and store the details of Father's hospitalisation—he went through the motions without distress.

Sherlock found that he was enjoying his maintenance, taking his time with it and going a bit deeper than usual: savouring the clean, fresh sensation of space left behind by each deleted item, methodically straightening the furnishings and symbolic accessories within the rooms of his mental constructs in a way he never felt compelled to in real life. At last the task was complete; the air was clear, the floors uncluttered, the surfaces of desks and tables polished and serene.

As he surveyed his work, a slight frown flickered across his face, marring the expression of satisfaction he wore. Not finished yet, he thought, moving decisively on to the less pleasant task he'd set himself. Once the grey, plain hall of his unwanted memories was before him, he turned a slow circle, staring coolly at each of thirty-eight featureless doors in turn.

New York. Berlin. Stockholm. Tokyo...

Each room here held its own story, its own tedious, boring timeline, recorded moment by moment in precise detail and vivid, saturated colour; the long waits, the sudden rush of action, the fear and physical discomfort, the sick triumph—and above all, suffusing it all, the gnawing sense of wrongness. Because it was wrong, it was all wrong, all of this; he shouldn't have had to do any of these things. The men behind these doors—Eddie, Scott, Anatol, Connor, Neal—none of them were Sherlock, not in the ways that mattered. The things they'd done and seen were utterly deserving of deletion.

Where shall I begin, this time? Sherlock wondered. Is there anything else I can do, anything at all that I have not already attempted?

He had once entered this hall each time full of determination, and the confidence that he could find the way forward. That self-assurance was gone, now. Failure after failure had left a bitter taste in his mouth that had grown ever more astringent over the long months since his return; the cold metal doors seemed to mock him in their unchanging certainty. Once every three weeks, he confronted the problem anew, putting the strength of his resolve into a fresh approach. On this night, however, all he could dredge up was doubt.

He felt empty, disheartened. Racked with indecision, he made one more pass around the circle. This time he stopped before a door he had opened before, the nearest he had yet come to success: some of the images within the Chicago room were changed, faded and partially overwritten with more recent memories of his time in that city with John. Even this unorthodox strategy had not allowed the deletion of the room, however, and repeating the technique he'd used here would
require another trip around the world.

*Unacceptable*, Sherlock growled, flinging the portal wide in a sudden rush of frustrated anger.

He stalked forward to stand in the doorway of Chicago, looking in with cold eyes at untamed flashes of memory—the rain-soaked streets downtown in April; the pale brown hair William Harris had worn slicked straight above thick tortoise-shell glasses; the noise Karl Verrone had made as he'd fallen for the last time, and the renewed sting in William's bandaged shoulder as he'd stepped back from the man, hand pressed under his bloody nose.

*This must go*, he told himself, clenching his jaw and focusing the full might of his concentration. *This. Must. Go...*
"Are you ready?" Anna called in, tapping her foot impatiently.

A strange noise came in answer, something that could have possibly passed for a "yeah," if Liz had been brushing her teeth perhaps, but that just as easily could be interpreted as "not yet."

"Lizzie? Come on, what are you up to? We need to get moving!"

Her friend made another strangled multisyllabic sound and emerged at last from the depths of her apartment, wearing a floppy sunhat, laden down with luggage and smacking light switches off with her elbow on her way up the hall. The source of her speech impediment was clearly the handbag strap clutched between her teeth.

"God, Liz. You could've asked for help, you dork," she muttered, intercepting the woman and pulling the bag out of her mouth.

Free once more, Liz laughed breathily and plunked one of her bags down on the carpet, leaning over to fiddle with her thermostat. "And ruin the fun? Hell no."

Anna frowned and picked up that bag as well. "Come on, Ryan's waiting. You always pack too much stuff, geez."

As they moved out into the building's common corridor, pausing to lock the door, Liz shrugged. "It'll balance out. One of my checked bags is all gifts for Zia Celeste, from the family; I won't be this loaded down on the way back."

"Déjà vu," Anna laughed. Her friend always loved to be the bearer of others' gifts. "Did you ever think about just mailing a package to yourself? I sent myself a box of embroidery supplies, at Greg's address."

"That's 'cause you're the smart one," she huffed, following Anna down the two flights of stairs and out to the street. "But speaking of smart, I don't get why you're even taking this flight with me. The first layover is in Chicago for goodness' sake..."

"And I'm about to take three months away, so I was obligated to spend a few days with my family first," Anna replied, nodding gratefully to her younger brother as he popped his trunk for them. "Besides, I figured I'd feel better about things if I didn't have to worry about getting checked in and
finding you, too. This way,—she paused to slide into the back seat next to her own luggage, while Liz took the front—"we won't get separated."

Ryan grinned at both his passengers as the doors slammed. "All right ladies, are we ready to go?"

*Ready as I'll ever be, I guess,* thought Anna, nodding up at his reflection in the rear view mirror.

As Ryan pulled his car away from the kerb, Liz tugged the wide brimmed hat from her head, twisting in her seat to face her friend. "I'm so excited for this, hon. Thanks for changing your plans for me!"

"You mean *making* my plans for you," Anna corrected. Now that the hat was off, she could see that her friend looked different than she had when she'd visited Chicago a few weeks before. "You cut your hair!"

Liz grinned. "Just a little shaping, I kept most of the length. You like it?"

"It frames your face a little differently. I do like it."

"Thanks! A new continent deserves a new 'do, I figure. What do you think, Ryan?"

After a brief silence, he spoke solemnly, staring straight ahead as he drove. "I agree completely with the prevailing opinion of the vehicle. And, um...you have cute shoes?"

Liz had searched out and chosen the least expensive combination of flights to accommodate both their limited budgets, and as a consequence they were in for a day-long adventure complete with two layovers. The first order of the day was a short morning hop from Columbus to Chicago, and it felt almost like a practice run of sorts: a quick reminder of everything Anna loved and hated about air travel, to be followed by a five-hour interlude before the long slog.

*Takeoff: love.*

*Aerial view: love.*

*Crying babies: hate.* Anna winced as a fresh wail rose from somewhere behind her. *Poor thing has my sympathy though—my ears are already killing me, too...*  

After the ninety minute flight, the two women emerged into the bustling hive of activity that was O'Hare; Anna pulled out her phone as they made their way through the terminal, tapping out a short message. When she'd finished, she forced a yawn. "I need a new pack of gum," she told her friend.

"What about the gum you had out on the flight just now?"

"That was only a half pack to begin with. I have weird ears, and it's a long flight. You'll probably want me to share, trust me..." She angled their path towards a newsagent's shop on the concourse, beckoning Liz to follow her in.

"Whatever. Can you at least get a different kind this time? I'm going to get real sick of smelling cinnamon."
Anna snorted. "Tell you what, I'll buy a whole assortment."

"Oooh, fancy. So what's the plan for the next five hours?"

"Well..." She glanced at her phone and shoved it back into her pocket. "In about twenty minutes, we're having lunch."

Liz turned from the display of crossword puzzle books she was idly perusing. "That seems very specific. And isn't it more like brunch, this early? It's barely past eleven."

"I don't think it's going to be a problem."

When Anna eventually led them into a casual panini restaurant at the far end of the terminal, Liz was still unsure what was going on...until the tall blond man stood up from a booth to beckon them over. He wore an impeccable blue suit and tie, and not a hair was out of place.

"Oh. My. God. Is that Chaz Garvey?" Liz hissed down into Anna's ear, taking her wrist in a subtle death-grip between them.

"It sure is," Anna responded, lifting her free hand to wave back as they threaded their way through the restaurant. "I told you, he's a little bit different than you remember."

"Anna," greeted the detective, smiling and pulling her into a quick hug. "And if it isn't Leapin' Lizzie Biancardi! I can hardly believe my eyes."

Liz looked as if she couldn't decide whether the man before her deserved a handshake, or a vicious noogie; in the end she settled on a restrained and slightly awkward hug. "All right, Twinkle Toes Garvey, I hear you're doing well for yourself?"

"I can't complain," he grinned, wrinkling his nose at the old nickname as they all seated themselves.

Anna grabbed a menu from the table and looked him over critically. "Court today, huh? Are you gonna have to leave in a hurry?"

"Actually, court was this morning. I'm off till tomorrow." With an amused glance at Liz, he sighed and said, "Go ahead and do it..."

Giggling, Anna leaned forward and ruffled his pale hair thoroughly, breaking the rigid hold of his gelled style. "God, I love doing that!"

Liz smirked. "Maybe you haven't changed that much, after all."

"Oh, he has! He just indulges me," chortled Anna. She smiled up at the approaching waiter, who looked amused at their antics.

Said antics continued for nearly two hours; although they hadn't seen each other in the seventeen years since Anna's wedding, Liz and Chaz seemed to take up right where they'd left off. If anything, it seemed like they were trying to make up for lost time in good-natured teasing and casual one upmanship. Anna sat back and watched the show, laughing and chiming in from time to time, happily enjoying the respite from her worrisome musings.
Two rings...three...then four...

Just before the click over to voice mail, Chaz's familiar sharp voice answered.

"What's up? Aren't you supposed to be in the air by now?" he questioned without preamble.

Anna breathed a sigh of relief, leaning back against one of the columns that separated the departure gate area from the nearby Starbucks. "Boarding starts in a few minutes now. Sorry Chaz, I know I shouldn't be bugging you."

"It's fine, call me whenever you want. But you know, there's nothing to worry about."

"Ugh, I know! I do. It's just, I was sitting here with Liz and suddenly I was so sure I'd left a window open the other day..."

Her friend chuckled. "Anna. It's fine. I've got your spare keys, I'm checking on the house every other day. Your AC won't be left running, your mail won't pile up, your backyard won't get overgrown. Trust me; everything here in Chicago will be okay." It was basically a repeat of the assurances he'd made over lunch a few hours before, but he didn't sound frustrated with her.

"Thanks. I can't believe I'm being so ridiculous! I do appreciate your putting up with me."

"It's no problem! You took me back as a friend, even though I was a total asshole all those years ago."

"How could I not? I was so happy to find someone I knew here, I probably would've tried to hang out with you even if you were still a total asshole!"

They laughed together, at that; Anna felt her tension slipping away a bit.

"You're not just worried about the house, though, are you?" asked Chaz, after a moment.

"I shouldn't be worried about any of it, should I? I mean, it's not my first time in London. It's not even my first time staying with Greg. Last year I was flying over alone; I had no plan, no friends to spend time with, and no idea what it would be like." She fidgeted with the boarding pass she held, then peered around the corner to make sure she wasn't missing the lineup announcement. "So why am I so nervous now?"

"You're getting serious. It's not weird to be nervous," he assured her. "Plus you're committing to a pretty long stay. He was only here a month."

She chewed on her lower lip. "True."

"And you know that this time, everyone back at home knows exactly what you'll be up to while you're there...if not what positions..."

"Ha ha. Very funny. I'm gonna miss continual exposure to your gutter humor, hon."

"And I'm going to miss our margarita nights most of all. So, in return for keeping the watchful eyes of Chicago's finest on your house, I fully expect you to call me and dish. Frequently. Got it?"

She snorted. "Yes, Detective."

"Oh, is that what he has you call him? Hot."
"I'm hanging up now!" she laughed, her face red.

The first phase of the transatlantic flight had finally passed, with its disjointed fractal ripples of unsettled activity and noise; now, they were a few hours in, and the plane had fallen under a calm hush at last. Only an occasional laugh lifted brightly over the gentle murmur of quiet conversation among the passengers, and the deep, dull rush of jet engines underscored the fuzzy soundscape.

Anna stretched in her seat, surreptitiously looking over the other travellers visible from her aisle position. She idly wondered what details Sherlock would pick out and comment upon; what sordid secrets he'd see in the frumpy old woman two rows up, or the sullen teenage boy sitting across the aisle on her left side. On a whim, she tried to memorise the defining features of the nearest passengers; it was likely a futile and pointless exercise, but it was something to pass the time.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a yawn from her friend. "Well. That's it for SkyMall. Want it?"

"No thanks, I'm not in the market for a life-size concrete Bigfoot this year." Sighing, Anna gave up her scrutiny of the young man—any longer and he would surely notice, anyway—and twisted a little bit to face Liz. "Distract me. I don't want to spend the whole flight wondering if I packed everything."

"That's a more practical worry than I would expect you to be stuck on. Not thinking about your DI?"

She felt one side of her mouth lift. "Always thinking about him, even when I don't want to be. It gets so I don't even notice it, sometimes."

Thick blonde curls shifted on Liz's shoulder as she tilted her head fondly. "I can hardly imagine what that must be like."

"I know you've been single for a long time, Lizzie. But surely you've had some experience with this?"

The other woman shrugged. "I'm an old maid, hon, and that's all I need to be. I'm pretty sure I was one long before I turned forty!"

Anna raised an eyebrow. They'd entered a topic of discussion that never came up between them normally, and it was a surprising realisation; Liz usually avoided the subject so skilfully that the lack of it had never occurred to her.

"I believe in love," Liz insisted. "I believe in it, no problem. Romance, fate, all that—it's great, it's wonderful, it's this magical force that makes so many people happy. I've seen my friends in love, and it's a beautiful thing—so beautiful, Anna, the way you light up for each other and the world revolves around just the two of you."

Anna thought of the Skype call her friend had sat in on, and how she and Greg had so completely forgotten they weren't alone; David's kind face crowded in alongside the memory of the handsome older man, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

Smiling, Liz turned to gaze out the window as she continued speaking softly. "It makes me so
happy to witness that kind of intense devotion. But love...it's just...not for me, you know? I can't explain it. I just want to see the world, live my life, and be at peace. I don't need anyone else to help me make that happen."

"I can't believe I didn't know this about you, Lizzie. I mean, how did I not see...?"

"Back in college, you remember, I used to date—I'd go out looking, weekend after weekend, because that was what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I even found a few guys that I might have called keepers, in another situation. Remember Jason?"

Anna nodded, and they shared a little smile at the memory of the jazz guitarist with the chiseled jaw.

"But in the end, it wasn't about the people I dated," said Liz. "It wasn't about finding them unworthy, or about making them happy. It was about me. And what I wanted out of my life just wasn't tied to another person in that way."

"Wow." The pieces were falling into place, now, memories across years of their friendship fitting together to form a picture that made much better sense. A thought occurred to her, and she leaned closer to ask.

Before she could say anything, though, Liz giggled and answered that very question without prompting. "Now, sex on the other hand, that's a whole different matter!"

By the time the plane touched down in Dublin, Anna's eyelids felt lined with sandpaper. It was a little before six in the morning, here, and her internal clock still insisted it was midnight; she'd tried to sleep, of course, but had managed only a brief doze or two.

Her travelling companion didn't seem to be in a much better state. "Where are we even going," she groaned, stumbling bleary-eyed at Anna's heels with her wheeled carry-on bumping along behind her.

"Coffee," Anna replied, "as soon as we get through passport control and up the escalator to the departure terminal. We've only got a little over an hour to kill."

"Ugh."

"You sound more like me than I do," muttered Anna, smacking her lips to try and dispel the lingering aftertaste of stale chewing gum and soda. "What about your sunrise yoga?"

"Sunrise?" Liz squinted at the bright glow pouring in from the skylights over the bank of escalators ahead. "Is that what that is?"

"Don't look at me like it's my fault. You're the one who picked out this itinerary."

"You're the one who let me," grumbled the woman, nudging a petulant elbow into Anna's side.
The memory of the previous Christmas remained fresh in Anna's mind, even after five months, and when their final flight touched down at last on British soil, she found herself looking back on it. *I had decided that waiting at the gate was cheesy,* she remembered with a tired smile, pulling her bag from the overhead bin. *We both agreed on that; we're not in a movie.*

So, when they stepped off the plane and filed out of the jetway along with the crowd of travellers, plodding and stiff, Anna didn't think about anything but getting through the short customs checkpoint, and then finding the signs pointing the way to the baggage claim. She had her eyes focused overhead, blinking away the grit of eleven hours' combined air time, when she felt Liz's hand tugging at her arm—and a second later she was engulfed from the other side in a tight, ardent hug scented with a familiar woody cologne.

"Greg," she gasped, muffled in the plane of his shoulder.

"Luv," he murmured down into her ear, placing a feather-light kiss behind it; then, releasing her, he turned to greet her companion.

"Liz, it's a pleasure. Welcome to London," he said warmly, taking her hand in both of his. He took a half-step back and eyed her seriously, still holding her hand. "You've changed your hair! It's lovely."

Liz let out a bright laugh and stepped in to hug the man herself, looking over his shoulder to where her friend waited on his other side. Catching Anna's eyes, she clearly mouthed, *"He's a keeper!"*

Anna couldn't help but agree.
JOHN: Let Me Tell You

Chapter Summary

John is asked to make a decision that could forever change his relationship with Sherlock.

13. JOHN: Let Me Tell You
(12 May, 15 May 2015)

John dreamt of the seashore.

Wet sand squelched under his toes, and a warm wind ruffled his hair; about thirty paces ahead, Harry and Mum walked side by side at the edge of the water. His older sister was dragging a stick along behind her feet, laughing as it dug in and bounced and dug in again. Her bright hair barely brushed along the top of her shoulders: the bobbed haircut had been her gift on her thirteenth birthday, two weeks before.

A seashell caught John's eye, and he squatted to retrieve it. He turned it over in his fingers, raptly admiring the iridescent pink as it shimmered and flashed, catching the sunlight.

"John?"

The call was faint from up ahead; Mum was waving and beckoning him urgently to catch up.

"John!"

"Coming," he yelled back, brushing sand from knobby knees as he rose and squinted out into the water.

"John..."

"John!"

He awoke with a start, gasping to see pale eyes inches from his own. "Sh-Sherlock. What—"
Looking past the man, he squinted in the light of the little lamp that had been lit on his bedside table, behind his digital clock. "It's three in the morning. Have we got a case?"

"No. No case. I'm sorry, I had to wake you..."
Scrubbing one hand across his face, he sat up a bit, prompting the other man to edge back slightly in his perch at the edge of the bed. "What's wrong, love?"

A wave of expression crossed over Sherlock's face in a second, as if he still couldn't quite believe he was hearing the casual endearments that John had taken to using when they were at home. Visibly acknowledging the word with a small, grateful tilt of his head, he said, "I deleted Brewster," emphasising the words like a vital and revelatory statement.

"What?" After a moment's confusion, John narrowed his eyes. "Er, Sherlock, if you've deleted Brewster wouldn't you, um, not remember his name, to be able to tell me that?"

Sherlock shook his head, impatient. "Not—no, I didn't delete our time in Chicago with Brewster. And I retained enough explanatory detail to leave the logic of those memories intact. But—don't you see, it's important; I was able to delete the earlier Brewster!"

John thought this strange assertion over, chewing on his lower lip. "Okay. You said you'd tried to before. And it's not about Mr Brewster, is it? It's—whatever else you were up to." He looked up consideringly at the other man, as if he could see through those mussed curls to the intricate workings inside. "If it didn't work before, and it did now—why d'you think that is?"

"It must be you, John. I told you about Chicago tonight—or a large part of it, anyway."

That, plus the 'overwriting' he said he did in the city...must have been enough for closure. "So...are you saying you want to tell me..."

At this, Sherlock fidgeted a bit, glancing away. "I think. Yes. If you'll listen, then perhaps I can free myself of it."

"But then I'll know, I'll know what you did even if you don't...you haven't got a problem with that?"

"Do you?" His expression was open suddenly, earnest and pleading. It sent a little shudder down John's spine.

All those months he spent, travelling alone, probably in so much danger without me, damn it, and all I wish I could do is go back in time, put myself wherever he was; stand in between him and peril, hold him when he was sad, do the dirty work so that his mind palace wouldn't get blood on the floors. Wow, that's an image.

John swallowed hard and reached out for one pale, graceful hand. "Sherlock, yes. If it'll help you, of course I'll be here for you."

"It's just...there's so much," he muttered under his breath.

"Right." Nodding decisively, John scooted over to the far side of the bed, tugging gently at the hand he held. "Come on, then."

"John?" He allowed himself to be pulled forward, but he was clearly confused and slightly reluctant.

"Don't jump to conclusions, you." John yawned and gestured with his head, indicating the lamp as Sherlock tried to situate himself under the light blanket. "Toss your dressing gown somewhere, and off with that light. If I'm going to hear a story at three a.m., I'm going to bloody well be comfortable."
They lay facing each other in the dark.

John kept still and silent, waiting patiently for Sherlock to settle. At last, when he heard the soft sounds of the other man's breath become more regular and relaxed, he spoke quietly. "All right?"

"You're sure this is okay with you."

"It was bound to come up sometime." John sighed and shifted a foot; when it unexpectedly brushed against Sherlock's ankle he froze, waiting to see if the taller man would retreat.

He didn't. His deep voice closed the scant space separating them. "You never wanted to hear about any of it before."

"And you didn't want to tell, so we were even."

A gentle huff of breath ghosted across John's forehead. "I don't know where to begin."

"Hm, that's a toughie." He let a smile colour his words. "Maybe the beginning would be a fair choice?"

Sherlock hummed quietly; the sheet twitched to betray a tiny movement of his hands. "The beginning. Ah. When I was first—I didn't leave, right away."

"No?" prompted John.

"I had to wait for certain covert arrangements to be completed. My brother—he assisted me with a few preparations, and granted me access to intelligence data as I required it in those first weeks. But aside from a very generalised idea of my goals, he remained unaware of the specifics of my plans. On the first of July, I exited the reach of his surveillance en route to Paris; after that point, I was entirely on my own."

"For three years."

"For the most part, yes. I sent one brief coded missive at the start of every sixth month."

John felt his fist clenching hard between his pillow and the mattress. "Right." He took a slow breath, imagining the frustration Mycroft must have felt at being left out of the planning, and at waiting for such infrequent communiqués to serve as as proof of life. *It was more than I had;...but not by very much.* When his fingers had relaxed again, he asked, "And in Paris?"

Hesitant at first, and then with greater confidence, Sherlock began to relate the events of his first week out of London as a dead man. His partner listened, and tried to remember how to breathe.

It was a quarter past ten on Friday evening. John stood in the kitchen, spreading his attention
amongst the preparation of tea, the lively violin piece being played in the next room, and the phone at his ear.

"...Yeah, they'll be in the air by now; she and her friend arrive tomorrow morning, a little before nine." Greg's voice crackled slightly through the speaker, followed by a pop and hiss of faint static.

John tilted his head partially away from the device. "Where are you, Greg? The reception's awful."

"Oh, sorry mate,"—there was a pause, a few rustling noises and a metallic slam, before he spoke again—"on my way back up now. I was down in the lower file room."

"What, that dank little hole in the basement?"

"The very same."

"Who'd you piss off?" laughed John, stirring sugar into Sherlock's mug.

"Nobody," the older man answered, laughing in turn. "Just thought I'd find some extra work to do, keep my mind occupied. I'll be bouncing off the walls half the night, if I go home now."

"All right, well you have a lovely time with that, but be sure to go and get some rest at some point. Doctor's orders, mate."

Sherlock lunged into the room on a pause in his music. "Tell him to find me a cold case or two, while he's down there," he demanded, pivoting and sweeping away with a grand glissando.

Greg had obviously heard; he responded before John could relay the message. "Tell the great git he's been good, so I'll pick out something nice," he chuckled. "But I don't know what our plans will be, with Liz around, so he might not get it quick as he'd like..."

"It shouldn't matter. We'll be visiting for a few hours with Mr Holmes at the hospital tomorrow, anyway; give Anna our love, will you?"

A few more quick pleasantries ended the call, and John carried the two mugs out to where Sherlock was bowing a brilliant allegro finale. He waited and watched, entranced, as his companion seemed to lose himself in the vivacious music; bouncing on his toes and leaning into the graceful pulls of his bow, Sherlock was nothing short of a vision.

When the last bright note sounded, Sherlock opened his eyes and graced him with a dazzling smile to mirror the one he already felt on his face.

"Fantastic," John breathed.

Sherlock turned with a pleased flourish and began putting the instrument in its case. When he was finished, he moved to take the tea. John held it away, looking up expectantly; smirking, his partner bent and gave him a quick peck of a kiss before claiming his beverage. "I think we should continue the experiment we've begun," he stated, his face suddenly turning serious as he spoke into the steam and mouthed the lip of his mug.

John blinked and paused a long moment, trying to catch up to the abrupt change in direction. "Oh. Er. You mean, the details of your..."

"My travels, yes." Sherlock rested a hip on the edge of the table and crossed his ankles, casual and confident.
Travels. As if it was all a bloody holiday for him! "You mean, your prolonged absence?" he couldn't help but question; and just that fast, the atmosphere in the flat had taken a sudden chill.

Sherlock frowned. "A better term to use might be...my necessary journey?"

"Unexplained disappearance?" he fired back.

"Quest?" suggested Sherlock, a tiny worried line appearing between his brows.

"Exodus? Abandonment? Deception?" The words seemed to turn John's tea bitter in his mouth, but something deep within his gut was turning and loosening; he found he couldn't stop now, even though he hadn't the faintest idea what he was about to say.

Now Sherlock looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Hunt, perhaps?" He stood, relinquishing his tea to the table, and stepped forward to gently take John's mug from him—John realised he'd been gripping the hot ceramic tightly with both hands, holding it in front of his heart like a shield.

"Misguided, foolish self-endangerment." John swallowed, watching Sherlock's slim torso twist to set the second mug down. His eyes seemed blurry. "Your reckless, rash, uncaring desertion..."

Hesitant, the taller man carefully enfolded John in his arms, and dipped his dark head low to murmur, "My privation. My purgatory. My long years of loneliness and hardship."

"Mine too," John whispered, roughly clutching fistfuls of fabric at the back of Sherlock's dressing gown. Speaking his feelings outright was difficult for him on the best of days, and this brief exchange of loaded terms, as indirect as it was, threatened to lay him low.

It was a long minute they remained there, silently holding on to one another as if they might be blown away in a gale at any moment. Finally, John lifted his face from its press into his partner's chest; he looked up into pale eyes and saw a hollow pain that echoed his own. He cleared his throat, forcefully banishing unwanted tears that threatened to reach the surface. "Hunt. That—that works well enough, I think."

Sherlock looked down at him uncertainly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Come on, let's go talk about some of it." John took Sherlock's hand and led their way from the room, extinguishing the lights and leaving their tea to cool, forgotten.

They had returned to John's upstairs bedroom; the discussion could feasibly take place almost anywhere, but John figured it would be easier to repeat the arrangement that had worked four nights before. This time, however, it was only a little past ten thirty in the evening; although Sherlock had already been attired in his comfortable lounging clothes, the doctor was still fully dressed. With only a second's hesitation, he stepped up to his chest of drawers and began stripping off the jumper and shirt he wore, his movements spare and efficient in the dim light from his window.

Sherlock said nothing to this; John heard the squeak of bedsprings behind him as he quickly shucked his jeans and replaced them with flannel bottoms from his drawer. When he turned around, the tall man awaited him silently, dark sheet pulled up around his white T-shirt, his pale face
unreadable in the shadows.

John climbed into his bed from the opposite side, and leaned in to squeeze his partner's shoulder reassuringly before sliding down under the covers. "Comfy?"

"Almost." He shimmied lower into the bed, and his hand found John's between them.

"Look...I know I said 'start at the beginning' the other night, Sherlock, but I've been thinking about it, and I don't think I really want to keep doing this chronologically."

"No?" He twisted to lie on his side, facing the centre. "I had assumed that a linear approach would be the easiest one for you."

"Well, I reserve the right to change my mind. But for now..." John sifted through his formless thoughts, trying to find some kind of explanation. "I—I think I'd really rather be hearing stories. That doesn't make sense, does it?"

"I suppose it does, in a way. You don't want a cohesive storyline to follow; if you're hearing disconnected snippets, it makes it seem less real."

"Maybe so." John wasn't sure he was happy about that explanation, especially if it was true; still, it was a relief that Sherlock seemed to understand, even if John didn't himself.

"It makes little difference to me, as the end goal remains the same. Fine. Shall I simply choose something at random, then?"

"Sure."

Sherlock tapped the cool tips of his fingers on the back of John's hand in a gentle thinking rhythm before he murmured, "Australia. I travelled to Brisbane as Rodney Collins. His hair was truly atrocious."

"Is that so?" John sensed that Sherlock was deliberately focusing on humour, this time around, and he appreciated the effort.

"Oh yes. Stringy, bleached pale and straight, far too long. Terribly unflattering with the false rosacea. You would have hated it."

He tried to imagine it, and failed for the most part, but the haphazard image he managed to cobble together made him smile. "So what were you up to, Mr Collins?"

"My goal was to dismantle an operation that victimised the local population of illegal immigrants; the organisation was abducting people and harvesting organs to sell on the international market, among other things. Because Moriarty had a hand in setting up their process from the start, they were running a fairly tight ship. I spent four days watching for any way to gain access to their facility."

"That long," marvelled John, earning a huff of amusement from his companion.

"Thankfully, near the end of the fourth day, as I set about procuring some food,"—Sherlock put slight but noticeable emphasis there, as if calling for John's approbation of the fact that he'd eaten at least once in a week—"I was targeted for petty theft by a homeless boy of Sri Lankan descent. He failed in his efforts, of course, but I was impressed by his confidence and decided to recruit him."
"Of course you did."

"The child followed the instructions I gave him, quite well; I wasn't surprised at all. After all, the routine he'd attempted in order to try pickpocketing me had shown a good memory, a prodigious attention to detail, and a fair bit of acting talent."

"I'm sure whatever he did for you only encouraged his criminal tendencies..."

"Well. Of course I had to teach him a few tricks of the trade, in payment. By the time Rodney moved on, Nip was likely well-prepared to move up in the world."

"How old was he?" asked John.

"Twelve, but small for his age, so he could get by with playacting a fair bit younger. A history of undernourishment; he'd survived more than two years on the streets before he met me...he reminded me of you, actually."

"What, puny and undernourished?"

"No, of course not!" There was a pause to appreciate the small joke. "No...It was something in his bearing. I've never seen anyone so young act like that." Sherlock's voice had sobered significantly in the space of that one sentence, but after another short silence he said, "He had your 'you've got to be kidding me' look down pat, too."

"Probably just a side effect of dealing with you," John chuckled, and yawned.

As Sherlock continued speaking, he gradually shifted until he was practically curled against John's side. "At any rate, Nipuna pulled off his part perfectly, and I was able to get in with plenty of opportunity to access their records. Surprisingly enough, I found that they were also a linked source to a human trafficking ring that had begun fairly extensive operations in London that year; since I did not wish to call Mycroft's attention upon my location, I thought it best to insinuate a packet of data into a place where it would be discovered on a rather lower level."

John's ears perked up at that. "Wait a minute. When was this?"

"You didn't want to know—"

"Yes, yes. Humour my curiosity while you have it, Sherlock."

"This was just over a year after I'd left London; so, August of 2012."

"Huh." John thought back to that year, trying to pick out the fuzzy memory that had snagged on Sherlock's words. "Greg spent that whole summer working on a trafficking ring, and if I'm remembering right, he finally managed to take it down sometime around the end of August. Are you telling me you gave him the break in his case, from beyond the grave?"

Sherlock went quiet, then, in a very specific way; John could almost hear the smug little smile as it crept over his features in the dark. "Perhaps it would be best not to tell him that," the detective rumbled at last.

Their mingled laughter echoed off the walls of the room.

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Chapter Summary

Having an extra guest hanging around for his first week reunited with Anna wouldn't have been Greg's first choice. Thankfully, Liz doesn't seem to be the conventional sort...

14. GREG: Third Wheel Optional
(16 May - 19 May 2015)

The cab ride back to Greg's flat from the airport started in a flurry of excited chatter, with the two women exclaiming over plans in the city, and Greg answering an energetic scattering of questions about his work schedule. Within ten minutes or so, however, the lack of sleep began to visibly catch up to the travellers, and their slowing conversation turned to the subject of accommodations.

"I've got a fold-out sofa in my living room," began Greg, but Anna patted his knee to stop him before he could offer more.

"Actually, honey, I was thinking we could set her up at that bed and breakfast down the road from you. You know, the one where you offered to find me a room last year?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, that's a good idea. She'll have a much nicer bed there."

Liz smiled. "And you'll have your privacy. Anna said it's within walking distance, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's only a couple minutes away. Sure that's what you want though, Liz?" Greg had expected that Anna would want to be with her friend as much as possible during her short visit, and he'd assumed that would mean housing her. He didn't want to be seen as selfish—after all, his girlfriend had committed to a much longer stay, so waiting another week to have her to himself couldn't be all that bad.

"Of course, it'll be perfect! I love to have my own space, anyway."

Anna was digging around in the bottom of her handbag. She pulled out a little TARDIS charm, on a ring which held a single key: the flat key copy that Greg had given her. "Here, Lizzie, just make sure to give this back to me before you troop off to Italy."

"Will that be alright?" Greg asked as she passed it across, suddenly concerned that he hadn't thought of the issue of a third key.

"Sure it will," Anna assured him, giving his knee another squeeze and scooting in a little closer so that he would sling an arm around her waist. "Where will I need to be in the next seven days, without either you or Liz? We can make it work. This way, she can pop in whenever she needs to, for anything she doesn't have at the B and B."
Liz stretched and yawned wide. "So here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna go to this place first, and get me checked in, and then you're going back to yours, and we're all going to get a nice two hours' nap; and then you two can come back and get me for lunch, because I won't know where you live yet. Sound good?"

Greg went back over the rambling sentence in his head to be sure he hadn't missed anything. The blonde spoke in a rapid-fire style that was much different than the gentle brevity he was used to from Anna, and she had a thicker East Coast accent as well. "That all sounds brilliant, actually," he agreed, before disengaging the hand which had been quite pleasantly occupied in fiddling about with a belt loop at the side of Anna's jeans, and leaning forward to update the cabbie on their new destination.

Nearly three hours later, Greg and Anna arrived at the bed and breakfast to retrieve Liz for lunch—a full forty minutes late.

"So, did you enjoy your nap?" Liz asked pointedly, opening the door of her room and studying them closely. "I sure did."

Greg was certain that the expression on his own face wasn't all that far off the sheepish look Anna wore. Biting back a nervous chuckle, he stepped aside to let Liz pass, and answered, "One of the most memorable naps I've taken in my life, actually."

From the way Anna elbowed him in the side, and the shade of red that lit up her cheeks as she followed her friend down the hall, he gathered he'd placed the wrong sort of emphasis on his answer.

They made their way to a local café and tucked into sandwiches and crisps, seated together in a cozy little booth. Greg watched the conversation parried back and forth between the two women, carefully keeping his mouth full enough to allow him a few seconds' leeway before any responses. It seemed a prudent course of action, after he'd nearly put his foot in it earlier.

He had to admit he found Liz a little bit intimidating. Her forceful personality was far more apparent in person than it had been on the Skype call which had introduced them—mild violence notwithstanding—and it made a vibrant contrast to Anna's more subdued nature. Greg began to notice that when she was around Liz, Anna laughed differently: louder, heavier, sometimes snorting inelegantly through her nose at no more than a seemingly random word from the other woman. It seemed no less genuine than the laughter she shared with him, though.

As if she sensed he was making an internal comparison, Anna leaned over just then, bringing her soft lips up to brush against Greg's ear as she whispered an off-colour comment just for him, causing him to inhale a sip of his drink and nearly choke himself laughing.

They spent the afternoon on a little walking tour of the area, familiarising Liz with the nearest
conveniences and giving her a primer on the Underground. Capping the walk with a trip through
the grocery, Greg and Anna chose out meat and produce to a steady accompaniment of Liz's witty
commentary. Anna helped him with fixing their dinner, back at the flat; they bounced
companionably around in his small kitchen, falling into proximity like an old routine, laughing and
groping each other subtly whenever they came into contact. Liz hovered in the hall just outside the
kitchen doorway, nursing a glass of wine, tossing out new topics of conversation and making jokes.

Watching Anna and Liz fire ideas and references off each other was almost like opening a window
in time, onto a girl he'd never had the chance to meet before love and loss had matured her. He
remembered the photos he'd been shown of young Anna and her friends at university, faces flushed
and arms akimbo in candid, giggling trios and quartets. In all the stories Anna had told him of her
young adulthood, the same group of names had featured heavily. She was very like Greg, in her
tendency to make many acquaintances and few true friends. Having witnessed only the hesitant
beginning of her rekindled friendship with Chaz, Greg was intrigued and pleased to finally see this
side of her.

She's got good taste, in the friends she keeps closest. Liz and Chaz both, they're bloody perfect for
her, he mused, bending to peek at the ratatouille bubbling away in the oven. It wasn't the first time
a thought along those lines had occurred to him; and listening to the cheerful laughter behind his
back as he tested the doneness of the thin steaks he was frying up, he indulged in a second or two
of the worry that tended to follow it. If I were to ask her to stay, and she lost touch with them, she'd
blame me for it eventually, wouldn't she?

If he looked a little bit sad and wistful when Anna snuck up behind him, wrapping her arms around
to gently squeeze a bit of the excess around his waist, she didn't seem to notice. She kissed him on
the cheek and leaned past him to retrieve the plates from their cupboard; when she turned to face
him again, he'd made sure that all she would see in his eyes was a loving smile.

On Sunday they ventured further into the city, without a specific plan in mind: Greg knew where to
satisfy whatever fancy might take them, the ladies had insisted, and surely they'd not suffer from
boredom in London. He'd shrugged and acquiesced; it didn't upset him in the slightest to play the
aimless tourist once in a while, and walking the streets he knew so well with the benefit of fresh
eyes at his side never failed to be interesting.

"Oh, look!" exclaimed Liz; she reached out for Anna's hand and pulled her along, dislodging
Greg's arm around her shoulders. As the pair hurried together to join a small circle of spectators
around a particularly savvy street musician, Greg sauntered behind at a more reserved pace.

That's par for the course, innit, Greg thought, putting his suddenly empty hand into his trouser
pocket and smiling tolerantly after them. Liz was continually throwing curveballs: she tended to be
full of energy and enthusiasm for an activity for a while, and then would suddenly careen off in
another direction, entranced by a theatre poster or the sight of a green park in the distance. All of
this bubbly liveliness might have seemed unfocused and almost manic to Greg, were it not housed
within this tall, tanned woman: she simultaneously exuded a self-confident assurance that tempered
and balanced her ardour for distraction, an obvious product of her regular meditations and yoga
practice.

When he caught up, Anna turned to grin sweetly at him over her shoulder, and reached back to
offer her hand. His heart seemed to swell almost painfully as he took it. *I'll never get tired of this,* he silently told her, blinking away a sudden prickle in his eyes as he shifted his gaze from their intertwined fingers to the flamenco guitarist busking before them on the pavement.

Greg was up shortly after the sun on Monday morning; when his alarm clock buzzed to rouse him at five thirty, he smiled—admittedly, not a typical response to being woken for the early shift. His happiness wasn't at having to leave for work, of course, but at having the opportunity once more to wake beside his favourite sleeping beauty, and at being able to indulge his habit of reaching over her to the clock. He took great pleasure in performing the contortion for the first time in months, this morning; balancing upon one elbow, Greg stretched his arm out above her back and carefully groped for the button. Alarm silenced, he paused and took a deep breath with his face tipped into Anna's fragrant hair, listening to the soft sounds of her sleep. When she stirred beneath him and mumbled an indistinct series of syllables that clearly indicated she was deep in a dream, he smiled wider and dropped a gentle kiss on her shoulder before rolling away and out of bed.

Now that Anna was back, Greg knew he needed to return to the routine of grabbing all of his clothes before leaving the bedroom on work days, so that he could dress without further disturbing her sleep. Although she would gradually shift her schedule to match his somewhat—or at least, she had done, when she'd stayed here last fall—Anna was adorably, immutably not a morning person. He hadn't given his wardrobe any consideration the night before, though. The three of them had sat in his living room after supper and chatted amiably 'til nearly eleven, when Liz had noticed the time and taken herself off to walk the two blocks back to her accommodations. After she'd gone, Greg hadn't concerned himself with much but the bright spark of Anna's presence, and forethought had been an entirely lost cause.

Showered and shaved, Greg glanced over the pile of randomly chosen clothing he'd brought into the bathroom, and decided it was suitable. *She likes to tease me for not wearing colours, but there's one definite advantage: practically anything I grab in the dark will match...* He smiled to himself as he strode up the hall towards the kitchen, still yawning and just starting to button his shirt.

The unexpected sight of the Spandex-clad woman twisting and bending on her mat, facing away from him and centred in the open space between his armchairs and dining table, stopped him short; he couldn't help staring for a moment. In those few shocked seconds, Liz reached her slender arms overhead, then bent forward with a whooshing exhale and stretched out smoothly to lie in a prone position on her stomach. She had hips more angular than Anna's, limbs longer and more toned, honey-coloured hair that bounced in thick, natural ringlets and brushed the mat as she pushed up into downward facing dog—he recognised that pose, though he hadn't any memory of where he'd learnt the name—and then her dark eyes were open and looking at him upside-down through the open angle of her legs, he realised with a jolt.

"Fuck, I'm sorry. I mean, g'morning. I mean, um." Greg's fingers fumbled as he rushed to do up the buttons he'd forgotten.

She laughed softly, pulling herself upright in one fluid motion and pressing into a deep lunge; turning only her torso, she faced him to speak. "I didn't mean to startle you. Floor space is at a bit of a premium over at the bed and breakfast, I figured you wouldn't mind me coming over to do my practice."
Of course she wasn't distressed about being watched; she's an instructor, Greg remembered, she has people staring at her all the time. Clearing his throat, he replied, "Oh, no. No, that's no problem at all. 'Course not. Er, I was just gonna fix myself some breakfast, before I have to leave. Want something?"

He ducked aside into the kitchen to hide his embarrassment, and heard her response behind him. "I don't want to make you late. But I'll admit, I'm starving this morning."

"Right, well. Scrambled eggs okay?" he asked, opening the fridge.

"Yeah, that'd be great, thanks! I'll be done in a few minutes."

Greg didn't so much as peek back around the doorframe the entire time he was working to prepare the food.

By the time breakfast was ready, Liz had finished her workout and rolled up the brightly coloured mat. She followed him to sit at the table and gratefully accepted the plate and mug of coffee he brought out.

"You know, Greg, you could do with some practical yoga yourself," she commented, lifting one corner of her mouth along with a sculpted eyebrow as he pulled in his chair.

"What?"

"Learning some of the basic poses would be good for your strength and flexibility. Your back tends to bother you, right?"

"I'm almost fifty-two; I'm pretty sure back pain is one of the immutable laws of nature, innit? Besides, it's not that bad. It only acts up a touch, now and then."

"Mm-hmm." She gave him a look that would have been right at home on Sherlock's face: coolly assessing.

It jarred him more than he cared to admit.

Greg shifted self-consciously in his seat and put all his attention into eating his breakfast. He'd felt many times, over the past few days, as if he were putting on a sort of performance for inspection: be the perfect gentleman, show that he was an accommodating host, wear all his better qualities on his sleeve. He knew that Liz was only going to be around until the end of the week, and even as he got to know and like her better, he couldn't resist a little relief at the knowledge that she'd be moving on. He got the sense that she was—not judging him, exactly, but certainly observing him for some kind of verdict. Whether that scrutiny was on her own motivations, or at Anna's request, it was a test he didn't want to fail. But he didn't have an innate sense of how to exist around Liz—under her gaze he was uncomfortably aware of every move he made, and every word he uttered—and it only served to make him more grateful for the easy, relaxed compatibility he enjoyed with her friend.

Tuesday had Greg scheduled to work early again, but he took the afternoon off, leaving Donovan and Patel to handle the wrap-up on a cut-and-dried domestic violence case. He ignored Sally's
knowing smirk as he gave final instructions and took his early leave; he'd made a tentative plan to escort the ladies to the British Museum, and he was pleased to be able to carry it out. Greg was simply glad that London hadn't conspired to throw anything more complicated in the way of his team that day.

Hours later, strolling hand-in-hand with Anna to cross beneath the sunlit geometric lattice of the museum's Great Court, Greg felt so perfectly, utterly pleased and content that each tiny detail of their surroundings seemed to etch itself, glowing, into his memory.

"I was thinking of buying us memberships," he commented, looking up with a smile to the tessellated clear cobalt of the cloudless sky.

Anna slowed their steps and followed his gaze upward. "I'm surprised you don't already have one."

"Well, I might've done, I suppose. I've always liked it here. But I never really came all that often, before...never enjoyed it nearly as much as I do with you."

She squeezed her fingers tight between his, and tilted her head sideways to rest briefly on his shoulder. "Mm. I'll grant you, stealing kisses in the shadow of Ramesses II does add a certain something to the whole experience..."

Shaking off the ridiculous urge to pull her over against the high wall of the curved staircase they passed and bury his face in her lovely neck, he cleared his throat and checked his watch. "Right," he said, his voice a bit rough, "so Liz said she wanted us to meet her over in Chinese jade, yeh? That'd be...back this way, we gotta cross through the Mexico gallery to get to that, don't we?"

"Yeah, um. I think so." Her shoulder pressed up against his as she dug the museum map from her pocket, and he felt an unmistakable tremor run through her at the point of contact: she feels it too. Bloody hell.

Liz seemed to be making a deliberate point to remove herself from his and Anna's presence regularly, as she'd just done here at the museum, casually stating her intent to do something on her own for a clearly specified window of time. Over the course of four days, she'd made herself scarce in this manner no less than seven times, three of which had occurred while they were out in public as a group. On the one hand, this seemed positively charitable—Greg couldn't complain at the opportunity to indulge his seemingly unquenchable need for one-on-one contact. On the other hand, each time Liz was back with them after one of these breaks, Greg keenly felt the weight of imagined judgment. She likely thinks I'm too randy to help myself, he'd thought at one point; later, Does Anna look satisfied enough?—and even, Am I being too casual about this? Does she expect me to pull Anna away without waiting for a cue? The signals he was getting from his girlfriend weren't telling him anything was amiss, but he worried just the same, despite his best efforts not to.

Even while he'd remained nervously attentive to Liz's presence, Greg had moved through the week in a happy daze. Having Anna suddenly back at his side was a disorienting rush of endorphins, a wave of dizzy, intense emotion threatening to knock him off-balance at the oddest moments—when she met his eyes over her coffee mug; when she leaned into his shoulder and pointed out to something in his sight line; when he heard the distinctive lilt of her voice in the next room just before he came around the corner. On one such occasion, he'd caught Liz looking at him with a strange expression, one he found himself interpreting as something straddling fondness and concern. He couldn't be certain, though; for all that she spoke openly and seemed to be nothing but genuine, Ms Biancardi remained an impenetrable mystery...

"Hey, Mister Deep Thoughts. This way," chuckled Anna, tugging at his arm to correct his course. He'd gotten so wrapped up in himself that he'd missed the entry to the next gallery room on the
way to their destination.

"Sorry, love," he murmured, tucking his contemplations away for another time.

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"Hurry, John, do keep up!"

"You know, you might have carried this damn tree, if you were so worried about me keeping pace. Prat."

Sherlock spared a glance over his shoulder, before striding across the next intersection. "It's not a tree. *Dracaena Deremensis 'Warneckii'* is technically a slow-growing shrub."

"What it is, is bloody awkward!" groused John behind him, angrily spitting one of the narrow, glossy leaves from his face.

*Oh, fine then*, thought Sherlock, rolling his eyes heavenward; he paused at the kerb and adjusted the shoulder strap on the small overnight bag he carried. When John reached him, huffing and grumbling under his breath, he bent and summarily collected the large pot from the man's arms. "We mustn't miss the twelve fifty-three train," he told John, spurring himself on once more. "If we do, the next departure isn't for two more hours, and it adds over forty minutes to the travel time. I'd rather get into London before midnight, wouldn't you?" With the leafy shrub blocking eighty-five percent of his visual field, at least the appallingly beige buildings of Inverness were mostly hidden from sight, as was the doubtlessly sour face of his companion.

"We would've had plenty of time to catch this train, if not for your insistence on bringing the bleeding houseplant home."

"This venerable plant was the only *reliable* witness to the murder of Warwick Stuart—"

"Oi! Watch your step just here—"

Right on cue, Sherlock tripped on a raised paver. Only his partner's quick lunge stopped him
tipping face first into the road.

"All right?" asked John, suddenly close at his side, clutching his elbow with a warm, steadying hand.

He turned his head to peer down at the shorter man through a screen of foliage. "Thank you," he said, and then it was his turn to spit out an errant leaf; the prolonged fit of ridiculous giggling that overtook them both at that very nearly did make them miss their train.

A little while later, they'd managed to claim a set of double-facing seats for themselves in a sparsely occupied carriage, and they were beginning to settle in just as the train juddered into motion and pulled out of the Inverness station.

Sherlock stowed their bags on the overhead rack and then seated himself at the window, leaving his companion to decide on his own seating and the placement of their live parcel, currently blocking the aisle. He watched, amused, as John considered the dilemma; the good doctor was conscientious to a fault, and clearly didn't want to allow it to occupy a second set of seats. So he pulled it behind him as he backed in, leaving the pot to fill all of the floor space between the two aisle-side seats of their four. This left John with limited options: he could either sit straddling the potted plant, or interpose his knees between the taller man's. In the interest of finding a comfortable position for the three and a half hours' trip to Edinburgh, he finally chose to stretch out sideways along the opposite pair of seats, his back against the carriage wall.

The metre-high shrub stood sentinel at their side, its leaves trembling in rhythm with the rails. It visually dominated their view to the rest of the train car, giving them an illusion of privacy. Sherlock would have liked to recline similarly on his side of the four seats, but he knew that his limbs were too long to allow the position without projecting into the aisle; instead, he stretched his legs across and braced them on the opposite seat edge.

"Comfy?" asked John.

"Almost," he responded, with a smirk; lifting his feet, he deposited them in his partner's lap.

John let out a dramatic, long-suffering sigh, but he was smiling as he dropped his hands onto Sherlock's crossed ankles. He rolled his head to the side and regarded the detective with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "I hope you think twice before dragging us all the way up to the Scottish Highlands again anytime soon."

"Don't be silly, John. If an intriguing enough crime is brought to our attention, of course we shall travel wherever necessary. And you must admit, this has been a worthy venture in itself."

"Has it? How about you explain to me, finally, why you need to take this tree—shrub, sorry—back to London in its entirety? I think you may've been attempting to tell me about it, when Inspector MacDougall barged in."

Sherlock's brows drew low at the thought of the bumbling, stocky officer, and his annoying, un-Lestrade-like tendency to carelessly interrupt a good stream of deductive reasoning. "This species is highly regarded for its ability to absorb harmful chemicals from indoor air. The shrub is confirmed to have grown in Stuart's office for the entirety of the past three years, and he began to
suffer the symptoms of his slow poisoning about six months ago, although the actual gaseous dosage must have begun some time earlier. With careful analysis of the growth rings in these woody stems, I'll be able to determine the approximate starting date of the poisoning, and that, obviously, will lead us to the killer among our three suspects. Cuttings taken from the plant will oxidise over a period of hours; and without consistent growth data from all portions of the plant, my calculations will be inadequate to pinpoint the date we need. So, naturally, I require the entire thing."

"Brilliant," was the breathy reply.

His lips twitched into a small smile at the praise. "I trust that upon receipt of the proof of my investigation, MacDougall shall be competent to arrest the guilty party without our return to Scotland—if only just barely."

"The man doesn't seem to think very highly of you, either," John pointed out. "And we did just pilfer part of the victim's office décor before leaving town quite suddenly. Sure he'll trust you when you call him up with your answer?"

"Hm. Good point, he was quite unpleasant. Perhaps I should ask Lestrade to have a little tête-à-tête with him. Or I could simply have him report my findings, once I have them."

"If Greg's not too busy, and you ask him nicely, maybe."

Sherlock sniffed at the man's tolerant, parental tone. "Too busy? For a phone call to Police Scotland? Doubtful." There was a quiet moment, punctuated by a lurch of the train car and a deliberate squeeze of the fingers above his feet. "Oh, you mean busy with Anna."

"She brought a friend over with her from the States, who'll be with them 'til tomorrow afternoon, I think he said. He didn't have the week off work or anything, but don't just assume you can reach him right away." John shrugged and tipped his head back against the wall, closing his eyes.

After that exchange, their contented silence stretched out for about an hour. Sherlock spent the time using his phone, skimming over any recent articles and references he could find regarding the testing of living plant matter for chemical trace, on the off chance that there was something new to learn regarding the topic. (There wasn't.)

John was pretending to nap; Sherlock knew he was simply resting his eyes, though, because he frequently stroked his fingertips back and forth over the bones of Sherlock's ankles. It was just the sort of casual, quiet gesture that never failed to soothe him, and he smiled despite himself at the chemical absorption charts he studied.

Aside from the disturbance of a few brief stops, shuffling local commuters on and off at the larger villages, the winding high-speed rail journey was relatively peaceful; their carriage—chosen cannily by Sherlock with an eye to the habitual boarding and spreading patterns of this type of traveller—saw most of its few passengers disembark before Dalwhinnie. Shortly thereafter, when the train began to cut into the higher foothills of the Grampian mountain range, Sherlock's phone signal got spotty. It wasn't unexpected, but he was frustrated just the same.

"There should be more mobile towers installed through this region," he complained, shoving the
now-useless device into his breast pocket.

John opened his eyes and looked over. "You ought to save your battery, anyway," he yawned, peering down at his watch. "It's over two hours yet to Edinburgh, and after the transfer we've got almost five hours to London..."

"Yes, yes, you've made your point. Scotland is incredibly inconvenient; I agree wholeheartedly. What should I have done, begged Mycroft to requisition a helicopter for our personal use?"

This elicited a short huff of laughter. "If only."

Sherlock was silent another minute, gazing out the window to the rolling hills they passed. Soon enough, he found the tension of inactivity too much. "Bored," he growled under his breath.

One side of John's mouth rose, and he shifted to dislodge the feet in his lap and stretch. "Talk to me, then. Tell me a story."

"Here?"

"Why not?" He turned to sit properly in his seat, bumping their knees together.

Sherlock glanced around: there were only two passengers at the other end of the carriage, and the bulk of the standing shrub, incongruous as it was, made their little group of seats seem almost like a cozy private compartment. We're not in the dark, the way you like it, John, he thought; but in looking across into his partner's calm, expectant eyes, he realised that the familiarity of the setting was apparently no longer an issue.

"Fine," he sighed, bending forward to stretch his lower back; he briefly took up John's hands in his own, staring down at the well-studied features of the doctor's concise, skilled fingers. What to choose?

When Sherlock finally began to speak, John cocked his head and blinked, interrupting before Sherlock could get more than his first few words out. "Berlin? Really?"

"Yes."

They had leaned apart once more, finding a new comfortable position to spend the ninety minutes' journey remaining to their transfer station. Their legs stretched to span the space separating their seats, from both sides this time: Sherlock's feet were tucked cozily into the space between John's left hip and the wall, and John's extended likewise to Sherlock's hip, where he held them with a loosely draped arm.

"I could see you getting along in Paris, no problem. Somehow, Germany seems to be a stretch," said John.

"Whyever should that be?" Sherlock inquired, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "I speak perfectly good German, as you know. The cultural disconnect was hardly an issue there, compared to the non-European countries; even America was stranger to me, really..."
"Forget it, I don't know why I thought it. It just...doesn't seem to fit your personality, somehow?"
John shrugged and turned his head to watch the quaint stone cottage of the Pitlochry rail station pass off into the distance.

"Well. It may surprise you then, John, to learn that I actually maintained a cover identity there for upwards of eight weeks."

"Go on, then, tell me all about it. I've only ever spent about two weeks in Germany, myself: they rotated us through Bergen-Hohne garrison before they sent us on to Kandahar. That'd be a fair bit to the west."

"Yes, I know of it." Sherlock paused to file away this new tidbit of data—John didn't often talk about his time in the RAMC. Perhaps now, with the change in our relationship, he might be convinced to share more?

Pinning that idea for later consideration, he settled further back into the seat and dipped more deeply into the memories he wanted to purge. "I was named Jerry—Jerry Grant. I had arranged a preset cover while still in London, knowing that I would eventually go there; I was ostensibly in Berlin as a web journalist, working on an in-depth piece on the city's fashion industry."

"Fashion?" asked John, sounding amused and a bit disbelieving.

"Mm-hmm. Jerry had a rich background, and expensive tastes that were befitting someone moving in those sorts of circles; the safety deposit box I'd had prepared far in advance held much more in the way of funds than I'd become accustomed to surviving with."

"Nice way to get a break, then?"

"It was no break," he corrected his friend. "Rather, it was incredibly stressful. In order to infiltrate the organisation, Jerry needed to socialise, work contacts, become trusted. And the people I had to fool weren't the lowly criminal element, ignorant of the wider world beyond their schemes. No—these were well-connected, Internet-savvy socialites with suspicious minds. I had to attend galas, be seen at runway shows, dine and rub noses with a whole cadre of insipid wastes of humanity, all of whom had to get to know Jerry Grant personally. And if I slipped, just once—if one observant bodyguard saw me remove my glasses at the wrong moment, or if I failed to hold back a comment or observation that I might normally allow myself, or if the vocal mannerisms I'd adopted were to falter..."

The doctor no longer sounded amused; rather, there was a note of sympathy in his reply. "That must have been hard."

He nodded, closing his eyes and sinking deeper into those weeks of excess. "There were parties. Once I was a known part of the social circle, I gained my standing invitation along with that trust. It was an important step in getting to the heart of the operation, and it had to be done." Sherlock pursed his lips, crossing his arms over his chest and ducking his chin lower. "It had to be done."

John went quiet, and the subtle brush of his feet against Sherlock's hip stilled completely. "What had to be done?" he asked, his voice low.

The train lurched on the rails and began to slow, coming in for its final approach to Edinburgh.

"Sherlock?"

He shook his head mutely, turning to watch the station grow nearer. There would be the bustle of disembarking the train, the crowd of intercity commuters; John would want to purchase something
to eat, and they would have no more privacy until well into the second phase of the journey.

The five o'clock train departed Edinburgh Waverly right on time. As it gathered speed, John occupied himself with unwrapping and consuming a pale, mournful-looking ham and cheese sandwich, and a bag of seasoned crisps that covered his fingers in a fine rust-coloured powder.

"You should've got something," he admonished mildly.

"You should've got something less disgusting," Sherlock countered, wrinkling his nose at the obnoxious odour of the artificial spices.

John popped a crisp into his mouth and made a little assenting noise.

They were in the rearmost carriage of the train; the leg between Edinburgh and London was a far more popular route, and they had been unable to procure facing seats as before. The best that Sherlock had been able to do was to seat them in the very last row, where the end of the train meant there was no corresponding seating across the aisle. John had placed the potted plant in the pair of seats just ahead of them, where he could keep an eye on it; it served admirably to screen and separate them from the rest of the passengers.

They remained comfortably wordless through the rest of John's substandard meal. Eventually he pulled out paper napkins and cleaned himself off, with the last of his small bottle of water; when he was reasonably certain he'd adequately removed the salty residue, he dropped his left hand casually to rest on the seat between them.

Sherlock aimed a fractional smile out the window and pretended not to notice for a full twenty seconds. Then, he took up John's hand in his own and pulled it over to rest on his leg.

"Sherlock," his partner murmured, after a long moment.

"Yes, John?" he asked lightly, still looking out at the tedious scenery, although he knew exactly what the man wanted.

And John knew that he knew, of course. He was quiet but for a small clearing of his throat, and tightened his fingers in Sherlock's.

Sherlock sighed softly, and nodded.

"The parties," began Sherlock at last, his voice carefully modulated not to carry. "Private, exclusive, and frequent; hosted by Oliver Bösch, a powerful force in Berlin's fashionable society. He also, of course, held the reins to the most extensive drugs distribution network in all of Central Europe."

"So that's why you had to be so visible," John murmured; Sherlock continued as if he hadn't
"He was somewhat reclusive, and hard to get to outside of his access-controlled revels...there was no way to complete my task without becoming part of the favoured group as Jerry. But getting in was hardly a problem, as it turned out, compared to being in." Sherlock's gaze dropped to his knees. "Bösch was vain, fickle, perverse, and more than a little sadistic. He wasn't always present, those late nights; when he was, he was as likely to hold court and give orders as he was to lose interest and leave us suddenly."

"Orders?"

"Oh, yes, he loved to make decisions. Which model should sit on his lap. What round of drinks should be served to everyone next. Which couple should be encouraged to perform lewd acts in front of the others; whose turn it was to shoot up, and whether they would be given heroin or cocaine when they did; that sort of thing..."

John had gone thoroughly still beside him once more. Sherlock paid it no mind; he was riding the cresting wave of memory, now, calmly dissociated from both his own story and the presence of the man beside him. His quiet words flowed rapidly, unchecked.

"I managed to stay on Oliver's good side without attracting too much attention, until my fifth party: three weeks since my first invitation. Little red-headed Milena had got it into her head that I was competing with her for Brigitte's attentions—a ridiculous notion. Brigitte wanted Leo, of course, and regarded Milena as nothing more than a post-show amusement; as for me, she'd simply taken pity on poor, inexperienced Jerry and covered for me the previous weekend when I refused a hit. Still, all it took was one ill-timed outburst from the idiot girl to draw Herr Olli's eye to me, and before I could find a plausible excuse he'd had his strong-arm fetch me over. It was my turn, he told me."

Sherlock's jaw clicked shut, then; for a breathless moment there was only the sound of the rails, the soft swish of the vibrating leaves, and the indistinct murmur of passengers further forward. Eventually he spoke again, his voice expressionless. "The next I remember clearly, I was in another room. I gather I'd resisted—flinched, twisted away, prevented myself getting the full hit of heroin—exactly how, that's unclear now. I do remember Bösch entering the room, ordering Hans to hold me down long enough to administer a second injection. His smile. I remember thinking, it was the most isolated I'd been with him, I was away from the public rooms—if I could just stay lucid long enough to do it..."

He shut his eyes, furrowing his brows, letting the sentences become as choppy and disconnected as the images he replayed. "His smile. He sent Hans off for something—I was no threat, of course not, not high and shaking and whimpering there in the corner—and then. My tie was still in my pocket. His smartphone was in his, but I got hold of it first. Strangling him was more difficult than I'd hoped; he wasn't a tall man, but he was strong. I remember. His back was to me as he struggled. Particoloured blond hair, so much like..."

Sherlock cleared his throat to free it of a sudden tightness. "After, I ran...couldn't remember how to get to Jerry's hotel, passed out somewhere along Anklamerstrasse. By morning I was rational enough to know the hotel wasn't safe. I paid a young woman all the cash I carried to sneak in and retrieve a few vital items for me; I had her wipe the surfaces down so Jerry's fingerprints wouldn't raise alerts. Everything I hadn't left in the safety deposit box had to be abandoned, but I still had Oliver's phone; I used it to burn his contacts, expose the network. Job done. By mid-afternoon, I was already heading through Poland...and by evening...I was in bad shape, for days. I needed; but I didn't. I didn't."
Was it Sherlock crushing John's fingers in a painfully tight grip? Or was it the other way 'round? The distinction didn't register. A sort of tremor passed through his frame, releasing him from the hold of the tale: he turned his head at last and focused on the man beside him.

John's face was pale, but he visibly gathered himself under his friend's scrutiny; he met Sherlock's stare with eyes that were only slightly glassy.

"I never did again, John, no matter the temptation. It wasn't by choice." He put urgent emphasis into the assurance, realising belatedly that he'd gone perhaps a bit further with the story than was exactly prudent.

"I—I know," John rasped, and the pressure he exerted on Sherlock's hand lessened somewhat.

Sherlock studied their joining impassively, then carefully, slowly uncurled his own tightly cramped fingers. "Would you mind, if I just..."

Thankfully, his companion understood right away; blinking, he lifted his freed wrist and glanced at his watch. "You've got two hours to London. As long as you can do what you need to without me switching to sit with the shrub, I don't mind." The doctor folded his hands on his lap, perceptively shifting his position to remove any points of contact between them, and gave Sherlock a tiny, encouraging smile.

"Thank you, John."

It hadn't been the usual three weeks. Even so, Sherlock might have gone in to do some of this work sooner, testing the success of his new theory, had hospital visits and the poisoning case not dominated his time since then. Tonight, he was certainly not inclined to wait any longer; he had plenty of time, and John's tacit understanding. Stepping into his mental sanctuary, he began the preparations to scrub out some of the sooty marks of his journey: Paris...Brisbane...and most definitely, Berlin.

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ANNA: Station to Station

Chapter Summary

Seeing Lizzie off on a journey to Italy is only the beginning of a very eventful day for Anna.

16. ANNA: Station to Station
   (23 May 2015)

It was a breezy, cool morning on Saturday; overnight rain had given way to patchy sunlight. Anna watched the clouds shift and break outside the window of the taxicab, listening with half an ear as Liz completed a phone call to her great-aunt.

"Sí," laughed Liz, "sí. I'll be in Paris this afternoon, and from there I go on to Milan for the night. I'll get into Florence tomorrow, at about eleven o'clock, okay? Sí, of course I'll telephone when I arrive. Okay, grazie, grazie! Ciao!"

Hanging up, she grinned over at her friend. "I sure am lucky Zia Celeste speaks good English, because my Italian is really shitty."

"Well, you'll have a few weeks to learn better, anyway." They passed through an intersection whose buildings looked familiar to Anna; with a start, she recognised the tall, imposing façade and distinctive arched windows of the Baker Street Underground station. It sent a pleased little thrill through her to realise she knew exactly where she was in the sprawling, enigmatic city. She turned her head to smile after the building as it receded behind them. "So, Liz. You promised me you'd tell me what you think about Greg..."

"Yep!" Liz stuffed her phone into a pocket of her light jacket and twisted in her seat to face Anna. Affecting an almost comical expression of deep thought, she ticked off points on her fingers as she spoke. "Well...He's attractive, for sure. He's a good cook, and funny. He's smart, but not stuck-up. He's got a lot of respect for your artistic side, which is nice for you."

"Yes, and?"

"Um... He's super secure and confident about his work, not stressed about the routine or about angling for advancement. Knows how to relax when he's not working." She tapped a finger at her lips, as if trying to come up with more. "And he's conscientious; never leaves the seat up..."

"Ew! No, he doesn't, and thanks for reminding me that guys even do that."

"What can I say? I guess you lucked out twice in a row." She shrugged, spreading her hands wide. "Hey, gimme some of your gum stash for the trip?"

Anna nodded and dug out the variety she'd purchased at the airport shop, allowing Liz to choose
from the handful of packages. "All right, now that you've covered the basics we both already know, what are you really thinking?"

Liz quirked one side of her mouth up, extracting one piece of gum to chew and depositing two of the packets in her handbag. "All right, you asked for it. This guy is hopeless over you. He is so in love with you he hasn't even figured out what to do with it yet...and he's scared, Annie."

Her brows rose.

"You heard me. He's been hurt, and he's convinced on some level that whatever went wrong with his ex is going to happen all over again. Probably because he's never been able to really place the blame anywhere but on himself, whether or not he knows all the reasons. It's awfully noble of him, but yeah—he's freaking out. But you know what's so special about it?"

"No, what?" She was frowning, now, staring uncomfortably out the window to watch a column-faced church pass by.

Liz laid a gentle hand on her elbow to get her full attention. "Typical guys, when something scares them about a relationship, they pull back; get distant, pick fights, self-sabotage. The better ones stick around, or at least figure their shit out eventually. But Greg...honey, he's all in. You haven't figured out what kind of power you have over him yet, and he knows you could tear his heart to shreds, but he's determined to let you."

"Jesus, Liz. No fucking pressure!"

"Hey, you asked me to analyse, that's my analysis. Now, I don't think I really need to say it, sweetie, because you're pretty dopey in love yourself...but don't do anything stupid, okay?"

The high, curved expanse of the St Pancras Eurostar terminal was an imposing place for a goodbye. Even bustling with its crowd of morning travellers, and blaring with frequent announcements and warnings over the loudspeakers, its grand size made Anna feel somewhat insignificant. A puny speck floating in the great wide unknown, she found herself musing, before she shook it off.

Anna handed the last of Liz's excess baggage over to the porter just in time to be pulled into a tight hug.

"Enjoy this, sweetie," Liz said at her ear; "make the very most of it. You deserve every moment, and he's worth it."

A final boarding call echoed over the crowded platform, then, and she released Anna and moved to join a line waiting to enter the sleek train. Before she reached the doors, though, she turned to call out over her shoulder.

"Tell Greg I'm looking forward to my next visit!"

"What?"

"Once he stops looking at me with his detective eyes, and worrying I'm gonna warn you off him—I
feel like we could have a nice little friendship, someday!" She threw a hand overhead in a final exuberant wave, and disappeared into the train.

Abruptly alone in the busy crowd, Anna stood still for a moment, letting strangers pass around her and listening to the profusion of unfamiliar voices and accents.

She needed, suddenly and sharply, to get away, be somewhere that didn't feel so oppressively foreign—but she didn't want to go straight back to Greg's empty flat. He wouldn't be home until after five that evening; and besides, she had a lot to think about, and his personal space probably wasn't the best place to do it. Liz's words from their cab ride were echoing in her ears, it seemed, ricocheting around her ribcage as if they were trying to rearrange things inside. It barely required conscious thought to direct her steps briskly towards the Tube, with the goal of the Baker Street station and familiar ground foremost in her mind.

The brass knocker was cool under her fingers, and Anna smiled fondly at the graceful numerals as she waited for an answer. After a moment, she heard muffled movement, and the door opened onto Martha Hudson's inquisitive face, which lit up immediately.

"Oh! Anna, dear! John had mentioned you were coming back to London for a spell, but I never caught when. What a nice surprise!"

Anna grinned widely and leaned into the doorway to accept a hug. "It's so good to see you, Mrs Hudson! You're looking well."

"And feeling it, lovey! I decided to get a membership at a senior's centre a few months ago; it sounds dreadful, I know, but Evie in my book club swears by the water aerobics, and she finally won me over. It's quite nice actually—not hardly the museum of mouldering fuddy-duddies that you'd think. Gives me something to do, so I don't just clatter about the flat day in and day out. Oh, and here I am wittering on! Come in, come in, let me fix you a cup of tea."

She followed the older woman willingly down the hall, glancing up the stairs as she passed; aside from Mrs Hudson's energetic chatter, all seemed silent in the house.

"They're not home, dearie, sorry to disappoint you," Mrs Hudson said, holding open the door to the ground floor flat.

"It's no disappointment! You and I didn't make nearly enough time to chat, when I was here last year."

Mrs Hudson ushered Anna through to her kitchen, a cosily small room made bright and airy with floral wallpaper and a vintage dinette. She bustled about with the tea things as she continued to talk. "The boys were away for a few days this week; Scotland, John told me as they were leaving. They got in late last night—my hip had me awake, and I heard them on the stairs. But they're out again this morning, already. I heard John shouting something after Sherlock about how he shouldn't be the one lugging the tree to the lab? I confess, dearie, I haven't the slightest."

Anna stifled a giggle. "Who knows, with them? But I'm sure it's something for the case, if they've gone off to the lab. It's okay; we'll arrange to have dinner with them or something, pretty soon."
"Of course you will, that'll be lovely." She brought two china cups to the table and sat down, smiling fondly across at Anna for a long, misty-eyed moment before launching into speech once more. "Oh, my dear, I'm so very glad you've come back to visit! Your Gregory must be over the moon. Do you know, he brought me just the nicest little gift from his trip to see you?"

"I think he showed me—handmade soaps, right?"

"Yes, and they were darling! He brought them over on my birthday, back in January, actually—Gregory's got quite a talent for remembering dates, doesn't he?—and that was lovely, really, because Sherlock pretended to forget, and kept John running all over town on some fool's errand that whole day." She chuckled, shaking her head. "You'd think he would remember, seeing as mine is only two weeks after his; he always acts terribly cross when I make a fuss over his birthday, but he never refuses the cake, does he? I suspect dear Sherlock just doesn't like to acknowledge that the years pass for me, same as everyone on God's green earth. Anyway, John made up for it two days later by coming and putting up some shelves for me, and then he sat and watched telly with me for four hours 'til Sherlock got starved for attention."

Anna sipped happily at her tea, enjoying the pure comfort of silently listening to the landlady. It was nice to hear about the day-to-day, the normal: the things I've missed while I was away, she thought, and then did a little internal double-take that she hadn't thought of Chicago as "home". However, she quickly decided it wasn't worth mulling over, and dismissed the thought. "So how have they been, since New Year's?"

Mrs Hudson tittered, her eyes twinkling. "Oh, they're practically dancing on clouds! I do wonder how they thought they were slipping it by me at first, when it was plain as the nose on your face, good gracious. I'm sure they've got a different sort of dynamic when they're out on cases, I wouldn't know except that Sherlock is always so single-minded when he's working, isn't he, and I don't think it'd be likely, do you? John's always been the private sort."

Anna shrugged, nibbling at a biscuit.

"But here at home—oh, those boys! They're just the most darling couple. You can see it in their eyes. I always knew it was meant to be, but they were too stubborn to see it for ever so long; I never would've guessed a trip overseas would be what finally did the trick."

It brought another smile to Anna's face, to hear such good things about the state of John and Sherlock's relationship. She wouldn't presume to claim full responsibility, but she did tend to think of the two of them with just a touch of protective pride.

After that, their discussion went on through a number of topics; the older woman prompted her to talk about her hometown, her family, and the things she and Greg had taken Liz to see and do in the week since her return. All told, they'd been chatting for nearly two hours when Anna finally stood up from the kitchen table. "Thank you for a lovely visit," she said. "I think I'll get going now, though; I'd like to take a walk, maybe do some shopping before Greg's due back from work."

"You're quite welcome, dearie, come and talk with me anytime. Oh!" She rushed off into her sitting room and re-emerged clutching a familiar piece of purple fabric. "I almost forgot."

"Wow, it looks just like new, thank you so much!" Anna exclaimed. She tucked the knitted scarf into the outside pocket of her smallish handbag, where it bulged out.

Mrs Hudson followed her up the hall to the door, stopping her once more just beside the stairs for a tight hug. "John told me something of your incident, when he asked me to repair it," she said, patting Anna's back, "and I won't ask you to tell me any more about it. But Anna dear, I'm so
Visiting with Mrs Hudson had been exactly what Anna had needed to improve her mood; her feet felt light once more as she stepped back out onto Baker Street. The fresh sense of belonging, of being accepted and cared for, seemed to reflect from her onto the buildings and the buses, putting a benevolent glow on what she could see of the city she'd chosen to adopt as her second home. She smiled and began to walk, continuing on past the station to explore.

After a few blocks she decided the street she was on held too many fast food restaurants and not enough opportunities for window shopping, so she made a left that took her past a pretty park. Across the next major intersection, she saw exactly what she was in the mood for: retail therapy.

Her first stop was a shoe store, and she happily browsed for awhile, letting her mind wander. A pretty pair of high heels caught her eye; she returned to look at them and finger the periwinkle blue satin four times, before finally deciding they were impractical. *For the amount of walking I do on this side of the ocean, they're hardly ideal,* she chided herself. Nothing else in the store held quite the same appeal, though, and so she eventually walked out.

Next door, the window of a ladies' clothing boutique caught her eye. Looking in, she saw an assortment of long skirts printed with pretty graphic designs. She stood before the glass only a moment before stepping over to the door; *okay,* she decided, *if I find a skirt that would match, I'll go back for them before I go get lunch. They really are gorgeous.*

Seven minutes later, when sudden shouting rang out against the bright, tastefully patterned walls of the boutique—when the double handful of other shoppers began to react to the disturbance, with confusion, shock and realisation passing over and through each individual in a rough, rapid wave—Anna dropped a flowing silk skirt to the floor, its ombré shadings of blue and violet pooling at her feet.

Her very first thought, the one she would remember later with faintly dark amusement at herself, was not for her own safety, as it perhaps should have been; neither was it concern for the others around her, nor even an instinctual thought for Greg.

No—all of those came soon enough, of course...but of all things, her first thought was oddly, incongruously this:

*I should have just bought the damn shoes.*

The three men had already spread out over the shop floor when Anna's attention was called to their presence. They wore baggy, lightweight windbreakers of plain and unremarkable nylon, and dark coloured balaclava masks covered their faces and hair; at first they were all three shouting, moving aggressively and quickly to herd everyone together. After the first few seconds, though, the one in the centre began to give instructions, and the other two quieted except to urge the people before
them onward: a clear leader.

"Shut up and don't do anything stupid, and no one gets hurt," the leader shouted over the chaos of frightened cries; an older woman close behind Anna whimpered, but a ragged silence fell over the shop.

The men were still moving, advancing to push them all further from the storefront windows, and Anna pressed through her shock enough to begin shuffling backwards between the clothing racks. As she did, her eyes flicked among the trio, taking in the few visible details of the tall man closest to her before jolting back to the leader.

"Up the stairs there, all of you lot! Quick-like!" He waved something that looked like a large hunting knife as he called out the order, and a disorienting thrill of fear nearly caused Anna's knees to buckle; she looked away, blinking hard.

The older woman reached out and clutched fearfully at Anna's elbow as they moved towards the stairs, but the contact was soon replaced by the rough grasp of hands at her upper arms. Anna clamped her jaw firmly shut against the cry that threatened to escape, trying desperately to remain passive and somewhat lucid as she was manhandled up the first few steps. The only thing that kept her from complete panic was the fact that it was the tall, skinny one touching her. Anna could see the leader from the corner of her eye—all of the masked men were grabbing shoppers, now, driving them forcefully to the upper level—and she knew, she just knew that if that man were to grab her, there would be no stopping the scream.

He was about her height, stocky and thick, with wide shoulders and meaty-looking gloved hands. No hair was visible beneath the balaclava, and the voice was clearly not American. But in Anna's distressed mind it may as well have been Denis Sawicki, right down to the knife he brandished: the image of peeling off the mask to reveal her kidnapper's crooked nose and beady, piggish eyes loomed behind her eyelids each time she blinked.

It's not him, she silently chanted, willing herself to find a measure of calm, and not at all sure that there was one to be found. It is not him, he's in jail on the other side of the ocean! It was bad enough to be in this situation at all; but to be experiencing it in concert with the memories of completely separate events was just too much, and on some level she was angry with herself for the ridiculous illogic of her response.

She was trying so hard to banish Sawicki from her mind that the words being shouted didn't immediately register.

"...the global agenda of the greedy corporate regime! Only through rejection of the entrenched system can we stop living like sheep!"

The fuck? thought Anna, and then she was near the top of the stairs, and the third man stood at the banister, grabbing each person and pushing them into line. He was even less gentle than the tall man; she could feel the throbbing imprint of his thumbs when he shoved her onward.

One side of the mezzanine level consisted of a few doors leading to a restroom and what appeared to be a shop office; the rest of the space was filled by a few fitting room enclosures, and a fashionably appointed seating area with mirrors. When Anna and the white-haired woman beside her joined the group, they made a total of eleven wide-eyed people crammed in the room; most of them were tentatively trying to get situated on two curved contemporary sofas, perching on the edges of the cushions. Their faces and postures were eloquent: fear and a touch of stoicism, mixed with an intense, polite discomfort at being forced into the personal space of strangers. The only two men in the mix of hostages were clutching women who were clearly their spouses, eyeing the
aggressors warily.

"Keep your hands where we can see them, now, that's right," instructed the third man; his voice wasn't as rough as his hands had been. "We'll be having your phones, all of them. Two at a time, no funny stuff."

They moved close to begin, and Anna twitched at the thought of not-Sawicki touching her—but thankfully, it was the tall man who approached on her side, while the strong man went to the other side, and the leader waited in the centre with a bag. As Tall-man leaned in to take the phone from her hand, she caught a whiff of a familiar scent. Why only the phones? she wondered, giving up her device without protest. Wouldn't it be quicker just to take our bags?

At the opposite end of the sofa, a woman with straight blonde hair spoke out, her voice shaking only slightly. "You can't get into the register, you know, not unless I'm downstairs to enter the code."

This set the spokesman off again: as the two henchmen threw phone after phone into the duffel bag he held, he paced back and forth shouting. "We don't want your money! The world must be rid of the plague of the currency-centred capitalist system! None of us will be free until we throw off the shackles of pointless, base consumerism! Retail economics are a global conspiracy to enslave and numb the masses!"

He went on in this vein for a minute or so more, sounding increasingly unhinged and ridiculous...and then, at some unseen signal of readiness, he abruptly fell silent. The three men turned and strode down the stairs, leaving Anna and the others staring open-mouthed after them.

As the slam of a door echoed from below—some sort of exit door on the interior, it sounded like; the glass doors to the street had been locked when the attack had begun, and wouldn't make a noise like that—everyone looked at each other for a numb, confused second. Then the blonde shop assistant stood in the heavy silence and tiptoed towards the stairs, peering cautiously over the banister. Seeing no-one, she spun and went for the shop office, unlocking its door with a key she wore clipped to her belt on a springy plastic coil.

At a loss, Anna turned to the elderly woman who had stuck near her side since the first shout. "Are you all right, ma'am?" she asked quietly.

"My name is Esther. Yes, I'm fine, I think." She grasped Anna's elbow as she had done before, patting at her arm with the other papery-dry hand; this time it seemed far more comforting.

With that exchange, the shocked hush was fully broken, and everyone began moving and softly talking at once. On the other side of the stairs, Anna could hear the shopgirl's voice over the rising babble: "Hello, yes, I need to report a robbery..."

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Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock return home to find their timing's just a little bit off.

17. JOHN: We Missed Her
(23 May 2015)

John paid their disgruntled cabbie, tipping him well for his inconvenience. Their murder-witness houseplant, only slightly worse for wear after two days' travelling and the variety of precise cuttings taken from it, had sat proudly in the front seat and tipped its bushy profusion of leaves directly into the driver's face with each of three right turns. Sherlock, ever helpful in the least possibly helpful way, had pointed out that a route from Bart's utilising only left turns would have been a far more logical choice; John could practically see the steam coming from the poor cabbie's ears by the time they'd reached Baker Street.

As the taxi pulled away, he took his time crossing the pavement to where his flatmate waited in barely concealed impatience.

"You know, you make a fairly attractive tree. We should definitely keep this in mind next time we're invited to fancy dress at the Yard," he teased, blithely grinning up at what little he could see of the man's face, and drawing out the unlocking of the door for as long as he reasonably could. It probably wouldn't have been so amusing, had he not known that this would be the last time either one of them would need to lug it around in public: they'd spent so much time with this thing over the past two days that John had actually considered naming it.

Sherlock sniffed unappreciatively at John's humour. He muttered, "Shrub," just loud enough to be heard as he walked into the entry hall, bearing the large, heavy potted plant with as much dignified grace as he could muster. He stooped to deposit it beside the hall table: John made a mental note to move it later.

Straightening from his crouch, Sherlock stopped short, suddenly alert. John watched, curious, as he bent forward to pluck up something from the side of the banister.

"Look!" He spun and held his find before John's face.

John went completely cross-eyed before grabbing Sherlock's wrist and moving the pinched fingers a few inches further away. "Er...it's a purple fiber?"

"Mrs Hudson had a visitor," he announced. "And that visitor appears to have come into possession of a purple hand-knit scarf."

"Oh! Anna," guessed John, at last understanding the pleased gleam in his partner's eyes.
The glass-paned door at the far end of the hall opened, and their landlady emerged, pulling oven gloves from her hands as she approached. "Afternoon, dears! I thought I'd make scones; they've just come out, but once they've cooled I'll bring a few up to you."

From where he stood, John saw the curls at the back of Sherlock's head tip up, then down. "Anna didn't stay for lunch," the detective stated.

"No, she had some things to do this afternoon, and you boys were out working anyway," Mrs Hudson replied, tipping her head cheerfully. "Why, had you been expecting her?"

"Not specifically." He spun on his heel and ascended the stairs, removing himself with his typical alarming speed.

John looked from the stairs to Mrs Hudson, and shrugged.

She pursed her lips in a tolerant little smile, then peered past him. "Oh, is that the tree, then?"

They heard a petulant shout echo from above. "It's a shrub!"

"Well whatever it is, it'll be needing more sun than it'll get down here."

"My thoughts exactly, Mrs Hudson. I'll move it upstairs somewhere, just as soon as I can clear a space for it," John assured her.

"All right then, so long as you don't leave it to languish." A sudden heavy thump overhead shook the little framed drawing on the wall, and she startled visibly. "Ooh dear! Do go up and see what's got him in such a state, won't you John? I do so hate when he makes my cupboards rattle."

John began speaking before he even reached the top of the stairs. "Would you please stop frightening Mrs Hudson so? Much more of this racket, and she'll likely decide we don't rate fresh scones after all...Sherlock?"

The sitting room lacked the expected mad genius, but the leather armchair was shifted out of place, backed up nearly against the bookshelves behind it. Frowning, John turned and hung his jacket, then proceeded on a hunt through the now-silent rooms.

Kitchen—empty.

Bathroom—door open.

Bedroom...

"Sherlock?"

There was no answer to his call; he rapped a knuckle lightly at the door as he pushed it open.

"Hey," he said softly, cocking his head to the side to align it better with Sherlock's face: the man was curled in the centre of his mattress, fully clothed except for his jacket, which had been uncharacteristically wadded and thrown halfway under the bedstead. A thick, yellowed tome lay open on the coverlet before him. Not for the first time, John wished he had the talent to draw.
"You'll give yourself eyestrain, reading at an obscure angle like that."

"Hardly," snorted Sherlock, but he pulled his elbow in tighter under the pillow, raising his head a fraction. He gave no other acknowledgment of his friend's presence, no signal to stay or to go.

John watched a little longer, attempting to silently itemise what subtle signs of mood and intention he could; much as he liked to consider himself an expert on the care and feeding of the wild Sherlock Holmes, moments like these still tended to catch him off guard. When Sherlock snaked two long fingers out from his near-foetal curl to turn a page, John let out a breath and toed off his shoes, padding around to the opposite side of Sherlock's bed.

At the first dip of the mattress behind him, Sherlock tensed just slightly, twitching to shift his gaze up towards the ceiling without actually turning his head.

"Okay?" asked John, pausing with one foot still on the floor.

Another twitch. John interpreted this one as a shrug; he finished settling himself on the bed, lying on his back with hands interlaced on his stomach. So it's quiet time. I can handle quiet time, he thought, content to watch the early afternoon sun illuminate lazy streams of dust before the west-facing window.

Eventually a light touch brought him out of a doze: the arm that Sherlock had held tightly in front of him had moved to fall between them. When John looked over, the other man rolled onto his back in one sudden, smooth movement.

"Better?" asked John.

"Than what?" returned Sherlock, somewhat derisively.

"Come off it. You just spent four days on a case; you made a call this morning that'll put away a woman who spent a whole year slowly murdering her stepfather. I'd expect you to be haggling over our takeaway order, or texting Lestrade to gloat, or maybe even demanding a neck rub and some bad telly. Instead you're shut up in here, looking like the world's done you a grievous wrong and you've taken revenge on your clothes."

"So, being happy at the close of a case is a requirement."

"Of course not." John wanted to take his hand, but considered Sherlock's recent posture a sign that he shouldn't be the one making the move. "Feel however you like. Have I done anything to interfere?"

"Not directly," the detective grudgingly responded. After a pause, he continued, "Your presence is rather a comfort, apparently."

"Well. My apologies, then, for ruining your bad mood," he chuckled, grinning wide as Sherlock reached down himself to clasp their hands together.

"Apology accepted."
They lay there quietly another minute before John spoke again. "What were you reading?"

"Historical account of the death of a fourteenth century Italian noblewoman. It's theorised that the murder was carried out via a poisoned pin secreted in a heavily embroidered bodice panel."

"Ah. So you're upset that Anna didn't wait around for us to get home."

"Whatever gave you that impression?"

John rolled his eyes. "Please. You were in a perfectly reasonable mood before we got back, and then stomping and sulking after; and I'm certain I didn't tease you about the plant that much."

"It could be about the plant. That last dig was entirely uncalled for," grumbled his partner; but he shifted on the bed to face John.

"Greg said he'd be working all day today, when you had me call him about talking to Police Scotland. Why don't you text her?"

"You heard Mrs Hudson. She had things to do. And she's clearly spent at least two hours of her day here already; it's pointless."

John put a gentle shove into their joined hands. "So she won't come back today, fine. No reason not to say hello."

Sherlock's lips pursed; visibly reaching a decision, he abruptly twisted away, stretching down to the floor and rummaging around. John kept his hold on the hand he held, smiling as it was tugged across the bed, and tugging it back when the other man inevitably overbalanced—and then Sherlock flopped into place again alongside John with a satisfied huff, fishing out his phone before throwing the poor abused suit jacket across the room.

As he held the device up above their reclining heads and typed out a text one-handed, John noted the time in the top corner of its screen: eight minutes to one. "Fancy some lunch, maybe?"

Sherlock tapped Send and rolled to face him. "Mrs Hudson brought scones up seven minutes ago, and left them in the kitchen for us. You were snoring at the time."

"Was not!"

"Yes, you were."

"Sherlock, I don't snore."

"Sadly, I must disabuse you of that notion," he said, leaning in close until their noses nearly touched.

"But—nobody ever—"

"Clearly, none of your past bed-mates thought it necessary to clue you in to the fact," said Sherlock, his clinical tone a heady contrast to the amused smile playing about his full lips. "I wouldn't hesitate to conclude that some were too dazzled by your considerable sexual prowess to think of criticising you afterwards..."

"Oi. Shut it about my 'sexual prowess', would you?"

"...And in more recent years, it's entirely possible that dissatisfaction was as much a factor in your conquests’ silence on the topic. After all, you remained emotionally unavailable in large part."

"Well, I think it's time we had another look at this old work. It might be the clue we need to..."
"Whose bloody fault was that?" countered John, returning an easy grin. There were layers beneath this conversation, nuanced pathways of memory that stretched between them unspoken, not all of them leading to good places; but here, somehow—their heads pillowed close together under a warm shaft of sunlight, their breath mingling and fingers intertwined—it felt right.

"I suppose the responsibility was mine. Pity I didn't realise it at the time." Sherlock's voice had deepened, taking on a smooth richness that put John in mind of smoked honey; dreamily, he leaned closer to see if it would taste as sweet.

When their long, lazy kiss broke apart, Sherlock continued speaking without hesitation. "None of your girlfriends ever placed enough value in you to bother with honesty on the topic. I, however, have been well aware of your nocturnal habits for quite some time, and I can inform you with verifiable certainty: you snore four nights in every ten, on average."

A small shiver ran down John's back at hearing this. He was struck by the memory of silently wondering: of lying awake late nights, trying to dispel the nagging, nebulous sense of being listened to, dismissing it as paranoia. The fear that had always knotted at the back of his throat—that had caused him to clamp down so tightly on his reactions that he'd never even brought himself to discuss it with Ella, in the therapy sessions of those bleak early days—was that of being known without knowing, being watched and judged and pitied without the benefit of consciousness to protect himself.

Sherlock must have seen his expression falter, for his green-grey eyes flickered and he pressed in to kiss John swiftly and decisively. "You never shout," he murmured when he pulled back, raising his free hand to brush against John's cheek. "You never make more than the slightest, most innocuous sounds; I don't know how you manage it—""It took me absolutely ages to figure it out..."

"You really paid that much attention?" The question came out sounding choked, the emotions behind it a messy, confusing tangle: fear and anger, shame and sorrow, gratitude and awe.

"Data, John. At first, it was simply that I was used to living alone; I needed a baseline to cover the extra sensory input of your presence in the flat. But you are, and ever have been, uniquely deserving of detailed study. Your very essence is one of contradictory states in harmony; long before I knew my own feelings, I found myself irrevocably intrigued." Sherlock paused and stroked a thumb reverently over his left eyebrow. "I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable. I never realised, before, never gave nearly enough thought to what might upset you; and then, after..."

"After," John continued, his voice rough, "everything was worse. And I shouldn't have tried so hard to keep you out, Sherlock. If I weren't so damned stubborn, if I'd just let myself be honest with you from the first, then maybe..."

"We wouldn't have had to wait for Anna's help to sort us out? Perhaps. Or perhaps the time it took to get us to this, past all of the false starts and misunderstandings, was exactly the way it needed to be for each of us. It's impractical to mourn lost time."

"Impractical." A breathy laugh bubbled out of him unexpectedly, and he reached out to sling his free arm over Sherlock's trim waist, leaning in to rest their foreheads together. "You're mad, you know that? Mad and impossible and utterly bloody brilliant."

"Mm. So I've been told," Sherlock purred, and then there was nothing that mattered but the sweet slide of mouths and the tender press of hands, for a while.

John tilted his head back eventually, catching his breath and gazing with happily unfocused eyes at the dark, unruly spread of his partner's glossy curls on the pillow. "Anna will be pleased, I think.
She's obviously come to care very much for your happiness.

"Goodness knows how that ever happened," said Sherlock, but he was smiling. "Oh,"—he scrawled around on the mattress behind him for his phone—"hmm. I would have expected her to respond to my message by now."

"Maybe she decided to go see a film or something," John suggested. His stomach growled to punctuate the statement; he reluctantly moved to sit up in answer to it. "I could do with food, now; and so could you, love."

Sherlock rolled suddenly and shot an arm out, catching John's wrist before he could reach the door. "We'll order takeaway later; just bring the scones, for now."

"Bring the scones? To bed?"

"Why not?" Sherlock rolled his head entreatingly on the pillow, exposing a tempting expanse of neck. "Tea would be nice, too."

John couldn't help but laugh.
Whatever Greg was expecting from his day at the Yard, it certainly wasn't this.

Sally checked her watch as Greg made the turn into Dacre Street, the narrow one-way alley that led alongside the Yard and provided access to its vehicle entry points. "It's already five after one. I still think we should've gotten lunch before coming back in," she grumbled.

"Nope, sorry. I don't wanna wait any longer than I have to for our search warrant. You saw the shifty eyes on that one, Sal." Greg waved up at the duty officer in the guardhouse, and they idled while the gate slowly lifted. "I want you to work up the request, while I make the calls to smooth the way for it. Once I've got it signed and sent off, all proper-like, then I'll spring for lunch, all right?"

"Okay. It's gonna be sushi, though."

"I'd expect no less," he replied, tugging the wheel around to guide the department car carefully down the ramp.

As usual, all of the conveniently close bays in the underground car park were taken. Greg pulled to a stop before turning to make another pass around, and gestured for Sally to get out near the main lifts. "Go on up, I'll find a spot."

A few minutes later, he emerged from the cavernous concrete depths into the clean, utilitarian lift lobby of New Scotland Yard's tall northern tower. Like Greg, the Yard was slightly shabby these days: worn around the edges, and just a little old-fashioned, but solid and steadfast all the same. He'd come to think of it as a second home, for the sheer amount of time he'd spent here through the years.

The lift took him up, pausing at ground level to take on an inspector he recognised from the Economic and Specialist Crime team on the seventh floor.

"Afternoon, Turley."

"Lestrade." They exchanged a businesslike nod, and the other man dropped his attention to the folder he carried. Whatever it was, it wasn't making him happy.

Greg stepped off at the fourth, leaving Turley to frown his way up another three floors, and made a quick detour into the loo. When he returned to the hallway, the second set of lift doors was opening on another familiar face: Martin Dane emerged with his hands full, and his light brown
hair slightly unkempt. He carried a thick stack of form folders, with the handle of a zippered effects bag looped over one wrist and a coffee clutched carefully in the same hand.

"Well, if it isn't Detective Sergeant Dane! How's the missus, and the little one?"

Dane grinned, shifting his arms to catch a slipping folder. "Right as rain, sir, ta for asking. Ariana's starting to sleep about three hours at a stretch, finally; Lilly and I are just about managing the same." He made a little face to acknowledge the vital necessity of his large coffee.

"Well, that's something, eh?" Greg stepped ahead with a smile and held the heavy glass door to the office floor open for the younger man. "You'd think Cartwright might load you down a little less, since you're just back in, though. How many cases are you on?" he asked, gesturing at the man's pile of paperwork.

"Just the one today, don't worry! It's pretty minor, all told; a no-loss incident this morning, aborted robbery attempt at a fashion boutique over on Marylebone High Street. Near-hostage situation with some kind of political agenda, apparently, which is why my team covered it. No identifying evidence, inconclusive surveillance, all property recovered. There were eleven people involved, though, and they're all to be interviewed. You know how it goes."


Now that they were crossing the open office floor, he could see a milling group of people up ahead, in the area of Dane's and Gartner's desks. Beverly Gartner turned from the back of the group as they approached, and waved her partner over with a harried expression: she was obviously unaccustomed to wrangling this many people around her workstation.

"Here, now—" Greg stepped up and moved to take Martin's coffee from his hand before it could be spilled.

"Thanks," Martin nodded, juggling his folders to hand the bag over to Gartner. Then he pivoted and raised his voice to pitch over the small crowd. "Right, folks, so we've got all the phones retrieved from where we found them dumped in the shop's back hall; Sergeant Gartner, here, will be returning them to you as quickly as possible, just bear with us please. In the meantime, I'll be talking to each of you in turn to complete your witness statements. Thanks for your patience."

Greg stood to the side, placidly waiting for Dane to free his hands and reclaim his coffee. He had already sent his mind on ahead to the work he had waiting in his own office; but then, a familiar and unexpected voice startled him from his thoughts.

"Greg!"

His head snapped around, and his jaw slackened. "Anna, what are you doing here? You should've called if you wanted to meet up for lunch."

She shook her head, brushing a loose tendril of brown hair from her eyes as she stepped between an elderly woman and a young married couple to reach him. "No, sorry—I'm not here because of you..." Looking past him, she gestured to catch Gartner's attention. "Oh, ma'am, that's mine, the one with the blue patterned case."

Greg was flummoxed for a split second, until the pieces came together to form an alarming picture. "What? You—Anna, you're saying you were a witness to a robbery?"

"Attempted robbery," corrected Gartner from behind him, in her brisk, clipped voice. She looked between him and Anna, assessing the pair of them as she offered the mobile. "Afternoon Inspector
"Lestrade, I take it this is a friend of yours?"

"Er, yes, this is Anna Clark. Ms Clark is my girlfriend." Something about saying the word "girlfriend" out loud on the floor at the Yard made his ears heat up. To cover it, he stepped forward and searched for an open space to set the paper coffee cup down on Sergeant Dane's desk.

Behind him, Beverly spoke in a rather gentler tone. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms Clark. We'll get you through your statement as quickly as we can; I'm sure I could get Martin to pull your file next..."

"No, don't," Anna insisted. Greg turned to face her as she explained her protest. "There are other people here that shouldn't wait as long. Poor Esther is exhausted already,"—she gestured towards the white-haired woman; someone had thankfully found her a seat—"and I overheard the Stevensons fretting about fetching their daughter from day care. Please, save me for later, Sergeant. I've got no problem waiting."

Gartner smiled tightly and nodded, brushing her long blonde plait back over her shoulder. "Very good. Just sit tight, then. I'm sure it won't be too terribly long, anyway." She sent a meaningful glance to Greg. "You don't need to stay out here, if you don't want to, Ms Clark. I can tell Sergeant Dane where to come look for you when it's your turn."

And with that, it was clear what Greg was expected to do. Far be it from me to miss my cue, he thought, stepping back up to Anna's side; his arm began to come up around her shoulders, but he thought better of it and aborted the gesture, leaving him with an awkward half-wave. "D'you want to come with me to my office, then?"

Anna opened her mouth, flicked her eyes over to the ragged group of witnesses with whom she'd come in, and closed it again. When Greg followed her glance, he saw the elderly woman smiling at her and making a little shooing motion with one hand. Figures, doesn't it, he supposed dazedly, when Anna nodded up at him; of course she's gotten to know everyone!

His feet moving on autopilot, Greg led their way across the large room. The fourth floor housed two divisional units, with teams from Serious and Organised Crime filling desks from the centre out to the southwest corner, and Greg's own Homicide and Serious Crime Command arrayed through much of the remaining space. Some areas of the floor were open, some divided off with narrow hallways that allowed quick access to corner stairwells, conference rooms and secondary lifts; the office buzzed with activity at this time of day, and Greg cut through it with a solid confidence that gave no clue to the churning in his stomach.

As he threaded them through the maze of low dividing walls and half-cubicles closer to their destination, Greg saw Sally at her desk; her curly head was bent over a sheaf of papers. Greg unconsciously sped his steps—he still felt numb with shock, and he wasn't prepared to deal with questions or comments from her yet. She looked up at his approach, clearly noticing and recognising the woman following him from her photograph. Sally took his lead, however—whether it was something in his expression or his body language, he had no idea—and she remained silent as they passed.

Greg opened up his office and let Anna enter ahead of him, rigidly refusing to look back and see
whether Donovan swivelled around to watch them. It wasn't the corner suite, but he had a nice view eastward to the upper floors of the building facing across Dacre; Anna's gaze scanned over the windows as he shut the door behind him and pulled the blinds.

"Anna," he said, at last; the harsh bite in his voice startled him. He sucked in a deep breath through his nose.

Her face, when she turned, was restrained and oddly still. She saw the closed blinds, and her stiff shoulders relaxed a fraction. "Nice office. Not quite how I pictured it."

"One week," he ground out. He felt dizzy, disconnected, as if the words coming from his lips weren't in his power to choose. "One week here and you've already gone and—and—"

"And what?" Her tension was back in full force, and Anna made no move to cross the space separating them. They faced each other with his desk between them, and he wasn't on his usual side.

Greg felt his face twist. "And proved it's not safe for you to be here!"

"You don't even know what happened, yet!"

"Will knowing make me feel one damn bit better?" The hot edge of a headache was beginning to push at his temples.

"I don't know! Maybe not! But you looking at me like that isn't gonna make me feel any better!"

"Anna, I can't—"

"No. No, Greg, you can't. Sometimes, things just happen! It's a big, bad, weird world out there, and it's not on you to somehow prevent all the random petty crime in London. Or Chicago, or Columbus, or anywhere I happen to go—stop looking at me like you think I'd be better off anywhere else!"

He grabbed one of the two small visitors' chairs and sank into it, bringing both hands up to drag heavily over his eyes and down his face. "Fuck," he cursed vehemently, the word muffled in his palms as he slumped forward.

There was a brief silence. When Greg gathered himself to look up again, the sight of the woman he loved burned itself into his eyes: she stood tall and defiant behind his desk, bright sunlight from the windows haloing the edges of her loose hair. She looked like—fucking hell—a kind of goddess of the hunt, strong and stern and a violent contrast to the softer, sweeter images of her that lived within his head.

"They keep saying 'attempted robbery', when it wasn't really that at all," muttered Anna half to herself, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "Hell if I know what it was, but it wasn't that."

He let out a long sigh, trying to expel all his worry and misplaced anger with the air leaving his lungs. "I'm sorry, Anna. I'm sorry I'm being an arse. I do want to hear what happened; I promise not to get into a state again. It's just—" His hands spread wide, empty and entreating. "I love you so bloody much..."

This broke her brittle stance; Anna dropped her arms and moved around the desk to stand before him. "I love you, too," she told him softly, offering her hands to pull him up.

A knock interrupted their silent hug before Greg could think of anything else to say. He lifted his
cheek from the crown of her head; Anna stepped back, plainly trying to make herself calmly unobtrusive as he turned to answer.

Sally stood at the door; questions were written clearly all over her expressive face, but she held them in check. "Got that warrant request ready for your signature. You were going to call..."

"Right," he answered, cursing inwardly. He took the papers she presented him, spinning to step over to the desk and grab a pen. "Thanks, Donovan. I'll be doing that right now; give me five minutes on the phone with the magistrate and then put it in their queue, all right?" He skimmed his eyes over the document to quickly check the relevant details, scrawled his signature in the appropriate places, then returned to push it back into her hand. "Five minutes."

To Sally's immense professional credit, she didn't so much as glance towards Anna before backing out of the room. "Yes, sir."

When the door was closed and they were alone once more, they switched positions wordlessly, stepping past each other without allowing another tempting touch. Greg was at work, now, and Anna had always been insistent on allowing him a clear boundary between that and his personal time—excepting, of course, those occasions when she got involved, he thought, trying to ignore the acidic flare in his stomach that came along with the memories. He'd sometimes wondered about how her relationship with David had worked, in terms of the man's career as a pharmacist; it struck him as a trifle unusual, really, her just assuming from the very beginning that he wasn't to be disturbed when he was on duty. God knows, Tracy never felt that way. Greg directed an apologetic smile to Anna as they both settled down to sit, and he picked up the phone to take care of his business.

Greg thanked the magistrate and rang off, glancing at the clock on his desk. One twenty-nine. He'd managed to get the call completed in only six minutes, and he'd spent much of that time surreptitiously watching Anna while he talked. She'd met his glance a few times, but for much of his call she had quietly studied her hands, her bracelet, and the unremarkable furnishings of his office. At one point, he'd seen her pull out her phone, frown at it and then decisively power it down before putting it away.

"Sorry about that, love," he said, standing from his desk. "Just have to deal with this morning's case."

"Of course! I understand." She smiled up at him as he crossed past her to open the door and step out.

"Sally, the call's made. Go on ahead."

"Consider it done," the sergeant responded immediately; just then, they both saw Martin Dane approaching. Sally looked up at him, confused, as he stopped beside her desk. "Marty, hi! Didn't know you were already back to work."

"Hi, Sal. Yeah, it's my first day back. I'll have to bring over some photos of Ariana to show you, later," Dane told her, smiling; then he looked to Greg apologetically, tapping the form folder he clutched to his chest. "Sorry, Inspector, if I could just get a few minutes of Ms Clark's time..."
"Oh, yes." Ignoring another inquiring look from Sally, Greg turned to speak over his shoulder. "Anna, it's your turn, if you're ready." He looked back to Sergeant Dane and asked, "Maybe we could just take care of it here in my office, rather than trooping her back out to Organised?"

"Sure, that's no problem for me. You can sit in, too, Inspector—if you'd like him to, ma'am," the younger man answered to both of them; Anna had come to stand in the doorway.

"That's fine. It'll save me having to go over the details more than once," she said, giving both men a small, demure smile as she stepped aside to let them pass.

After the witness statement had been completed—Anna was right, it had been a strange sort of thing, some kind of small-scale political demonstration as far as Greg could figure—the three of them returned to the busy floor, and Dane went on his way.

Sally stood and stepped over to meet Greg, hands on hips, her face arranged into the trademark don't-you-dare-keep-me-in-the-dark expression he'd come to know well over the years.

"Sir," she began, agitatedly; he stopped her with a raised hand.

"I know." He turned and gestured for his girlfriend to step closer. "Anna, this is Detective Sergeant Sally Donovan. Sally, meet Anna Clark."

"Pleasure," said Sally, and they shook hands; but the look was still being directed Greg's way, and he knew he wouldn't get away with leaving his sergeant confused any longer.

He exchanged a question-and-answer glance with Anna; having received a nod of permission, he turned a very different silent look on Sally, and she willingly followed him the few steps to her own desk. He leaned close within the half-wall of her cubicle and began to quietly explain the situation in as few words as possible.

Anna had been calm and almost clinically logical a few minutes before, when recounting the incident to Dane, but standing off to the side while Greg summarised it was apparently a little more than she was ready for. She turned suddenly and strode away down the nearest narrow hallway, picking up speed as she went.

Greg noticed immediately, breaking off his low words with Sally in mid-sentence. "Anna," he called softly after her, but she didn't slow. Grimacing, he followed her around the corner and caught up to her in a few long jogging paces.

As he reached her, he threw his left arm out before her in a sudden, impulsive move. Anna stumbled to a stop, effectively caged with her back against the wall; he moved in close in the deserted hallway, and brought his other hand up to take her shoulder in a gentle grasp. "Anna, come on. Talk to me."

Her jaw was tense as she looked up to meet his gaze; Greg could see a sheen of imminent tears in her eyes. "I—" The single word was all she could manage, before her rigid control began to visibly crumble.

Greg spared one fast glance up the hall, to be certain they were alone, then leaned in still closer,
allowing her to bury her face into his shoulder. She kept her arms crossed tight over her stomach, shaking against him silently as he stroked up and down her arm. His lips were in her hair, whispering comforting nonsense.

"Sorry," she said eventually, muffled in his jacket.

"No, Anna, you've got nothing to be sorry for. Come on, hey." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and gently pressed it into her hand.

She busied herself with cleaning up her face; her gaze was fixed on the carpeting as she muttered, "You'll probably have a hard time with me for a couple nights, honey. That middle guy looked a hell of a lot like Sawicki, right down to the big fucking knife."

"Oh, darling," Greg murmured, dropping a brief kiss on her forehead and taking her hand to walk slowly back up the hall, "you can keep me up all night, anything you need. Promise."

They returned to his office, and Anna retrieved her handbag; she smiled at him, but still looked shaken.

"Come on, let's get you a cup of coffee, yeh?" He laid an arm gently across Anna's back, and began to usher her toward the staff-room.

Sally heard, however, and turned her head to call softly after him from her desk. "Best not. Today's McIntyre's day..."

"Pfauh," he huffed, immediately pivoting them both back around. "We can't go subjecting civilians to that sludge." Greg glanced between his colleague and his girlfriend; Sally had the look on her face she got when she was sizing someone up, and Anna seemed like she was trying not to look too intrigued in return. Covering the slightest of resigned sighs, he turned back to Sally. "Fancy coming out on a coffee break with us, then, Sal?"

She stood without hesitation, grabbing the smart grey linen jacket she'd hung over her chair and her own compact handbag.

The three of them moved together to the back elevators, down the same quiet hall by which Anna had tried to escape only a few minutes earlier. Soon enough, they were out in the sunshine; Greg started them across the street, towards where a Starbucks was clearly visible.

"Hey, look..." said Anna quietly, and Greg's short laugh at the little joke they repeated with each sighting of the ubiquitous brand brought a disbelieving glance from Donovan. He grinned over at his colleague and reached down for Anna's hand unrepentantly.

As they got closer to the Starbucks, Sally sighed, "I won't complain about you buying me coffee, Greg, but coffee is definitely not sushi."

On his other side, Anna gave a little growl under her breath. "Mmm, sushi. I haven't eaten lunch yet, have you?"

Greg tossed his head in clear acceptance. "And so it's decided: the ladies have spoken." It was only a block or so further to the unassuming but highly-rated sushi bar frequented by many of the Met's personnel. He held the door for them with a smile, wondering silently whether it could be some sort of good omen, after all, for the rest of the summer. *Get the trouble out of the way early, right?*

...Right?
Chapter Summary

Sherlock doesn't make a habit of doing favours. This one, however, isn't such a hardship.

19. SHERLOCK: They Just Do
(27 May 2015)

I've confirmed plans for the day. We will remain occupied until dinner. -SH

Thanks for this. -GL

You're being ridiculous, you know. -SH

Maybe so. Just don't mention I asked you, OK? -GL

Manipulation doesn't suit you. Don't make it a habit. -SH

Stop rubbing it in, I feel bad enough as it is. See you tonight. -GL

Sherlock frowned down at his phone. Then he returned it to his pocket and frowned out the window of the cab, instead. It annoyed him that Lestrade was resorting to such measures to assuage his paranoia; surely the man had the basic sense to realise his fears were ungrounded.

That wasn't to say that Sherlock didn't sympathise with Lestrade's upset, in some small fashion. On Saturday, it had been nearly four o'clock when his phone had finally buzzed with a return text: upon receipt of Anna's apology, Sherlock had initially wondered whether John's theory about the cinema had some merit. Her choppy, evasive second and third messages had been enough to ignite suspicion, and although he could deduce much from those brief texts, it was clear that she'd been unwilling to explain the events of the day.

I waited ten full minutes before making John contact Lestrade, Sherlock recalled, twisting his lips at the memory of his tactful restraint; and what Lestrade sent in response was a little more informative, but not by much. John had insisted that although the incident in which Anna had been involved was minor, the two of them simply needed space and time alone. By Tuesday afternoon, however, it had become clear that Lestrade was not handling the situation all that well on his own.
That he turned to John and me for assistance was not entirely surprising. What's surprising is that he actually seems to believe it necessary! From what Sherlock knew of Anna Clark, he understood that she was well able to take care of herself. Aside from a certain demure desire to be treated gently and reverently—a typically feminine sentiment—she exhibited clear strength of resolve, and a remarkable tolerance for the grittier aspects of reality. Although he still hadn't heard the actual details of the incident, Sherlock knew that it had been a brief scare, that nobody had been hurt and that all of the stolen property had been quickly recovered. Surely Lestrade was overreacting based on his personal fears, and recollections of the events in Chicago. John had sternly warned him not to press Anna on the details, of course, before he'd left to fill in at the surgery for the day; Sherlock had grudgingly agreed, secure in the knowledge that any salient information would be written perceptibly upon her person, free for the deducing.

The cab slowed, pulling up to the block of modest red brick flats into which Lestrade had moved when his ill-fated marriage had finally begun to crumble. Sherlock had, in fact, never actually seen this building in daylight—by the time the DI had relocated here, John had already been living at 221B for six months. There had been plenty of occasions over the years when Sherlock had barged or broken into Lestrade's home and used the man as a reluctant sounding board for his frustrations, but the bulk of those had taken place while the wife had slept upstairs. After John...the already infrequent visits to Lestrade had become even more rare.

Blinking away a moment's surreal nostalgia, Sherlock stepped out to the pavement. "Wait here for me," he instructed the driver.

When Anna opened the door to him, an intriguing series of expressions appeared to be layered upon her face. Whatever the initial reaction had signified, within a second a smile had spread over and obscured it; she lunged upward and threw her arms about his neck, pulling him down into a hug. "Sherlock, hi!"

Sherlock was slightly taken aback: it was only the second time he'd been embraced by the woman, and like the first, it was unexpected and sudden. "Welcome back to London," he offered tentatively, carefully returning the gesture and straightening to step away.

She tilted her head up to study his face, and her gaze turned sharp, although the fond smile remained in place. "You know, you really don't have to bother putting on an act, if that was what you were planning. I know exactly why you're here. And I know it's more to keep Greg satisfied than anything else."

"Come now," he chided, following her into Lestrade's small, tidy flat. He waited just inside the open door as she bustled about. "Might I not simply desire the pleasure of your company?"

A snort of laughter bubbled from her; she spoke in a matter-of-fact tone as she strode down the hallway and disappeared into the bedroom. "Even if you did, Sherlock, you'd be far more likely to request my presence and then wait for me to bring myself over for your amusement. Telling me we'd meet here was basically like holding up a sign: 'Your boyfriend doesn't trust you to be on your own.' I'm not stupid."

"I doubt he thinks you are..." Sherlock trailed off, internally wincing at the incredible discomfort of the situation. He'd made himself complicit in Lestrade's attempted deception, however well-
meaning the man thought it; and now it appeared he would be caught in the centre of the couple's argument. He was in no way prepared to tactfully handle this sort of emotional minefield. *I can't believe John actually encouraged me to do this; shouldn't he be the one to know better about such things?* He made a face at the thought. *No; of course not. He may be the essence of tact with patients and witnesses, but relationships with women were never a strong suit.*

Anna reappeared, tying a pale green cardigan around her waist. "Oh, he knows I'm not. He's just being overprotective, which he has to know isn't going to work on me for long." Grabbing her handbag and a small canvas tote, she ducked in and out of the kitchen to turn off the lights.

"His fears are entirely ungrounded, in your opinion."

She frowned. "How much fear is a normal amount to have? How much fear would you have for any other woman in London, going shopping on a busy street in the middle of the day? He doesn't do things by halves; when he decides to worry, it's like turning on a tap until something snaps him out of it!"

"Ah." Sherlock held open the door for her, and they walked out to the waiting cab. "Lestrade does tend to gnaw over his problems until he's internalised a solution. He harangued me for months, early on, about the bad habits he perceived me to retain; and then one day, it was if he simply accepted that I had changed."

Anna gave him a sidelong look as she slid into the seat. "Not sure that's quite analogous. You could control your own actions at all times, theoretically." She tactfully followed along in not naming his drug problem outright, but he knew she understood what they were talking about. "I can't control the rest of the people in the city."

"Granted."

They rode in silence for a moment. Anna finally turned from the window, asking, "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Ravenscourt Park, to begin with. An old contact of mine will be there to exchange notes with me. Today seemed an appropriate occasion to take care of it; the weather is suitable, and I thought you might appreciate some time outdoors. It's clear that you've stayed in the flat most of the last few days."

"What, Greg didn't tell you everything I've been up to, when he convinced you to come and babysit me?"

Sherlock pursed his lips and stared out at the road.

"Stop worrying. For one thing, I don't blame you for the fact that Greg asked. And I really did want to get out, anyway. You're right: I've been cooped up in there since Saturday evening. He was home on Sunday, and it all seemed okay; we didn't have anywhere we needed to go. But then, after he went back to work Monday, he started taking absolutely any excuse to text me. I got so many messages yesterday while I was trying to stitch that I started to wonder if he'd shut himself in a cabinet!"

"Very funny," he replied, dryly acknowledging the joke at his expense. "I should think that a few less eventful days will be enough to calm him. Clearly, he regards the misfortune that befell you in January as a personal failure on his part."

Anna sighed. "I know. I don't think it matters how often I tell him otherwise, does it?"
If anything, either of you could just as easily put the blame on my own gross misjudgment, mused Sherlock, lapsing into silence.

Ravenscourt Park was lush with early summer greenery, and a considerable crowd of people had come to enjoy the day’s pleasant weather there. Once inside the stately wrought-iron gate, Sherlock and Anna strolled along shady tree-lined paths until they came to the banana-shaped lake which was the centrepiece of the park’s northern end. A cool breeze skimmed across the water, rustling the fronds of an elegant willow tree. Anna paused and shoved her things into Sherlock’s hands while she donned her cardigan.

Sherlock held the bags without comment, scanning a nearby stand of trees for the silhouette he expected there. After only a moment, he saw the slouched figure, recognisable in the shape of his hat and the thick walking stick he leant upon. Sherlock deliberately stepped a pace away from Anna and raised his free arm in a static gesture of greeting, holding it there until he saw the shadow duck in a nod and walk away towards a nearby bench.

"Old Floyd is a bit skittish of strangers," explained Sherlock, returning her bags and sending her off. "Take a walk around the lake, and take your time; dawdle for a few minutes at the other end if you like. By the time you come back around to this spot, I’ll be done."

The next eight minutes were passed in the quick exchange of information, updating Sherlock’s extensive mental map: the deceptively intricate social strata, power plays and territorial changes of greater London’s destitute society. Sherlock kept up a loose, mutually beneficial contact with approximately forty members of the homeless community, but he knew it was important to retain a grasp on the larger patterns at play. Old Floyd had observed and catalogued the shifting tides for years, pulling nuggets of useful knowledge from gossip and bluster with the detached precision of a scientist. He held himself off to the side, claiming little power for himself as he circulated regularly through the boroughs of the city. Nonetheless, he remained well-respected, and almost feared in certain circles. Sherlock suspected that Young Floyd must have been a force to be reckoned with, in years long past.

Payment delivered and respects given, Sherlock returned his attention to the lakeside path, looking for his American companion. She’d apparently taken his suggestion to dawdle quite literally, and hadn’t yet completed her lap; he set off walking in the opposite direction to intercept her.

The circuit around the Ravenscourt lake was popular, this afternoon. A steady stream of people passed before Sherlock’s reflexively discerning eyes: young mothers, beleaguered grandparents, dog walkers, lunching office workers making attempts at being fit to varying degrees of success, and no less than three couples in the midst of clandestine meetings away from their spouses.

Tiresome, thought Sherlock.

When he caught sight of Anna at last, Sherlock was immediately struck by the way she moved. Unaccompanied, she set her stride to place her in a modestly open space, equidistant from the bland, unthreatening strangers on all sides. Her left arm hooked into her handbag, holding it and the tote securely at her side; in contrast, the right arm was held awkwardly, elbow jutting out while her hand remained in the deep pocket of her cardigan.
Sherlock cut smoothly through the sparse crowd, noting the quickly covered flash of startlement as he came into her view and pivoted to walk close alongside her.

"It's beautiful here," she said, smiling up at him; the hand between them slipped casually free of the pocket.

As if I wouldn't notice. "You're carrying your keys," he observed.

Her smile wavered at the edges, but she held it in place. "What?"

"Your pocket. You had them in your handbag, but once you walked on alone you moved them to carry them in your hand; and the hanging shape of your pocket tells me that the ring carries a full complement, including your Chicago house and car keys, even though the only key you need to keep on your person here is the one to Lestrade's flat. At this distance from home, most sensible travellers keep their home keys safely hidden away in their luggage once they've reached their destination, and you are certainly no exception. You surely had yours packed away before your international trip even began—you were visiting with family, and had no need of them; but you intentionally returned them to your handbag sometime in the last two days, for the express purpose of holding them."

"Is there a reason you're deducing my house keys?" She frowned and pulled them out, returning the jingling ring from pocket to bag with a touch of petulance.

"It's a telling detail. You scoff at Lestrade's protective concern for you; but clearly, you've been linking the two incidents in your own mind, as well."

Anna's walking gait stiffened. "There is no link."

"Obviously not."

"So what did Greg tell you about it last night?"

"He told us that a small group of anonymous demonstrators had used the threat of violence to make a brief anticapitalism statement. The choice of a women's clothing boutique for such a thing seems a bit under-ambitious; but I suppose every budding protestors starts small and works their way fruitlessly towards imagined relevance."

She chuckled softly. "They were definitely what I'd call logically challenged. But when crazy people meet like-minded crazy people, yelling at the shoppers in a fashion boutique during Saturday lunch rush must seem like as good an idea as any."

"Perhaps. The question remains: as there was clearly no connection between this and your abduction, why persist in what you know is baseless worry?" He read the answer clearly on her face before she could say a word. "Oh. I see. Physical similarity; a visual link to a traumatic memory, recognised and reacted upon without the influence of logic. Of course, Lestrade has picked up on your subconscious discomfort, which has in turn fed into and amplified his own."

"And the more he reacts, the more I think about it. A vicious cycle," Anna sighed. "It's so stupid, that it should bug me like it does when I know there's really no reason for it. Why do people's brains do that?"

"They just do," he murmured with a shrug, rather than delve into the evolutionary vagaries of memory and emotion.

Together they walked on, turning away from the water.
As the afternoon waned, they stopped for coffee and then returned to Baker Street. Discussion in the cab had turned eventually to the arts, and siblings' divergent talents; by the time they arrived at the flat, Anna had told him all about one brother's briefly popular webcomic, and the other's talented garage band. Sherlock knew he would get rid of the useless information within weeks; but it was tolerable, as far as "chatting" went, and he understood he was expected to indulge the woman a bit. In return, as they settled into the sitting room, he offered a few amusing anecdotes of his own regarding Mycroft's angelic prepubescent singing voice and later short-lived foray into sculpture.

"Why did he stop?" Anna asked, her eyes bright as she nibbled on a pastry. (Cheese, of course. She was predictably easy to please.)

Sherlock traced an airy figure with his bow and replied, "The human form presented an insurmountable frustration; clinical observation alone wasn't enough to breathe vital realism into his work. Soon enough, he realised his true talent lay in the manipulation of much more than mere clay."

"Your parents must have put up with so much."

He chuckled darkly, tucking his instrument beneath his chin, and began a complex étude. When John arrived home a few minutes later, Sherlock paused in his playing only long enough to receive a gratifying peck on the cheek—and a pleased smile from Anna.

The pieces Sherlock chose to play over the next hour were stimulating, then serene, then contemplative in turn: a pleasant counterpoint to the quiet, relaxed conversation that Anna and John carried on.

After a while, Sherlock tired of the violin and moved to put it away. Anna looked up from her stitching work and met his eyes. He watched the brief play of her thoughts cross her face; she glanced between him and John, obviously weighing a question in her mind, then dismissing it.

"What can you tell me about Greg's family?" she asked instead.

"Not much more than the basic details you probably know already," replied Sherlock, "and of even those, I've surely deleted quite a bit. It never held much interest for me."

"I know his Dad lives somewhere in Norfolk, and he has a brother in Cambridge. That's about it, though." John shrugged. "Why?"

"He's planning to take me out of the city for a three-day weekend at his father's house. We're supposed to be going the day after tomorrow."

John dropped the paper he'd been perusing into his lap. "You don't sound happy about it."

"Well, no! I've barely been here a week and a half, we haven't gotten very much time on our own yet,"—Which was by your purposeful design, thought Sherlock, but wisely did not comment—"and now, before I have time to catch my breath we're going straight off to introduce me to his whole family. I don't feel prepared for this!"
Sherlock frowned as he sat down. Yes, it seemed that preparation was something desirable, when meeting the family of one's significant other. *Pity I didn't take it into consideration, myself.*

John glanced his way, looking nothing so much as amused, and turned back to their guest. "Didn't you introduce Greg to your family as soon as he got into the States?"

"Yeah, but that was different, I—" She snapped her jaw shut abruptly, and her cheeks took on a flush. "Damn, John. You got me."

They heard a knock from below, and a few moments later a brief flurry of Mrs Hudson's pleasantries preceded the heavy, confident tread of Lestrade's shoes on the stairs.

"Evening, all," he grinned, holding up the two bulging takeaway bags he carried. "Thai, as requested. Extra spring rolls for John, and enough pot stickers to keep even Sherlock happy."

Anna set her embroidery hoop aside and stood. "Hi sweetie! Just so you know, John's already invited me to come over tomorrow and teach him my Mom's stroganoff recipe, so you won't have to worry about asking him to watch me."

"Ah—" The immediate contortions of embarrassment and contrition that passed over the older man's face were incredible; he glanced towards the others as if looking for defence, but neither Sherlock nor John were moving a muscle. "Love, I'm sorry, er..."

She left him groping for a response for a few more seconds, letting the tension build to a fine simmer, before breaking at last into a wide, chuckling smile. "C'mere, you dope."

John launched himself from his armchair with precision timing, swooped their dinner up, and padded off into the kitchen with it. Lestrade put his freed hands to use immediately, catching Anna about the waist and pulling her close for a thorough kiss. *Interesting,* thought Sherlock, *he has such an intense focus on her, he doesn't even notice I'm still watching...*

Lestrade spoke with his eyes closed, then; his voice was rough, muffled in the soft juncture of Anna's neck. "Sherlock, 'f you'd quit starin' at my kissin' technique now, that'd be lovely!"

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ANNA: Weekend At Bert's

Chapter Summary

Anna is finally introduced to the rest of the Lestrade clan, in a weekend trip to Mr Lestrade's beautiful country home.

20. ANNA: Weekend At Bert's
(29 May - 30 May 2015)

On Friday Greg and Anna packed bags, ate breakfast, and escaped London's overcast morning haze. Over the course of their two hours' drive northeast, Greg's rented car took them from the city proper, out to long stretches of walled-in road; the walls became neat lines of trees verging the asphalt; the trees thinned and revealed pristine fields bordered by distant woods. After a while they traded the six-lane highway for four lanes, and eventually only two, as the landscape became more densely wooded. The narrow road took them through a sprawling little town, and out the other side to another woods, this one wilder and frequently broken by glimpses to open meadows and occasional dwellings.

Greg took every turn, roundabout and split in the road with utter confidence, navigating the long drive as if he took it on a daily basis. *He told me himself he only gets out to visit his father once or twice a year, at most,* Anna remembered, studying him from the vantage point of the passenger seat. She was struck by the almost indefinable shift in his mood: a subtle release of a tension he nearly always carried in his shoulders, in exchange for an ever-so-slight clenching of his hands on the wheel. He'd chatted and joked in his usual way during the early part of the drive, but the further they got into the countryside the less he seemed inclined to talk. Anna couldn't decide whether the silence was a sign of peace at being out of the city, or anxiety at the prospect of seeing his family; from what she could see, it was an even toss-up.

Finally, some time after having passed a sign marking the border of Cranwich, they took a turn into a nearly hidden drive leading off into a dense thicket of trees. The house at the end of the long, curving approach sat tucked well back from sight, situated in a picturesque clearing. It was a generously sized home with a striking glass-fronted A-frame at its centre, and skylit wings extending to each side: the sort of structure that had been quite modern in the late seventies, and now seemed almost nostalgic. It was showing its age, a bit, but overall it appeared well cared for, and it sat serenely and comfortably in its wooded surroundings.

"And here we are at last," murmured Greg.

As he pulled up the drive, a woman stepped out from the house; a flowing, multicoloured dress lushly accentuated her stout, curvy figure. Anna could see from the car that she was neither smiling nor frowning, but by the time they parked beside a white Mercedes and opened their doors, her expression had changed to something clearly meant to be welcoming.
"Ian!" she called out over her shoulder, still paces away from where Greg was opening the boot. Hearing no response, she turned her head further—obviously yelling around the house, not into it. "Ian Paul Lestrade! Get up here!"

A lanky, tanned young man in basketball shorts bounded into sight from somewhere. His hair was a dark chestnut brown, and as he skidded to a stop behind the car the long, fine fringe fell into his eyes. He ran his hand back through it, grinning wide, and panted, "Hey, Uncle Greg!"

"Ian, my lad!" Greg clapped him on the shoulder and passed him one of their bags. "Take this in, will you?"

As the teenager nodded and took off running, the woman reached them at last, crunching her way delicately over the gravel drive in bright yellow heeled pumps. "Well, I can hardly believe my eyes," she drawled. "If it isn't Gregory Lestrade, in the flesh."

"Hullo Frankie, you're looking lovely, as usual." Greg clasped her in a brief sort of half-hug, then turned to extend a hand to his companion. "This is my girlfriend Anna; Anna, love, meet my sister-in-law Frankie."

"Fran, please." She pumped Anna's hand, jingling the chunky necklaces she wore. "When Greg responded to my email I thought he was having me on. This man must have the strongest work ethic in all of London!"

"He is quite dedicated, that's true," Anna replied with a smile. "It's going to be nice to see him relax for a few days."

"I'll believe it when I see it, honestly!" Pushing long, thick auburn hair over her shoulder—the roots were clearly visible, dark brown like her son's—she turned to lead the way to the house. "Come in and get settled, both of you; the blue room, Greg. Dad's out back, and Sophie's practising right now, but she'll be done in a little while."

"And Brian?" asked Greg. He hopped a step ahead of the ladies to hold the front door for them.

"He had business to finish. He'll be along before dinner."

"Ah." His face remained carefully unreadable as Fran passed inside.

Entering the spacious central foyer, Anna swivelled her head all around, trying to take in every detail at once. Sunlight filtered in through the massive windows of the A-frame, dappled by moving shadows that played across warm flagstone floors. The sunken, carpeted living area was ringed by low built-in shelves; they were populated by woodcarvings of every description, scattered amongst a profusion of books. More carved figures and masks sat in niches and hung on the walls between framed photographs. The effect might have been chaotic, but the myriad warm colours of the polished wood tied everything together, making the admittedly dated interior seem eclectic and inviting.

Fran gestured airily, walking around the living room towards what was presumably the kitchen. "I've got to check on the cake; I'll put on the kettle and bring tea out back for us all. Join us when you're ready."

Faint strains of flute music emanated from the hallway to their left; Greg turned to the right and led Anna to a room at the end of the hall. Ian had left Greg's bag just inside the door.

"This is a beautiful place, honey," Anna sighed happily, setting her handbag and embroidery tote down on the blue-quilted bed. "Nice coincidence that it's Fran's birthday today."
"Just so you know, I'd already been considering this trip before last weekend, love. I'm invited every year, it's just that work is usually—well, work. Don't go thinking I was just trying to get us away because of what happened, right?"

"It's okay if you were. We'll have a good time, and when we go back we'll both feel better."

Greg stepped up close, twining his fingers together at the small of her back and tilting his forehead down to rest against hers. "I dunno about you, darling, but I feel better already."

When Greg led her outside, the rear patio and garden took Anna's breath away. The house's clearing extended into a moderately-sized oval yard, bordered by riotous plantings that spread all the way out to merge with the wild edge of the woods. The garden was well-kept, but seemed to lack the elegance of a feminine touch in its planning; rather, it was beauty run wild and rampant. Out in the grass, Ian was bouncing a football off knees and head, accompanied by a border collie that frolicked in happy circles around him.

"Pop, I'd like to introduce you to Anna Clark."

"Glad to meet you, Mr Lestrade," Anna said, smiling as the man stood up to greet her. He was tall like his son, with the same rugged frame and broad shoulders, and his thick hair was a uniform pale silver that gleamed in a shaft of sunlight when he moved.

"My dear, I'm honoured," he intoned in a deep, resonant voice, taking her hand in his own larger one. Anna felt the tickle of calluses against her palm as he continued, "The name's Bert. Short for Bertrand, just call me Bert."

They all settled around the glass-topped table, and Fran poured tea. At a gesture from his mother, the boy took a break from his energetic ball-handling to jog over and be formally introduced.

"It's good to meet you, ma'am," Ian dutifully told her, flashing a disarming grin before returning to the yard. At just barely seventeen years old, he bore many of the apparent hallmarks of the Lestrade lineage: height, luminous brown eyes and a strong jaw. His face was long and thin, where Greg's and Bert's were sturdily filled out; he was clearly still growing into himself, but Anna could see that within a year or two, he would be devastatingly handsome.

Conversation started light, dancing over basic pleasantries and the story of how Anna had come to meet Greg. After they had that out of the way, Greg asked after the state of Fran's little interior design business.

"Well, I do a consult here and there," Fran answered. "I've got a few regular clients, you know, but these days I hardly seem to do anything but ferry the kids about. Anyway, since Brian took the financial directorship, it's not as if I need to worry myself much about it."

"Oh. 'Course not, right, you're well flush now aren't you?" said Greg, and he paired the words with a smile—but Anna's scalp prickled.

"So, Bert," she smoothly interjected, "you must tell me about the carvings. Those are all your work?"
"Yes, I confess, I have something of a habit!" Bert's eyes crinkled. "I started learning years ago; it's something to keep me busy when the words won't flow."

Fran laughed lightly. "Dad, have you even written anything since, what was it, *Stone On Fire*?"

He aimed a bland smile skyward and corrected her, "That was *Stone Under Fire*, Frances dear, and I've worked on two other series since then, as well you know. My agent is very excited about my new character...says he has the potential to become as big as Agent Tabitha Stone was in her heyday..."

"That's promising, Pop," encouraged Greg. "I always thought it was a real shame your Samuel Vale books never got picked up."

Bert scoffed a little at the praise, but rested a loving hand on his son's shoulder. "Still think that was a fluke of the late nineties market, myself. A gritty police detective with a heart of gold—they were good stories, sure, but it just wasn't selling its own series."

Anna bit her lips together and took a quick sip of her tea.

When dinnertime came around, everyone gathered around Bert's large table. Anna sat down between Greg and his niece, who had emerged from her room at last. Fourteen year old Sophie was soft-spoken and slender, with delicate features that favoured her mother, and hair in the soft, ashy brown colour that Anna knew from photographs of Greg's younger days—just a shade or two darker than her own.

"How long have you played the flute?" Anna asked her quietly, while Fran and Bert bustled back and forth between kitchen and dining room.

"Um, about four and a half years now." The girl ducked her head shyly, plucking at the serviette in her lap. "I started on piano, though, when I was six."

"Well, I wasn't trying to listen in on your practice, of course, but I could hear down the hall earlier. You're very good," murmured Anna. "I don't think I played with even half that much musicality at your age. It's impressive."

Sophie turned to face her. "You think so?"

"I do," she nodded, earning a pleased smile.

Greg leaned close on her other side and whispered theatrically, "Wait'll Anna hears you on the piano, sweetheart. You might make her cry..."

Just as everyone was seated and beginning to pass the salad bowl from hand to hand, they heard noise from the direction of the front door. Darwin, the collie, shot out from under the table with an excited bark; moments later the last of the Lestrades strode in to join them.

"Sorry I'm late, couldn't be helped, had to get the figures out to New York today," he boomed; he went straight to Fran's chair and bent to kiss her on the cheek, placing a box in her lap with a theatrical flourish.
"Brian, sweetest, you shouldn't have," she cooed as she opened it to reveal a fine leather handbag.

"Nothing but the best for my birthday girl," he laughed. Only then did he turn and greet the others. "Evening, Pop, kiddos—and, hey! My little brother, as I live and breathe!"

"Brian. Glad you could make it," Greg nodded, without rising from his seat.

"I should say the same." He turned a megawatt smile on Anna, the teeth even and professionally white in his tanned face. "I'm Brian, hello," he said, offering his hand to shake; his voice was smooth and clear as a bell—he had clearly never smoked with anything approaching Greg's former habit, if at all.

"Anna Clark; pleased to meet you," she responded, smiling. She was painfully aware of Greg's still, silent presence at her side; when she risked a glance, though, he had a fairly genial expression on his face.

"The pleasure is all mine, Anna, I'm sure!" Brian circled around to his seat at his wife's side, patting Sophie's head fondly on the way, and accepting the salad from Ian as he sat.

Anna watched him with barely concealed curiosity; it was impossible not to notice and itemise each similarity and difference between the two men. Brian wore a white shirt and navy trousers, and his hair was running to silver in a similar pattern to his brother's. *If I squinted, they'd look almost alike,* thought Anna, but she knew she'd need to squint hard. Brian's haircut was clearly expensive, as were his clothes. His chin was somewhat broader than Greg's, and his nose lacked the endearing roundness at its tip. He was tall, as she'd expected, and a bit paunchy; it was the sort of middle-aged fitness of figure that likely came from casual sport, rather than from training or serious labour. Even the economy of his movements was different: the carefree glide of his arm as he loosened his silk tie, the tilt of his head as he answered a question—it all spoke volumes to Anna about a man whose world was jarringly dissimilar to that of the man she loved. She'd never expected Greg and his older brother to be *alike,* of course not...but somehow, looking from one to the other of them was unnerving.

During the meal, she responded to questions and made conversation, and laughed with everyone at Bert's jokes. She sang along with the family, ate cake and toasted to Fran's health; Greg presented his sister-in-law with a hand-painted silk scarf; it was a picture-perfect family gathering, by all accounts. The longer it went on, though, the more Anna became aware of the subtle tension simmering between the two men, pulling taut in her stomach like a tripwire to sound a silent alarm. Still, she couldn't quite pick out any one instance where anything aggressive was said by either of them, and in fact the whole thing seemed positively cordial. *Is it the company?* she wondered. *If the kids weren't here, or if Fran and I weren't here, would they be at each other's throats?*

*Fran doesn't seem bothered at all. Maybe I'm imagining it,* she thought.

Then Bert stood up at the head of the table, raising a glass of dessert wine that looked small in his strong, weathered hand, and proposed a toast: "Here's to having *all* the Lestrades together, again, after so long. To my dear boys; may you both continue to be so successful!"

Brian laughed bracingly and lifted his glass, and Greg's right arm went up as well; but as Anna raised her own drink she felt the touch of Greg's left hand above her knee. It twitched, and his fingertips were five distinct points of tense, trembling pressure.

Anna looked to him; sipping his wine, smiling and nodding, he looked just as pleasant as ever—but his face was a mask, and she knew she'd just had a glimpse behind it.
By the time the after-dinner cocktails wound down and Bert finally abandoned them for bed—over an hour after his grandchildren had been sent off—Anna was confident in her conclusion. She knew there was something off, definitely, but what was it about Brian that upset Greg so? They were all sitting together on the curved sectional sofa, listening to the older man tell a story about the various trials and tribulations of managing finances for the largest software corporation in Cambridge’s Silicon Fen, when the well-hidden stiffness of the arm around her shoulders became too much to comfortably ignore.

"I'm sorry to say, I'm entirely worn out, you guys," Anna laughed at the next opening in the conversation. "This has been lovely, but I think it's time I turn into a pumpkin!"

"Yeah, I'm knackered too," Greg agreed, standing readily and offering his hand to pull her up. "Happy birthday again, Frankie, I'll enjoy the four and a half weeks of being younger than you..."

Fran's upturned nose wrinkled as she gave him a rude grin. "Cheers, you plonker. You'd better have a do for yours this year, I wanna be there to laugh in your fifty-two-year-old face."

"I agree," put in Brian, "there should be a party for you, Greg, definitely. Give me an excuse to get the family into the city for a weekend, take Sophie to that show she's been wanting to see." The family-man sentiment sounded almost too perfect, spoken in the silky, persuasive tones of the businessman; Anna doubted he could help the way he'd trained his voice to such flawless oversincerity.

"Right. Well, we'll just—we'll let you know," Greg said, trailing off lamely at the end of the sentence. "See you lot in the morning, yeh, unless you're leaving early?"

Yawning, Fran levered her short frame up off the couch, carefully fussing with the skirt as she uncurled her legs and stood. "Ian's got footy practice at ten, and Sophie asked me to take her shopping. So we'll be off bright and early, but Bri will likely leave a bit later." She retrieved her heeled shoes from the carpet, then turned to Anna and hugged her on tiptoes. "We should have a girls' day sometime while you're here. Call me."

"Sure, will do! Goodnight," Anna waved, expensive jasmine perfume lingering in her nose while Greg pulled her down the darkened hall towards their room.

Anna's attention shifted fully to her companion as they left the others behind. Her observations over the course of the evening had served to bring Greg into sharp focus for her, emphasising each facet of his personality. He remained a warmly reassuring presence: careworn, capable, and strong in a way that felt bone-deep. At the same time, a river of passionate emotion lay hidden beneath his surface at all times. Something about being around his family—something about seeing Brian, Anna felt sure—had stirred up that unseen current in a way she'd never seen; it was a raging torrent, suddenly. A tremor passed between their joined hands, and she caught her breath; the hallway seemed so long.

The moment the guest room door closed behind them, Greg took her face between his palms and kissed her like a drowning man; it was desperate, almost wild. Silently urgent, he took possession
of her in the still darkness of the unfamiliar house; he left her gasping and trembling, utterly beyond words as they both finally slid towards sleep.

As Anna had expected, Fran and the kids were already gone by the time she awoke on Saturday. For once, no early alarm had been set to call Greg away, but he'd slipped out of bed before her, nonetheless. As she made her way out into the house, low voices caught her attention, snappish and plainly confrontational; she paused in the hallway, out of sight, to listen.

"Don't be such a prick," Greg was saying.

"Come on, I'm just saying I don't bloody understand it." This was Brian's honeyed drawl.

"What's there to understand?"

"It's rough, it's dangerous, it's stressful, you're clearly underpaid—"

"Underpaid? Just 'cause I don't live in a sodding mansion."

Brian snorted. "Please, give over with the mansion shite already. You look old and tired, you know."

"Yeah, well you look like you just got a fucking seaweed facial," Greg spat. "Must cost a pretty penny to keep your slimy gob polished up so nice."

There was a great, heaving sigh. "All I ever said was, I wonder how you can care so much for a whole city full of so many worthless people!"

"An' that, Brian, is why you've only ever been suited to your own greedy, self-involved little world!"

"You know, I wonder why I ever even make an effort with you—"

When the clatter of the sliding patio door suddenly interrupted the argument, Anna startled violently and almost cried out. Bert's booming voice called in. "Brian, you're still here? Didn't you say you were golfing today?"

"Yeah, Pop, I was just on my way out."

"Ah. All right then. Greg, would you mind popping out to the grocery for me? The kids used the last of the milk. I need a few things, actually; let me make you a list..."

Anna took a deep, steadying breath and carefully composed her face before walking out to join the three Lestrades.
With everyone else gone but herself and Mr Lestrade, the whole property seemed to take on a charged, intense hush. Out on the patio, the surrounding woods were a palpable presence: birdsong and rustling leaves accompanied the soft scrape of Bert's sharp knife against the block of pine he cradled.

Her own project nearly forgotten in her lap, Anna watched in rapt silence as a rough figure began to emerge under his skilled hands. Clearing her throat softly, she broke the stillness just before it became almost too much.

"I have to say, I could hardly believe Greg when he first told me his dad was Nic Lawless. I remember reading a bunch of those Tabitha Stone paperbacks when I was in junior high..."

Bert chuckled. "It's a silly, silly nom de plume, isn't it? My first editor picked it out, and after Broken Stone was published it seemed a lost cause to change it. What can you do?" He shrugged and winked at her.

"Yeah, you don't seem like much of a 'Nic Lawless' in person, I guess."

"My middle name is Nicolas, so it's really not so far off the mark." He puffed his cheeks and blew a flurry of shavings from his trousers.

Anna smiled and turned her attention back to her stitching. A bird called as it crossed overhead; the quiet was such that she could track its path by sound from west to east.

Bert spoke again. "Has Greg told you he was very nearly born in France?"

"No! He mentioned he'd had grandparents there..."

He nodded, turning his carving and resuming the hypnotic passes of his blade. "I actually lived in Lyon until I was ten years old, and then my parents brought me to England. Papa was an engineer; he'd been hired into what was the Bristol Aeroplane Company back then, y'know, over in Filton..." He trailing off, then appeared to gather himself with a little start as he realised Anna did not, in fact, know Filton. "Er. He and Maman ended up returning to France, in sixty-two—British Aircraft was working on the Concorde, then, and it made perfect sense for them to send Papa back to work in Toulouse, where they were being assembled. By that time I was twenty-five, and I'd already been married to my dear Emily two years; little Brian was just over a year old, and Greg wasn't a twinkle in my eye."

"And they wanted you and your wife to move back with them?"

"They did. But Emmie wouldn't hear of it; she knew if we went, she wouldn't be able to teach biology." He shrugged. "It all works out in the end, yeh? I daresay I'd never have dreamed up my first short story if Emily and I hadn't been crammed in our first little Bristol flat at the time, with the tots underfoot. And I can hardly imagine, even author as I suppose myself to be, what my boys would be like now if we'd raised them in the French countryside."

Anna hummed and gazed out across the garden, trying to picture a fully Francophone Gregory Lestrade. The image led to thoughts of his burr-edged voice caressing the language, tucked up close with his warm breath in her ear...

Bert interrupted her brief, vivid daydream, setting down the knife and leaning forward in his deck chair. "Anna, may I ask you for a favour?"

She started and sat straighter, nodding in anticipation of a fetch-and-carry request. "Of course, Bert! What do you need?"
"I need—my sons." He grimaced, shifting his shoulders as he stared down at the wood he held. "They've been on the outs for over a decade now, you know. Well, maybe you don't know—"

"No, I noticed," she broke in softly.

"They've kept me well out of it all, whatever it was; and you saw last night, they do a fair job of acting reasonable when they need to. Maybe it was wrong of me to stand aside from it, play the hermit out here for so long, I don't know. I thought if I let it be, they'd get over the row...but it's shown no sign of improving, not in years, and I haven't been able to get either of them to show a lick of sense." Bert lifted the back of one hand to his lips, scrubbing it back and forth as he looked out to the woods. "I'm not a young man, Anna. Damn it all, I'm seventy-four this year—I have time, sure, but I can't pretend I'll be around forever! And when I go...when I go, I want my sons to have each other."

Anna's heart felt like it was clenching around something sharp. "What could I possibly do?" she asked, her voice husky and hesitant.

He laid the faceless carving down and reached out to take her hand lightly, brushing his dry, age-roughened thumb in a gentle sweep across her knuckles. "My baby boy loves you. He'll talk to you in a way I could never get him to talk to me. There's got to be something...maybe you can just open the way, hm?" His brown eyes were clear and kind; he blinked, and blinked again, holding her gaze as he repeated: "He loves you."

Her breath caught in her throat, and words were unreachable; she could only swallow, and nod her assent.

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Chapter Summary

When they receive a surprise visitor for tea, John looks on as the air is cleared in a surprising way.

21. JOHN: Demanded, Declared, Deleted
(31 May 2015)

"Hoo-hoo! Boys!"

John twisted off the kitchen tap and stepped over to poke his head out into the sitting room.

Sherlock had apparently roused himself from whatever deep-thought exercise he'd been doing all morning, though. He greeted their landlady himself before John could do it, raising his curly head from his perusal of the newspaper. "Afternoon, Mrs Hudson. Still baking, are we?"

She laughed and walked in from the hall, bearing a covered platter which she set on the table. "I suppose you're going to tell me you've tired of it?"

"No, not at all," the detective quickly answered. "Ply us with as many sweets as you like; John quite enjoyed the madeleines on Friday."

"Mm, yes, lovely they were," John chimed in from the next room, pulling his little plastic watering can from the sink.

"Well, I've made lemon cake today, John," she said, turning to smile his way. "You do like lemon cake don't you?"

"Always, yes, and yours in particular." He returned the smile, tipping his head to the side. "Are you trying to fatten us up, Mrs Hudson? Sherlock's right, you have been baking quite a lot."

"Oh, well, it's just so nice, seeing you boys so happy—and Gregory and Anna here together the other night, looking so well, the darlings—it all just puts me in the mood to putter about the kitchen, I suppose."

"Sentiment," rumbled Sherlock, but a small amused smile hovered about his lips. He glanced to the covered cake platter, and up to John. "Tea goes quite well with sentiment."

John barked a short laugh, and gestured with the full watering can. "Let me take care of this first, all right?"

As he padded off down the hall, he heard Mrs Hudson behind him. "Well, I suppose I can put it on for you, Sherlock...just this once, mind you..."
John chuckled to himself as he pushed open the door to Sherlock's bedroom. It was warm and bright inside, with the afternoon sun streaming in; their large potted plant looked right at home here. It had taken a few days to convince Sherlock to allow him to bring it upstairs and place it to the right of the window at the foot of the bed. But, as John had argued, its profuse greenery really did improve the atmosphere of the room, which tended to seem almost clinical, its oddly persistent neatness uncharacteristic of their flat. And that was nice, because John had spent more time in this room in the past week than he'd ever expected to.

Who knew he'd be such a cuddler? thought John wryly, stooping to brush aside the long spear-shaped leaves closest to the pot. Since that long, sunny afternoon last Saturday—hours of laughter and laziness and fresh scones leaving crumbs in the expensive sheets—Sherlock had taken to coaxing John in with him for late afternoon naps. "Napping" was a generalised term, of course, covering reading, chatting, snacking, dozing and everything in between; having spent time here on four of the last seven afternoons, John could already foresee this break time becoming a weird little habit between cases.

Sherlock didn't get John's company on the afternoons he worked at the surgery, of course. Tuesdays and Wednesdays were the current arrangement with Dr Sawyer, usually a six-hour stretch from ten to four, barring case work which she already understood would always take precedence. John had chosen those days because for some reason (or no reason at all), it always seemed that new cases were few and far between during mid-week. And then, Anna had spent almost all of this Thursday with them, as well; denied his cuddle, Sherlock had satisfied himself instead with an eerily prolonged stretch of intense staring. (Anna had given them a strange look when John had cracked before the man's probing eyes, at last; he'd begun giggling helplessly and uncontrollably, nearly crying into the stew beef she had him browning for their stroganoff dinner. Neither he nor Sherlock had attempted to explain what could possibly be so funny.)

"There you are, Siegfried, all topped up," John murmured under his breath, standing and surveying the room. He estimated it would be no more than another hour or two before Sherlock stopped whatever he was doing, silently offered his hand and tugged his friend in to lie with him in the sun-warmed nest of his bedclothes. I think I'll bring in my own pillow this time, he decided with a smile, and it really wouldn't hurt to plug in my spare phone charger over on that side...

He returned to the kitchen and stowed the empty watering can in its place beneath the sink, pointedly ignoring the jarred pig foetus that floated in formaldehyde beside the U-trap. Rejoining the others, he found a mug of tea already prepared for him on the table, next to a plate bearing a slice of the lemon cake. "Thank you, Mrs Hudson," he said as he sat.

"You're welcome, dearie. Oh—I think your phone made a noise while you were down the hall." She stood beside him and patted his shoulder fondly, looking well pleased with herself for successfully feeding her tenants; in the seat to John's right, Sherlock munched contentedly on a thick slice of cake, still studying the newspaper he held folded stiffly upright in his other hand.

Just as John leaned forward to retrieve his phone from the far end of the table, they all heard a tapping knock from below: a distinct, rhythmic rat-a-tat that was primmer and politer than all but one of their usual visitors. "Ugh, Mycroft," muttered Sherlock, setting down the chunk of cake and picking up his tea.

John glanced over his shoulder and began shuffling his seat back from the table; but before he could stand, the front door audibly opened and closed. Upon hearing the sound, John gave up on rising to answer it, and instead turned his attention to unlocking his mobile.

"Honestly, why you haven't taken that key back from him is beyond me, Mrs Hudson," Sherlock
snapped peevishly. "I'm not dead any longer, for Christ's sake!"

"And glad we all are of that fact," said Mycroft, gliding into the room as if his polished shoes were casters, and stationing himself before the fireplace to face his brother. "Apologies; I seem to have interrupted your Sunday tea."

Mrs Hudson had bustled into the kitchen, and now she returned to the sitting room with a third small plate. "Mycroft's right, dear. We are all glad you're back with us; but keeping a spare key with a family member isn't an awful idea." She put the plate down before the free chair on John's left side. "With the odd sorts of things you two get up to, and always travelling on such short notice —"

"It's a breach of privacy!" Sherlock grumbled, snapping the folded paper around to read the other side.

John looked up from the phone—Sarah had texted that Dr Bressler had a funeral to attend, and she was hoping he could fill in tomorrow morning—and flicked his gaze to his flatmate. It's been eleven months, and he's only now railing against this? He had to have known the whole time. Never mind the fact that John himself had been unaware that Mycroft held a key to the Baker Street flat. That didn't seem to have much bearing on things at the moment, and anyway, he wasn't quite sure how he felt about it yet.

"It's family, Sherlock," admonished Mrs Hudson, fussing behind him at straightening some papers on the coffee table. "Family is all we have..."

A wave of déjà vu swept over John as he put his phone down and turned his head the other way; Mycroft stood stiffly with one hand in the pocket of his charcoal grey trousers, jacket pulled aside to reveal his immaculate waistcoat. John recognised the flash of violet and indigo, delicate dark swirls almost invisible in the soft grey wool. Family he is, at that, he thought; he cleared his throat. "Mycroft, sit down. Have a bit of cake."

He sensed Sherlock's sudden stare, like a burning pinpoint at the back of his neck. Rather than acknowledge it, he directed a mostly affable smile at Mycroft.

The man raised one eyebrow in a silent expression of disbelief; his thin lips pursed, and he looked to his brother.

After a few seconds of quiet, Sherlock expelled a rude breath. "Go on then, have some."

Mycroft nodded guardedly and slowly came forward to sit before the plate Mrs Hudson had clearly set out for him; she made a little pleased noise, hurrying into the kitchen to make another cup of tea.

Whatever pressing business had necessitated Mycroft's visit (and the use of his key, rather than his waiting for the door to be answered) was apparently less important than Mrs Hudson's fresh lemon cake. Having received a murmur of thanks and praise from the elder Holmes, Mrs Hudson had made her excuses to return to her downstairs flat. For a few minutes, the three men sat at the little table together in silent peace; John tapped out an affirmative reply to Sarah and slipped the phone into his jeans pocket.
"So." Sherlock snapped the paper down and fixed his brother with a stare that pasted a thin veneer of boredom atop a core of snapped patience. "State your business, already."

Mycroft sat back in his seat, crossing his arms to cradle his tea at the crook of his elbow, a flash of smug superiority crinkling the sides of his eyes. "I see that things are as well as ever here. 'Domestic bliss,' one might even say. It's surprising, really; five months..." He trailed off and sipped his tea, but the insinuation was insultingly clear.

Without giving it a thought, John shifted his weight slightly in the seat, letting his leg brush against Sherlock's. He kept his own eyes fixed on Mycroft's face, but the man's gaze was locked across the table.

John heard the soft tap of Sherlock's mug touching down, and then a hand fell to rest lightly upon his knee. He dropped his own to cover it. When Mycroft's stare flicked to him, John changed his smile subtly, deliberately: it took on a challenging, dangerous edge that he rarely allowed his expression to show. He knew Mycroft saw it. John could see the tightening at the corners of the man's mouth, and a slight twitch of his long, patrician nose.

Sherlock lightly broke the moment of silent confrontation before it could escalate further. "I think you'll find that pressing that particular button no longer has the desired effect, brother dear. Domestic bliss, I find, rather suits me. It'll take more than that weak gambit to distract me from the reason you've darkened our door today."

The other man took another long, slow sip of his tea, and made a gesture that somewhat resembled a shrug.

"Stop stalling, Mycroft," scolded Sherlock. He looked his brother up and down, coolly cataloguing every detail of his appearance in seconds. "You've barged in unannounced, on a Sunday afternoon. There's no family news of any pressing nature to impart. You came prepared with something for me to solve, but now you hesitate to bring it up—why? Ah, it's nothing of real importance, obviously you know it would have been a hard sell to get me interested in it—likely some silly scuffle between members of the minor European nobility, hmm?"

Mycroft was beginning to look flustered and indignant—not in the mobile, expressive way that a normal human being might look it, but then again, this man was the archetype of the famed Holmes dispassion. "Sherlock..."

"You wanted to check up on me, yes? See that I haven't gone mad from boredom?" The detective's face split into a wide, cruel grin, and he waggled the fingers of his free hand about. "After just one week without a case, you believe I require your assistance, and the distraction of whatever pathetic puzzle you've scrounged up. This is laughable."

John frowned a little and put a slight squeeze into his partner's hand.

"Before Father's surgery, it had already been nearly six days since you'd had work. In the three weeks since, you have apparently handled only one case. That lasted not even four days, and since then you have left your flat exactly once. It wasn't an unfounded supposition," Mycroft sniffed.

Sherlock placed spread fingers dramatically over his heart, briefly miming a shocked expression that John thought rather reminiscent of an insulted Southern belle. "The level of concern is almost touching; the level of surveillance is decidedly not. And mentioning Father's condition is, at best, a paltry distraction from your own manipulative motives; that event, in itself, provides a perfectly reasonable explanation for the lack of new case work. Honestly, Mycroft, you're slipping!"
Mycroft's mouth twisted. "Concern is hardly the appropriate term. At the most, I found myself slightly...curious as to your recent disposition."

"Well." Sherlock shifted slightly in his seat, twitching the fingers that rested beneath John's; looking over, John watched a strange mix of expressions crowd his companion's face and fight for dominance. When Sherlock eventually spoke, it was clear that he'd reluctantly resigned himself to something he was loath to say; but, at the same time, he sounded...proud. "Let me put your mind at ease, then, Mycroft. You've worried about me, all these years; you've done your damnedest to manoeuvre me into what you consider a safe and acceptable existence, for all that I have been ever ungrateful, obstreperous and stubbornly rebellious."

There was a short, expectant pause; Mycroft punctuated it with a soft, noncommittal hum.

John's eyes were wide, flickering back and forth between the two brothers. A curl of fluttering sensation had arisen somewhere in his gut; he felt he should be made invisible, that wherever this sudden, honest declaration was heading, John should not be witness to it. He lifted his right hand underneath the table, intending to lean carefully away.

A quick flash of movement—and John's hand was back on his knee, this time covered decisively by the firm, warm weight of Sherlock's larger one. Sherlock did not glance his way as he continued. "You hardly dared to hold out hope that perhaps I might someday find the capability within myself to stand on my own—that I might surpass the immaturity and weakness that you felt so strongly called for your supervision of me. And even as I railed so desperately against you, brother, you grasped and pushed for years to influence each new person that gained importance in my life: Victor, Lestrade, Mrs Hudson, John, Molly—you've been slow on the uptake with Anna, haven't you, but then, John's quite rightly distracted you..."

Mycroft dipped his head slowly in hesitant acknowledgement. The sharp angles of his face were still and cautious.

John felt deeply uncomfortable. Who's Victor flashed through his head, and then the curiosity was set immediately aside; Sherlock was wetting his lips and breathing in to speak again, still looking fixedly at his older brother.

"It had been your greatest hope, had it not, that John Watson would somehow be the making of me? You scrutinised every aspect of our friendship from the outset, researched and plotted and pulled your strings wherever you could, watching from the wings. And somehow, even after all that's happened—even after you'd made your mistakes, and had been forced to wait powerless as I undertook my hunt,"—here, at last, Sherlock gave John the barest, slimmest glance before looking back across the table—"John has confounded your every prediction and expectation, just as he has done from the beginning. When he might have left, he stayed. When he might have faltered, he defended valiantly. When he might have moved on, he mourned instead, and when you expected him to welcome me home with open arms, we fought bitterly for months on end."

"Sher—" John whispered hoarsely, and was cut off by a squeeze to his fingers.

"And so, Mycroft, let this be the only time it need be said: I do understand your continuing concern. I understand your need to decipher this thing that's come to exist between John and myself. And I can answer you now, without a shadow of uncertainty, that it is love; it is no less than a permanence of profound mutual sentiment. So if I find myself less than bothered by boredom lately, you must recognise that John is the sole reason for it."

There was a long silence following this solemn declaration. John couldn't bring himself to look back at Mycroft; he dimly realised there was a sort of burning feeling in his chest, and it took him
another few seconds to trace the sensation to the fact that he wasn't actually breathing. Blinking hard and repeatedly, he sucked in a long, shaky inhale, and Sherlock finally, *finally* met his eyes.

"All right?" Sherlock asked him softly, with that lovely, haunting half-smile pulling at one side of his mouth.

He didn't trust himself to speak, so he nodded. It seemed the burning had transferred all at once from his lungs to his face.

Behind him, a polite throat-clearing returned their attention to Mycroft. There were tiny spots of colour high on his pale cheeks, and his jaw worked visibly before he spoke. "Thank you, brother," he managed at last. "Please accept my apologies for having doubted."

"It was logical to have done so, given your experience of me," Sherlock replied, suddenly gruff. "Now, Mycroft. The *case*, if you please?"

Mycroft blinked and folded his hands carefully; he appeared to be considering a further statement of filial esteem.

Sherlock snorted. "Come now, get on with it! Unless you expect me to deduce this entire ridiculous case from the details of your person, which is not impossible, but certainly tiresome. So—minor nobility; an embarrassing dispute; missing property of some value; a reputation in peril. I know this much already. *Spit it out.*"

Mycroft heaved a long sigh and gathered himself straighter in his seat; with that, the messy sentiment was fully dispensed with as if it had never been. "The Baroness Sabine of Luxembourg hosted a gala event last month, to which she wore an impressive ensemble custom-made for her by famed designer Lorenzo Fortario. The dress alone is worth more than sixty thousand pounds..."

When Mycroft eventually took his leave, Sherlock stood and watched at the window until he was gone. John didn't look, himself, but he could sense the presence of the sleek black car as if he saw through Sherlock's eyes; he visualised their visitor slipping inside it and being borne away.

"Finally," sighed Sherlock, after a moment. "That was tedious."

"Yeah, tedious is *just* the word I was thinking of," John chuckled, still reeling slightly from Sherlock's earlier words. He stepped up behind his companion and reached out to interlace their fingers.

Sherlock turned and leaned down for a kiss. "I think I'd enjoy a little nap. How about you?"

"I was hoping you'd say that, love..." They made their way to the bedroom hand in hand, and John hummed on a little happy yawn as they settled themselves. "I'm a little surprised you didn't jump all over that case just to show off."

"Whyevery would I do that, John? It was *barely* worth the minimal answer I gave him."

"Well, sure, but you hardly could come by a better opportunity to flaunt your special knowledge."
"What knowledge?" Sherlock looked genuinely confused.

"What kn—? Um." John backtracked quickly. "Sorry, I thought you'd said a few years back that you knew some stuff about the European fashion scene. I must be remembering wrong."

His lips curled at the corners. "You certainly are. I can barely even conceive of a case in which it would have been helpful to have even temporary knowledge of something as banal as the fashion industry. Are you sure you weren't having a strange dream?"

"Now that you mention it, I seem to also recall something along with that about juggling pineapples. Guess my subconscious likes to write cases for you while I sleep," John grinned, rolling in to rest his cheek beneath the hollow of Sherlock's throat.

A low chuckle reverberated through his head.

"Pineapples, John? Your mind is full of surprises."

John had heard Sherlock talk about "deletion" many times, of course; he'd run up against its supposed effects in discussion of various topics, basic astronomy and the American Civil War being two major examples. Even so, he'd never really considered that it could be the way Sherlock described, not exactly. As much as the maddening genius insisted on likening his mind to a computer, John knew the human brain to be a softer, more indistinct place. Memories that were long forgotten could appear out of the blue, whole and intact; one's remembered experience of childhood faded and flared in irregular bursts; even the perception of time's passage wasn't constant. So, when confronted with Sherlock's declaration that an item had been "deleted", John tended to regard it as a regimented inattention, a purposeful forgetting that would nevertheless leave traces—because it would have to, wouldn't it? For all that he'd accepted Sherlock's explanations, his offhand references to the ins and outs of the Mind Palace...for all that John had even been the one to explain the strange concept to Dr Stapleton at Baskerville, and to a few others over the years...he'd never fully believed. Not entirely.

But now, John listened to the rhythm of Sherlock's heart, and thought of the unpleasant story he'd been told only a week past. He really, truly doesn't remember Berlin? Eight weeks of immersion among Europe's fashion elite, and it's totally gone? A small, cold shudder travelled across his shoulders at the thought.

Sherlock's arm curled around him in response, and long fingers began to gently rub through his short hair. John fuzzily promised himself he'd worry about the whole thing later, as he felt himself drifting off into a doze.

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Chapter Summary

Greg presides over his team, called out to the scene at a modest flat in Bow: it’s a strange little murder...or is it?

22. GREG: The Body in Bow

(1 June 2015)

When DI Lestrade walked in on a new case, he could almost always get a sense of it right away. You could call it a special talent of his, perhaps.

Sometimes it was clear from moment one—the really bad ones were obvious, of course, as were the impossibly strange ones: locked rooms and the like. Usually, within five or ten minutes on a less unusual-looking crime scene, he had an inkling of roughly where it fit on the scale. Is this gonna be routine and easy? Is it involved, but simplistic, a set of hoops to jump through? Or is it something more?

He still hadn't really pinned down what it was, exactly, that tended to clue him in—just something about the scene, some indistinct uneasiness that would gradually appear and sit heavy and hard in his gut as he scanned over the victim and the surroundings. It was by no means an exact thing; plenty of times he'd called Sherlock in, only to be scathingly insulted for requesting help on what was obviously only a three. And there had been a number of cases over the years that had seemed basically simple, but that had drawn him deeper and deeper until, by the time Greg realised he needed to call Sherlock, he'd already been in almost over his head. (He got berated for those ones, too, though usually not in front of his team.)

Other investigative teams in his division hit upon the stranger cases once in a while, of course, but they'd gradually taken to quietly shuffling most of those sorts along to Lestrade. Working with Sherlock Holmes was not for the faint of heart, after all; DI Dimmock was the only other inspector in Lestrade's division that had made any serious attempt at it, and though Dimmock had admitted he wouldn't mind doing so again, he was quick to warn others off. There was simply no other DI at the Yard with that special touch, no-one else who'd earned Sherlock's respect. It had been quite some time before Greg had even realised that respect was what it was, after all—and beyond that, recognising it as friendship of a sort had come even later, and as a far greater surprise.

Though they may not always admit it, the others at New Scotland Yard had learned, over time, that Lestrade's high closure rate wasn't entirely due to reliance on his unconventional consultant. He saw every case through, whether or not Holmes was involved, and quite a lot of the time he got results; Greg credited that to hard work, long hours, and sometimes—he assumed—dumb luck. If he'd ever let himself truly believe the sneering, sharp words Holmes had so often repeated in regards to Greg’s fitness for duty, perhaps he would have had less success. But then, Sherlock had got his hooks into DS Lestrade's head before he'd ever been considered for promotion; so maybe, in
the end, those insults had been a driving force for him to become a better copper.

*Chicken or the egg,* Greg sometimes thought, chuckling to himself whenever it occurred to him; it didn't really matter either way. Here and now, he was what he was; the work was the work; and this scene...

*Hm.*

This scene wasn't quite piling rocks in his gut. But it didn't seem exactly right, either.

When Sally joined him, Greg was standing at one end of the decedent's living room, hands in his pockets and a vague frown on his face.

"The perimeter's clear, sir," said Sally, briskly stepping over to his side. "Ronny has the witnesses outside for you, if you wanted to talk to 'em yourself."

"Mm."

She allowed him another moment of contemplation before speaking again. "What's your hunch?"

Greg swallowed a sigh. "I dunno, Sal. Not sure I've got one, yet. What d'you reckon?"

"Well, it doesn't look like anyone else was here; that fits with what we've got from the witnesses. Mr Leighburn was forty-nine, he'd lived alone in this flat for three years. The neighbours on either side aren't home, but a woman living across the street says she hadn't seen him with visitors of any kind in at least a week, and she's the type that watches."

James Leighburn lay on his back, with the top of his head touching the wall beneath the front bay window; the angled curtains were drawn to cover the glass, but they were pulled partially off the rod on one end. Sunlight fell across the top half of his face, the shadow line of the curtain above giving the effect of a bright mask over his staring brown eyes. His mouth hung wide open, in a rictus of a scream or a gasp.

Greg nodded, still staring at the dead man. "I only saw one drinking glass out, one plate. No extra jackets lying about, nothing obvious to suggest either company or an intruder. But this whole room looks like a trail of destruction, like a struggle."

"I'll give you that," Sally said. "Could've just been, I don't know, staggering? Thrashing?"

"Bad enough to bring down a whole shelving unit?" He worked his way carefully forward, tiptoeing through the wreckage of the contemporary shelves: lacquered steel and shattered frosted glass. Most of the debris here was comprised of books, compact discs and framed photographs. Greg squatted and reached out with his gloved fingers, carefully turning a few of the frames face-up. An older woman—mother, likely; two artistic, moody shots of an attractive middle-aged man; a candid shot with the same man, his arm around Leighburn at some sort of outdoor gathering. Boyfriend, then. The glass on the boyfriend's elegant sunset pose was broken out; Greg could see that the photo paper was glossy and slick, signs of traditional developing rather than the printed digital that was far more common these days.
As he stood and moved back, Sally took his place wordlessly, pulling her digital camera up from its shoulder strap and snapping a few shots of the photographs he'd exposed. "I'll keep an eye out for evidence of who this man is," she murmured, "and ask next of kin about him." She turned her head to survey the room once more from her crouched position. "No, sir; it definitely looks like nothing's been thrown, only toppled or pulled. I'm sticking with it not being a struggle."

He found himself in agreement with her observation. "Could he have called for help?"

"We found his mobile phone in the bedroom, attached to the charger. He might've meant to get to it, but once he hit the floor he obviously didn't get very far."

"So, what? Natural causes, then?"

She rose to stand, and shrugged. "Stranger things have happened."

Anderson returned to the room, fidgeting with his usual nervous energy at one cuff of his blue latex gloves. "Nothing too suspicious in the kitchen or the loo. Looks like he ate a tuna-fish sandwich for lunch; I bagged the tin, maybe it was off or tampered with. I couldn't find anything out of place or recently used, but there are a number of different household pesticides, in addition to the normal sort of cleaning products; I'll be testing all of them, too, just in case."

"You're thinking it's poisoning?"

"That, or a severe heart attack." Anderson grimaced. "But heart attacks don't generally present with scratches about the arms and neck like this." Kneeling beside the body, he brushed fingertips over the ragged net of welts on one forearm.

Greg grunted. "Yeah, I don't like that either. It's like he was trying to get something off himself. Or out of himself. Er, it was him doing the scratching, right?"

The forensic tech nodded, then twitched his head in an awkward-looking spasm to rub the bottom of his chin against his own shoulder. His strange, scraggily beard was apparently itching; Greg still didn't understand why Phil had begun growing it out.

"Right." Greg frowned once more over the mess, holding himself perfectly still, waiting for the nagging thought at the back of his mind to coalesce. Photographs. Ah. "Sally, you said this guy owns a photography studio. I want you and Anderson to have it gone over for toxic substances, contaminants, anything he might have touched or ingested—and find out when he's been at work recently. By the time we get blood panels back, we should have all the possibilities on hand to match it with."

"Will do."

"Good. I'll be outside, go ahead and finish up in here, yeh?" Greg peeled the gloves off and stuffed them in a trouser pocket, double-checking the soles of his shoes for glass before heading out the open door.

DS Ranjit Patel stood out by the front garden wall, shading his eyes against the bright sunlight. Two men waited with him; the elder stood hat in hand, with his stocky body angled to face the
building, clearly trying to keep a watchful eye on the scaffolding set up across the front façade. *He's probably worried we'll want to take his tools into evidence or something*, thought Greg, pacing down the walk towards them.

"Ronny. Who've we got here?"

"Inspector Lestrade." Patel pulled his hand from his eyes, clasping his wrists behind his back. "This is Mr Wade Turnbull; he's the master stonemason contracted to restore this block of flats. And his apprentice, Mr Jeffrey Applewhite."

Greg turned and cast a quick, appreciative eye over the building; the bay windows and doorways along the face of the dun brick terraced houses were accented with elegant cornices and carved friezes. To the right of where they stood, the decorative elements were weathered and crumbled by age over eight small flats. To the left, the pale stone features appeared pristine and perfect all the way to the end, twelve doors down. "You do fine work, Mr Turnbull."

"Thank you, sir," replied the older gentleman, touching a fingertip politely to his brow; the sun gleamed white on his smooth, bald pate.

"How long have you been at it, here?"

"Been out here every day but Wednesdays and Sundays, going on three weeks now."

"And Mr Applewhite, you've been assisting Mr Turnbull that whole time?"

"Yes, sir." The slender young man wore a battered cotton work cap. Smears of white stone dust stood out harshly against his night-dark skin, and his expression was earnest and attentive.

"Which of you called it in?" Greg asked next.

Jeffrey answered. "I dialled 999 from my phone, sir, but it was Mr Turnbull saw the bloke first."

"Right, okay." Greg crossed his arms. "Tell me what you saw, please, Mr Turnbull."

"We were just finishing up the window at number forty-seven, when we both heard it, Jeff and me. There weren't no words, just noises—a thumping and crashing, like. But then it was all quiet, nobody yelled or came out or nothin', so we just kept on working. It was mebbe, what, Jeff? Half-hour? Yeah, half-hour or so later, we moved over to start on the corbels here at forty-eight; and we didn't even notice right away. I was on the scaffold right in front o' that window for at least ten minutes before I called for Jeff to hand me up the narrower spackle knife. When I looked down to take it outta his hand, I saw the eyes lookin' up at me in the bottom of the window. Never had such a fright in my life; I nearly fell off an' broke me neck."

"So, at what time did you first hear the crashing sounds?"

"Musta been about ten 'til one. Jeff had just come back from a coffee break; weren't you talkin' to your Laura about then, Jeff?"

Jeffrey hurriedly pulled out his phone and scrolled through the history. "Yessir, I rang off just as I got back to you. One fifty-two." He held the device out for inspection.

Patel stood by, busily jotting down the new information; Greg thanked the witnesses, then caught the sergeant's eye and nodded to relinquish control to him, taking a step back and turning towards the building to study it once more. He stared at the scaffold, the window, the walk; he watched the bodybag gurney being bumped up over the front stoop and wheeled into James Leighburn's little
His stomach was churning empty over his afternoon coffee. He thought it over, weighed what they knew against what they might find in the darkroom, or with the boyfriend; weighed the vague, smallish rock in his gut against the possibility of a natural medical issue.

*Nah,* he told himself. *Wait a bit.*

Sally was the one doing the driving, today. Greg slid into the passenger seat and held her camera in his lap, flipping through the photos on its little video display. It wasn't 'til he got to the close-up of Leighburn's left wrist, livid scratches running from the brown leather band of the man's wristwatch, that his own timepiece caught his eye.

"Christ, it's four forty," he groaned. "By the time we get all the way back in from Bow, I'll practically be late already!"

"Got an appointment, then, I gather."

"Yeah. I promised Anna I'd meet her straight after work, take her out somewhere nice for dinner. If you could drop me off near the Underground at Piccadilly Circus, Sally, that would be* brilliant.*"

"Sure, I can do that. Where are you taking her?"

"Italian place. Bocca de Lupo, a little north of there."

"I've heard about that one, I think. Good things. You don't want me to just drop you off at the restaurant?"

"No. I'd rather we meet at the station. We can walk from there together, it'll be nice."

She gave him a sidelong look. "It'll be more than nice, looks like. It looks like it'll save you from half an ulcer."

Greg rubbed a hand reflexively over his jaw. "I'm fine. She's fine! I just, I just need to..."

"Yeah, I get it, Greg. Relax." She checked her mirrors and made a right turn. "I have to say, you've seemed a lot better today. That weekend in the country did you a lot of good."

"Better?" He scowled. "Shite. How bad was I last week, then?"

Sally chuckled softly. "Don't worry. Not so bad anyone else noticed. Ronny's never gonna call Policy on you, and Phil was oblivious. You just had your phone out an awful lot, that's all."

"And I pissed her off doing it, too," he sighed. "Thank God she liked my father; the weekend actually went pretty well, all things considered."

"That's good!" She drove on in silence for a bit before speaking again. "Can I just ask..."

Greg waited for a count of ten; when no question was forthcoming, he turned to face her. "The suspense is killing me."
"Sorry. Just—what happened wasn't all that bad, was it? Rotten luck, and all, I get that. But I never would've pegged you for such a worrier."

He sighed. "Right...Sally, I never actually told you what happened to us in Chicago after Christmas, did I?"

"What do you mean? You told me about meeting her family; you said it went well."

Greg checked his watch again. "If I boil it down to the bare bones, I might just have enough time to tell the story..."

He left out everything he feasibly could, with the solemn promise that he would owe Donovan the full, unabridged version in the very near future. Unabridged except for the bits about John and Sherlock getting together, he reminded himself; that wasn't his to tell. By the time he'd recounted Anna's rescue from the trunk, Sally was driving with her hands clamped tightly on the wheel, and her lips compressed into a tiny line.

The second he fell silent, she let loose. "How could you just leave all that out, Greg? I thought we were friends now!"

"We are friends, Sal; we've been friends for ages, and I'm sorry. Really. You remember how much work I had on my plate when I first came back, yeh? I had to throw myself in at the deep end, and the right moment just never came up...and I'll admit, I was kind of trying not to think about it too much, anyway. Didn't want to think about how much I missed her, and didn't want to dwell on how close I came to losing her entirely. Please understand, Sally."

She was still steaming mad, he could tell. The last time he'd seen that particular expression on her face, it had been directed at Anderson; Ronny had spent two flustered weeks acting as go-between before she'd deigned to speak to the poor fool again. Greg watched nervously as her brow twitched, as her fingers stretched and clenched repeatedly on the steering wheel; he felt the urge to pile on more awkward apologies, but wisely kept silent until she calmed herself and spoke again.

"I still think you're a right arse for not telling me. But...I can see why you didn't." Sally pulled up to the kerb at Piccadilly and turned in her seat to face him, tucking a few curls back behind her right ear with a quick hand. "To make up for it, though, you'll be buying me lunch tomorrow and giving me the whole story."

Greg nodded. "Not a problem. Least I can do," he said, faintly relieved to be getting off so lightly.

"And."

He froze with his left hand on the door latch. "And?"

"I want to be invited to dinner at your place, soon. I want to get to know Anna better; you honestly need someone to be your confidante in all this, mate. You'll work yourself into a nervous breakdown otherwise, that much is bloody certain. And I don't much like the idea of having to move onto Dimmock's team when you get your sorry arse sectioned, all right?"

A startled laugh burst from his throat. "You've got a deal. How about Friday? I'll talk to Anna, let
you know in the morning."

"Good." Sally gave him a fond, exasperated little smile. "Go on now, don't be late; you've got to walk your lady love to dinner! Get moving!"
Sherlock's still adjusting to this constant closeness, to simply sharing whatever's on his mind; but it can't be *that* hard, after all.

23. SHERLOCK: A Casual Horror

*(4 June 2015)*

It had begun as an impulsive experiment, a whim that had followed close on the heels of suddenly averted dysphoria. Utterly unplanned from the start.

At the close of the Inverness poisoning case, suddenly home and at loose ends once more, Sherlock had felt nothing so much as *raw*. Struck all at once by the vicious, unexpected mood swing, he'd taken the path of least resistance, allowing himself to indulge in whatever actions had felt right: anything, *anything* to slice open the swelling boil of malevolence within him, and allow it to dry up in the open air.

A book—something dense, something far removed from his usual, predictable pattern: something with the reassuring scent of age and obscurity. The setting—a room he rarely saw in his waking hours, perfectly isolated and unfamiliar in the bright daylight, and yet entirely his own dominion. The movements—the shove of the chair, the stomp onto it and leap off; the violent crumpling and satisfying thump of the thrown jacket; the stretch and compression of his muscles as he curled himself tight.

None of these factors had been *planned*, exactly, but as he had assembled the pieces that Saturday afternoon, they had fit into place where he knew they could be expected to. Spontaneous moods like this were rare for him, but Sherlock's instinct for self-care (such as it was) led him intuitively to search out the sensory balm to his internal stormclouds.

The *surprise*—well, that had been John, of course. As ever.

Sherlock had been intrigued by the sense of well-being that had suffused him through the remainder of that day. The following afternoon, he'd decided quite suddenly to try it again, pulling John along to the bedroom without explanation; without the rebound from a black mood, he'd expected a much less marked result. And when *that* theory had proven itself wrong, he'd repeated the experiment for a third day, simply stopping what he'd been doing as soon as he'd found himself thinking of it.

John hadn't protested—not even when Sherlock had tried bringing other activities into the room, varying the amount of talk and contact, trying to figure out the breaking point at which John might draw the line and insist upon a return to his own more private habits. But if anything, the man had seemed even more pleased and content with each iteration of the experiment.
After the three days mid-week during which an afternoon session could not be managed, Sherlock had found himself looking forward to reinstating their daily retreat into his bedroom with unexpected pleasure. No longer merely an experiment, it had already begun to take on the hallmarks of habit.

Sherlock had spent the last twenty minutes of this, their Thursday "nap", replying to comments on his website, using his phone to swipe and tap out responses in a discussion thread that had flared up on the subject of fingerprint alteration.

"Wouldn't it be a lot faster for you to do that on your laptop?" asked John, turning his head to look over. He was laid out on his stomach, propped on his elbows with a magazine open on the pillow before him.

He lowered the phone to his chest and met John's eyes seriously. "Yes. But neither of our laptops are in here."

John made a strange face in response, one that appeared to combine unbearable fondness with surprised confusion. It was one of his more intriguing, complex expressions; subtle variations on this face had been appearing more and more often over the past week or so. Sherlock didn't understand what might have prompted it this time, but he happily filed it away for future study, nonetheless.

He did enjoy these new faces John made, very much. So many of them were new, or had begun appearing in unexpected contexts. Sherlock had already added quite a bit to his recorded data on John in the past months since New Year's, but in the past two weeks alone...I could write a treatise, thought Sherlock.

"You're staring again, love," murmured John, reaching one blunt finger over to gently tap Sherlock's chin.

"I rather thought that was the point," he replied, and smiled.

Later, Sherlock sat at the kitchen table, idly mixing up a small batch of ballistic gel in an ice tray he'd liberated from the freezer. John stood at the worktop, busily shelling and deveining a pile of prawns; he was humming a song to himself, moving slightly from side to side in unconscious dance steps as he worked.

He seems quite happy, noted Sherlock. He watched the little rhythmic shaking movements of John's hips and shoulders, allowing his eyes to linger where they liked: form-fitting jeans, lightweight striped shirt still rumpled from their hour in the bedroom, sock feet shuffling back and forth. Yes—as impulsive experiments went, the afternoon retreats really had turned out to be an unqualified success, so far.
Sherlock's last regularly scheduled Monday maintenance, three days prior, had been light and easy. When he'd entered the dark room that lay at the end of that imagined hall within his mind, there had been thirty-four doors remaining of his original thirty-eight; when he'd left it, the doors had numbered only thirty-two. The beauty of it was that he'd succeeded so thoroughly—he honestly couldn't say for certain what was gone. What remained was not inconsiderable, of course, but he felt that the atmosphere of the holding area had changed already. He no longer needed to focus on his prolonged string of failures; he no longer railed against himself to frantically seek out new solutions or strategies. The continuing reassurance of success was a welcome relief, drawing the urgency from his task like poison from a sting, while making him simultaneously ever more eager to proceed with it.

It wasn't until John moved from the worktop over to the cooktop, moving his body from the direct, unblinking line of Sherlock's sight, that Sherlock roused himself from his thoughts. He dragged his eyes over to follow his partner, smiling slightly in the anticipation of another door's removal.

"Can I tell you something, John?" he asked.

"Mm?" John murmured, pouring a small jar of pasta sauce into a deep skillet and setting the gas. "What's that then?"

"I think I should tell you about Manila."

The wooden spoon John held stuttered, paused in the pan, then resumed its slow, steady circling. He answered without turning. "Okay. Mind if I keep cooking?"

"Of course not." Sherlock hadn't missed the reaction. Clearly, though, it was simply a switching of John's focus: the man had been immersed within his own thoughts, and now he would be attentive. Good.

Sherlock folded his hands on the table and began.

John's cooking became slower, but more purposeful and measured, as he listened to Sherlock roughly describe the week he'd spent tracking weapons smugglers through Indonesia. Aside from a mild snort when Sherlock mentioned his alias at that time ("Toby Hooper. Really. You must have had London on the brain," John had chuckled), the comments and interruptions from his flatmate were minimal.

"Damn," John muttered at one point, "I thought we still had pasta. Rice, maybe?"

Sherlock paused mid-sentence, blinking. "Er. A bit unconventional, but it sounds edible."

"And you'll eat it, too," warned John, giving him a bland little smile and setting the little pot of water to boil.

He dipped his head, acknowledging the statement but neither confirming nor denying it. "So, having determined at last that my quarry was in the process of shifting their operations to the
Philippines, I naturally booked the next available flight."

Giving an experimental lick to his fingertip, John judged his sauce adequately spiced, and moved to tip the prepared prawns into the pan.

"It was only a four hour flight from Jakarta to Manila. I was in the very back row, on the aisle; the seats beside me were empty, and I could see everything ahead of me. There shouldn't have been a problem." Sherlock frowned, studying his hands.

"You slept?" John's words were soft.

Sherlock's head snapped up; his flatmate had turned to face him, arms crossed and lower back resting against the worktop. He—oh. I'd implied as much, in Chicago. Of course. "Takeoff was at twelve thirty in the morning; many of the passengers were napping. But it was my habit to sink only into a controlled sort of half-doze on flights. It kept me aware of my surroundings, and the slightest shift in the air around me could draw me back to full alertness."

"Not a bad idea, in concept," John said. "I presume it didn't work out this time." He turned away again, busying himself with measuring out rice and pouring it into the boiling pot.

"Not as such." Sherlock stood and took the ice tray to the fridge, sliding it gently onto the top shelf to set up, then returned to stand by the table. "I had, unfortunately, been plagued by distraction over the course of that week. It seemed likely, on later examination, that I had allowed extraneous thoughts to obscure my usual caution somewhat; at any rate, I was well and truly asleep within the first hour of the flight."

He paused, picking at the table edge with his fingernails, feeling oddly as if John should already know what he couldn't bring himself to say. I spent my time in Jakarta longing desperately for London, for you. And when I slept, on that plane, I dreamed...

John was still stirring the prawns in their red sauce, not looking up; if by some chance he actually understood what Sherlock wasn't telling him, he gave no sign. "You always go too bloody long without sleep, I can't say I'm surprised," he commented mildly. "Go on. What happened?"

Sherlock began idly clearing equipment from the table, returning pipettes to jars and stacking empty microscope slides: less for the act of straightening up, and more for something to do with his hands while he spoke. Get on with it, he scolded himself. "I woke to searing pain. The plane had hit a patch of sudden turbulence—I saw my attacker only from the rear as he rushed off down the aisle, and I didn't even get a glimpse of his weapon. He'd aimed for my chest, most likely, but the roll and shake of the plane had thrown him, so he'd only managed to stab me in the upper arm. The air hostesses were busy making sure everyone was seated and buckled in, so I couldn't get up without drawing unwelcome attention."

He looked over to where John stood, cautiously eyeing the stiff, unmoving line of his back; he began to speak more quickly, trying to get through the story before he lost his confidence.

"Thankfully, I wore dark clothing, and I had my black hooded sweatshirt in my lap, so I was able to conceal the problem until the turbulence passed; but I couldn't tell yet how badly I'd been injured. As soon as I could, I slipped into the rear lavatory with my bag. The bleeding was substantial. I spent most of the next two hours locked in there, working to avoid shock; by the time the plane was ready to land, I'd cleaned up somewhat, and my makeshift tourniquet was secure enough to allow me a fairly discreet exit. I'd jammed the lavatory door on my way out, so that the mess wouldn't be noticed until I was long gone. Rather than search out the man who'd tried to kill me, I disappeared into the crowd straight away. The nearest hospital was far too obvious, and I couldn't
know if I'd been seen, so I crossed Parañaque to the south to reach a busier high-rise hospital—it was nearly two hours' walk through busy neighbourhoods to avoid being followed, but once there I could pilfer the supplies I required, and enough antibiotics and medication to go to ground. I remained in hiding in Manila for two weeks."

John still hadn't turned from the cooktop. His sauce was hissing and sizzling, beginning to show signs of burning at the edges—he'd ceased the stirring motion at some point. His head was moving, very slightly; Sherlock took a step closer to see that it was a convulsive working of his jaw, repeated swallowing with his eyes tightly shut.

Unnerved by the silence, Sherlock spoke again. "The worst of it was, I never did figure out who made the attempt on my life; I never understood how he saw through my disguise, or whether he even knew who I really was. It's a loose end that I know will never be tied up, now."

John's silent rigidity broke with those words; he spun abruptly, the wooden spoon pushing violently through the pan to spray a long spatter of bright red across the worktop. "The worst of it?" he exclaimed, his cheeks tinged with gray. "You might have bled out, you walked two hours on top of serious blood loss and impending shock, you chose to self-help rather than get professional medical care, you risked life-threatening infection afterwards, and you're telling me that a loose end is the fucking worst of it?"

"Well, it was hardly inconsequential, in the scope of my goals. I left the Philippines without knowing if there might still be a remnant of Moriarty's network festering there—"

"The worst of it would be your almost dying, Sherlock! Alone. For God's sake!" John twisted both burner knobs hard to the right, turning and pushing past Sherlock to escape the kitchen. On his way out, his arm bumped the spoon, sending it clattering out onto the floor with another wet, red splash.

*Say something. Fix it, fix this! How? "John..."

"No. I—*no. No, I'm sorry. I just, I just need a minute..." He reached out and grabbed wallet and keys, shoving them hurriedly into his jeans pockets as he rushed down the stairs.

Sherlock stood frozen in their sitting room doorway, looking out into the empty stairwell, for a very long time.
Chaz Garvey's voice sounded rougher over the phone than it usually did.

"You sound tired, hon," Anna told him, pinching her mobile between her shoulder and her cheek while she tore a paper towel off the kitchen roll and dampened it.

"Fucking triple homicide last night in a Walgreens on West Cermak," he sighed.

She tutted, walking to the dining area to wipe off the dark mahogany table. "Bad one, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty messy. Right in the damn candy aisle. I'm not gonna crave chocolate for a month, I swear."

Anna took the mental image in stride. It was no worse than the sort of work story Greg might bring home, after all. "I'm glad I waited this long to call you, then," she said.

"Me, too. I didn't get home till nearly four."

"So what the hell are you doing answering your phone at nine thirty in the morning on your day off?"

"Like I'm gonna stay in bed when you actually deign to call me again?" he retorted, finally laughing a little. "Besides, I've got no excuse to sleep any later. It always screws me up the next damn day."

She giggled softly under her breath; Chaz had a tendency to be far more foul-mouthed in the mornings. "Well, I'm glad you picked up; we've got company coming tonight, so I wouldn't have had the chance to call you this evening. And you already know we were out of town last weekend."

"Yeah, okay. Excuses, excuses." She could hear the smile in his voice. "I know at some point you're just going to lose interest, and stop checking in with me altogether."

"Doubtful. You're the one collecting my mail." Returning to the kitchen, Anna tossed the dirty
towel in the bin. "Anyway, I need a dose of your brilliant advice, today."

"Brilliant, you say? Flattery will get you everywhere, my dear..."

"Hush, you. Okay, you got my email the other day about meeting Greg's family, right?"

"Yeah, I did. Sorry I didn't get a chance to reply, things got busy and I forgot. The photos you attached were nice to see, though! Good looks definitely swim in that gene pool."

"No kidding. And his Dad really seems to like me, which is great. I like him a lot, too."

"That's good! And he's a famous author, huh?"

"Did I say famous? Hm. No, not exactly. He put out a steady stream of genre fiction in the eighties...it wasn't bad, I liked the stories when I was a kid... But that's not important right now," she said, cutting herself off before she started to babble. "The point is, Mr Lestrade asked me to do something for him, and I'd really like to at least try. It would make him really happy, and it'd probably be a good thing for the whole family."

"You've got me intrigued," said Chaz. "What's the mission?"

She sighed. "I need to figure out some way of getting Greg and his brother to air out their differences. But whatever the fight's really about, it's been on for years. More than ten, apparently."

"Hm. I do have a little experience in long-held grudges—but Anna, we're talking holding them, here, not releasing them. I don't have a great track record."

Anna paced through the flat, straightening things up here and there. "And if someone were to bring up the subject of your grudge when you weren't ready, you wouldn't like it, would you?"

"I'm pretty sure I bit your head off the first time I saw you again, when you mentioned Andy. And if I didn't, I sure as hell wanted to."

"That's pretty much what I thought. Damn. I don't want to barge in on it like an idiot, but how can I figure out what's going on without asking direct questions?"

"All right." Chaz yawned into the phone. "Let's brainstorm while I make some coffee. Obviously Greg must be at work or something right now; you've got a little while to talk, right?"

Just four stops away, now. If you want you could meet me coming off the Tube and we can go together? -GL

Sounds good, I'll start walking now :) See you soon. xx *A*

Anna approached the shabby red brick underpass at Shepherd's Bush Market just as Greg emerged from the Underground entrance behind it; he didn't see her, just at first. He tilted his face slightly up towards the sky and breathed deep, shoving his hands into the pockets of his black macintosh and squaring his shoulders before walking on. She was sure, suddenly, that she'd seen him do it
before a few times, when they'd exited the Tube together, but it hadn't made an impression on her. Seen from a distance, though, the subtle mannerism seemed something to treasure, just as much as the way his face lit up when he noticed her coming his way.

"Perfect timing, love," he said softly at her ear, drawing her close with an arm about her waist.

"I missed you today," she replied, smiling; she leaned up to kiss his cheek as they began to walk. "I already cleaned up, some. Did you remember to ask which wine she likes better?"

"She said she likes both, depending on the food. My vote's on white, for this."

"Good. If she wanted red I would have done the mushroom version, but I like plain best, personally."

"You know, we could've picked something I already know how to make. I appreciate that you let me invite her, but you don't need to go to the trouble..."

Anna scoffed and bumped her left hip against his right. "It's easy. Trust me. I won't be doing it all myself, anyway."

The walk all the way out to Waitrose was further than they usually went for groceries, but they needed more specific supplies than the little local Sainsbury's could provide. Once there, their light chatter about the events of their day apart shifted to more practical concerns, as they split up to cover the store more efficiently. It was nice to have had the long stroll together, but they had a limited amount of time to work with before dinner. Anna picked out fresh garlic and the components of a salad, while Greg trotted down the aisle that stocked rice and beans. On the other end of the store, they met up again to reconnoitre and shift Greg's armload into the cart Anna pushed.

"You go pick out a worthwhile Chardonnay," she directed him next. "I'll choose the cheeses, and meet you by the fresh bread."

"Gotcha." He paused to give her a quick peck of a kiss, and was off again.

They were back together a few minutes later; Anna surveyed their cartload and compared it against her mental checklist. Satisfied, she pointed the shopping trolley's wheels towards the checkout, and Greg took over pushing it as they headed to the queue.

"You know, I'm glad you like tomatoes as much as I do," she commented casually. "I noticed your brother picking them out of his salad last weekend."

Greg swivelled his head to face her, giving her a quizzical look.

She returned his gaze as innocently as she could. "Was he always such a finicky eater?"

"No-o," he drawled, hesitantly. "Couldn't be, in our house. You ate what Mum fixed, like it or not." He twitched his shoulders and turned to face front again, edging their cart forward a few steps.

"Mm." Anna felt the weight of the silence, but couldn't think of a way to continue the topic without seeming strange.

They hailed a cab to take them home from the shopping centre. Greg reached down to take Anna's hand, where it rested atop one of their bags between them.

She licked her lips and tried again. "Your Dad took me in and showed me some old photos last
Sunday, when you were running the mower for him."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm surprised you didn't keep more, yourself; you were a real cutie! I especially liked the pictures from your track and field team."

"God. The shorts. Pop showed you that? I'll be having words with him..."

She chuckled, encouraged, and pushed on. "It's funny, though—with how similar you two look now, you and Brian barely look alike at all in those albums!"

Greg's demeanour shifted instantly; his amused expression froze into something uncomfortable, and his eyes slid out of contact with hers. Just then, the cab pulled up to their destination, saving him from having to respond; he lifted his hand from Anna's and moved quickly to step out, the lines of his body tightly controlled as he paid their fare.

Anna flushed and bit her lip, opening the door on her side of the cab. "Fuck. This is going to be harder than I thought," she realised; then she made a rude face at herself, internally. "And exactly how easy did I think it could possibly be?"

By the time they got inside the flat, Greg had already begun to relax, clearly putting aside what had upset him. "Right," he said, checking his watch, "Sal's supposed to be here in about forty-five minutes. We'd better get cracking." He went straight into the kitchen and set the bags he carried down on the worktop, pulling out the wine and putting it in the fridge to chill.

"Uh-huh." Anna followed him in, pausing to wrap her arms around his waist from behind; the back of his coat smelled faintly of cigarettes, as if he'd stood for a while next to someone who'd been smoking, but was overlaid with the clean, unobtrusive scent of the cologne he liked to wear on work days. "Go get your coat hung up; and then, you can either mince the garlic or the onions, your choice," she said, patting his back as she turned to begin sorting through the grocery bags.

Already on his way out of the room with the mac half off, he called back over his shoulder, "I'll take the onions, love. Wouldn't want you shedding a tear."

"Sweet of you, darling."

They had the prep out of the way in short order, and while Greg monitored the sizzling pan, Anna pulled dishes and wine glasses from the cupboards. Table set, she returned and took over at the cooker, readying three quarts of chicken stock on the nearest work surface.

"Okay. I'll do this part, you grate the cheese. About two cups,"—she paused and made a face—"and no, I have no damn clue how that translates."

Greg laughed. "Don't worry yourself, I can handle it!"

She dumped in the rice and started stirring it around, humming to herself as she poured on the first little puddle of stock. After a few seconds, she realised she'd gotten halfway through the first verse of Lady Stardust, and Greg recognised it too: they hummed in duet until the chorus, when he burst
out singing. She tried to join in, but she was laughing too hard by that point to hold a pitch; his voice cracked on the high note, and then he dissolved into laughter with her.

"Come over here, I can't stop stirring," she gasped. When he complied, she leaned over for a giggling kiss.

"Doesn't look like much, does it?" Greg placed his hands on her hips and rested his chin on her shoulder comically, watching as she stirred in another bit of broth.

"Give it twenty minutes."

By the time Anna had mixed in two more doses of liquid, Greg had snaked his fingers down her arm and was holding her hand around her grip on the silicone spatula, moving it gently with her in slow circles and figure eights. The hand on her hip, and his body against her back, had begun to echo the sinuous movement.

"Greg..."

His gravelly voice at her ear was practically a purr. "Yes, love?"

She swallowed hard. "You're...mmm...going to need to take over," she managed, before slithering out of his grasp and leaving him with the spatula.

"Aw."

"Don't look at me like that—keep stirring, or it's ruined." Am I actually panting? She ran shaky hands over her hair, trying to ignore the come-hither stare he was sending over his shoulder. "I'm. Um. I'm going to go change, and when I come back I'll start the salad. Okay?"

"I suppose," he sighed, in his best melodramatic voice, and she couldn't resist swatting his behind playfully on the way out of the room.

Nearly three-quarters of the chicken stock was gone into the risotto, by the time Anna returned to the kitchen.

"Are you going to behave yourself now?" she asked.

Greg grinned, and winked, and kept stirring.

They worked in easy silence for a few minutes. When Anna began chopping the tomatoes, the sight of them brought her earlier mission to mind. He was clearly in a good mood, and she decided that might help the cause; she steeled herself for just one more try.

She sidled up behind Greg, peering around his broad shoulders to check on his work. Without even trying for a conversational preamble, she said, "You know, Brian doesn't seem all that bad. He seems like a pretty fun-loving guy, as far as I could tell."

The muscles of Greg's back immediately tensed beneath her hand, and he whipped around to look at her, incredulous. "What's with you, tonight? You've been bringing him into the conversation every five bloody minutes!"
Her first instinct was to apologise and back away from the topic, but the anger in his tone and the look in his eyes snapped her restraint. "Sorry," she retorted with no actual sorrow in her voice, "but you can't take me to meet your whole family and then expect me not to be a little curious about them!"

"God, Anna..."

"I mean, all that time we spent talking here, last year—before I went home—seriously, Greg, for all you really told me I might have thought you were an only child! I know more about your childhood dog than I do about your older brother. And I'm sorry, but I think that's kind of weird!"

He grimaced and stepped back, abandoning the steaming pan. "I need the loo. 'Scuse me," he bit out.

Anna watched him go, biting her lip unhappily. She wanted to go after him, stand by the door and ask forgiveness—though she wasn't at all sure what to say—but the damn risotto needed stirring. Blinking back the prickling in her eyes, she snatched up the spatula and returned her attention to the meal.

Their guest was expected to arrive any minute, and Anna was still alone in the kitchen. As she stirred in the grated cheese to complete the dish, she silently berated herself. She was so focused on the vicious stream of her self-recrimination that when she finally became aware of Greg's presence, she had no idea how long he'd been standing there.

He had changed his shirt to the dove grey check she'd told him was her favourite; he was leaning against the door frame, arms crossed and face solemn. When Anna turned, he straightened and took a single, slow step into the kitchen.

Anna set down the bowl of finished risotto and stepped forward to meet him. For a long, heavy moment, they stared into each other's eyes.

When Greg's arms came up at last to gently encircle her, she nearly sobbed in relief.

They both spoke at the same time: "I'm sorry—"

"I am sorry, Greg. I shouldn't press you on it."

"And I shouldn't be so short with you. It's your right to ask what you wanna know, Anna. It's just —"

"Shh. Not now, okay? Another time."

"Thank you, love."

A knock at the door interrupted their kiss; Greg jogged to the door and admitted Sally Donovan. She was dressed for her night off in a pretty dress of mottled mossy greens, and she carried a white baker's box.

"I brought us a banoffee pie for afters," she grinned, handing the box off to him.
"That's great, thanks Sal! Come on, have a seat, and I'll pour us all some wine." He ushered her in, and Anna stepped up to offer a friendly little hug before they all settled down for their meal.

Over dinner, the conversation remained light, energetic and friendly; when Sally asked about her experience meeting the Lestrade family, Anna was careful not to tread on anything Greg might consider a sensitive topic. He didn't show signs of being upset by anything she said, though, and his sergeant already seemed to know exactly the sorts of questions he wouldn't like to answer.

She's worked with him so long, it's no surprise she's got that figured out, Anna realised, laughing along with her at an amusing story Greg was relating. I'll bet she could help me, if I asked... But the memory of having provoked Greg's angry outburst in the kitchen was too fresh, too shameful, for Anna to seriously consider recruiting Sally's help with her mission—and even 'mission' was suddenly an uncomfortable term. She put the whole matter firmly out of her head, resolving not to bring it up again until and unless Greg broached the topic himself.

"Look, I've gotta ask, right." Sally took a healthy swig of her wine and leaned in. "Is Greg exaggerating? Did you really nearly get your throat cut?"

Greg's eyes went wide and shocked on Sally's other side, but something about her tone of voice just made Anna laugh. "Sure did, look—" She tipped her head back and swayed close, tracing the faint white scar with one finger. "John said a little further to the right, and I'd have been a goner."

"Christ." Sally sat up and briefly rested a hand on Anna's shoulder, giving her a decisively approving little nod. "Wicked."

This response brought Anna down into outright giggles, and looking over at the face Greg was making only made it worse; soon, both women were cackling and falling all over each other.

"I think I'll be making a note somewhere about this wine," Greg muttered, standing to take their plates to the kitchen.

Anna straightened from her merry clutch at Sally's arm, and called after him. "You're coming back with pie, aren't you, darling?"

He made his voice syrupy-sweet from the next room. "Absolutely, precious light of my heart!"

Sally and Anna both positively howled.

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Chapter End Notes
And now we've reached the halfway point of this story, at last. :) 

If you'd like to take a little detour and read *Waiting For Johanna*, a story of young Greg Lestrade's late adolescence and early adulthood, you will have a better understanding of some of the things that come up later, and that have been referenced in small ways through the earlier stories...

Cheers!
JOHN: The Silent Librarian

Chapter Summary

There's been a peculiar death at Queen Mary University; John and Sherlock have been called in to consult.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

25. JOHN: The Silent Librarian
(11 June 2015)

Riding in cabs always seemed to refine and intensify whatever emotional state John happened to find himself in.

If he was pleased, watching the city move past outside the windows was a truly joyful experience. When he was unhappy, it seemed a stifling cocoon, wrapping him in the grey despair of his own shortcomings. Anger simmered and became focused into a cutting edge; nervousness found its way all too easily to fear; everything in the spectrum from grief to love cut deeper and pushed harder, if he got into a cab. It never failed.

Today, John was feeling silently thoughtful, and even this benign, detached sort of emotion quickly became surreal in the moving vehicle. While Sherlock sat silent beside him, he considered the stronger feelings that had moved him in recent days.

In the week since he had learned what had happened to Sherlock in Manila, John hadn't heard much more about the storytelling experiment. He'd come home calm that night, and had made a point of giving Sherlock his full, affectionate attention. Still, the walk he'd taken himself off on had been fully as long as some of the most furious and frustrated ones of the previous summer—during the weeks when John had been trying to reconcile the bitter knowledge of what his best friend had forced him to see and believe, and to live with for three years.

The difference between the black thoughts that had circled in his head back then and those that had plagued him this time around was one of semantics only. He was dead became he could have really, actually died and I'd never even have known; the sick churning in the pit of John's stomach was nearly the same for he thought I was better off believing him a suicidal fraud as it turned out to be over he thought he was better off alone, with nobody to help him...

Here on their way to a new case, one week on, John was no longer mired in that awful recursion of anger-fear-pain-regret that had pushed him to walk on and on, until his legs had ached and his stomach had clenched emptily over the lack of dinner. Only now, looking back on it and comparing it to his abrupt escapes of the previous year, did he realise with a sort of sick wonder just how good he'd become at avoidance. The things Sherlock had begun to share with him in
recent weeks were painful to hear, no doubt...but why had John never even asked about the events of those three years, before his partner had brought it up as something he needed to tell?

Some "partner" I am...

"Are you steeping again?"

"What?" John shook himself from his thoughts with surprised force, turning to face the quizzical stare of his companion.

"Like tea. You told me once, when you'd had too much to drink; you said that cabs steep you in emotions."

"Did I?" John felt his ears heating; he braced his hands on the seat at either side of his hips, and stared determinedly out at the passing traffic.

Sherlock's voice was soft, and seemed to hold no trace of mockery. "I always listen, John," he said, and laid his large, cool hand atop the smaller one beside it.

There was no public vehicle access beyond the outer edges of the Mile End campus at Queen Mary University. The cab pulled to a stop along Westfield Way, dropping John and Sherlock as close as possible to their intended destination.

"This way," Sherlock instructed, his coat flapping behind him as he strode off down a path that led into the campus to the southwest. A few large, fairly modern buildings lined up to the left of the straight stretch of pavement, but on the right side they passed a wide, fenced clearing. John could see rows of raised, flat stones within, a ragged profusion of low tables, their long rectangular tops age-dark and mottled green with moss.

"Are those...?"

"Graves, yes," he replied over his shoulder, not slowing his pace. "The cemetery was opened in 1733, to serve a community of Sephardic Jews."

"Okay," said John, sparing a respectful glance towards the interred before spurring himself to catch up to his friend.

The long side of the cemetery backed up neatly to a clean-lined building of warm, rosy brick. It lacked much in the way of decorative features, but as they passed the southern side of it and rounded the corner, the facility's angled, contemporary entrance wing came into view on their right side. Of course, the university's vehicle restrictions did not apply to the Metropolitan Police; three response cars, their blue lights silently pulsing, were parked in the patterned brick courtyard, flanking one plain car that was surely Lestrade's. Scattered clusters of students stood around the courtyard, standing well away from the police vehicles, excitedly talking to one another and gesturing at the library building.

Sherlock pushed his way brusquely beneath the police tape, leaving John to apologise and identify them both to the flustered young PC watching the building's entrance. Rather than going on ahead, though, Sherlock turned and paused before the door just long enough for John to reach him.
John opened his mouth to scold Sherlock, but shut it again when he saw the faint smile playing on the man's face. Instead he simply sighed and bumped a gentle, recriminatory elbow into Sherlock's side as the detective held the door open for him.

Greg stood in the library's airy, open foyer, standing watchful and stern with his macintosh rucked up over the hands in his trouser pockets. When Sherlock and John pushed through the door, he nodded grimly in greeting and stepped forward.

"Right, lads, we're up to the second floor," he told them, leading them past the welcome counter and through the brightly modern ground level facilities: study tables with cheerily coloured plastic chairs, large directional graphics boldly stencilled on the walls, and student help areas decorated liberally with garish, electric orange.

The building was deserted, eerie for a place that was no doubt a high-traffic centre in the university. Greg stretched an arm out in front of them and hit the lift call button; his voice echoed in the empty hall as he explained, "We've got the building cleared temporarily, just 'til it's confirmed that there's no harmful substance involved. As soon as the coroner's come and gone, we'll start letting the kids into the lower floors again, and keep the second cordoned off."

Sherlock nodded impatiently. "Obviously you don't seriously suspect a contaminant. The risk procedure was your idea, Lestrade, no doubt to avoid the interference of curious students with cell phone cameras. So, who's the victim?"

"Theresa Prentice, library archivist, age sixty-five. She's managed the Archives here for the past twelve years. Stephen Cho, third year student of history, had a research appointment in the Archive room scheduled at a quarter past three. He came upon Ms Prentice and raised the alarm."

The lift doors opened, and the three of them walked out into the second floor. It was clear that the trendy, modern remodelling of the library had only extended to include the ground floor: here, the interior design was far more bland, and smacked of the late eighties' institutional design trends.

Greg led them through to the north end of the library, and John noted the subject listings as they passed isolated islands of aging study carrels and densely packed stacks: art, classics, politics, economics, sociology, religion. The last few rows of stacks—philosophy and Russian language—were offset to the opposite wall, and they walked around them together to enter a small open area, with a modest work station guarding two glassed-in rooms.

Sally Donovan stood inside the office, writing in a small notepad. She looked up to see them coming, and raised her nose in a sort of twitchy reverse nod.

Lestrade spoke first. "Donovan, if you could ask Mrs Weir to be ready for us in, say, five minutes..."

"Yes, sir." She moved without hesitation or complaint, passing alongside the others to reach the aisle. John instinctively braced himself for a muttered comment as he backed up into the wall to let her through, but the sergeant only murmured, "Sherlock, John," as she brushed by.

Eyes widening slightly, John looked to his partner—but Sherlock didn't seem surprised in the slightest by Sally's abnormal politeness. His focus plainly already belonged to the dead woman laid out on the floor beside the disarrayed desk.

"The student didn't find her like this?" asked Sherlock, squatting near her feet, his gloves already on.
"Er, no," Greg answered, handing John a pair of latex gloves as well. "Ms Prentice was slumped across her desk, unresponsive, but apparently still alive at three twenty-five when Cho arrived. He called the university's emergency line, and a duty paramedic arrived four minutes later. The paramedic was unable to save her, but was convinced the cause was unnatural, so it was called in."

By the end of the recitation, Sherlock had stood and begun to scrutinise the office, beginning with the phone, which hung near the paper-strewn floor by its cord. John took the opportunity to move forward and see the body himself.

The petite archivist was laid out face up, the buttons of her plain short-sleeved blouse partially undone and spread—clearly an action taken during the brief attempt to save her life. She'd had dark blonde hair, apparently, before ninety percent of it had faded to pale golden white; it was severely dishevelled. Her staring blue eyes were bloodshot, and her lips and fingertips were faintly bluish.

"Asphyxiation," John observed softly.

Sherlock prowled from the desk to the door of the reading room, practically sniffing at the doorframe in his examination of it; he glanced back at the DI and said, "There's something more, of course; you wouldn't have called me otherwise—ah." His sharp, cool gaze had settled up above Lestrade's head.

"Yes." Greg's mouth became a harder line. "I've already seen the video."

They proceeded to the library's administrative area, which was located at the south end of the basement level, as far from the crime scene as it was possible to be within the facility. Donovan ushered the three of them into a bright, clean office, where a large vase of fresh flowers cheered a tidily appointed work area. The occupant of the office stood to greet them, nodding at Lestrade.

"I'm Lynette Weir, the Research Support Manager," she said, offering an uncertain hand in introduction. The other one clutched a tissue, and her eyes were red-rimmed.

"I'm John Watson; this is Sherlock Holmes," replied John, shaking her hand and immediately tinting his voice with gentle compassion. "You knew Ms Prentice?"

"She—she was the quiet type..."

"Please," he scoffed. "They're always 'the quiet type', aren't they? What a pointless, self-excusing phrase. Why don't you say what you mean: she was the social pariah of your staff. She could easily work up there at her post for an entire week without any of you bothering to pass more than a handful of words with her, isn't that right?"
"Sherlock! Tone it down," John snapped, taking the poor woman—half sobbing now—under his arm and leading her over to the nearest chair.

Greg allowed her a long moment to recover before speaking. "Mrs Weir, if we could trouble you to cue up that video now, that might be best."

"Y-Yes, all right." She rose, sniffling, and returned to her desk, bending to access her computer without sitting.

As she clicked and typed, the three men moved to stand behind her, and Sherlock spoke again. "The collection. Is there anything desirable? Worth stealing?"

Mrs Weir frowned. "There are quite a few fascinating historical records and rare prints in the Archive, but I don't know of anything that would attract attention. If there was an item like that, though, Theresa would have known about it..." She gave a little hiccup of upset and wiped miserably at her nose with the tissue.

"Well, there's no sign of entry to the reading room, at any rate," he said, flicking his wrist in a dismissive gesture. "I can only assume the storage down here remains secure."

"As far as I know, yes, but I'll be double checking—I'll need to familiarise myself better with the cataloguing system, since I'll be—" She broke off, pressing the tissue firmly to her face, and backed away from the computer. "Here. Inspector, you remember the controls? I—I can't—"

"Of course not," said Greg, reassuringly. "Go on ahead and wait outside; Sergeant Donovan can stay with you."

Once they were alone, Greg sat down in the rolling task chair and grabbed the mouse to make an adjustment to the feed. "She cued it up to 2:40, but I know you, Sherlock; you'll want to see the whole lead-in."

When he clicked the Play button, the screen showed 1:55 across the header; the three of them watched Ms Prentice cross the floor in black-and-white and settle in at her desk.

"Coming in from her lunch hour," Greg explained. "I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, but then, I'm not you..."

"Hm. No, you're most certainly not." Sherlock leaned closer to the monitor and watched for a minute. "There's nothing notable. Speed it up, now."

The DI obediently clicked the appropriate control, and the numbers began to tick over. For forty-five recorded minutes, Ms Prentice fidgeted, typed on her computer, patted at her neatly bunned hair, and rose periodically to file papers. John waited patiently for his preternaturally attentive partner to point out some unseen detail, but there was no comment.

Greg returned the playback to normal speed just as the clock reached 2:38. The woman was typing again; she paused, and lifted her arms in a weary stretch above her head. Out of the corner of his eye, John sensed Greg becoming tense beside him.
Moments after Theresa Prentice finished her stretching and returned to her work, she twitched slightly, and shuddered. She bent to retrieve a new folder of paperwork from her drawer, but dropped it immediately; she pressed a shaking palm to her forehead, tipping to the side a bit.

"Dizziness, chills..." John murmured, watching her move the hand to her heart; "possible palpitations..."

She was clearly beginning to have trouble breathing. Her eyes had gone wide and panicked, and her movements were becoming more erratic moment by moment; she lunged for the phone but knocked it to the floor. Within another minute of the silent footage, she was gasping and shaking—slumping forward onto the desk—and then convulsions set in shortly after, her spasming arms sending papers flying. The thrashing and twitching went in agonising waves that slowed and tapered off over four more minutes, until at last, Theresa Prentice was still, although John knew from Greg's notes that she was still barely alive: she'd slipped into a hypoxic coma.

"Nope, that didn't get any easier to watch the second time," Greg breathed softly through gritted teeth. John looked across and saw the older man blinking hard and working his jaw; beyond him, Sherlock was unmoved, still intent on the screen.

"Back to 2:39, Lestrade," he instructed.

"Right," Greg responded roughly, sucking in a deep breath before setting the video to replay.

John rested a hand briefly on the man's left shoulder. He's hardly ever rattled in front of bodies, he thought, but it can't be often he has to sit and watch the victim die slowly, can it?

The soundless sequence began once more; but in John's mind, the woman's distress was anything but silent. He couldn't help but imagine the laboured gasps, the thump of the falling telephone, the scraping of her feebly kicking feet on the tile floor. He thought about how isolated the Archive office was, tucked at the far end of the floor behind some of the library's more esoteric subject matter. The chances of her being heard in time to be saved would have been slim, at any point in the day.

"No windows nearby," Sherlock was muttering, almost inaudibly. "No line of sight beyond the stacks. No evidence of change in the surrounding temperature; consistent humidity; no air vents close enough to be relevant..."

Greg cleared his throat, dragging his eyes away from the monitor and turning to fix them on John, with a sort of subtle desperation in his professionally serious expression. "She doesn't eat or drink at her workspace, and the only items she's touching are the keyboard and mouse, paperwork and file cabinet. I had it all swabbed before you arrived."

John nodded, willingly holding the inspector's gaze—he didn't much relish the thought of seeing any more, either, and he could tell Greg needed someplace to put his focus. "Have you determined what she did on her lunch hour, yet? Maybe it was something she ate; autopsy will look at stomach contents, of course." Even as he said it, though, he doubted the theory. The signs come on too quickly, all at once. What sort of poisoning takes effect that suddenly, an entire hour after ingestion?

"Back again, once more," ordered Sherlock; Greg winced, turned around and reset the video, and Sherlock continued muttering. "Under the desk, perhaps? No. No, of course not, her feet are clearly visible..." He abruptly jabbed a long finger at the screen. "Look there, John. What's she doing with her arm? Lestrade—back thirty seconds, again!"
John leaned in and watched carefully. He had interpreted the movement directly before her initial distress as a shudder, before, but now that he focused where Sherlock was pointing, he saw that her arms were making a strange movement. "Looks like—I don't know, she's brushing at her forearm. Like she's noticed something on herself?"

"Yeah," Greg said thoughtfully, "like—if you felt a bug crawling on you, maybe?"

Sherlock's eyes narrowed, and his pressed fingertips returned to his lips. "An insect might be...but no, there was no bite, and the symptoms are too indistinct, that's wrong!" Straightening and spinning away from them, he began pacing Mrs Weir's small office in erratic loops. "I'm missing something..."

John sprang forward in the nick of time to save the vase of flowers from the long coat's flying edge. "Greg, I think we're about ready to get out of here,"—he glanced up at his companion, assessing —"but maybe we need another look upstairs first, yeah?"

Greg closed the video feed, nodding. As he stood, he ran a slow hand over his hair. "I think they may've collected the body by now, so you can take as long as you need up there. I'll have Molly inform us as soon as she's ready for you; and I'll make sure this file is copied to the Met server, so it'll be available to you later."

John followed Sherlock out of the room, but before they reached the stairs to the ground level, he noticed that Lestrade was lagging behind, walking with hands shoved in pockets and gaze trained on his battered leather shoes. Frowning, John paused on the bottom step and waited for the older man, while his partner sped off ahead. "You all right?" he asked softly.

When Greg looked up, the expression in his brown eyes gave John pause. More than anything, it reminded John of the dark days—those months after Sherlock's death, when the two of them had become close purely by virtue of shared grief. There had been no question; John had certainly been the worse off of the pair of them, but it had been like a seesaw, really, with each of them taking turns trying to support the other until they'd found a shaky balance.

The DI shook his haunted look off within a second, quirking a little crooked smile. "Yeah, John. 'S fine."

"Uh-huh. You know you're a shit liar, Greg."

"I know. Look, it's really nothing, mate. It's just, this victim—right, you'll laugh, I know, but my mum had hair very much like that, and Anna's mum is a librarian..."

"And so it's as if you had to watch the both of them go through that, four times over," John sighed. "Like I said. It's nothing, yeh? I can shake it off, I just need a minute."

John studied his friend's face intently, finally nodding. "Okay. When's the last time you and I got out for a pint together? We should do that soon. After this case."

The smile returned at that, but this one was more genuine. "Yeah, all right."
Greg seemed about to say more, but the sound of John's text alert echoed in the deserted hallway to interrupt them.

**If you've finished coddling Lestrade now, send him up at once. Anderson needs removing. - SH**
After the rest of his team is off for the day, Greg spends some time on his own to try and put a few of the pieces together.

"Bloody hell!" grunted Greg, flinging open the door to the fleet car. He threw himself in, smacking the fat envelopes he carried into the empty seat beside him and pulling the door closed as quickly as he could get both his feet inside—but one more hard gust of rain followed him in, nonetheless.

He sat panting for a moment in the vehicle, quiet but for the muffled roar of water hitting the windscreen; then he turned to double-check the envelopes. The university's administrative staff had provided him with copies of the paper records for all their employees—best to be thorough, when you don't know what you're looking for—and their IT manager had come through with email records for Theresa Prentice's work account. Thankfully, the thoughtful assistant who'd assembled the documents for Greg had placed them in fancy plastic string-tied folios; upon examination, they appeared to be no worse for the sudden downpour.

Taking the extra time to acquire these documents had allowed the early evening storm to catch Greg on the wrong end of the Queen Mary University campus, with his hands full and his mac wide open. He sighed as he replaced the plastic envelopes on the passenger seat. The sigh became a stifled curse as he felt a tug with the movement, and realised he'd inadvertently shut the tail of the coat in the car door.

Sally had decided to ride back to the Yard a little earlier with Phil and Ronny—they'd mentioned plans to go out as a group for dinner—and now Greg was peevishly thankful for that fact. It meant that there was nobody in the car to laugh at him as he wrenched the door open once more and snatched up the sopping end of his black macintosh, getting another full-frontal faceful of rain in the process.

He was utterly beyond stifling the curses, now, and he was alone, so he just let it out: "Bloody, buggering, stinking shite!"

Greg turned the ignition, shivering at the blast that hit him from the air vents before he lunged to smack the controls. The windscreen fogged immediately, of course; he sat and fiddled about determinedly with knobs and buttons until he'd succeeded in clearing a moderately sized oval of visibility through the swishing wipers. The rain was still lashing down, and if he believed it was letting up even a bit, that was likely wishful thinking—fuck, and there's the lightning, too—but he was in no mood to sit dripping in a parked car, when he could sit dripping in a moving one, however slow.
He indulged his temper with a loud stream-of-consciousness rant for the first part of his drive, railing against the weather, the lorry drivers, London in general, and anything else that came to mind. It did little to help the discomfort of the open collar of his shirt dripping ticklishly down his chest, the clammy cling of the wet layers at his stomach, or the cold drag of his soaked trousers around his ankles. It did, however, release a fair bit of the tension that had been slowly building up ever since he'd arrived at the library.

*That poor woman,* Greg found himself thinking, again; then he jutted his jaw forward and forcefully recentred his thoughts outside the car, and outside his head.

It was almost seven by the time he pulled into the underground car park and made his way upstairs. The worst of the storm had blown over, and the lighter gusts remaining at its edges made a fitful spattering against the windows of New Scotland Yard.

The Yard at this hour was still active, but only in certain departments: his own floor was largely empty, save for perhaps five or six desks. It looked like Dimmock had a case on, this evening; the lights were on in that office, and he saw a shadow moving behind the pulled blinds. Greg took the long way around the perimeter of the floor to avoid being seen in his wretched state by any of the late workers. Every step he took squelched awfully in his shoes, and he pulled silent faces at the feeling of it.

Alone in his own office, Greg dropped his papers on the desk, then hung his coat. The soft patter of drips on the carpet and the fluctuating counterpoint of the drops at his windows were the only sounds as he slid the mobile phone from his jacket pocket and unlocked it.

*Damp, but fully functional. Thank goodness,* he thought, composing a text.

*Case ran later than I expected, I'll likely be awhile yet. Hope that's OK. xx -GL*

He turned next to the low, wide file cabinet at the far wall. With a faint sigh of relief, he pulled the gym bag from its hiding place in the bottom drawer and slung its strap onto his shoulder, then squished his way back out to the main floor, this time taking the corner hallway and stairs that would lead him quickly to his destination. The phone chimed in his hand on the way down the steps.

*Of course it is! There'll be leftover pasta for you whenever you make it home. Love you... *A**

The air conditioning was running cold in the locker room; at this time of night there wasn't a high demand for steamy showers, but the thermostat was still set as if there was. Greg set his bag down on a bench; the clink of the strap's buckle echoed across the empty room.

*I feel like a drowned rat.* He turned to face the mirrored wall above the sinks as he began to undress. *Ugh, and no surprise, I look like one too.*

First, he removed his watch, placing it carefully aside with his wallet, keys and phone. Shoes and socks and jacket came off next, and then he tugged his belt from its loops, bending to unstick the soggy trousers from his calves and slide them off. That done, Greg unbuttoned his wet dress shirt and peeled it from his shoulders.
As his arms were exposed, the cool breeze of the air conditioning caused the damp hair there to prickle uncomfortably. It felt like bugs crawling over him.

"Eugh," he muttered, absently scratching at his forearms to get rid of the unpleasant sensation.

Then his eyes widened, and he froze mid-scratch, staring across at himself in the mirror.

*Like if you felt a bug crawling on you...*

If Greg hadn't been standing there in nothing but a cold, wet cotton vest and pants, he might have run straight back to his office then and there.

Walking up to the fourth floor again made an almost hedonistic pleasure out of the mundane sensations Greg usually took for granted: nothing chafed, nothing clung, his feet were dry in fresh shoes, and the feeling of the warm, clean dress shirt against his skin—fold wrinkles and all—was nothing short of glorious.

It was great, no doubt, but he only registered it with part of his awareness. He'd spent the duration of his shower and change focused on the file that he knew lay buried at the side of his desk; upon his return, he dropped into his seat and dug quickly through the pile, pulling out the folder and opening it with a sense of anticipation.

James Leighburn's staring face looked out at him, brown eyes washed out by the high contrast of sunlight and shadow. The photos were clipped in atop page after page of dead ends; Greg pulled them out and flipped through until he found the shots he was looking for. Yes—there were the mysterious scratches, in the exact locations where he'd touched his own arms in the cool air of the locker room. These, of course, were deep gouges, not the faint, disappearing welts Greg had scraped into his own skin...

Greg set the photographs aside and flipped a few pages in the file. There were notations in Anderson's crabbed handwriting, listing each of the six pesticides sampled under the kitchen sink in Leighburn's clean and clearly pest-free flat. Roaches, ants, spiders, rodents, midges...it seemed that the man had harboured a distinct fear of crawling pests in general, and insects especially. *If I were that type, and I felt things up and down my skin...yeah, I'd probably panic,* Greg decided.

Of course, there had been no toxic substance whatsoever found in Leighburn's blood; and so all of their work in cataloguing and analysing his household products and darkroom chemicals had come to naught. Molly's report—he turned to it, now—had been unenlightening, citing only "fatal acute pulmonary oedema" as cause of death. She'd told Greg afterwards that, while she couldn't say for sure what had actually caused the respiratory failure, she shared his suspicion that it might not have been a fluke event.

That suspicion alone—lacking trace evidence, lacking clear motive or means on the part of any acquaintance they had tracked down, and lacking any hard data to prove the cause of death unnatural—wasn't enough to take them any further. Greg hadn't closed it out entirely yet, but that was more out of frustration and hope than anything else. It was looking more and more like Sally's natural causes theory was on target.

Still...there were those scratches. Logic told him he was probably barking up the wrong tree, but...
that little voice in his gut apparently thought it had hold of something, and it wasn't yet ready to let
go. Greg hadn't found enough of note on the Leighburn case to bother bringing it to Sherlock's
attention, before; this file had languished on his desk, near-forgotten for much of the past ten days.

Until now...maybe, he thought. He briefly considered whether it would be possible to ask Sherlock
to consult on two unrelated cases at once. If they could close this Leighburn thing before it
dragged quietly into a third week, it would certainly be nice...but already, Greg's giddy rush of
confidence was fading. What more do I know, really? That he was scared of bugs, and he maybe
thought he was covered in them? That doesn't necessarily mean anything. A hallucinogen could do
that, or an allergic reaction...or maybe the bloke was just going mental! Shite.

After another few minutes of thought, Greg hadn't come up with any more promising ideas; he
sighed, and resigned himself to return his attention to Prentice. The photographer's case was going
nowhere—that's all there was to it. He took up his phone and tapped out a new text message,
flipping another few pages of the file over with his left hand.

**Have you been able to get a look at T. Prentice yet? Should have arrived around 18:00 or
thereabouts. -GL**

While he waited for Molly's response, he idly scanned the printout under his thumb. These were
the last few pages in the Leighburn file, after the exhaustive transcriptions of interviews with
friends, neighbours, and Zachary the elusive globe-hopping boyfriend: a brief write-up from an
officer in the Hackney borough command, in regards to a minor disturbance the photographer had
witnessed nearly five weeks prior to his death. There had been a holdup outside a local bank branch
near James Leighburn's studio, while he and four others had waited in the queue for the automatic
teller—or at least there might have been, had the unidentified perpetrators not bumbled the whole
thing. According to the report, all they had managed to do was shove a few people around, and
make off with one woman's handbag. Greg hadn't given the report much attention; it was far less
important than those Leighburn had actual contact with in the lead-up to his untimely demise.

**She's here, but I haven't got to her yet. Busy day, today, sorry! (-:**

He smiled a little at the reply, imagining it in her friendly voice, and followed it with another
message.

**Well, I don't mean to pile it on you, sorry Mol. It's already almost eight - how long have you
been at it? -GL**

**I started 4 victims for Alan @ 1PM. Shooting at a greengrocer's, some innocent bystanders
were hurt too. 10 min break, now; I might start yours by 9? (-:**

"So that's what Dimmock's up to, over there," Greg murmured softly. If it had happened that early
in the afternoon, and the other DI was still at the Yard this late, he could imagine it must have been
a gruesome scene.

Dimmock certainly had his sympathy. *Innocent bystanders.*

His eyes unfocused as the words sparked a slow, silent wave beneath the surface of his thoughts,
and he remained still for a long moment before coming back to himself with a start.
"Oh...oh, yes," Greg breathed.

Sally had left the new case folder on his desk, before she'd left for the day with the others; and there was something she'd mentioned in passing, he remembered now, something from her records check on the victim that had filtered straight out of his head when he'd begun watching that horrible footage.

Greg pushed the open Leighburn file to one side, lifted the still-unopened plastic folios from the university and revealed the Prentice folder. He twitched it open and leafed past the mostly handwritten notes—to be revised and made presentable later—until he found the printout Sally had included.

There had been an armed robbery attempt at a jewellers shop in Bethnal Green, approximately one month ago. Theresa Prentice had been one of seven innocent bystanders; the owner of the shop had produced his own weapon from hiding while the robbers were distracted, and had managed to scare them off. It had been a relief for the frightened customers, but unfortunate for the police: they'd arrived too late to catch the criminals, and the plastic cartoon character masks worn by the trio had left the grainy surveillance footage all but useless. The only jewellery they'd grabbed had been dropped in their haste to escape. In the end, the Bethnal Green investigators had taken cursory statements and closed the case.

Greg pulled the two files so that they rested side by side, and studied them point by point.

*Different boroughs. Different businesses. Both unsuccessful, but apparently for different reasons. One committed by two unidentified men, the other by three; very different sorts of clothing and masks. Both weeks apart from the actual deaths, and nearly a month apart from each other. Likely a coincidence...*

He seemed to hear Sherlock scoffing loudly somewhere inside his head. *Well, I've followed looser hunches before,* he supposed...and as much as his personal consulting headcase made out like he'd always got absolutely everything figured out straight off, he knew Sherlock was just as liable to go off half-cocked from time to time. Screwing his mouth thoughtfully to one side, Greg took up his phone again.

*Hey Mol - when you do get to examining Prentice, please look for any link to J. Leighburn/01.06 case - thanks. -GL*

*What's done is done,* he thought, staring at the message he'd sent. Molly's cheery response came right away.

*Sure, will do! Did you find something new on Leighburn? You were disappointed last week when the blood panels came up. (-:*

*It may be nothing, and I'm sure Sherlock will be all too pleased to point that out to me. Never hurts to check, though, right? -GL*

*Right! OK, break's nearly up, back to it. Do you need me to call everyone out tonight, or wait 'til morning? (-:*

*Unless you find something incredible we all need to see straight away, I'd think we can wait. You need your beauty rest. -GL*

*I'd say the same for you. Didn't you tell me you were going to try to work late less often,*
while Anna's here? Go home. (-: 

"Yes, yes I did, damn it all," Greg said out loud to his empty office. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the rain had dwindled almost to nothing; and now that he thought of it, he realised he was famished, and quite tired as well. With a yawn, he closed the two folders, grabbed the gym bag and his damp mac, and locked up for the night.
Chapter Summary

There appears to be more to this case than Sherlock had originally suspected. But where's the link?

27. SHERLOCK: Rarely So Lazy
(12 June 2015)

"You've been awfully quiet this morning, John."

"Have I?" The blue eyes that appeared above the newspaper were the flat, muddy colour of an impending storm, as the sky outside 221B had been the previous afternoon.

"I don't see a reason to have said it if you hadn't," said Sherlock, raising a brow.

"As usual, trumped by your impeccable logic," John responded, snapping the paper back up to break the line of sight. "Eat."

He flicked a glance at the eggs and toast on his plate and pursed his lips. He was on a case; he didn't understand why John still insisted on pushing him to change perfectly functional habits, after all this time. "Something's bothering you."

"It's nothing, Sherlock."

"Clearly not. Is it last night?"

"What about last night." The flat tone was a warning. Sherlock was feeling reckless.

"You had a nightmare, didn't you? I heard you, I know you did. Why didn't you come downstairs?"

"We've been over this. I'd much rather you didn't continue to catalogue my sleep patterns." Now John sounded like his teeth were grinding together.

Sherlock stood up from the table, to stare down on his friend from above the paper. "What was different? You aren't usually this tetchy the morning after one, only tired, and sometimes sad..."

"Sherlock. Drop it, and eat."

He sank back into his seat, crossing his arms and glaring at the wall of newsprint. "You know, it's quite counterproductive, your insistence on false secrecy. How is it meant to ever get better, if you won't allow help?" Sherlock chose to ignore the ominous lack of response; to be honest, he was feeling a bit snappish as well. Must be something in the air. "There are at least three ways I might have been of use last night, and that's merely after the fact: with a bit of analysis, it could be
lessened or even successfully prevented—"

"Shut. UP. Have you still got the meaning of the phrase 'drop it' rattling around somewhere in that sodding great melon of yours, or did you delete it?" John slapped the paper down onto the table and stood with a loud scrape of the kitchen chair, clenching white-knuckled at the front of his dark plaid dressing gown.

Sherlock jumped up and followed a few steps behind him. His own dressing gown flapped open and fell off his shoulder with the force of his movement; when he reached the foot of the stairs, John was fully three-quarters of the way to the landing, ascending in a quick march.

"John. Wait," he burst out on a gasp, gripping the newel post with both hands. His chest felt oddly tight, and his throat seemed to be doing its best to close entirely. He watched John's back, his soldier's shoulders, rigid and unflinching as the man froze silently on the eighth step to listen. "Please, I'm sorry. Please don't shut me out, John. I just want you to feel better, that's all! I just want to be able to help."

There was a long pause, and Sherlock felt the suffocating weight of every second of it.

At last, John spoke, slow and measured, his head twitching aside to reveal only a sliver of his right cheek. "I appreciate that, Sherlock. I do. And it means a lot to me. But this isn't just—" He sighed, and his tense shoulders sagged forward a bit. "Look, I'm going to go get dressed, and get myself a little calmer; and then I'd like to come sit with you, but...I can't guarantee I can talk about it yet. Okay?"

"...All right," Sherlock watched him ascend for a few steps, and then—"John?" he blurted, surprising himself with the words that bubbled up in his throat next, unplanned and irrational and frightening in the intensity with which they demanded to be voiced.

"Yes?"

"I love you."

John turned at the landing and looked down, and the slow smile that spread over his face pulled the lines in his forehead smooth and soft. "Love you too, you berk."

Sherlock strode into the hallway outside St Bart's morgue at almost precisely eleven, exactly as the text message he'd received had suggested. John followed at his heels, still smelling of his morning coffee—he'd drunk a cup more than usual, unsurprisingly, and now Sherlock could tell he was riding the sharp edge between exhaustion and jitters, but at least his mood had improved. They hadn't actually discussed the details of the bad dream that had sparked their clash, of course. Sherlock had expected to feel sharply disappointed; it was invariably frustrating to be denied knowledge when a clear puzzle lay before him. Oddly, though, the evasion hadn't seemed to matter in the slightest, once John had come back down to the sofa in his striped jumper and jeans and fit himself cozily into Sherlock's side.

Pushing the swinging door inward, Sherlock put his head into the outer office. It was empty. "Molly?"
There was a pause before the reply, and when it came her voice was doubly muffled by the distance to the workroom and her surgical face shield. "Wait outside, please, Sherlock—I'm working on someone! Twenty minutes."

"Fine," he said, loudly enough for her to hear, then pulled back into the hallway. John was already sitting on one of the waiting chairs, his knee jiggling with excess energy; Sherlock crossed the hall in one large step and spun to throw himself gracefully into a seat beside him.

When Lestrade bustled in a minute later, he carried two brown files under his arm, and wore an unsettled, almost nervous expression on his face. He nodded a quick greeting and assumed a stiff, awkward stance across from them before speaking. "So, er...I was going over some things last night in the office, and there's something I'd like to have you take a look at, Sherlock." With a quick glance, he picked out one of the files. "James Leighburn, photographer, found dead in his flat in Bow almost two weeks ago—Molly couldn't come up with anything beyond acute pulmonary oedema, no explanation, seemed as if it might have been natural causes. It's come to a bit of a dead end...but I've got a hunch it may be linked with Theresa Prentice, somehow."

Sherlock peered down his nose at the proffered case folder and crossed his arms, still sprawled casually. "You don't sound very sure of yourself, Lestrade."

"Well, no, 'cause I'm not. But I figure, it can't harm anything to have you check it out. If I'm wrong, you'll set me straight right off, and you won't have to concern yourself with it, all right?"

"What, you're not hoping I'll incidentally also solve this, whatever it is"—he took the file and brandished it about without opening it—"and take it off your hands?"

Lestrade grinned, a little crookedly. "You might do. And I suppose I wouldn't stop you."

"Hmph. Fine." Sherlock opened the folder and began to read through it.

While he did, the DI turned aside and continued speaking to John in a low voice. "See, I figure if these two are linked in cause of death, at the very least, then we can use what we saw of Ms Prentice's death to figure out what Mr Leighburn went through. And the reverse should be true, too, in that case...so we could add hallucinations to the list of signs we've got for Prentice."

"Hallucinations?" asked John, in the tone of voice that was nearly always paired with that certain raising of his eyebrows which was somehow really a lowering of his hairline. Sherlock didn't look up from his reading to confirm it.

"Well, not necessarily visual ones, though I guess we've no way of knowing. But I'm fairly sure Leighburn felt like bugs were on him," Lestrade answered.

Sherlock raised his eyes from Anderson's testing notes to see the man eyeing him hopefully for confirmation. "Not a terrible conclusion, all things considered," he reluctantly allowed. "I presume your suspicion is based on the man's apparent predilection for over-enthusiastic pest control. A pre-existing phobia would certainly cause him to have a more violent reaction to such a sensation, while Ms Prentice gave only the barest indication of it."

Lestrade's face immediately went bright-eyed and pleased, as if he were a loyal old dog who'd just been praised. It was very nearly ridiculous. "There's one other thing, too, but I don't really know what to make of it. Last page in there, and then last page in here," he said, tapping the second folder he held: obviously the one they'd begun to assemble yesterday. "Both these victims were witness to a minor criminal incident, weeks before they died."
As Sherlock turned to the report in question, John leaned in alongside him to peer at it curiously. "The same one?"

"No, one was a snatched handbag that may've been supposed to be a bank holdup. The other was an armed robbery at a jeweller's; the owner pulled his own weapon, and the perps dropped the goods to make a run for it."

Sherlock scanned the report of the stolen handbag, then passed the file to John and held out a hand to receive the second one. The new information flowed in, and he hummed, feeling the wheels beginning to spin into motion. As ever, it was an enjoyable sensation.

"Four possibilities," he intoned. "One: the minor crimes are the link, and the perpetrators feel they've got some reason to be getting rid of witnesses long after the fact; highly unlikely, and frankly ludicrous. Two: the victims are linked in another way, and the earlier incidents are coincidental. Three: the minor crimes were targeted somehow to the victims, who are also linked in another way."

There was a brief silence, and then John asked, "And, four?"

"Four would be the possibility that that there is no link between the victims but for their killer, and that the minor crimes are also mere coincidence. The murderer could be choosing targets at random, or based on some circumstantial external factor that isn't yet clear."

"You're leaving out five," added Lestrade, shoving his empty hands into his trouser pockets with a frown. "In which I've got it all wrong, and these two poor souls died of completely different causes."

"Now, now, Inspector," murmured Sherlock, meeting his always-earnest eyes with a faint smile; "have a little faith in that primitive instinct of yours, hmm? The fact that it's an illogical and unfounded leap doesn't necessarily mean it's landed in the wrong place."

He watched as Lestrade's expression did something quite amusing.

Molly popped out into the hallway to greet them, freshly scrubbed and smiling. "Good morning, everyone. Sorry to make you wait."

Sherlock stood, taking in the details of her appearance in a glance as she stretched on tiptoe to give Lestrade a hug. "Why, Molly, it's been quite a while since you put on lipstick directly before seeing us..."

"Oh, you, stop trying to tease. Surely you can tell I'm going straight out to lunch after this," she snapped in a falsely stern voice. Then she broke into a stifled giggle and told them, "Simon's meeting me; it's our second anniversary, today!"

"Lovely, congratulations Molly," replied John, standing as well; he reached out, apparently unthinkingly, and picked something off the back of Sherlock's coat, brushing casually at the wool fabric draped over his rear end.

*Lint, transferred during the cab ride; previous passenger was sloppy about her laundry...* Sherlock
cleared his throat and forced his eyes ahead, refusing to glance at the others to see if they'd noticed. "Then let's not keep you too long. Shall we?"

The four of them proceeded together into the refreshing coolness of the morgue. Beneath the sharp, lucid tang of antiseptic, faint and ever-present remnants of that spectacular, cloying aromatic array dead tissues could produce were at once familiar and comforting; Sherlock lagged behind a few steps and paused to inhale deeply.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that John had turned and was giving him a look—and that gaze was a wonder: more amused, understanding and fond than he should ever have deserved, he realised. A lifetime of experience had taught Sherlock that the usual reaction to this sort of behaviour was more along the lines of horror and disgust; in the years since he'd met John Watson, he'd never failed to be freshly astonished with each new demonstration of the man's singularity.

*That such a man as John should care so for such a man as me*, he marvelled, blinking at the swell of joyful gratitude that rushed tingling through his veins.

It was a distraction. (He knew this, had repeated it silently in endless variation on so many nights, while he'd paced the floor beneath faint sounds of midnight gasping.) It was mindless, imprecise...*not an advantage*. And now that he'd given in to it, allowed himself to believe and accept and relax into happiness inch by unscientific inch; now that the floodgates on his tightly reined heart had opened enough to force *those words* out this morning...well.

*Well.*

Sherlock felt a bizarre urge to repeat them, again and again until their meaning blurred; he wanted to write *poetry, for God's sake*, and wanted a hundred, a thousand even less logical things besides, all of the preposterous ideas crowding together breathlessly in his thoughts within that precious, silent instant—

Instead, he met those sweet blue-flint eyes with the smallest smile he could manage, while he wrapped the ridiculous urge away, folding it tightly in on itself before placing it on a high shelf in the back of his mind.

*Case first*, he admonished himself. *The Work must always, always come first!*

Ahead of them, he heard the metallic rattle and drag of the vault drawer, and the low voices of Molly and Lestrade, already beginning to discuss the body she'd pulled out for their examination.

"It looks like you were right, Greg," she was saying. "Same postmortem results as your earlier case; completely clean tox screen, pulmonary oedema, no clear secondary signs to point to cause..."

Later, after consultations with his team, a few more phone calls to make arrangements, and a brief, exasperated argument over the pointlessness of paying for a cab to meet at a scene he was about to drive to anyway, Lestrade brought John and Sherlock with him out to Bow. He retrieved a key from the building's owner and took them inside number forty-eight himself, readily describing everything he recalled of the original scene and pointing out anything that had changed since he'd last examined the flat. James Leighburn's half-sister had come in the previous week to clean the mess of the living room, and had removed the perishables from his kitchen. Sherlock was pleased,
however, to find that the woman had so far disturbed little else in the man's home; additionally, Donovan had documented every detail of the original scene well enough that had she been on hand, Sherlock might have found it necessary to commend her. Thankfully, only John and Lestrade were standing by as he prowled the flat and studied the dead man's belongings.

From there, Lestrade drove them all to Bethnal Green, only eight minutes by car; here, of course, Sherlock would not have the privacy he had enjoyed in Bow. The Met had only gained their access this morning, and so Lestrade's entire complement was on hand to crowd Sherlock's deductive process: quite literally, as it turned out.

Theresa Prentice's residence was quite a depressing affair, from the outside. The small, aging block of flats was utterly featureless, and lacked even the most rudimentary front garden. Instead it squatted upon its row of concrete stoops like a beige brick toad. Inside was little different, but the librarian had attempted to dress the cramped living space with frilly fabrics and figurines. In Sherlock's opinion, it did not constitute an improvement.

Anderson was working in the bathroom, sampling anything he could find—the idiot had already been told that the blood tests were clean, so all he was accomplishing was the disturbance of the room. Sherlock started in on one of his usual complaints, but it seemed his own voice was too big in this crowded flat, blasting off the walls uncomfortably and making him wince almost as much as serious, quiet Patel did. Everything of his seemed overlarge here: Theresa, petite and delicate, had bought small, dainty furnishings in an effort to maximise her living area. John sat at the little kitchenette, tucking his feet underneath the chair to try and avoid being tripped on. Even he appeared to be a giant, oafish lout on this doll's furniture.

"Right," said John, gazing up at Sherlock from his seat. "Tell me what you're thinking, then?"

Sherlock hummed, watching Donovan methodically taking a series of overlapping photographs: walls, worktop, cabinets, floor. "I haven't seen anything to connect them, just yet," he answered thoughtfully. "You've already done the bath, haven't you Sally?"

"Did it before you got here, Holmes." She glanced up from her camera, sharply assessing, and then let a tight smile flicker across her face before continuing her task. "And no, I didn't let him in there before I was done."

"Good woman." Sherlock stepped carefully around to John's other side to allow her progress, then returned his attention to his friend—who now appeared to have seen a ghost. "No, I can't see any way in which they might have been acquainted. But there must be something."

John tilted his head, creasing his brow in thought. "Could they have shopped at the same grocery, maybe used the same bank?"

"Clearly not. As we know from the incident report, James kept his bank account where it was more convenient to his business location than his home. He spent most of his time at the studio, especially since his boyfriend travelled so frequently; he worried less about Zachary when he was immersed in his work. So. Did Theresa ever have portraits taken?" He expelled a frustrated breath in immediate answer to his own question. "Doubtful. She was single, lived simply, out of touch with what little surviving family she had left."

"Yeah, she enjoyed pretty things, looks like, but she wasn't vain," murmured Lestrade, fingering a crocheted doily atop the small television half a metre beyond the kitchen doorway. They may as well have all been in the same room. God, Sherlock could sympathise with claustrophobics.

"Exactly the opposite, in fact," he agreed, fighting the urge to fidget and pace. All it would
accomplish would be kicking Donovan and falling over John.

"My older sister lived in a flat as tiny as this, one year," contributed Sally, between snaps of the shutter. "She hung mirrors on practically every wall, and it helped a lot. No mirrors here except the one above the bathroom sink."

Lestrade chuckled. "That poor girl! Isn't Hannah even taller than you, Sal?"

This comment brought Sergeant Patel's head around the corner from the bedroom. "You've met her too, sir? I'm surprised..." He pulled back out of sight abruptly, allowing Anderson to step through from the bath, carrying his case full of samples towards the door.

Sherlock clapped a hand into his hair in frustration. "This is a perfectly lovely social hour, but if everyone could please just shut up!"

Silence returned to the little flat, at that; Sherlock chose to haughtily ignore the pointed sniff from Anderson and the tiny, stifled snicker from Lestrade. He focused instead on the quiet attention John directed towards him, and closed his eyes, imagining the network of variables that might lead these two persons to occupy the same space. "Why would the killer choose a forty-seven year old photographer, and then a sixty-five year old librarian? There's a deeper layer, here, there must be. We need to study their financial records, organisation memberships, Internet histories; search for common family members, prior employment; similar experiences in their upbringing, perhaps..."

"How far do we go, in the end?" asked John. "How much effort will it take to declare these two a coincidence?"

The priggish, self-satisfied voice of his older brother echoed through his head, annoyingly spouting his theories of the universe in regards to coincidence. Sherlock shooed it away irritably...but he rather agreed with the point.

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ANNA: Catching a Ride

Chapter Summary

With Greg on a new case, Anna is left at loose ends. Luckily, she won't have to spend her weekend alone, after all.

28. ANNA: Catching a Ride
(13 June 2015)

The weather outside looked beautiful, and Anna was antsy. Unfortunately, she was also feeling aimless, and vaguely dissatisfied with practically everything—the idea of going out was mildly attractive, but deciding on something she actually wanted to do was about as easy as choosing a snack from the fridge.

"Ugh," she groaned, shutting the refrigerator door with a thump. It was the third time in two hours that she'd found herself staring aimlessly into it, and unsurprisingly, none of its contents had changed.

Anna paced back out to the living room empty-handed. The embroidery she was currently working on—a small silk shading project depicting a hummingbird sipping from a bloom—sat patiently waiting for her there. Usually, it was a pleasure to sit and lose herself in the calm, methodical pull of her needle, but in her current mood she hadn't been able to stay focused on it. Instead of sitting back down and trying to pick up where she'd left off yet again, she threw herself face down onto the sofa.

"It's just too fucking quiet," Anna complained to the empty flat; then she buried her face in the dark blue throw pillow, and used it to muffle a cathartic little scream of frustration.

Greg had come home late two nights in a row, and he'd left early that morning as well. Anna knew that if she'd asked, he would have told her what was going on—she got the impression that having someone at home who was genuinely interested in his work was a new and pleasing situation for him. But whatever this new case was, it seemed to be the sort of thing that made him need distraction, more than discussion, at least until he'd got it to the point where he did more at home than mutter vaguely about Sherlock before rushing out the door.

Anna lay there, inhaling the soft scent of Greg's cologne that lingered on the pillow: smoky cedar and cool rain, and a hint of his musky sweat beneath. God, she thought. I love that he's dedicated to his job, I really do. But I am going to go batshit crazy stuck in here, if this case drags on too much longer...

Her phone began to ring on the dining room table, and she pushed herself upright with a start. She knew it was only six thirty in the morning where her family was, and an hour earlier even than that with Chaz; Lizzie had called to check in two days before, enthusing about the beauty of Italy in
early summer, and Anna didn't expect to hear from her again for at least another few days. For a second, Anna half-believed that she had somehow summoned Greg by thinking of him. When she rose and crossed the room to pick up the device, though, she was surprised to see a number she'd programmed in only two weeks before, and never yet used.

"Hi there," she smiled as she picked it up. "What a nice surprise to hear from you..."

Less than an hour later, Anna had her weekend bag packed, and her mood had lifted significantly. Normally, a few text messages would be her preference for checking in with Greg during the day, but under these special circumstances she knew she needed to make an exception.

Greg sounded harried when he picked up the phone; she could tell he'd answered without looking at the display to see her name. "Lestrade."

"Hey, sweetie. Sorry to call and bug you. Is this a bad time?"

Instantly, the clipped edge in his voice smoothed over. "Anna, no, 'course not love. What do you need?"

In the background, Anna could hear Sherlock's resonant, demanding baritone: "Surely, before too terribly much longer, someone can manage to locate that security footage! I must see both of the incidents!"

Anna smiled wryly at the commanding tone, imagining the likely face of the person receiving the demand. "I just wanted to let you know, I've decided to go out to Bert's for the weekend."

"Oh—sorry, what? How're you managing that?"

"Fran had to come into London this morning for a meeting, and she called to see how I was doing. She's going to be here pretty soon to pick me up, and she said she'll be able to bring me back on Sunday, too, if you're not free by then to come get me."

Greg didn't sound upset, but he did seem quite surprised and flustered. "Well! I guess that's nice—er, I mean—"

"Look, you're working on a complicated case right now, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah, it's some sort of serial poisoning. I just got word about a third victim found; we're on our way out there now. How..."

"You've been distracted half the week, coming home later and later; you mentioned working with Sherlock yesterday, and then you were off like a shot again this morning."

"All right, you got me. But—"

"No buts. I have every right to make my own plans."

"Yes, yes of course you do!" Now Greg sounded bewildered, and cautious; considering the argument about Brian they'd had a week prior, he surely wanted to avoid seeming confrontational about anything to do with his family.
"Your father said he'd hoped to spend some more time with me. I like it up there, and the weather is gorgeous, perfect for walking...and you can't deny that your case will probably keep you so occupied I'll barely see you 'til the end of it."

There was a heavy sigh at the other end of the line. "That's likely true. I'm sorry, Anna, I should be trying harder to spend more time at home with you."

"Don't be sorry. I don't know why you're always so convinced that I'm going to be angry with you for being the fine, hard-working detective you are. Your work is just as important to me as it is to you—you got that?"

She imagined she could see the tension leaving his shoulders as he replied. "Loud and clear, love."

Fran's white Mercedes suited her well, Anna reflected: the car was flashy, well-cushioned and luxurious, with shiny accents. The woman, similarly, was wearing a sleek apricot-coloured linen pantsuit with matching leather pumps and large gold hoop earrings; her dye-bright auburn hair was spread thickly over her shoulders like a curtain.

Anna slid her bags onto the creme leather back seat, alongside a fat laptop bag and a pile of bulky, awkward binders—fabric and carpeting samples, by the looks of them.

"You did eat something before I got here, didn't you?" asked Fran, starting the ignition as Anna buckled in.

"Oh, yes. You don't need to worry about me," Anna assured her.

"That's good. I do wish the Honeycutts would stop scheduling brunch meetings; they throw off my whole day. What with driving there and back, I never get hungry again until everyone else has already had lunch, and it's too early for supper as well. I'm sure Dad will have something around the house we can graze on, once we're up there."

"The meeting went well, though?" She glanced back at the sample books.

Fran laughed. "Well enough to ensure I have to come back again. Evelyn's changed her mind on the trim and accent colours for the fourth time, and Lewis is still insisting upon a leather sofa, no matter what his wife says. But, what can I do? My job isn't to solve their marital discord, only to provide them with the options. I weed out the worst and make design suggestions, but in the end the client always wins. In the case of the Honeycutts, though, I'm beginning to think about bringing a couples counsellor along for the next go-round!"

"You seem pretty laid back about it. Considering you need to drive so far to make these meetings happen at all, I'd think it would be fairly frustrating."

"That's the blessing of being a private consultant, lovey. I only deal with one project at a time, and I earn more than enough to make it well worth my while. Besides, it's an excuse to be without the children for a few hours, isn't it? I do adore the dears, but so far they're not getting any less demanding with age!" Fran glanced over with a smile, then took the entrance to the motorway.

"What about you? Ever thought about children, yourself?"
Anna blushed slightly, twisting her fingers together in her lap as she answered. "Well, David and I thought we wanted to, originally. Sadly, it turned out I wasn't able."

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry. That's me, blundering into a touchy subject straight away!"

She waved a placating hand. "No, no—it's fine! Really, you couldn't have known. We might have adopted, of course, but somehow we never got to the point of considering it seriously, you know? I'm sure I'm far better suited to aunthood, anyway. I get to lavish all my love on my niece and nephew, and I don't have to worry about the messier bits."

"Me, I never thought of myself as the mothering type either," Fran confessed. "Ian was a surprise, really; we'd been married nearly five years by then, but we hadn't been trying. If only we could've seen the future...I do wish he'd come along a little bit earlier, you know, so that Brian's dear mother could've at least held her grandson. She got to see me waddling along, size of a house, of course—and then he finally made his appearance two weeks after she passed on. It was...trying."

"I can imagine," Anna said softly. They drove in silent contemplation for a few minutes, and then Anna spoke again. "I've heard so many good things about Emily. What was she like, as a mother-in-law?"

"Emily Lestrade was a wonder. She saw the logical side of absolutely everything, and never missed an opportunity to correct anyone; she seemed terribly stern a lot of the time, and that was the teacher in her. But she had such a big heart for Bert and her boys. She just loved to brag, you know? All the neighbours could count on hearing stories, every time they saw her: if it wasn't something about her brilliant son, just promoted Detective Constable, serving the city of London and already on his way up in the ranks, then she was telling them all about her older boy the financial genius. She was so very proud of them both."

Anna couldn't help but think of the fight she'd overheard between Greg and his brother. It had sounded to her like the two of them had very different ideas about what constituted a suitable career; she wondered if either of them knew how often they were the subject of their mother's bragging, or if each of them only heard the news that sang the praises of their sibling.

"Do you have any idea what happened with the two of them?" she asked, picking nervously at a little snag on the knee of her jeans. "I can't get Greg to say two words to me about Brian; it's obviously a touchy subject for him. And from what little I've seen, I suppose I can imagine your husband having maybe been a bit of a dickhead at some point—forgive me!—but I just can't picture anything so bad that would leave it like this between them."

Fran had let out a soft, appreciative chuckle at the word "dickhead", but was silent for a long moment before she made a response. "To be honest, Anna, I'm ashamed to say I don't rightly know. I married Brian in 1993, and our wedding was only something like the second or third time I'd met Greg. I remember he brought Tracy Kandless with him—it was only a few months after they'd started dating—and those two men fairly danced around each other like they were radioactive, that entire day. It was the only black mark on the whole affair, and I daresay their mother would have thrown a fit if she hadn't been distracted by my meddlesome Gran most of the reception! I never was able to pull a straight answer out of Brian; I suppose I always figured it was...everything, you know? Some siblings simply never learn to get along and play nice."

"I guess so," murmured Anna. Now that she knew the feud went back into the early nineties, her vague theory about it being related to their respective career choices seemed a little less feasible...but not out of the question.
Conversation flowed easily through various casual topics for much of the remaining journey. As they got onto the shady wooded roads closer to their destination, Fran opened her sunroof to let in the cool, fragrant air, and asked, "Greg isn't upset that I'm dragging you out here for the weekend, then?"

"Well, I don't think he was really expecting me to go running off while he was on a case. But he really can't complain much; he's said he wanted me to get to know his father better anyway. And besides, if I'm away from the city he can breathe easy, right? I may have bad luck enough to inherit a home from a man with a secret money-laundering cousin, to be kidnapped based on that man's mistaken identity, and to witness an armed political protest within a week of coming to London...but as overprotective as all that's made him, he has to admit that nothing like that is likely to happen to me out here!"

"I'll call ahead and tell Dad to cancel the invitation he sent out to the local mafia for tea, then, shall I?" said Fran, throwing a deadpan look across the car at her.

"Ha! Wait, you have one here?"

"In Norfolk? No! I mean...I don't think so..."

They burst into simultaneous laughter, and were still breaking into periodic fits of giggles when they pulled into Bert's curving gravel drive.

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JOHN: It Leaves a Bruise

Chapter Summary

John does his part along with the rest of the team when a third death turns up to fit the pattern.

29. JOHN: It Leaves a Bruise
(13 June 2015)

The alert had gone out the previous afternoon: any unexplained deaths that flagged a match with prior case records were to be forwarded through Lestrade's team for review. None of them were certain that they would come across any cases similar to the Leighburn and Prentice poisonings this way—it was certainly far from clear that the stolen handbag and attempted jewellery heist were related, after all. Since the possible cases had begun coming through, however, Greg Lestrade's office had been a continual hub of activity. While DS Patel had continued to search for the elusive link between the two known victims, Donovan had spent the morning running down various possibilities...and Sherlock had spent the morning hovering around her, pointing out the details that proved each of those cases unrelated.

John had been given no useful task to do, himself, besides keeping Sherlock marginally in check. As midday approached he stood unobtrusively near the back corner of Greg's office, well out of the way, silently watching the show.

Just inside the door, Sally was holding out a case folder with one hand and talking on her phone with the other. "Describe the scene?" she was saying.

At the opposite side of the room, Patel stood awkwardly beside his supervisor's desk, with the office phone pressed to his ear. "No, ma'am, Inspector Lestrade was hoping to get access to earlier records. What we're looking for would likely be from the mid eighties onwards; how far back do you archive? Yes, I'll hold..." The coiled phone cord stretched over the desk, springing up and down and dislodging the top pages of a precarious pile of paperwork.

Greg turned from taking Sally's file and bent to retrieve the fallen papers; as he straightened and dropped everything on his desk, the insistent ringing of his own mobile phone was a jarring layer of sound atop the increasing chaos of the small room. He pulled it from his breast pocket and answered it tersely, his eyes fixed on the confrontation blocking his doorway. "Lestrade."

Sherlock pushed back inside, ignoring Donovan's frustrated attempts to block his re-entry with her outstretched elbow. "You haven't got it yet?" he asked her, his face clearly communicating disbelief.

Sally shook her head "no" and held up an impatient hand. "Can you confirm that?" she said into her phone; she glared at Sherlock as she listened, and he glared right back.
"Anna, no, 'course not love. What do you need?" Greg's voice was gentler now, and he took a step backwards to seat himself on the front corner of his desk.

"Surely, before too terribly much longer, someone can manage to locate that security footage!" Sherlock snapped imperiously. "I must see both of the incidents!"

Ronny looked up at him, vaguely apologetic, but Sally's face hardened. "We're doing what we can, Holmes," she hissed, covering the microphone with her other hand.

"Oh—" Greg put a finger in his opposite ear and turned away from them, facing John instead. "— sorry, what? How're you managing that?"

The young sergeant snapped back to attention on his own phone call. "Yes, paper records are fine. I can be there in a half hour to pick them up; thank you!" He leaned forward over the desk to replace the handset.

"And was there a witness?" Sally was saying now; she gestured frantically to Patel, who quickly passed over his notepad and pen. "Right, yes, that fits; give me the address..."

Greg's eyebrows rose. "Well! I guess that's nice—er, I mean—" He glanced up at John, then away, looking slightly confused.

Behind him, Sally finished scratching down the details, thanking the caller quickly and disconnecting. She tapped Greg on the shoulder with the notepad; he took it and peered down at it as he listened, then handed it off to Sherlock. "Well, yeah, it's some sort of serial poisoning," he answered Anna. "I just got word about a third victim found; we're on our way out there now." He said it in a tone that was clearly meant as a directive, standing up from his perch and gesturing for John to move as well. "How..."

Ronny moved to leave the room first, intent on his own mission, and Sherlock swept out again behind him, ignoring Sally's pointed glower as she snatched back the notepad; John followed after her in response to the silent tilt of Greg's head.

"All right, you got me. But—" Greg stopped to listen again, reaching out to snag his macintosh from the hook behind his door. "Yes, yes of course you do!" he carefully assured her, as he pinched the phone at his shoulder and went about sorting out his keys. He locked the door and followed them across the busy office floor, still listening attentively to whatever Anna was telling him.

John frowned and called out softly, "Sherlock, not so fast..."

His partner paused mid-stride, as if only then remembering John's presence, and allowed him and Greg to catch up. "You're going to insist we go with Lestrade, again, aren't you?" he asked. His arm brushed against John's in a way that was surely calculated to look unintentional.

"I was considering it," replied John, trying hard not to smile too fondly as he turned his head to look up at the taller man. "It's not as if riding with him is so terribly unpleasant, after all. And he doesn't charge cab fare."

Sally and Ronny were walking on ahead. Her curls bent close to his shiny, smooth black hair as they conferred, and then he nodded and turned off down a side hall while she continued towards the main lifts.

The DI sighed deeply behind them; John glanced back to see him speak into his phone again. "That's likely true. I'm sorry, Anna, I should be trying harder to spend more time at home with you."
"Fine," Sherlock huffed. "You should plan on making sure Lestrade eats with you later. It sounds as if Anna's made other arrangements."

"Loud and clear, love," Greg said at their backs, and after another moment he was striding up alongside them at the lifts. "Sorry, lads. Looks like we're on our way to Bedford Park; are you off to hail a cab, Sherlock, or will you just swallow your blasted pride and ride along?"

Their destination turned out to be a quaint Edwardian brick duplex with a thick screen of trees and shrubbery bracketing it. The foliage and solid garden walls—weathered wood slats on one tenant's side, and red brick matching the house on the other—combined to give it a sense of quiet isolation, even though it stood only a block or so off of the suburb's well-travelled thoroughfare. A panda car from the borough station was on hand, and when Greg pulled up, the local inspector walked over to greet him right away.

Sherlock stepped out of the unmarked police vehicle with a disdainful sniff and stalked along the fenceline, examining the pavement and the rolling trash bin near the gate while Greg took care of the preliminaries. The sleuth looked like nothing so much as a vicious, prowling wildcat, and it wasn't exactly what most would call innocuous behaviour, but he was clearly trying to contain his usual impatience, to an extent. John appreciated this, more on Greg's behalf than his own: the older man had made a few pointed comments during the drive about how he expected the scene to be handled.

Donovan and Anderson arrived in a second car, within a minute or two. They were directed behind the garden wall and went into action immediately. After another few minutes, John and Sherlock were called forward.

"Finally," Sherlock muttered.

Greg caught his eye and gave him a mildly placating nod as they approached. "Geoffrey Cornish, aged fifty-two. He worked from home as a technical manual writer, and went out very rarely."

"That much is clear from the state of his garden," he said. Before John could spend more than a second wondering exactly what clues pointed to that, Sherlock was inside Mr Cornish's fence and squatting in the shade of a spreading elm, near a rolling recycling bin that stood incongruously in the centre of the front walk.

John crouched down alongside his partner to study the dead man. Cornish lay sprawled on his stomach in the soft earth beside the brick path, clothed in a shabby dressing gown, loose tracksuit bottoms and a pair of well-cushioned trainers. Flecks of soil stuck around his nose and mouth indicated that he had fallen face first into the flower bed while gasping for air; upon examination, John could see very little soil in the airways themselves. **Quick onset of a total inability to breathe. That fits with the mysterious poisonings,** he noted.

"You've just noted the respiratory failure, of course," hummed Sherlock, close at his ear.

"Yes. It seems similar in that respect," John replied, lifting the man's left hand, "but *this* is a big difference." The palm was livid and swollen with dark bruises. As John moved it closer, the sleeve of the dressing gown fell to the elbow, revealing that the bruising continued up the forearm.
Sherlock actually laughed; nearby, Sally's head snapped around to stare at them. "What it is a stroke of pure luck, John!" he exclaimed. "One of the chronic health issues keeping this man largely housebound was a bleeding disorder. When we get him on the table, there will be so much to see!" His eyes sparkled with gleeful anticipation.

John glanced over, pursing his lips; now Donovan, Anderson and two local bobbies all had their attention on Sherlock. "All right, that's promising; maybe you could keep the disturbing level of enthusiasm down just a little bit, though?"

Sherlock looked up coyly through the screen of his lashes and the unruly dark curls over his forehead. "Spoilsport," he said, very, very quietly; and it took every ounce of John's control not to break into audible laughter himself.

Mrs Agnes Short, the neighbour, was of perfectly average height. John curtailed his witty silent commentary with a mild frown—the giddy amusement his partner kept sparking in him today risked being unseemly—and tried to listen attentively, as she retold her story for the benefit of Sherlock and Lestrade. It was brief, and John could see from the increased level of fidgeting that Sherlock had digested all he felt he needed within her first few sentences: Mr Cornish had reduced his activities outside his home to regular walks to the chemist's at the top of the street, and aside from that was a habitual night owl. She had noticed that his bins had been left out, unusual for the man who was fastidious about always bringing them in during the night, and had found his body when she'd peeked in the gate.

"Yes, yes," Sherlock complained, interrupting her. "The poison's effects came upon him suddenly as he pulled one of the bins up his walk, sometime between two and four in the morning, when the rest of the street was deserted. None of this is new information!"

John frowned, and Greg gaped a little, as they turned to watch him sweep off abruptly.

"Poison?" asked Agnes, wringing her hands anxiously. "Oh, how dreadful! Was it at least quick for him?"

They glanced at each other, an image of struggling, suffocating Theresa Prentice clearly present in both their minds; John turned back to the woman and delicately answered, "It...may have taken some time. But after a few minutes, he would have been unconscious."

"Even if I hadn't been sleeping," she moaned, "I'd never have heard the poor man. I keep the telly on when I'm falling asleep, it helps me drop off; now that Hubert is passed on I get so lonely, nights!"

Greg shifted on his feet, as if sympathising with Sherlock's impatience. "Well, ma'am, it looks like we have the information we need; we'll be sure and let you know if there's anything else you can tell us to help."

With a few more words of thanks from both of them, they left her with the constable, and moved in wordless accord to find Sherlock, wherever he'd gone.
They planned for their arrival at St Bart's to coincide with the expected delivery of Mr Cornish; the inevitable delay involved in the routing and transport of the body allowed them time to make a brief stop for lunch. Not that Sherlock would eat anything, of course. He sat impatiently in the corner with arms crossed while John and Greg wolfed down sandwiches with quick cups of coffee. As they ate, John confirmed that Anna had, indeed, decided to spend the weekend away; Greg shrugged it off and didn't appear too upset by it.

"Gives us the better part of three days to work, and I don't even have to worry about getting home at all," he'd said, before popping the last crumbs of his lunch into his mouth and standing. "Now come on, let's get going. She gave me this time to work guilt-free, and I'm sure as hell gonna work as hard as I can..."

John and Sherlock exchanged a silent look as they followed the older man outside.

When they all made their way into the morgue a few minutes later, Molly turned to greet them. She clasped her clipboard across her chest and gave them a careful, alert smile. "Afternoon! You're here to view Mr Cornish, right? I just put him up on the table a couple minutes ago; good timing."

They went through to the work area, pausing to don their customary gloves. Greg hung back near the wall, as usual, pushing his bare hands into his trouser pockets as he watched the others attentively.

Cornish's hair was a dull, lustreless grey; his skin was sallow under the bright lights of the mortuary table. John noted that the man had poor muscular tone, and that his fingernails displayed mild horizontal ridges indicative of inconsistent nutrition. But more intriguing were the patterns of bruising spread over his body: Sherlock had been right about there being a great deal to see.

"Which bleeding disorder was it?" he asked Molly.

"Von Willebrand type 2B," she read off her clipboard, "and he was also suffering from late-onset Addison's." She looked across to the DI at the other end of the room, clearly assuming that he was the only one of them who likely didn't already understand the implications: "It's a deficiency in adrenal gland function. He'd have been plagued by chronic fatigue, low blood pressure, and lack of appetite, among other problems."

"Well. He certainly didn't have it easy, did he?" commented Lestrade.

John huffed in mild agreement. "And then he was murdered. So there's that." He leaned closer to survey the multicoloured array of bruising patterns. The most lurid of them were on his knees and shins, nearly matching his hands and forearms in intensity; a slightly less violent mark darkened one hip. John pictured the man pitching forward to his knees on his front walk, then tipping to the side.

Sherlock hummed softly under his breath as he carefully examined various smaller contusions, in different colours denoting various stages of healing: upper thigh, elbow, ankle, big toe. "He tried to be very careful around the house, but he couldn't prevent everything."

"He may have been careful, but he clearly managed to jostle himself frequently," Greg pointed out, watching with interest as John prodded at one of the ragged purplish splotches. "Looks as if he may have been fairly uncoordinated."
"Not hardly, Lestrade. Almost all of these were caused by very gentle taps; even the most graceful of us might make such contact with the surfaces of our homes on a more regular basis. If John bruised this easily, he'd likely be surprised to find twice as many marks upon his person just today," Sherlock stated, with barely a glance away from his scrutiny of the corpse.

John sucked his lower lip up between his teeth a moment, struck by the vivid imagining of Sherlock noting and tallying each brush of contact upon his body—calculating infringements upon his territory like a jealous lover, in strange competition with every single surface his partner touched against. It was blatantly implausible, of course, and John worked to put the image out of his head immediately. He'd had surprisingly little problem with channeling his sexual urges into wholly non-sexual affections, so far; but this offhand comment provoked an unbidden visual of himself laid out upon the bed, with Sherlock intently focused upon counting the evidence of his every interaction with the world—
god.

He blinked up at the ceiling and the bright lamps overhead for a few seconds, sternly taking hold of his thoughts. There was an appropriate time and place for entertaining wholly unfulfillable fantasies, and standing over a dead man in the morgue was not it.

Sherlock finished studying the soles of the victim's feet, then straightened and looked around with a frown. "All right, Molly; I can't see anything out of the ordinary here. We need to flip him over." As she went about carefully repositioning the body, he muttered under his breath, gloved knuckles hovering a few inches in front of his mouth as he shifted irritably from foot to foot. "I'm absolutely certain it's murder, but the circumstances are maddeningly unclear!"

John looked over as his partner stepped towards him and out of Molly's way. "You were so excited before to see all these bruises, Sherlock. Were you really expecting to see more than signs he'd stubbed his toes in the shower last week?"

"That was the corner of his bed approximately three days ago, actually; he hit his elbow in the shower week before last," he replied distractedly. "I still firmly believe that the poisoning will have left its mark somewhere."

"You can really tell that, from those marks?" marvelled Lestrade. "I mean, the locations and the timing, that accurately?"

"There's a slight margin of error on the timeline, of course," Sherlock allowed, somewhat reluctantly. "But each mark has its own distinctive features, yes." He might have elaborated further, but the sight of Geoffrey Cornish's exposed back distracted him, and he stepped forward again, lapsing into a silence that practically whirred with thought.

John cleared his throat, unable to see for himself while Sherlock stood between him and the body. "You haven't told us about the robbery yet, Greg," he said. "I assume there was one?"

"Oh, yes." Greg slipped the notepad from his pocket and flipped a few pages. "Bedford Park Pharmacy, on May the third. Two masked men terrorised a group of seven customers, but they only made off with two wallets and a large box of sticking plasters. The robbers' net gain was about fifty pounds cash. That's about all I know so far, but I'm having Sally get us more information on it."

"They jostled the patrons around," murmured Sherlock. He was leaning over the table so closely that John could no longer see anything of Cornish but his thin, splotchy calves.

John walked around past Molly to the other side of the table, to regain his view, and saw that the sleuth's dark head was bent close over a series of marks on the man's shoulders. Glancing up,
Sherlock drew back slightly with a mildly expectant blink, and John took it as a signal to look closely himself.

"So these are from nearly six weeks ago," mused John.

"Yes. Clearly handprints. See—" Sherlock lightly rested the fingers of his right hand on the body, each digit curled very slightly to perfectly match the faint greenish-yellow spots spanning the crest of the scapula; then, to complete the symmetry, he repeated the action with his other hand. "The hands were slightly smaller than mine, but larger than yours."

When Sherlock began to draw his hands away, John's nod of agreement froze. "Wait," he breathed, stilling Sherlock with his own extended hand. With the visual distraction of the ten marks covered, John's eye was caught by a subtle but distinct eleventh, nestled in the shallow, soft area along the inside of the left shoulder blade. He placed his own finger on the spot before allowing Sherlock to pull back.

"Molly," John asked calmly, "could I get a magnifier here, please?"

She provided it right away; he stared at the mark for a moment, barely breathing. This bruise was different. In the centre of the blurry oval, John could just barely make out a darker shape, like a tiny, oblong mark with a faint line bisecting it...

"Scalpel, Molly," he instructed next, his voice low. "Come here and I'll show you where I need you to cut." She would be the one who had to do it, of course; the body was under her custody. As she brought over the instruments and a camera to document her work, Sherlock stood silently back and stared at John with an odd sort of look on his face. Maybe he's wishing I'd break the rules and do it myself, thought John, watching the man from the corner of his eye. Or maybe he's surprised I noticed something at all?

Molly followed his direction carefully, very lightly slicing into the upper dermis layers and peeling them back. A breathless hush fell over the already-quiet room, with even Greg frozen in confused anticipation; John and Sherlock watched intently as she slowly revealed the evidence of a mostly-healed wound track extending about a centimetre beneath the skin. And then, they saw a miniscule glint of colour, something foreign and glistening that made Sherlock's breath catch excitedly.

She drew the blue fleck out with the utmost of care, biting her lip.

It was half-dissolved, fragile and small as a grain of rice, but the rounded shape of its remaining half was clear: a capsule.
GREG: Hold On Tight

Chapter Summary

Greg's had a lot on his mind while he's spent the weekend alone. The case isn't the half of it.

30. GREG: Hold On Tight
(14 June 2015)

The buzzing of Greg's alarm clock came far too early on Sunday morning. When it sounded, it jarred him from a dream that hadn't felt like sleeping at all: something that had involved running and shouting, immediately following a long, tedious and overly detailed sequence in which he'd been searching high and low for some vaguely important piece of paper.

*As if I don't get enough bloody work at work,* he thought blurrily, in those first unpleasant seconds of awareness. *Well, at least there's Anna...*

It took him another three seconds to realise that the soft, heady scent he associated with his girlfriend wasn't coming from her lying beside him. In fact, he'd been clutching tightly in his sleep to the pillow she would have been using.

*That* knowledge didn't help his temper one bit. Nevertheless, he didn't let go of the pillow until two minutes after he'd lunged over the empty half of the bed to smack his alarm into stunned silence.

While Greg showered, shaved and dressed, his black mood eased upwards to a pensive dark grey. He'd stayed at the Yard past ten the previous night, sifting through the detailed personal histories Ronny had been assembling on the victims. So far, whatever connection tied Leighburn, Prentice, and Cornish together remained maddeningly out of reach—and the longer he'd sat at his desk and stared at the disparate data of these people's lives, the more he wondered *how* it was possible the victims were linked at all. Had it not been for Sherlock's quick acceptance of his admittedly flimsy hunch, Greg would likely have given up on it by this time. He was entirely sure that there was something he was missing.

It was frustrating for Greg to spin his wheels knowing that when he eventually turned the mass of information over, the genius would probably pluck that elusive golden thread out of thin air. Still, he couldn't bear to simply rest on his laurels. There had been a brief period when he *had* allowed himself to be lazy—when he'd sat back and accepted the credit for his closed cases, having done
little more than open the door to Sherlock and stand aside. It was a far briefer period than some at
New Scotland Yard seemed to believe even now, and to be fair, he'd been dealing with some
personal issues at that time...but it was a shame he still felt keenly. Of all the guilt Greg carried on
his back—and oh, he had so much to be guilty for—the fact that he had ever taken Sherlock
Holmes for granted was one of the only things he could atone for, somewhat.

Greg yawned deeply as he poured his coffee. Even after the hot shower, he felt stiff and achy, as if
he'd been sitting hunched over the case files the entire night rather than having come home and
tried to sleep at all. The petulant, selfish side of him silently complained that he could have gotten
better rest last night, if only Anna had been with him rather than out of town. It might have been
nice to cuddle up with her for those few hours he let himself sleep, but he knew it was unfair to
expect her to mould her whole life around him.

*It's her holiday, after all, he told himself. And I'm the one who told her I wanted her to get to know
Pop. How else did I expect her to do it, with me working the way I do?*

He found his hand—the one not firmly fixed around the coffee mug at his lips—drifting to touch
the phone in his trouser pocket, and he stopped himself with a grimace. It wasn't even six yet. *I'm
not about to wake her up on my schedule, when she's not even here! She's probably glad to have a
weekend of lying in...*

The problem with the situation, Greg realised, was that he couldn't seem to decide how he felt
about it. He knew that second-guessing himself was one of his more persistent flaws: he'd fought
against it for years, and not just in his relationships. But lately, his knee-jerk tendency to make
unpleasant assumptions was playing both ends of the spectrum. Should he be more worried about
working too hard—alienating the woman he loved—or should he beware becoming clingy, and
demanding more from her than she was willing to give?

Neither pitfall was outside his experience, sadly.

Even after his walk up to the Tube station, Greg wasn't feeling much more awake. It seemed like
the coffee he'd sucked down had somehow managed to bypass his brain and go straight to his gut,
where it was apparently attempting to incite rebellion; he'd forgotten to stop for groceries over the
weekend, and he'd put off this morning's breakfast as a result.

Clearly, that hadn't been the best idea.

Greg stifled a tiny, burning belch as he stepped onto the Tube along with a wave of morning
commuters, and wondered if the Criterion happened to stock antacids as well as pastries. He made
his way towards the back and found an open place to stand, tucking his elbows carefully in and
spreading his feet just enough to stabilise himself. After the rest of the morning's sardines had
packed in around him and the train began to move, he gave in to the temptation to briefly close his
eyes.

*I wonder what time she'll be getting up, today. How early would be too early to give her a call? For
a moment, he pictured Anna, peacefully asleep under the pretty blue quilt in the spare bedroom he
usually claimed at his father's country home. She'd be curled on her side, her hands loosely
bracketing the pillow near her face, with the first hints of sunrise over the woods barely filtering
between the cobalt drapes at the north-facing window, gently beginning to pick out the curve of her hip and shoulder from the soft darkness of the room...

The train lurched into the first of the thirteen stops he had to wait through, and his eyes popped open, dispelling the image. People shuffled past him to the accompaniment of the recorded announcements, out and in: many of them looked to be in the same sort of early morning haze as he was. When travel resumed, the car was well packed and loudly silent in the particular way of polite crowds.

A skinny young man in a battered denim jacket coughed quietly into his elbow, reaching out to the yellow grab bar beside Greg with his other hand. A few seats away, someone's phone made a noise like a church bell underwater, and was quickly silenced. Greg picked up a whiff of someone's perfume. *Lavender and jasmine: like Tracy always wore.*

Greg turned his head involuntarily, drawn despite himself to search out the owner of the scent. Some dark, sleepy corner of his mind half-expected to see his ex-wife standing behind him, the top of her head barely coming up to his shoulder and her pixie-like features set into their customary expression of barely restrained sarcasm. Tracy's dark, glossy hair was nowhere to be seen, of course, but his eye was caught instead by a slim woman of nearly his own height, facing away from him near the train car's doors, whose long, wispy blonde locks trailed over her back.

It was only that he was so tired, surely. It was only that he'd allowed himself to dwell that morning in his worry and the memory of his failures—that he felt a little bit raw and lonely, waking up in an empty bed. Greg *wasn't* the type to see ghosts, truly; he didn't catch glimpses of Jo in every young, blonde woman he passed on the street. Outside of the last few weeks, in fact, he hadn't thought of her all that often in the past year—no more than the brief, habitual salute to her memory that came with doing the dusting in his living room, once or twice a month.

But since he'd taken Anna out to Norfolk...and then, last week, when her strange, maddening fixation on Brian had provoked him to a frankly shameful level of anger...

Christ. Greg knew it couldn't be healthy, the way just saying Jo's name inside his head could make his guts twist and seize, after all this time. *It's been over half my life ago,* he reminded himself, clenching a fist at his side and turning his eyes downward. *I need to find a way past this, for god's sake!*

When he finally looked up again, three stops later, the woman was gone.

By ten 'til eight Greg was in line at the café to get his belated breakfast, and fifteen minutes later, he bustled into the familiar lab at Bart's. As expected, it was in use; Sherlock sat hunched scowling over a thick book, and didn't respond to his greeting.

"I *said*, good morning," Greg repeated, setting down the bag and cardboard cup carrier. "All alone?"

"Of course not," the detective scoffed. He still didn't look up.

"Well all right, Mister Grumpy. There's tea for you, here, if you want it. What's wrong?"
Sherlock did meet Greg's eyes at that, with a petulant and disdainful expression. "Molly wouldn't start the mass spectrometry analysis last night. And she wouldn't let me begin the work myself, either. She's just in getting it started now, and it will take nearly three hours to run each test."

"Ah." Greg remembered that it had taken ten tense minutes, the previous afternoon, to isolate a sample of whatever substance had been in the strange little capsule. Sherlock had practically hovered over Molly's shoulder during the procedure, until she had actually shouted at him. After the tiny sample had been secured, she'd allowed him to visually examine the capsule itself, while she had begun the full autopsy on Geoffrey Cornish; Greg had returned to his own office around that time, but he could well imagine that Molly had been exhausted and hungry once she'd finished that.

He hummed and said, "Well, you know how it goes, yeh? Chain of evidence, and all. Since those formal reviews after you were gone, they're paying much more attention all around." He knew that the younger man was aware of all this already, but the more often Greg gently reinforced proper procedure, the better off they were all likely to be.

"It's most upsetting that there wasn't a large enough amount of the poison to allow further experimentation," grumbled Sherlock, pulling out his phone and glancing at it. "We have enough to get the mass spectrum results, but no recourse if that turns out to be insufficient for identification. Still..." He tapped at his upper lip with one long finger. "The microcapsule remnant itself is nearly five millimetres long. Molly could easily cut it down and give me enough to perform physical tests. If I can determine the material before the poison has been analysed, it could save us hours!"

"Sounds fine to me." Greg glanced around, decided he wasn't too near anything, and retrieved his blueberry scone from the bag. "Where's John, then?"

"Loo, most likely. He was with me a few minutes ago. Take that out in the hall, Lestrade, surely you know better than to eat in here."

"Yeah, 'course, sorry." He turned to go, paused, and gathered up a second paper cup as well, balancing another wrapped pastry atop its plastic lid. "If Molly comes back out, the bear claw and vanilla coffee are for her," he instructed as he carefully pushed the door open with his hip.

"Obviously."

Thankfully, Greg didn't have to carry his balancing act too far; John appeared at the far end of the hall just as he started in that direction.

"Morning, Inspector," he smiled. "For me? Ta."

They walked together to the nearest seating area, around the corner. "I spoke to Sherlock already," Greg said as they settled themselves in the deserted hallway. "Looks like we'll be in for a wait today, eh? And here I was, all set to find out he'd been working all bloody night."

"Nope. Believe it or not, I actually managed to get him to eat and sleep, last night." John took a smug bite of the cinnamon bun Greg had chosen for him.

"Really? Mid-case? Who says love doesn't have its advantages."
"It wasn't what you're thinking!" laughed John, his ears reddening. "But there was an exchange of sorts, I'll admit."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah—I, er, let him tell me about something." Even as John said it, he seemed to reconsider the statement; he ended with an uncomfortable shrug, his forehead furrowed.

Greg felt an eyebrow raise as he took in the shift in his friend's body language. "Okay. Go ahead and shut me down if you want, John—but, if there's anything you need to talk about...?"

John was silent for a long moment, sipping his coffee whilst an internal debate raged across his face. At last, he sighed. "I think this is a conversation to be had over something far stronger than coffee. And if I tell you anything at all of it...you need to understand that Sherlock can't know you know. Are you sure you want that burden?"

He looks like he's wishing he'd never accepted it, himself, thought Greg, but he met John's eyes solemnly, putting everything of their shared experience into his own steady gaze. "I won't ask you to betray his trust, John. I care for him too much for that. But I care for you, too. If it'd help you to share the load...I'll gladly carry it with you, whatever it is."

The doctor's shoulders visibly sagged with a sudden release of tension. He hadn't explained anything, yet, but at least now he knew he could plan to, and Greg could tell that just that knowledge had helped. "All right. Looks like we're definitely having a pub night. Just as soon as we wrap this up."

They finished their food in companionable quiet, and then returned to the lab to wait alongside Sherlock.

"Sir, we've finally got the video footage from the jewellers ready. They were using an absolutely ancient VHS system, and I had to have Ronny clean it up a fair bit, but he's got it saved to a DVD now. If you want to tell Holmes he can come up and see it..."

Greg made a face at his phone; he was out in the hall to take the call, so he knew nobody would see it. "Sally, I don't think I've heard you 'sir' me over the phone since March at least. Lemme guess: someone's standing there?"

"Of course, sir. I'll take care of that right away."

"Well, thanks for letting me know," said Greg, trying his best not to snigger too loudly, "but there's no way Sherlock's leaving here 'til he has the analysis finished on this mystery poison. Why don't you just bring it all down here to Bart's? We're in the Pathology building, lower level, lab three."

There was a slight pause—he could see the aggravated pursing of Sally's lips in his mind's eye before she replied curtly. "Will do. I'll have all three incidents on my laptop for you. Half-hour."

She managed to end the call without tossing another superfluous 'sir' at him, and he managed to wait until she'd rung off before laughing out loud.
Still smiling down at the phone in his hand, Greg felt the urge to call Anna and share his amusement with her; he knew she'd laugh, too. But...well, he could stand not to be needy for the duration of one weekend, couldn't he? She'd promised him that Frankie would be bringing her back today—she hadn't specified a time, though. It was just past eleven now, and as much as Greg wished her home, he hoped it wouldn't actually be until later; considering the current state of the case, he didn't really expect to be home early.

He found himself wondering whether his sister-in-law was up at Pop's already. Had she been around all weekend? Had she and Anna discussed the night that Sally had come to dinner, and the childish, erratic behaviour he'd still not explained? What awful things could she tell Anna about him, considering her years of experience with his bad attitude—and with his ex, for that matter?

Worrying as that was, Greg didn't feel particularly antagonistic towards Frankie. And, if he were to be utterly honest with himself, he didn't feel that way about Brian either, not really. It was difficult to describe or justify the acidic gnawing of angry discontent that he felt whenever he stood in his older brother's presence. Away from the man and in the privacy of his own thoughts, however, Greg simply felt...*hollow*. When he thought about his brother, it was as if he were scrabbling at the icy, slick edges of a black hole that just happened to be Brian-shaped. There was surely something good there, somewhere, memories of better days—but it seemed impossible to find any of it without being sucked into the maelstrom, and nothing good ever came from exploring those thoughts.

A therapist would have a fucking field day with that one, he thought, smirking unkindly to himself at the surreal picture he'd conjured up.

Sighing and putting the thought from his head, he pushed back through into the lab. Molly was intent upon the computer at one end of the central table; at the other end, John and Sherlock broke off a quiet conversation in mid-sentence, looking up as he approached them.

"You're back just in time, Greg," said John, smiling. "Molly should have a match any minute now on the poison, and Sherlock's just managed to isolate the capsule compound!"

"Really! That saves us another long test, right? That's great."

Sherlock nodded, grinning excitedly as he scribbled notes on the pad beside his microscope. "The microcapsule was formed of a particular blend of copolymers made from glycolide and L-lactide; it's a method for prolonged-release subcutaneous drug delivery that was first researched about eight years ago. It hasn't come into wide use, however, and the shape and thickness of *this* capsule was obviously geared towards single release rather than a gradual stream..."

John must have known that would set Greg's head spinning, because he put a hand on his partner's shoulder to pause the high-speed stream of information. "It's polyglactin: the same material used for a common type of surgical suture. They dissolve into the bloodstream as incisions heal, so they don't need removal."

"Oh, right. I've had stitches like that, before. So, forgive my ignorance, but why's it so important what it's made of? I mean, lots of things like pills and such dissolve in the body, right?"

"It's the *timing and execution* of it, Lestrade," Sherlock told him. "Now we have more knowledge of how and when the killer expected his victims to die. Furthermore, assuming these doses were homemade, there are certain chemicals that person would need to acquire, and special equipment. The timeline becomes much more clear with this!"

John turned to Greg and explained, "I don't know much about its application in microcapsule
format, but I do know that polyglactin sutures dissolve at a slow rate, variable from person to 
person—based on blood chemistry and metabolism, among other factors. Most sutures lose twenty-
five percent of their strength after two weeks, fifty percent after three weeks, and are fully 
dissolved by three months out. I'd guess that once they've weakened to half-strength, these capsules 
would very easily begin to release their contents."

Sherlock made an approving noise of agreement. "That appears to be exactly the case, John."

"Okay, that's good to know." Greg creased his brow in thought, trying hard to keep up with his 
more scientifically-minded colleagues. "So if it might normally take about three weeks on average, 
but here it was nearly six...that's got something to do with the health conditions Cornish suffered, 
yeh? Low blood pressure, fatigue—he didn't do a whole lot of moving around."

"And now you've caught up at last with the rest of the room," Sherlock stated, in a drawling, 
deadpan tone. "It seems that your advancing age and romantic fixation aren't hindering your mental 
performance quite as much as I'd postulated. Interesting."

"I should've asked Anderson to bring by those videos you needed, rather than Donovan," replied 
Greg, entirely failing to suppress his bright smile at being complimented in such a typically 
Sherlock way. "He tends to make me look a hell of a lot smarter!"

John and Molly both laughed with him.
Finally, the pieces begin coming together—and Sherlock finds himself racing towards an answer he doesn't much like.

Objectively, Sherlock understood the typical human need to defuse tense and stressful situations with the use of humour. He wasn't at all surprised when Lestrade resorted to a self-deprecating joke in reaction to the confirmation that he'd grasped the process of the serial murders. (In fact, he'd approved of the DI's choice: a joke involving Anderson was always appreciated.) However, while everyone else stood about chuckling together, Sherlock himself was already otherwise occupied. His mind was geared into high speed and divided into tasks, working on parallel, interlinked questions leading in different directions.

Why use capsules for the poison? (Physical: to kill surely, but not immediately. Psychological: to keep a perceived distance between killer and victim.)

Why kill on a time delay? (Physical: the killer is far from the victim at time of death, and has clear alibi. Psychological: doesn't feel the need to witness the suffering. Impersonal.)

Is only one person being injected at a time? (Unclear; only one in pharmacy, but could be escalating. Have Lestrade check on all others present for each latter incident...)

What purpose to the robbery scheme? (Physical: an easy way to come into contact with multiple people in a short time—though by no means the only way to do so. Psychological: the victim is unsettled, frightened, touched in a fairly violent manner, but then has enough time to forget the incident completely...)

Why so little consistency between the methods of the robberies? (Physical: variety gives somewhat less evidence to tie the incidents together. Psychological: experimentation? Playing out fantasies?)

Why steal so little during each robbery? (Lack of desire to profit from the crime? Hoping that unprofitable crimes might attract less police attention? Or simple incompetence?)

Is each robbed business a place to choose a new target, or a specific location chosen based on an existing target...?

What connection between the victims...?

How many other victims have already been effectively killed without their knowledge...?
There were still so many questions, and not enough answers...

"Sherlock?"

He opened his eyes as John's voice filtered into his awareness. Everyone in the room was in different places than he expected. Lestrade had removed his suit jacket and had crumbs of breading scattered on his shirt, from an apparent lunch of fish and chips; Molly had put up her hair; John was drinking tea he hadn't had a moment ago, and was holding out a second paper cup.

"You were saying?" murmured Sherlock. He reached over to accept the tea, finding that his arm was stiff.

"I was saying a lot of things, but sometimes you do a fair impression of listening when you're actually far away," John said, smiling. "Should've realised earlier, sorry. What's the last you heard?"

"We were mocking Anderson."

"That was forty-five minutes ago!" exclaimed Lestrade from the other end of the lab.

John nodded, setting his cup down on the table decisively. "He's right, you know. Come on, up you get. Let's walk around some; you're going to wreck your back like that."

"Fine." He straightened up and stood, leaving his own tea beside John's, ignoring the minor scream of protest from his muscles as he left the lab.

Once they were out and strolling together in the hallway, he turned to John. "Why was Molly looking at me like that?"

"You harassed her about testing that poison all morning long, and then didn't even wait for her to give you the results before you faffed off to your Mind Palace," chuckled his partner. "I'm surprised she let us out of there, frankly."

"Oh! We should go back, then." Sherlock turned to backtrack, but John stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"No you don't. You're going to walk with me for ten minutes; we're going to get the blood pumping to your brain again."

"It already was," he huffed, leaning slightly into the warm pressure of the hand.

"So you say. But you're forgetting, I'm your doctor. And I happen to have a vested interest in slightly more than just your brain."

Sherlock recognised that tone of voice. He hadn't heard it since three days ago, the last time they'd spent the afternoon lazing about together in his bedroom. It seemed a bit incongruous here, but the hallway was deserted, after all, and he'd already been resigned to ten minutes' break from the case... "You do, do you?" He let a little smile touch his lips.

John glanced down at the hand he held at Sherlock's heart, now not alone. It twitched slightly beneath Sherlock's long fingers. "Now, see? Feel how cold your fingers are," he scolded, ignoring the rhetorical question. "We'll just have to do something about that..."

Before Sherlock could respond, he was being pulled by that hand; John led him in a near-jog to the service stairs at the western end of the lower level. Springing ahead, he ascended to the first
landing, tugging Sherlock up and out of sight of the hall. He then threw himself back against the painted cement wall, beneath a burnt out lighting fixture that made the alcove dim, and pulled Sherlock's hand deftly past his own shoulder to brace the taller man over him.

Sherlock was surprised, to say the least. It wasn't like John to be so forward, and he rarely showed his playful side in public without having consumed alcohol. "Why, Doctor Watson," he rumbled, and his words echoed up the empty stairwell. "Dare I ask what's brought this on?"

John licked his lips and breathed, "Your face when you're thinking. Your bloody gorgeous neck coming out of that purple shirt. The way you say things like you did yesterday, and you don't even know what it does..."

"I said what?" He quickly thought back on the past twenty-four hours, confused and intrigued. *I told him about the assassins in Las Vegas last night, so that I can delete it next week... "Was it the thought of me in hand-to-hand combat with two women? It was in no way arousing at the time, but I suppose I can see the potential for—"

"God, no. Not that, it was in front of—ah, fuck, just kiss me will you?"

There was little precedent for this. John's usual method was to make the first contact, to silently take the lead and allow Sherlock to follow along at his own pace. But, having been asked in such a way, what else was there to do but answer yes?

Eight minutes later, as they turned the corner to approach the lab once more, John paused and ran a hand over his hair to smooth it down self-consciously. "I don't look obvious, do I?" he asked softly.

Sherlock looked down at his partner, calculating the potential visibility of his faintly flushed cheeks under the lights of the lab. "Obvious to me, but no, they won't be nearly as observant," he concluded. "Do I?"

"Er—" John reached up and corrected the fold of his shirt collar, brushing deft fingers across the side of his neck. "Now you're okay. Sorry about that, Sherlock."

"Don't be. It's fine." And oddly enough, it actually was. By all rights, he should have been upset by the distraction. With so many variables still unknown in this puzzle, one of the only things that was clear was the element of time, and the knowledge that other potential victims could be unknowingly on their way to their deaths at any moment. Stopping to snog one's boyfriend was hardly an appropriate way to handle the problem; and yet, he felt unexpectedly refreshed, ready to renew his focus on the task at hand.

"I really did mean to have us walk farther than that, you know."

"My circulation is quite restored enough, no worries," he smiled, pulling open the door and holding it for John to pass ahead of him.

Lestrade was speaking on the phone again as they walked in. "That's fine. You can email me what you've got, I'll look it over when I'm back in the office later. Meantime, keep trying to get hold of those employment records, as far back as they go. Maybe they had a common coworker somewhere along the line...No, she's not here yet..."
Sherlock spoke loudly to get the DI's attention. "Have Patel check on everyone else who was at the cashpoint and the jewellers. There could have been more than one target."

"Shite, yeah. All right, Ronny—you heard that? Good, get on that first then, okay? Thanks."

Sherlock retrieved his tea, now just moderately warm, and took a long drink. Beside him, Molly cleared her throat pointedly and crossed her arms over her floral printed blouse; swallowing, he lowered the cup and turned his attention to her. "My apologies, Molly. You were about to enlighten me as to the mass spec results?"

She clearly hadn't expected the polite words, and it took her a second to collect her flustered thoughts. "Um. Yes. I found a very close match; I've never come across it before, so it took a while to find, but it seems that the liquid is comprised of aconitine, for the most part."

"Ah, yes! Of course. The confusion would come in with the presence of the related alkaloids, as it's a naturally derived substance..." He spun to the laptop on the table, quickly tapping it awake and opening a search tab. "And that leaves no traces in normal blood testing, of course. An LC/MS/MS test could confirm the presence and concentration of aconite in the blood, but no autopsy normally calls for that. Which molecular structure did you observe?"

She pulled her notes from the pocket of her lab coat and showed him the formula. Oh, yes, he did feel quite refreshed. His next avenues of research were opening themselves to him within his mind; he had so many ideas, and the computer's browser couldn't possibly keep up...

There was sound and movement at the other end of the room; Sherlock looked up, still typing, to see Sally Donovan pulling open the door. She was dressed sharply in a skirted suit of navy blue that matched the bulky laptop bag slung over her shoulder, and she looked painfully out of place in the lab: this was, in fact, the first time she'd been called to come here.

"So this is where you're always off to, huh," she muttered, looking around the lab with a faint moue of distaste.

Molly stood straighter and pursed her delicate lips in consternation, but obviously lacked the nerve to defend her territory to Donovan. Lestrade threw her an apologetic shrug and led Sally over to the larger cleared worktable at his end of the room, where she went about booting up the computer she'd brought.

"I brought over copies of the reports for the three robberies," she told Greg, pointing at the open satchel. He nodded and moved to pull them out, spreading them on the table where he'd been sitting.

Sherlock coolly assessed her body language and vocal stress levels before standing and approaching. Not a perfect day for her, but nothing too unpleasant. Good; I won't need to waste my time on the game. "Afternoon, Sally," he said as he reached her side.

"Holmes," she acknowledged. Her tone was slightly resentful, but she scooted her stool a little to the left to make room for him. On his other side, John moved to stand close at Sherlock's flank, his stance perfectly casual while holding a quiet, protective menace that Sherlock could sense without even looking. The man was a marvel, truly.
Lestrade chose out one of the files and wedged himself in between Sherlock and Sally. "Right, let's start off with Cornish, as he's the freshest in our minds."

"None of these videos are ideal," warned the sergeant, obediently tapping the touchpad to start the footage. "Bedford Park Pharmacy had only two cameras working; one focuses solely on the chemist's counter, and didn't catch the incident at all. This one doesn't have a great angle, either, and it hasn't got sound."

They watched together as two men burst in at one side of the frame, gesturing and waving weapons threateningly; within moments, they had two staff members and five bewildered customers herded together. The taller, thinner one brandished his knife and held their attention while the other moved behind them, jostling each of them roughly with both hands as he formed them into a ragged line.

"There's one wallet taken...there's the second...and there's Cornish," Sherlock narrated along with the footage. "Doesn't look like all that much, and the angle is all wrong to see it happening. But see there, how his elbow flares out a bit as he pulls Cornish over; that must be the moment of injection. He's clearly repeating the same moves on each person. And then, they run. It seems the box of plasters was an afterthought."

"It seems awfully rough, doesn't it, for a couple wallets stolen?" squeaked Molly; she was peering around John's shoulder at the screen. When Sherlock turned to look at her, she shrugged timidly.

"I agree, Mol," said Lestrade from his other side. "They're not being challenged at all, nobody's fighting back. They shouldn't have had to use that much force."

"It's no wonder Cornish had bruised so badly, that's enough to leave good marks on a healthy person, and he definitely wasn't," commented John, falling silent as Sally changed to the next video.

This one was a slightly blurred fish-eye view from the cash machine: two men, one slightly stocky, took the queue by surprise. Unfortunately, the man at the front, in his shock, backed up almost into the machine itself before he was grabbed; his back blocked their view for much of the footage. It was over quite quickly, with the young woman's handbag snatched just before the two masked men took off running.

"There's nothing I need here," sniffed Sherlock. "Again, they grabbed everyone, Leighburn the same as the rest."

"And the tall one's missing, this time," Sally pointed out. "These two are both about the same size."

"True, but with such a bad view of them, that's hardly useful is it? Next."

The third video was astoundingly difficult to watch. The footage was grainy and striated with bars of interference that lazily scrolled up the screen over and over. "God, no wonder you had such trouble getting this digitised," Lestrade said, shaking his head.

Sally nodded. "This is the clean version. Ronny worked at it for ages."

"Surely the owners of the shop will reconsider updating their security system, now," Sherlock hummed, scanning the shadowy figures of the customers. "Look, there's Ms Prentice at the counter. Two young couples shopping for engagement rings, one man waiting on a watch crystal repair, and two women—sisters—it looks like they're searching for something specific in the vintage case."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Lestrade murmured, "Showoff," under his breath. He sounded amused, more than anything.
When the action began, there were three robbers, each attired in a crude plastic mask: cartoon characters of some kind. Sherlock didn't recognise the likenesses, nor did he care to. The group watched without much comment as the incident played out—shouting, herding, grabbing. This time the tallest man took a handful of necklaces from one of the display cases. It was a step up in ambition from the bulk package of sticking plasters, but when the dark-haired shopkeeper lunged for his hidden cricket bat, the jewellery was abandoned in favour of a quick escape.

Lestrade stepped back around the table and flipped a few pages in one of the files. "Almost every statement here mentions some minor bruising, usually on the upper arms or shoulders."

Backing away from the laptop himself, Sherlock replied, "Of course; they had to be rough, in order to distract from the sensation of the injection. But they were purposefully rough with everyone, so that the target—or targets—they'd chosen wouldn't be obvious."

"So it could've been any of them, yeh?" Lestrade gestured down at the documents before him. "You're thinking it's random chance, Sherlock?"

"We still haven't located a link, and I saw no clear indication in the assailants' body language that pointed to a premeditated target. That's not to say it isn't there, of course, but until we have better information, I must work under the assumption that the group is choosing a target while on the premises."

John spoke thoughtfully, flipping through the calendar application on his phone. "The incidents are spaced out. The bank on April twenty-third; the chemist's on May third; the jewellers on May thirteenth. Every ten days, exactly. Assuming it's purposeful, would we be able to find whether they'd committed another robbery?"

They all jumped when Lestrade suddenly smacked his hand down on the stainless steel tabletop. "Oh my God. The bloody twenty-third of May! Sally, look up the incident on Marylebone High Street. You remember it—that clothing shop! DI Woolwright's team was on it, Dane and Gartner. Do it now!"

She had her phone in her hand immediately, and was connected within moments. "Marty, it's Sal. Did I catch you out, or are you at your desk? Great. Hey, I need to get some information on a case you and Bev handled, back in May..."

While she spoke, John turned to Lestrade, frowning. "I think I know what you're thinking of, Greg, but does it really fit? From what you told me and Sherlock, that was some kind of anti-capitalist demonstration. Surely there were all sorts of minor armed robberies on the same day."

"I don't know, John," he responded, eyes wide. "But the date fits, right? I wanna be sure, that's all."

Sally listened to what Dane was telling her, and her eyes lit up. "You've got video, as well? Perfect, that's just what we need! Can you copy it to the shared virtual drive, right away? I've got my computer with me—wait, but I'm not connected here—"

John tapped Molly on the shoulder. "Fix her up with the WiFi password, will you please?"

She nodded, biting her lip, and stepped over to lean in beside Sally and open up the connection for her. As she worked, Sally told her colleague, "No, we're good now. I'm ready. Go ahead and copy it, yeh? Thanks Marty. We owe you one."

The atmosphere in the lab was tense and quiet as the files slowly uploaded. Lestrade paced back and forth behind the others, as they moved to group themselves loosely beside Sally once more.
"Can't be," he was muttering. "I'm wrong. I must be, I have to be...

Sherlock stretched an arm out and stopped the man in his tracks, pulling him by the sleeve to stand with the group. "Calm yourself. It's entirely possible you're jumping to an incorrect conclusion, based on the statistical analysis of your success rate alone."

"Is that meant to be comforting?" he growled, running a shaking hand through his greying hair. "Christ, kiddo!"

Sherlock carefully studied Lestrade's face, ignoring the startled expressions of John and Sally standing on his other side. "I'm thirty-eight," he murmured softly, knowing the non sequitur wouldn't make sense to anyone but himself and the older man. "Talk me through the footage, Lestrade. You were with her when she gave her statement; you know what we haven't been told."

He drew in a long, shaky breath, and visibly pulled himself together, nodding tightly.

This video was high-quality footage from an up-to-date security system, presented in three parts: the principal camera feed covered the front end of the boutique, and another feed showed the back half, with its stairs up to the mezzanine level. The third camera watched the small fitting lounge and office area. Sally determined which was which with a few clicks; when the first file started to play, Lestrade began to speak.

"Right, okay, so there's Anna, right there," he pointed out, his voice wobbling only a little. "And behind her, that older woman is named Estelle—no. Esther. Anna made friends with her, after. She got to know that young couple over on the left side, too. They showed her pictures of their kid. That woman, I swear she can charm anyone..." The narration seemed to be comforting him, somewhat, although it was nigh upon useless to Sherlock.

Sentimental drivel, he sighed to himself, but he didn't interrupt.

"Now, she said they were yelling the moment they came in, and they locked the entrance door behind them."

Sure enough, motion began at the doors, and the tinny laptop speakers began to register the yelling as three men advanced through the boutique, clad in plain nylon windbreakers, gloves and dark balaclava masks.

"She said—she said that the tall one smelled like he'd been smoking pot," Lestrade rasped, his voice losing its confidence, "and, and she was afraid of the one who made the speech because he reminded her of Sawicki...and the third man grabbed her shoulders really hard, she said he was very...strong..."

Sherlock's gaze snapped abruptly from the figures on the screen back over to Lestrade; he saw the colour draining from the DI's face as his voice trailed off.

Utterly stricken, Lestrade looked up to lock eyes with Sherlock; Molly, John and Sally had all frozen and were staring silently at the two of them, eyes wide.

"It's been three weeks, today. Where is she, right now?" uttered John softly, with a preternatural calm that didn't quite reach his eyes.

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ANNA: Shock to the System

Chapter Summary

After a refreshing hike in the woods, Anna returns to find a full house.

32. ANNA: Shock to the System

(14 June 2015)

A cool breeze made branches sway and creak far overhead, and shifted the rustling leaves that grew closer to the forest floor. It tickled in the loose hair at the nape of Anna's neck, and she scratched beneath her ponytail distractedly, focused on her footing.

"Be careful there, dear," called Bert Lestrade from a metre or so behind her. "There was rain on Thursday night, and it tends to stay slippery down here."

"I'm fine," she answered, glancing back over her shoulder—and snapping her head forward again abruptly as she felt her left foot sliding a bit in a brown patch of damp leaves. "Yep. No problem!"

"Good. I'd wager my son would be a mite upset, were I to return you to him with a sprained ankle."

"It'd be just like old times; I think he still has my crutch from last year," Anna laughed. "But no, I can't say I'd love that experience again!"

They had been walking for something like fifteen minutes, making their way at a leisurely pace along a roughly cleared path wending its way gradually down into the hollows of the forest. Ian walked ahead of her on the trail, shuffling his dirty trainers in the denser patches of detritus on the forest floor, and occasionally stooping to pick up a pebble or twig and toss it idly away. Not far beyond the lanky teenager, Anna could see a narrow stream, and a small break in the branches above sent down a shaft of midday sunlight. It glanced brightly off a clutch of stones that caught and wrinkled the edge of the running water.

"It's beautiful here," Anna sighed, half to herself.

"That it is," agreed Bert. "That it most definitely is."

He let out a little more play in the leash he held, and Darwin took advantage of every inch of it, nudging happily up into Anna's leg. She reached down and scratched behind the border collie's ears as Bert caught up and called for his grandson's attention.

"All right, lad, you remember the way to the boulders?"

Ian stood up from where he'd squatted at the edge of the streamlet, dropping whatever piece of forest debris he'd been fiddling with and jogging back up the trail to meet them. "Yes, Grandad!"
"Prove it, then. Run along ahead, and we'll meet you in a while. But, before we get there, I want you to cut and shape a good, sturdy walking stick for Anna. If you choose something with a good head on it, you can help me give it an ornament. Deal?"

"Yeah, okay!" Ian seemed pleased to have a mission; he took off at a good clip, leaping over the water and vanishing loudly into the shadowy foliage within moments.

"He's a good boy, that Ian," said Bert, smiling after his grandson fondly. "A little bit single-minded, sometimes, and I think he doesn't pay quite enough attention to his studies. But he'll be a fine man someday."

They walked along in the general direction by which Ian had disappeared, although at a much slower pace, and using a much safer-looking route. Bert pointed out a few interesting mushrooms and plants; a few minutes later, Anna decided to switch the topic of discussion.

"Moving out to the country must have been a big change for you and your wife. Was there a special reason you chose this place?"

"Well, the idea of living in some sort of beautiful isolation had appealed to me for quite some time. More freedom to let the mind wander, more quiet to hear what it's saying...good sort of place, for a writer. Emily had her eyes on a lovely cottage a bit closer to Cambridge, and of course Brian and his new wife were there, so we considered it. But it was these woods that decided me, beyond anything else."

"So you loved the forest even before you left Bristol, huh?"

He grinned and dipped his silvery head in a nod. "You'd said you read my series when you were younger. Not to be presumptuous, but you might just possibly remember the eighty pages or so of Still as Stone during which Tabitha has to survive in the forest for three weeks, while in hiding from the Assassin's League?"

She cast her mind back with a smile. "Gosh, that was only the second one in the whole series, wasn't it? I loved that one, actually. I'll forever associate that story with Mrs Franklin's algebra class."

"I won't ask why, but I'll take it as flattery all the same," he chuckled, carefully stepping over a fallen branch. "Well, it was originally meant to be part of a novel all its own, with an entirely different protagonist; I reworked it a few years later with Agent Stone in mind, when it turned out there was a demand for more of her. At the time I began it, originally, Greg was just thirteen. Now, I knew I wouldn't be happy with the story unless the detail, the experience of it was accurate and plausible..."

"Perfectly understandable."

"So, I undertook quite a bit of hands-on research, that year, to learn what I could of tracking, plant lore, some basic survivalist and orienteering skills. Nothing all that extreme, really, but I found I enjoyed it." Bert paused and prodded thoughtfully with his walking stick at a clump of dirt beside the path. "Brian was a slightly more fastidious youngster at fifteen, and wasn't at all fond of the rough outdoors. Greg, though—he was more than willing to tag along, and it became somewhat of
a special connection between us. I took him out with me to the woods as often as we could get away, that year, and we continued to hike together occasionally after that, until he went off to university. After he was married, we began the tradition again; whether or not he's got the time for anything else, he still takes a day once a year to come ramble these woods with me."

"I'm glad he does, that's wonderful," said Anna, smiling as she pictured it. "I do wish I could've seen him as a boy; sometimes it's so hard to imagine him not being just the way he is now..."

"Well. Greg was a timid child, especially around that age. Very sweet, forever concerned with right and wrong." Bert's stride slowed as he spoke, and his gaze drifted towards the leafy canopy; he clearly held his younger boy in his mind's eye. "He always had a voracious appetite for learning new skills, and a particularly good memory for them: once Greg really learned a path, or a plant, or a trick to find water, he never seemed to lose it, even years later. His mother had her own ideas about how to instil confidence in him, of course—sending him to ballroom lessons, for one—but I always liked to think it was his time with me that brought him out of his shell."

Anna smirked a little, thinking about the nights in Chicago when Greg had pulled out skills he'd apparently learned in his preteen years, dusting them off nonchalantly, as if he went dancing every other weekend.

_The way he is now isn't really all that far off, is it?_ So much of what Bert described was still apparent in his son; Anna had a feeling that the younger incarnation of Gregory Lestrade, though undoubtedly more innocent and shy, would have caught her attention in much the same way as he had when grown. It made her wonder how much she still resembled her own childhood self. _In a world where I wasn't eleven years his junior, and we ended up on the same continent...I wonder if he could've fallen for me, too?_ The frivolous fantasy, illogical as its premise was, seemed to fit right in with the magical, verdant surroundings of his father's woods.

"Oh, this is lovely!" exclaimed Anna, and the boy looked up from his work, grinning cheerfully. "It's great here, innit?" he agreed. "Here, check and see if I've guessed the right length for you."

She accepted the staff he held out, testing its balance and heft. The natural crook near its bulbous top end created an intuitive grip, situated comfortably just below her shoulder level, and he'd begun to shave that area smooth. Handing it back, she answered, "It feels perfect, Ian, good choice. Thank you."

"I thought you might enjoy this spot," said Bert, settling himself carefully on another one of the big rocks and opening his knapsack to pull out a vacuum flask. "Tea, dear?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Instead of sitting right away, she paused to turn in place, soaking in the beauty of the small clearing. Turning back, she reached for her pocket. "Aw, _darn._"
"What's wrong?" Bert asked, pausing in pouring the third cup.

"I just realised, I forgot my phone back at the house. It's too bad, I'd have loved to have a picture of the two of you here!"

He sniffed and shrugged. "Blasted technology. I didn't think to bring mine today, either—I wouldn't carry it all, except for Brian lecturing me about hiking alone. I told him, that's why I bring Darwin with me!"

"I've got my mobile on me," Ian volunteered, jumping up and dislodging the dog that had been playfully attempting to lick his face. "Here—you take one of us, and then I can get one of you and Grandad, and I'll send them all to you..." They took their turns posing for the camera, and Ian even leaned in for a laughing selfie with Anna when they both settled back down for their tea and sandwiches. 

It had been a wonderful afternoon, in every respect, but it had to end sometime. Fran had promised to arrive at five o'clock, and after their hours outdoors both Anna and Ian wanted time to shower and change.

Following the others back up the last leg of the long, winding trail they'd taken, Anna found herself looking forward to sharing the evening with Greg, and telling him all about her weekend. She had no doubt that she'd passed a more pleasant time here than she would have at the London flat over the past few days, and she knew that Greg had been hard at work. Still, the thought of staying up to eat a late dinner with him when he finally straggled in, and snatching a few hours of his company—even if they were exhausted hours—seemed perfectly tantalising after her time away.

Just as they approached the crest of the ridge that would bring them into view of Bert's home, Darwin suddenly perked up and let out a sharp bark. The border collie gave a hard tug to his leash that pulled it from Ian's relaxed hand, and then he was a black-and-white streak of fur barrelling away from them towards the house. On his way past, he knocked into the base of Anna's new walking stick, startling her as the freshly carved swan finial nearly knocked into her head.

"Hey, Darwin! No!" Ian called after the dog, taking a few instinctive jogging steps to follow; but Darwin had chosen to run straight up a steep hillside rather than use the path.

Bert laughed. "Let 'im go, lad. We're practically home, he won't go anywhere! Maybe he caught a whiff of that woodpecker he was crazy after last week, eh? He'll never catch it, but I don't have the heart to tell him..."

It took the three of them only another minute or so to emerge from the woods, to the long, narrow side yard that extended past the front of the house. Sure enough, Darwin hadn't disappeared completely: he stood at attention at the border between the grass and the gravel drive, his leash trailing behind him. When they came closer, he tossed his head with another small, gruff bark, prancing excitedly in place as he looked between his master and whatever he'd sensed.

"What is it, boy?" Bert asked him. "That's no woodpecker. You hear something?"

And then, they heard it too—Anna looked up curiously from the dog, and was shocked to see two speeding vehicles turn in from the road and careen up the long, curved driveway past them. Neither
the silver sedan nor the dark grey one bore any markings, but they each had flashing lights at the lower edge of their windscreen. Gravel scattered in all directions from their tyres as they screeched to a stop near the house.

*Something’s happened,* Anna heard in her head, as if spoken by someone else; she felt a lurch as her pulse tripped and her sense of time slowed to a crawl. *Something's happened to Greg—*

But no, there Greg was; he'd thrown open the driver's door of the silver car and leapt out, while Sally quickly exited the second vehicle.

Anna was still metres away from the drive, frozen just steps from the shadowy treeline. The dog had begun to bark insistently.

*Is it Sherlock, then, or John?*

But the rear doors of the lead car were opening as well, and she saw the two of them, their faces small and unreadable at this distance, and John quickly pulling something oblong and brown from the backseat.

"Uncle Greg?" Ian called out beside her, and it broke the shocked spell; she pulled in a great gasp of air as the DI—already nearly to the front porch—jerked his head around to see them in the yard, and abruptly changed his trajectory.

"—The hell are you doing without your *phones* on you?" Greg shouted as he jogged towards them. "I've bloody called, and called—*Anna,*" he ended in a gasping growl as he reached her, taking her face between cool, shaking hands in a sudden and entirely shocking move before he'd even come to a full stop.

She stared up at him, momentarily unable to form words in response to the commotion. His eyes were wild, his hair stood up on one side—"Wh-what..."

"What's the meaning of all this, Greg?" snapped Bert in the same second, the rounded smoothness of his usual tone giving way to sharp irritation. He held the leash tightly in an attempt to control Darwin, who seemed to want to be everywhere at once.

"Pop, we can explain. But it's complicated," Greg answered, slightly calmer now but still distinctly agitated, dropping his hands from Anna's face as he turned to face his father. "We need to get inside, all right?"

With that, Anna was being ushered quickly towards the house, guided by an arm that had barely touched across her shoulders before lifting as if burned and slinging around her lower back instead. As she spurred her feet to keep pace, she finally found her voice again. "We were just hiking. I didn't realise I'd left my phone. What's *wrong*?"

"Inside," he said, his jaw set.

As their shoes crunched into the gravel, John appeared at her left side, flanking her and matching Greg's brisk steps. "Don't worry, Anna, it's all right," he told her quietly; when she turned to look at him, his expression was gentle, but his blue eyes were unsettling.
Together, they stepped up onto the porch, where Sherlock already stood holding open the front door. His face was a cool mask. Behind them, Anna could hear Sally introducing herself to Bert, her voice collected and businesslike as she promised him an immediate explanation for the sudden intrusion.

She could hear Ian's voice, too, echoing in the foyer complete with excited sound effects as he followed the group inside. "That was so cool! How fast were you guys going, anyway? Did you come all the way from London? Yeeeww! I wanna learn to drive like that..." Sally made some kind of response to the teenager, but Anna couldn't hear it as she was hustled down the right-hand hallway.

Anna was thankful, now, that the blue-decorated bedroom was set up like a secondary master suite. It was relatively large, with a good-sized clear area at one side of the king-size bed; a comfortable pair of chairs bracketed the dark-curtained window. Even with four adult occupants, the room should have felt spacious—but when they got her inside, and Sherlock closed the door firmly behind them, it seemed as if he had shut the oxygen out of the room.

"Whoo, hey," she gasped, before any of the three men crowding her could speak. "Back off, guys. There's plenty of space in here, and I need some of it!"

A near-simultaneous jolt of surprise went through them, and within a second everyone had stepped back a pace.

Anna took a deep breath and let it out, looking to each of them in turn: Sherlock seemed carved from stone, Greg looked as if he were riding the edge of something frantic and dangerous, and John...

"John," she decided. "Explain this." She kept her voice firm and quiet, in a tone that made it abundantly clear she didn't want to hear from either of the others just yet. If she sounded stern and even a bit angry, then that was fine. It was easier to focus on that than the confused fear that was tightening the back of her throat.

John exchanged a glance with the others, and then began to speak: concise, calm, exactly as she needed. "The case we've been working on appears to be linked to a series of small criminal incidents over the past couple months. A few hours ago, we discovered that yours was one of them."

"Mine? You mean—the boutique?"

"Yes." Another glance. Anna didn't follow John's gaze across; she didn't want to look again at what she'd seen in Greg's eyes. John took a half-step forward and continued. "This man seems to have targeted one or more people at each incident, dosing them with something that takes effect between three and six weeks later. Anna, I'm sorry we frightened you, but to be safe, I need you to allow me to examine you right away. May I do that?"

"You—yes. Yes, of course," she responded, the breath giving out behind her words and turning them into a thready rasp.

He nodded, holding his right arm out expectantly without losing his steady eye contact with her. "Good. That's good," he said, and then Sherlock was reaching out into her peripheral vision, placing the handle of the brown doctor's satchel into his waiting hand. "We'll just go into the bathroom, all right? Sherlock and Greg will be waiting here."

At that, Anna risked another look over. Greg had been physically restraining himself from
interrupting, biting his lip and clenching his big, broad fists at his sides; when she took a step
towards him, his lungs shuddered visibly into motion once more, and he fixed her with a look that
defied simple definition.

"Hey," she whispered, bringing her face close enough to feel his exhale across her lips. "You
okay?"

"I don't know yet," he breathed, and he sounded broken. "Please, go..."

Swallowing against the trembling in her chest, she nodded, and turned to follow John into the en-
suite bathroom.

The door latched with a click, and John took a moment to set his bag on the vanity, opening it and
readying a series of items: gloves, a lighted magnifier, a paper packet that looked like it might
contain some sort of antiseptic swab, a capped syringe and a little glass bottle...

"This is just a precaution, Anna, no worries, okay?" murmured John, seeing that she'd noticed. He
picked up the gloves and pulled them on in a few practised motions, snapping the latex around his
wrists. Then he pulled a stethoscope from the satchel and turned to face her. "Let's see, how about
we have you sit down on the toilet lid. Shirt off, please."

She moved to comply silently, feeling terribly awkward and unsure of herself. Dr Watson was fully
in his element, though, and by the time he had stepped close to listen to her heartbeat, she could
almost believe she was in an actual examination room.

"Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary at any point since the robbery?" he asked,
performing basic checks on her eyes with his light. "Any tingling, muscle weakness, chills,
decrease in vision or hearing?"

"No, nothing like that," she answered.

"Good." He hesitated, then, looking down at her seriously. "Okay, Anna, at the risk of being far
less comforting than I'd prefer to be, I think I should be entirely honest with you."

Anna folded her hands in her lap. "Fire away, Doctor."

"What I'm trying to determine is whether you may have been injected with a small capsule that
day. It would be made of a slowly dissolving material, and filled with a powerful poison. If there is
one there, it will be difficult to find, and it may be weakened enough that trying to get it out could
cause it to release. That's why the syringe—it's flecainide, an antiarrhythmic; if at any point you
feel any changes, rapid pulse, trouble breathing, anything like those symptoms I asked you about—
I'll be able to help you right away. Do you understand?"

She nodded, eyes wide, and licked her lips nervously.

"All right. Turn around for me. Do you remember where the bruises were?"

While John silently, thoroughly checked over every millimetre of Anna's arms, shoulders and back,
she shifted her attention away from the gentle prodding and tickling, focusing instead on the voices
she could just barely make out beyond the bathroom door. Without Anna there demanding quiet, both of the other men had apparently given themselves over to muttering, and neither of them seemed to be listening to their colleague at all.

"It doesn't make sense..." came Sherlock's low rumble.

Greg's quiet, intense growl overlapped it. "Can't believe I nearly forgot..."

"...no sense at all, they're too varied, there's no need for it..."

"...and she was only here a bloody week!"

"The pattern is too loose. Assuming they wanted to choose a random person to kill from each group..."

"If she's not okay, I just dunno what I'll do..."

"...they could corner someone practically anywhere, and be just as anonymous with far less personal risk!"

"...I can't lose her. I can't bury the woman I love, *again*, I just fucking can't..."

Anna shifted uncomfortably, and John's fingers paused. "All right?"

"Yes. Sorry, I'm fine," she assured him, and returned her focus to remaining still under his methodical touch.

Hearing Greg's words, and the visceral pain behind them, turned something in her stomach—it made her feel intensely needed, and undoubtedly loved, but at the same time she felt like an intruder. She hadn't been meant to hear that; surely nobody had. *Tracy isn't buried. Who is he thinking of?*

She spent a few seconds puzzling over that, before she was startled from her thoughts by the warm flat of John's gloved palm settling firmly on her shoulder.

"She's okay, she's safe," he pronounced, loudly enough to carry clearly through the door, and then he handed her shirt down to her.

"Thank God," came Greg's ragged reply; Sherlock exclaimed as well in nearly the same moment, but in a very different manner.

"So why go to the *trouble* of herding up a whole group in public, under cameras? Blast it!"

When she reopened the door to the bedroom, Anna found Greg waiting for her; he reached out and pulled her into a tight, wordless embrace before she could take two steps in, and she could feel exactly how much he'd been holding himself back from the contact since his arrival. With a faint sigh, she let herself relax into his strength.

John followed, stepping around her and setting his bag on the bed; as Anna watched, he walked straight across the room and into Sherlock's waiting arms without hesitation.
"Hullo, love," she thought she heard him say, his face buried into his partner's collar in much the same way her own cheek was pressed against Greg's chest.

"Well done," Sherlock told him softly, kissing the top of his blond head.

Anna smiled and closed her eyes, nuzzling deeper into the comforting warmth and listening to Greg's gradually slowing heartbeat beneath her ear.

They all remained that way, and the quiet moment drew out until Greg pulled back and spoke. "Let me bring you back with us, darling."

"Sure, yeah! Fran was supposed to be picking me up along with Ian pretty soon, anyway. I know she won't mind you dropping me off at the flat, so that she doesn't have to drive all the way to London tonight..."

"No. I don't wanna leave you at my flat, I want you with me."

"But you're still on the case!" she exclaimed, looking over to the others in consternation. John had turned to stand with Sherlock's arms draped and clasped over his chest; the two of them didn't seem the least bit surprised or concerned that Greg wanted his girlfriend tagging along on their investigation. They appeared to be waiting calmly for her answer.

Greg sighed, raising a hand to stroke her hair away from her face. "I know it, I just...look, Anna, I'm sorry. I simply can't handle having you out of my sight, just now, all right?"

"Okay, it's okay. I'll come back with you, just let me get showered and change into something I haven't been out hiking in! But—I'm not involved in this, I shouldn't be around while you all are working..."

"To hell with that! You're—you're a material witness, now; you're the closest person we've got who's seen this killer up close. If that's not a good reason to keep you on hand for consultation, I dunno what is! Whatever happens, I'll keep you out of harm's way, and out of official scrutiny—but I am not letting you go yet, Anna."

She scanned over the expectant faces of the three men who'd driven at high speed all the way from London solely to ensure her safety, and realised that further argument would get her absolutely nowhere.
JOHN: ...And Delphinium (Blue)

Chapter Summary

In the deserted quiet of the very early morning at New Scotland Yard, John and the others are still on the case.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

33. JOHN: ...And Delphinium (Blue)
(15 June 2015)

It was nearly three o'clock, the bleak time of night after which John was accustomed to giving in and reluctantly shifting his internal calendar to the next day. By this hour, if some twist of fate had kept John from his bed—or woken him irrevocably from it, which unfortunately was caused equally as frequently by internal as by external influence—he usually found it easier just to move on, facing the day ahead with gritted teeth and the copious application of caffeine.

This Monday morning, he wasn't facing it alone. That wasn't a perfect consolation, but for now it was the best he could get.

Their group had begun the drive back from Norfolk at a quarter past five the previous afternoon. Obliged to wait while Anna had been in the shower, the three of them had emerged from the guest bedroom for a fairly awkward visit out in the living room, where Sally had already been sitting with Greg's father and nephew for nearly half an hour. Then, just as Greg had begun to make his own explanation and apologies, his sister-in-law had rushed in, understandably panicked by the sight of more than one police vehicle in front of the house. More introductions and explanations and small talk had ensued. By the time they'd finally been able to make their goodbyes, Sherlock had begun to resemble a trapped animal, and Greg hadn't seemed much happier until he'd finally gotten in the car with Anna. (Sally had driven the second car behind them, alone, solely to have a back seat free for rushing Anna to a hospital if needed; John had expected a foul mood from the sergeant, but her time with Greg’s family had somehow left her oddly cheerful. It wasn't the strangest behaviour he'd seen from her, of late.)

In the nearly eight hours since the five of them had reached London again, there had been plenty of work, but precious little progress. He and Sherlock had been with Greg at the Yard the whole time—going home had been out of the question, and the three of them had all been so wound up with nervous energy that working was all any of them would be good for. After their scare with Anna, they were all uncomfortably aware that the next victim had been dosed, and could die at any moment. Before Sally had gone on home herself—someone on the team had to stay fresh and ready, as she'd pointed out—she had run out and brought back takeaway for everyone...but that supper was now a sadly distant memory.
Greg had claimed one of the larger conference rooms down on the second floor as a temporary base of operations. The newest batch of stab-in-the-dark data Ranjit Patel had scrounged up lay spread across the long table, joining the scads of other information already collected; periodically, Sherlock would shuffle and rearrange bits of it, muttering and exclaiming over some new idea only to be thwarted when it didn't produce a result.

At this point in the night—morning—Sherlock was just hitting his stride: he'd been thinking on his own for much of the evening, but now he was vocalising. Usually by the time they reached this phase in an ongoing case, only John was around to see him pacing and bouncing ideas off the walls of 221B; the genius needed to talk it through, and this sort of talking generally required an audience—assuming Sherlock was watching closely enough to notice if John wasn't there.

Tonight, he was. But, again, tonight John wasn't minding his partner alone.

Greg had positioned himself at the end of the long table, sitting with his chair backed up against the wall, and his head tipped slightly back to rest against the solid surface behind him. The pile of case files sat just within careful reach of his left hand. His eyes remained bright and fairly alert, but he held himself perfectly still: Anna was balanced on a seat beside him, leaning precariously over with her head pillowed in his chest. He'd extended his right arm to cradle her and keep her in place as she slept; her breathing was deep and regular, even though Greg was still talking softly over her head.

I need a break too, thought John, locking his jaw closed over a yawn. He had been participating in conversation only sporadically while working on his own research, but the screen of his laptop had started to go double on him. He closed it, blinking the afterimage from his view. Just a few minutes, then back to it... Scooting his chair out a little, John crossed his arms on the table and rested his chin upon them, moving only his eyes as he watched the other two men speak.

"Right," Greg was saying. "But who's the next victim?"

Sherlock answered without pausing his slow, measured pacing around the opposite end of the room. "If we knew that, would we have been here all night?"

Greg smirked a little at the sarcasm. "Okay, let's try and look at it another way. We have a forty-eight year old man, a fifty-two year old man, and a sixty-five year old woman."

"We still haven't found any personal link," muttered Sherlock, glancing angrily at the piles of printouts on his end of the table as if they had personally offended him.

"But in the roster of those present at the clothing shop, there is one older woman. Esther Newbury is seventy-two this month," Greg pointed out.

"Mm. I see what you're saying. It doesn't work."

"Why not?"

"Think about it logically, Lestrade! I know that's difficult for you at the best of times, but do try. They were either linked, or targeted, or random. If they are linked, why haven't we found it yet? It should be arguably easier, now that we have three victims and every indication of a fourth. If they
were targeted separately, in the manner of a murder-for-hire operation, the bank and the chemist's make sense; the killers could reasonably expect their victims to return to those locations at fairly regular intervals. But the jewellery shop and the boutique don't fit; neither is a place people patronise on a predictable schedule. So, that leaves randomly choosing a victim on-site. But that doesn't quite fit, either."

Greg lifted his left hand and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "If they choose on-site...maybe there could be subordinate preference at play, affecting the choice of target, yeh?"

"I suppose, if age is a factor as you posit, the killer could be choosing based on perceived weakness or frailty. At both the chemist's and the jeweller's, our victim was the oldest and arguably least healthy in appearance. And the others in the bank queue were all younger and fitter than Leighburn, though not by very much. But why target the cash machine at all? That queue offered far fewer people to choose from, and compared to the other victims, Leighburn was the picture of health and vitality. They could've gone to the laundromat down the street, or the antiques dealer one block over. The choices of location are endless! It doesn't make sense."

"But, say, if the location was what was random, right? Like random random. Spin a wheel on the map, and pick out someone to kill at that business...?"

"Ugh." Sherlock sent a disgusted look towards the DI. "Really?"

"Look, I'm just trying to help," Greg grunted, glancing down at the top of Anna's head to be sure she remained undisturbed.

"...I know," Sherlock sighed, slumping abruptly into a seat with a gesture that curtly dismissed his own irritation. Beneath the table, he stretched his long legs across, spread wide apart; they brushed John's calves on either side, startling him from his dazed observation of the discussion.

John lifted his head and spoke, his first word rendered ridiculous by a wide yawn he couldn't suppress. "Yoo-ohh-ouuu...should step back, Sherlock, come at it from a different direction. Maybe think about the poison for a while, instead of waiting for the victims' link to jump out at you."

"Perhaps. Have you found anything, yourself?" Sherlock leaned forward on his elbows, fixing him with an expectant stare. Something about the lighting in the room was making his grey-blue eyes seem lit from within—or perhaps John was simply becoming delirious with fatigue.

"A little," he answered, dragging his own eyes away to reopen his laptop. He was painfully aware of Sherlock's warmth, burning through the lower legs of his jeans in two bright spots. He put it firmly from his thoughts, even as he shifted slightly to maximise the sensation. "I've been trying to find out more about how the capsules might have been pushed beneath the skin. It's being accomplished by way of a device small enough to be hidden in a sleeve or the palm of the hand; that's fairly ingenious."

Greg stirred, opening eyes he'd apparently been resting, and asked, "There's no existing medical equipment that can be used for something like that?"

"It's not a technique in use medically, as far as I can find. Even the use of this sort of microcapsule for delayed dosage is something that's mainly being worked with in theoretical terms, at this point. But it's not something that a killer would just come up with out of the blue. You'd need some pretty specialised equipment to form and fill the polyglactin capsules, not to mention clear access to theaconite solution."
"I'm working on that," put in Sherlock. "He'd likely have to produce that concentrate himself; so he's got to have access to the plant, or at least a supplier for its roots. I've sent messages to a few contacts of mine that may be able to help me track down how he could have gotten it commercially. The most toxic species isn't commonly cultivated due to its dangerous nature, and any sales of it for homeopathic use and the like would be tightly monitored. However, there are certain areas of the country—mainly heavily wooded areas in the western counties—in which monkshood can be found wild."

"I wasn't paying much attention to the details of the plant, yesterday—I was far more concerned with the action and treatment protocol—but didn't you say it had other names?" asked John.

Before Sherlock could respond, Greg grunted. "Larkspur, innit? I saw it once with Pop, when I was a kid, hiking up north of Bristol. Purpley-blue, droopy flowers. Never forget him tellin' me how even touching the leaves to bare skin could do you in."

Sherlock looked mildly surprised. "Larkspur, yes, or even delphinium; although what you observed would likely have been more correctly identified as monkshood; wolfsbane;aconitum. Your father exaggerated slightly—generally speaking, its poison is non-fatal unless ingested or introduced into the bloodstream—but enough skin contact with the leaves or flowers could cause fairly debilitating nausea and cardiac symptoms."

"Delphinium, huh." John furrowed his brow, struck by a memory from his childhood. "There's a poem...Harry used to love reciting it. 'The Dormouse and the Doctor,' by Milne. I never realised it was about a toxic plant, though."

"A superbly cutting criticism of the doctor-knows-best approach to mental health," said Sherlock, rubbing his hands over his face, "but hardly relevant to the discussion at hand, John. Was there anything else you turned up?"

Stifling an amused smile at the thought of Sherlock having analysed A. A. Milne's poetry, John nodded and clicked over to one of the Web pages he'd kept open. "Yes, of course. Back on the injection method...I also checked the patent offices. I was able to find three pending medical device patents registered, two in the UK and one in the US, that could possibly be modified to push a subcutaneous capsule; none of them have made it through the initial stages of the patent process." He turned the screen so that his partner could see.

"Well, this one looks like science fiction. How big is it? Oh, that's much too large, John, it couldn't possibly fit."

A soft snort came from John's left, and he looked over to see Greg's eyelids crack open again. One side of his mouth was lifting in a crooked grin—"Oi," John snapped. (Quietly.)

"Sorry," said the older man, "must've started drifting off there. I know I'd never be hearin' that, not at the Yard."

"No. Most definitely not at the Yard," John muttered; and not anywhere else, either, his internal voice supplied, unhelpfully. He tried to level an appropriately discouraging scowl at his smiling friend, but it was shortly ruined by another deep yawn.

"This one is much more promising, from a design standpoint, but it's complex enough that it's unlikely to be copied, and the patent applicant is deceased," Sherlock hummed, then raised his head, looking back and forth between them. "Have I missed something?"

"Nope, not at all. But I'll be missing something, if I don't get my heart pumping again," said John,
"I'm going to get some tea."

"I'll come with you," his partner responded immediately, rising to accompany him towards the hall. "We can give Lestrade the chance to rest a bit."

"You needn't worry 'bout it, John," mumbled Greg, tipping his chin over to graze against Anna's hair, his eyes already fallen closed once more. "Nobody 'round to gossip at half past three...don't do anything I wouldn't, eh..."

There were staff rooms and restroom facilities to be found on every floor at New Scotland Yard, of course, but by wordless agreement John and Sherlock made their way upstairs to the fourth. The little kitchen there, down the hall from Greg's office, was familiar territory; besides, John knew that forcing himself to jog up the two flights would surely make him feel more alert again.

Sherlock followed his lead without comment, leaping up the stairs two at a time by John's side in lithe, graceful strides, pacing himself to turn on each landing at the same moment John reached it with his faster, tighter footfalls. The rhythmic slapping of their shoes reverberated in the enclosed space, and when they reached the door onto the deserted fourth floor Sherlock smacked the push-bar to throw it open with an almost childlike relish, as if he'd won a playground game. John felt invigorated, as well: his breath came deep and even, the fresh air cleansing him from the inside.

"Better?" asked Sherlock, spinning to pace backwards ahead of him.

"Loads," John answered, swinging his arms back and forth and overhead to loosen stiff muscles, completing the impromptu exercise.

"Good."

They strode into the staff room, and Sherlock pulled two paper cups from the waiting stack while John filled the battered electric kettle. When he reached for the little basket of teabags on the worktop, however, a hand on his arm stopped him. John looked on in confusion as Sherlock opened the small, high cabinet atop the refrigerator, stretching onto his toes to reach the full extent of his not inconsiderable height. He pulled out a small airtight canister that had been tucked away at the very back corner, handing it down.

"What have you—oh!" John exclaimed, opening the unmarked container to see the label on the bags inside: it was the tea they drank most often at home, a much higher quality than the workmanlike brand on offer in the basket. "How long has this been hidden here?"

"Since mid-January. I haven't had much occasion to use it, of course. I wouldn't want anyone to see me retrieving it. But for overnight cases...I thought you might like to have your favourite."

Nodding happily, John pulled out two bags and dropped them into the cups. "Yeah, brilliant," he said, and then he looked up just as he set down the resealed canister; Sherlock's face was set in an odd, neutral mask. It brought to mind the look he sometimes got when he was trying to close himself off in advance of some expected ridicule—and suddenly, John understood. This was something he did for me, only a few weeks after Chicago and New Year's. He meant it to be a romantic gesture...
Stepping close, he reached up and slung his arms about Sherlock's neck, clasping his hands at the base of the man's tousled curls. "Thank you, love," he breathed, waiting until he saw the warmth return to Sherlock's eyes before leaning in to press a chaste, tender kiss to his lips.

"You never say that except at home," Sherlock said softly, breaking the kiss and leaning his forehead down to John's, his eyes closed.

"Would you rather I did?"

"I'm...not sure." He hesitated. "What's the right way?"

"There's no right way..." Stopping, John deliberately corrected himself. "The right way is what feels right to you. I mean—well, I hadn't thought you wanted people to know. Was I wrong?"

"Not really. I admit I hadn't given it all that much thought, in and of itself. Though the fact that you don't want to tell anyone has had a definite bearing on my opinion."

"I don't—" John grimaced and pulled his head back, searching Sherlock's serious eyes. "I'm sorry, love. I've spent so long denying what everyone's assumed...it's hard to let go of that."

His mouth twitched into a slight frown, and his large hands twitched where they rested on John's hips. "You needn't apologise. You care about how you're perceived."

"I care about how you're perceived. How we're perceived. The last thing I want is for your professional reputation to be altered by—"

"By my happiness? Mm, yes, I can see how that might be a problem."

John blinked, dropping his hands. "Don't turn it on me like that, now. I'm not saying that you shouldn't be happy—or that you shouldn't tell anyone you want to. It's just that it's your work, here; it should be your decision what you keep private."

"Oh." Sherlock considered this. "Have you told Dr Sawyer?"

Stepping out of Sherlock's loose hold, John turned away to pour their tea, hoping that focusing on the task at hand would lessen the heat he felt rising in his cheeks. "Um, no. At one point I thought she'd guessed, but—no."

"You don't even know whether she knows. Interesting. Had I been the one to walk into the surgery yesterday, and pick up your bag, I'd have known the answer to that question with one glance. But of course, it was better that you did it. I wouldn't have been sure she'd packed everything you needed." Sherlock shrugged, visibly dismissing the train of thought. "At any rate, that decides it for me. I'm perfectly content to keep it to myself."

"...All right."

The walk back downstairs was just that—a walk, and a sedate one at that. For one thing, they were both carrying full cups of hot tea. For another, as soon as he'd resolved the unplanned discussion on their relationship to his own satisfaction, Sherlock had clearly begun to return to his thoughts on
the case. That had sent John's thoughts in a similar direction; but the casual mention of Sarah Sawyer, and the task he'd been called upon to perform the previous afternoon, had been a jarring reminder of exactly what about this case bothered him the most.

In his current work at the surgery, John still ran across serious injuries now and again, although his job was to transfer those who required more urgent care or hospitalisation. In his years of military experience, he had of course seen and treated many severe wounds and tricky, delicate situations. On the whole, he didn't consider himself ill-suited to high-stress work; one might even say he thrived on it. But there in Mr Lestrade's guest bath, John had felt a sort of pressure to which he was wholly unaccustomed.

Greg, and Sherlock, and Anna—they'd all held an unwavering trust in him, there. They'd all been sure that whatever happened, Doctor Watson could handle it. But it hadn't been a matter of stopping bleeding, performing sutures, administering medications. They'd expected—had utterly believed, as far as John could tell—that he would be able to find an invisible, tiny, nearly half-dissolved caplet hidden under unmarked flesh, and that he would then be able to cut into Anna and remove it, without immediately poisoning her in the process! He'd readied the flecainide, in hopes that it would be enough to stave off the deadly effects of the fast-acting poison...but those minutes had been an ordeal of the sort he hadn't had in years. He'd felt Anna's life under his hands, willingly entrusted to his care—and deep down, he hadn't known if he would have even the slightest chance at saving it.

The picture his imagination conjured up, of his own hands lowering their friend to the bathroom floor, laying her out and injecting her in a one-shot effort to keep her heart beating, as she choked and trembled and struggled for air her lungs wouldn't pull in—her eyes wild and focused desperately on him, because of course aconite devastated the body but left the mind painfully clear—

"What are you thinking about? Stop it. You're making a horrible face."

John looked up at Sherlock, who followed two steps behind him on the stairs. He paused on the landing and took a sip of his tea, muffling his admission into the cup before he started moving again: "You know I had a hard time, yesterday."

"You're a brilliant doctor, John; and besides, it turned out to be fine."

"Brilliant," he repeated, and he swallowed something that wasn't really a laugh. "Well, it's nice that you think so..."

"No, I know so."

This stopped John in his tracks again, midway between landings. "Brilliant enough to do the bloody impossible? Tell me truly, Sherlock, what did you expect me to have done, shut in that little bathroom with only the supplies I had Sarah throw together for me at the last minute? If Anna had been gasping out her last breaths because I'd jostled or squeezed the invisible goddamn capsule, trying to find it without a single outward mark to help me? If one bloody syringe of heart medication hadn't been enough? If I'd had to look Greg in the eyes afterwards?"

When he stopped speaking, his breathing felt harsh and ragged. Sherlock had moved around him and now stood below him, hands empty; he relieved John of his cup as well, and reached up to set it aside on a higher step. In the next moment, he straightened and took John's face between his palms: one cool, one warm, both firmly directing him to meet his partner's intense gaze.

"John Watson..." he growled, his voice low and commanding.
John stared at him angrily, waiting for the inevitable words of substanceless comfort, of improbable reassurance. *What could you possibly tell me,* he put into his eyes, *that could make this better? That could make me forget that I may have dodged the bullet with Anna, but either I'll be in this same position with a stranger very soon, or we'll all be standing around another body?*

He waited long seconds for the useless, ridiculous words, and it certainly looked as if Sherlock was searching for them.

But in the end, the genius couldn't seem to find anything to say: he simply closed his lips to John's in a slow, fathomless kiss that somehow said everything his voice couldn't. It went on and on...and it was as if the toxic residue of John's self-doubt, his fear, the nightmares that were plaguing him more frequently, all of the vile thoughts he struggled to shut away were being brought to the surface, slowly lifted clear and exchanged for cool air and reassurance and *Sherlock.*

There was so much of it, and his cheeks were wet but he didn't even *care* anymore; there was a message in this quiet, unhurried trance of lips and tongues and breath, more potent and powerful than any verbal declaration he could imagine in that moment.

It was a new day, and all of those terrible things John feared still lay ahead.

*But I'm not facing it alone.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Note 1: Yes, for those eagle-eyed botanists reading - of which I am very much not one - I know the dialogue in this chapter is not entirely accurate. However, as far as my research has turned up, Aconitum was originally classified as a subgenus of Delphinium, and was only moved into its own genus within the 21st century. I think it likely that with the field guides available in the 1970's, Bert Lestrade could have easily conflated the name Larkspur with the aconitum plant when teaching his son. (After all, he was teaching himself at that time, too.) Sherlock is allowing for that more antiquated field knowledge, and that's why he doesn't correct Lestrade very stringently. (in other words: just roll with it!)

Note 2: The poem that John (and the chapter title) is referencing can be found here, if you're interested:

*The Dormouse and the Doctor* - A. A. Milne
GREG: Causes and Effects

Chapter Summary

Greg knows he needs to carefully balance his efforts to assist on the case with his desire to be there for Anna. Still, there's something to be said for how easy she makes it.

34. GREG: Causes and Effects
(15 June 2015)

The large room was silent but for the barely audible buzzing of two lonely fluorescent tubes, and Greg's arms were empty. He stood up slowly, rolled his incredibly stiff neck, and checked his watch with a gummy, lip-smacking yawn.

Just past seven. Christ, I can't believe they just let me sleep for nearly four hours!

He hadn't intended to doze that long: the case was inching forward, and it really felt like a collaborative effort this time around. Greg much preferred this sort of case to those with details so strange and solutions so murky that only Sherlock could really understand—the ones that left John and himself to follow gamely after the younger man's inscrutable genius, always off-balance and five steps behind. At least for now, he felt like he was on board, and a functional part of what was going on. Maybe I've even managed to help, if only just a little, he speculated, allowing himself the briefest flicker of pride.

Or maybe, Sherlock was just taking pity on him. It was hard to tell, sometimes, where the man's true feelings lay, although Greg had become fairly adept over the past decade at seeing beneath the detachment and the matter-of-fact insults. In fact, Sherlock had made more than one strange comment to him over the past few days...they'd seemed like veiled acknowledgements of that shared distant past, and they'd even been oddly comforting. Greg had always tended to believe himself the only one of them who could possibly wax the slightest bit nostalgic about those inauspicious beginnings—he couldn't imagine that memories of that time in Sherlock's life were incredibly pleasant to revisit—but since his return from his years as a dead man, Sherlock had proven himself more mindful, and more caring, than Greg had ever expected.

When the door clicked open to his left, it neatly dispelled the sentimental train of thought. Greg looked over to see Anna's shapely silhouette framed in the brighter light of the hall, and an entirely separate set of sentiments immediately took the forefront in his mind.

"Good morning, honey," she said. "Sleep okay?"

"For a given value of 'okay' that accounts for the spine-altering properties of conference room seating, yeah," he responded, smiling and moving to meet her as she came closer. "You?"
"I slept pretty well, all things considered. Better than I'd expected, really. You're very comfortable."

"I do my best."

She chuckled and held out one of the paper cups she held. "Tea. Here, hold mine too for a sec..." When he complied, she stretched both her arms high overhead and sighed, "My back's a little stiff, of course, but it's nothing a little stretching can't fix." She gazed off towards the other end of the room, looking thoughtful as she swooped down into a deep forward bend, dropping her palms flat on the floor to release the tension in her lower back.

_Now there's a woman I could happily watch doing yoga,_ thought Greg appreciatively, swallowing a bit of the steaming beverage and raising his eyebrows in surprise at the taste. "This isn't Yard tea," he remarked.

Her answer came from the level of the carpet. "Apparently it's Sherlock's special secret stash, for overnighters only. Be sure to thank John for sharing."

"Oh really? And where are the two of them, anyway?" He reached out and flipped the remaining two switches on the wall, bringing the room to full daytime levels from the dimmer lighting they'd used all night.

"Well, they were in here when I woke up an hour or so ago," she told him, pulling herself upright and reclaiming her cup. "Still working—I couldn't even pull that shit off in college, I have no idea how they manage it at our age!"

"John's got a rather impressive second wind, I'll give you that. Something about being a doctor, I suppose," Greg said, even as his internal voice rankled a little at her words. She and John and Sherlock were all within three years in age, which left Greg the unhappy outlier; while he didn't normally give his own advancing years all that much thought, there were moments...

"Well, at any rate, they offered to help me get situated; they told me you were still awake at three thirty, so we decided to let you get a little more rest. I'm sorry to say, we left your father's in such a hurry I forgot my toothbrush there—so I borrowed yours, I hope you don't mind."

"That's fine, love..." It took a moment for him to process what that meant, and when he did he patted his pockets in confusion. "My keys?"

Anna grinned and reached into her own pocket. "Oh, these? Sherlock decided to take pity on me, and show me where you kept your emergency toiletries."

"Ri-ight..." Greg found himself wondering exactly _which_ of them had been the one to delve into his trousers while he slept and fish out his keyring. He certainly knew which option he _preferred_ to believe. "I suppose it's not as awful as my warrant cards. Just, tell me he broke into my office _before_ anyone was on that end of the floor?"

Sherlock's resonant baritone preceded him into the conference room. "Sally didn't see anything," he said, smirking over the edge of his own cup.

"I can vouch for that," added John, striding in behind him. "Granted, he used _himself_ as a distraction, so you can guess how that went." He didn't look at all happy about it.

Greg grunted, reaching out to accept his keys back from Anna and tuck them into his pocket where they belonged. "Morning, boys. I have to say, I didn't expect Sal in as early as seven."
"Six thirty, actually," corrected Sherlock. "She came in only long enough to check in, and make sure you didn't need her for anything right away."

"And long enough to start a nasty little shouting match, but who's counting?" John groused, pulling out a chair with some force and throwing himself down into it.

"Ah." Greg turned to face Sherlock, and said, "So it's rough today, then. That's too bad. Does she expect to make it back?"

Sherlock began to answer, "She should be available by mid-afternoon—" but John cut him off before he could continue.

"Fuck's sake, Greg, what's it gonna take for you to set her straight? She's so far out of line with this it's bloody ridiculous!"

Greg held up his free hand in a placating gesture, but directed his comment to Sherlock. "Right. You seriously haven't told him?"

"Told me what?"

"I never told you, either," sniffed Sherlock.

"Told me what?"

"No, I had to figure it out on my own, ta for that," Greg snapped back. "I know you love the protective streak, yeh, but were you planning on waiting 'til there was a fistfight at a murder scene?"

"Told. Me. What?"

"I'm taking Anna down the street to grab some breakfast. You, Sherlock, had ruddy well better explain yourself to John before we get back! Love?"

Anna jumped slightly, looking from the other two men to Greg's outstretched hand. "Um. Okay, sure." As he led her towards the door, she stooped to quickly pick up her handbag from the floor beneath the chair where he'd slept; she threw one more confused glance over her shoulder before they were in the hall, but Greg didn't slow his stride until they were at the lifts.

Serves him right if John's hacked off at him! Even when he's being nice, he acts like a fucking child...

Once they'd gotten outside into the cool morning air, Greg's irritation had subsided somewhat. They had walked down to a small café nearby that served good breakfast fare, and he'd given Anna the explanation she deserved after having witnessed the confusing confrontation. Truth be told, Greg felt a bit guilty, himself. He might have made the effort to preemptively fill John in, quite some time ago. But Sally's mother hadn't been in a really bad way for a while, and Greg had foolishly assumed that Sherlock would have told his flatmate. It related to deductions he'd made, after all, and since when did Sherlock not enjoy sharing his brilliant, overpersonal insights into people's personal lives with John? It wasn't likely to be a matter of privacy; as much as the little
fighting routine seemed to be a kindness—in the ridiculous, backwards way that kindnesses from Sherlock often came—Greg knew that the detective didn't really like Sally very much at all. Respect, then—though showing professional respect for a colleague by allowing said colleague to behave in entirely unprofessional ways was a strange sort of thing, indeed.

"What are you thinking about?" Anna asked, pulling him from his musings as they strolled back towards the Yard.

"Ah, you know. Sally, still."

"Stop worrying. You handled it fine, and you were right that Sherlock should have to explain it."

She squeezed his hand comfortingly, and they walked on a little while in silence.

"How about you? What are you thinking, love?" he asked, in an attempt to distract himself from returning to the same thoughts.

"Oh, it's silly."

"I could use some silly. Tell me?"

"I was just thinking how it felt like I was in a TV cop show, like CSI or something, last night. The big table covered in papers and computers, the dim, dramatic lighting..."

"That was so you could get some rest," he protested weakly.

"The only thing missing was the evidence. Shows like that, there's always bits of evidence spread out on the table for everyone to stare at while they think about the Murderer of the Week."

"Well." Greg chuckled to imagine Sherlock in some cheesy, overproduced American crime drama. They'd probably have to name the whole bloody thing after him to keep his massive ego satisfied! Smiling, he told her, "We don't really have a lot of physical evidence to mess about with, in this case. With two of the three vics dying in or about their own homes, and the cause being so far removed from what they were doing at the time, there wasn't much we needed to take along. Guess we've got the personal effects the librarian had with her at work, but that's about it."

"And you already looked through them, right? Well, I guess I can just add that to my little mental image, and make it complete," Anna grinned, swinging their joined hands at her side.

Greg brought them up to his lips and kissed her knuckles before releasing her hand; they were within sight of New Scotland Yard's front entrance, now, and he couldn't quite bring himself to walk through the lobby, past so many of his colleagues both known and unknown, with a sweetheart on his arm.

"I had Ronny take a look at her things, actually, but he didn't see anything that helped us figure out what she'd been up to that day. It wasn't 'til two days later that we confirmed the murder had really happened weeks before," he mused out loud as he swiped them past the lobby security. "Guess we've got the personal effects the librarian had with her at work, but that's about it."

"And you already looked through them, right? Well, I guess I can just add that to my little mental image, and make it complete," Anna grinned, swinging their joined hands at her side.

"Well." Greg chuckled to imagine Sherlock in some cheesy, overproduced American crime drama. They'd probably have to name the whole bloody thing after him to keep his massive ego satisfied! Smiling, he told her, "We don't really have a lot of physical evidence to mess about with, in this case. With two of the three vics dying in or about their own homes, and the cause being so far removed from what they were doing at the time, there wasn't much we needed to take along. Guess we've got the personal effects the librarian had with her at work, but that's about it."
"Well, all right. When I was younger, I used to like imagining that I was a Bond girl, too; don't go getting any ideas, okay?"

A wide, lopsided grin spread over his face. "Now, see, that's actually giving me quite a few ideas..."

She bit her lip on an answering grin, and poked an elbow into his side as they turned the corner.

The officer manning the window at the evidence desk gave Anna only one uncertain glance when they arrived to sign out Theresa Prentice's belongings. She stood modestly behind Greg, hands clasped close over the shoulder strap of her handbag and expression politely bland, as if she belonged right where she was and couldn't possibly be bothered about it; a single reassuring nod from Greg was all it took beyond that to convince the man that she was nobody to be concerned with. Before he bent to sign his name to the custody forms and logging book, Greg silently handed her the little paper bag they'd brought with them from the café, freeing his own hands for the sealed and labelled box he received after a brief delay.

"You're so good at that," Greg commented back in the hall, hefting the box to rest on one hip as they waited for the lift.

"Good at what? Waiting? I thought that was the national pastime here or something, I'm just an amateur in comparison."

"Ha! No, that'd be queueing. Whole different animal," he laughed. "Nah...you do this thing, right, where you just suddenly blend in..."

"Oh really?" She looked askance at him, stepping briskly aside as the arriving lift emptied, and taking a place inside near the rear corner.

Two uniformed constables in the midst of their own discussion—something about their tactical driving recertifications, apparently—filed in after her before he could get the evidence box situated in both hands again. He manoeuvred himself past them to stand close beside her, angling his body a bit so that his burden wouldn't poke into her while he quietly answered, "Yeah. Like, five seconds into any given situation, and you've got all new body language to suit it."

"I find that hard to believe," she replied, just as softly.

"Oh, trust me, you do it." And it is hot as hell to see, he didn't add to the whisper.

"Well, it's nothing much, probably; just my inherent normalcy, right? I mean, I'm pretty bland, as far as it goes. Bland blends."

Greg couldn't hold back an audible scoff at that, and one of the officers in front of them paused her own conversation, turning her head slightly. He waited a few seconds; the lift opened at the first floor, and two more passengers came in. Once the other conversations in front of them restarted with the closing of the doors, he leaned slightly closer to her ear. "You have got to be kidding me, right?"

"If I do anything even close to what you're saying, I've never, ever known it. Sorry," she
murmured, not turning to face him.

He looked her up and down, and he'd be *damned* if she wasn't doing it here, as well: crowded in between the busy Met personnel in the lift, she held herself with a certain professional comportment that silently marked her as belonging there. And only in his ten months' association with Anna, after having been with her in galleries and airports and shops and family homes and even *Baker Street*, was he beginning to really see how certain tiny mannerisms of hers shuttled in and out, adapting her subtly to her surroundings like the changing skin of a chameleon.

He shifted on his feet as the lift lurched and slowed again. *She really, truly doesn't even notice she does that?* Mystified and impressed, he blinked and uttered only, "Huh."

Anna flicked one sharp, bemused look his way before moving forward to get out into the hallway, leaving him to follow with a thoughtful smile.

Greg's reflection in the mirror looked just as bad as it had earlier in the café's little loo, with the possible exception of now seeming slightly better fed and hydrated. He'd tried not to dwell on it then—hunger and lingering annoyance at Sherlock had been a greater distraction—but now, he scowled at himself and wondered whether their waitress and the evidence sergeant had both thought Anna had found a stray in a rumpled suit. *She* looked fine this morning, of course, in the same clothes she'd worn since late yesterday afternoon—better than fine, to be honest. Even John and Sherlock looked all right, somehow only slightly mussed and unkempt after their wakeful night. It was just *Greg* whose rough grey stubble and dark-circled eyes made him look like a wild man escaped from the forest.

Casually ignoring the intermittent distraction of others moving in and out of the facilities behind him, Greg leant close to the mirror, his little toiletry kit propped up behind the tap. He carefully stroked his electric razor over his face, automatically noting each line and hollow as he did: *Think that one's new. The ones in the corners of my eyes, they've gotta be deeper. And just look at this shite beneath my chin*...

Sighing, he packed away the razor and took up his toothbrush—which tasted now of the cinnamon tartar-control brand Anna favoured—and shifted his thoughts sternly from his inevitably aging features to the case. Greg wasn't sure what more he could be doing to really assist, beyond supervising the others on his team—Ronny had come in and was busy at his desk, now, so at least he could do *that*. Still, he felt honour-bound to give the others his very best effort going forward, since they'd found that he had a personal connection with the case. It was *their* connection too, of course, and not even Sally was dispassionate where Anna was concerned, by now...but Greg knew that of them all, he was the most likely to let his feelings get in the way of his professional judgment.

*I should've taken her home*, he thought, *and let her at least sleep in a bloody bed, while I worked! I should certainly be taking her home now...keep her out of all this, now that John's sure she wasn't dosed...that'd be the right thing to do. The fully professional thing.*

He rinsed his mouth, and spat, and raised his head once more to meet his own eyes in the reflection—but what he saw instead was the image of those men touching Anna, bruising her shoulders, pushing her around and taking her phone away and *frightening* her, likely more than they even...
knew...his Anna, who had been through so much, and who still tried to pretend she didn't have trouble sleeping because of it all...

*Nope. Not gonna happen, not just yet.*

When Greg returned to the conference room, as well-groomed as he could make himself without a change of clothes—he'd forgotten to bring back his gym bag the other day, after all—everyone was busy again.

At the end of the table closest to the door, John was absentmindedly munching at one of the bagels Greg and Anna had brought him; he had a laptop playing the videos from the boutique with the sound routed through headphones, and a list beside him beginning to fill with scribbled notes. Greg didn't want any part of seeing that footage again; he walked straight past to where Anna sat.

"You started without me," he said, in a gently teasing tone.

She looked up with a little smile. "Sherlock said I could look," she replied, nodding over at the detective. He was pacing once more in a triangular circuit at the far end of the room, but this time he held a phone up to his ear.

"Yes, of course all of them are toxic, but that species isn't nearly as toxic. It's not at all what I'm looking for. You're sure that only the *delphinium nuttallianum* cultivar has been imported off the books in the past year? Not *aconitum ferox*, not *aconitum napellum*, not—Well, no, it's not that I think you're *lying* to me, Faliwell; it's simply that I think you lack the basic wit to grasp the—"

Sherlock stopped walking and turned to them, blinking. "Ah. He hung up on me."

"Will wonders never cease." Greg pulled up a seat beside Anna, looking over the green leather handbag, its small matching purse, and the mess of other small personal items spread out on the table before her.

"It's so sad, isn't it?" she murmured. "The things a woman keeps in her bag can tell a whole story. But nobody expects that it'll be read, do they? Makes me want to clean mine out, that's for sure," she murmured, sweeping aside the empty wrappers of at least fifteen butterscotch candies.

Greg idly picked up a stray wrapper, examining it inside and out on some vague impulse before setting it gently with the others. "A lot of it's like that," he told her. "Besides the fact that Sherlock could tell someone's life story just by looking at their top buttonhole...well. There have been times I got the feeling I knew more about dead people's lives than living ones."

Anna gave him a long look that he wasn't sure how to interpret. Finally, she said, "You should get out more."

He laughed, hanging his head in rueful acknowledgment. It was true that he'd largely practised social avoidance over much of the last few years.

For a few minutes they all fell into comfortable quiet; John continued scratching notes from the videos, and Sherlock had begun exchanging text messages with someone as he stalked noiselessly back and forth like an angry pendulum. The long room was so silent that Greg could hear the small sounds of the Yard waking up for Monday morning, a steady trickle of people beginning to flow
past the closed door of their claimed sanctuary, bustling up and down the hall on their way to one thing and another.

Greg was perfectly content to sit by Anna's side, and watch her as she studied the items on the table. She treated each item with a certain quiet reverence that put him in mind of a museum curator, or an archaeologist, or possibly even a medium: holding the pen, the little collapsible hairbrush, then each neatly folded receipt still before her for long moments before moving on. Not wanting to be caught staring, Greg picked up the inventory sheet Ronny had filled out for the box, looking it over with an air of purpose—but really, he was all but mesmerised by the woman beside him, and after awhile he noticed that even Sherlock seemed to be watching her from the corner of his eye, his pacing grown more slow and measured.

Oblivious to her audience, she picked up Theresa's lipstick, and opened it briefly to reveal a soft shade of pink. "Ah," she uttered very softly, twisting the tube to fully extend and retract the makeup before replacing the cap.

In the next second, Sherlock spun fluidly from the wall and perched on a seat across from them. His face was intent and almost hawklike as he asked her, "What do you observe?"

Anna looked up at him, startled by the man's sudden proximity. "Um...nothing important..."

"Likely not. Nevertheless. Indulge me," he demanded, a hard, expectant smile twitching one corner of his mouth.

Greg sat back in his own chair, trying to give her the space she lacked from Sherlock.

"Uh. Well..." She swallowed, deliberately standing the slim gold tube on its end between herself and the detective. "It's not cheap. Less than six months old, and it's about half used up, so she wore it almost every day. Probably mostly at work." Twisting her mouth thoughtfully, she added, "I bet her flat was really tidy, huh?"

"How do you know?" asked Sherlock next, glancing meaningfully from the lipstick to the mess of candy wrappers.

"Just..." She gestured vaguely at the tube, clearly becoming a bit flustered under the scrutiny. "She's used that much of it, but she's kept the point almost at the same angle as a new one. It's hard to do that, you'd have to be a real perfectionist to use it that evenly. My friend, Liz...her lipsticks are all worn into weird round nubs, with gouges in the sides from putting the caps back on too fast." She glanced over at Greg, as if looking for reassurance from someone who could vouch for Liz's enthusiastic personality.

The half-smile remained in place, but something around Sherlock's eyes shifted and softened, and Greg felt an answering smile spreading across his own face.

"Not too shabby, Ms Clark," Sherlock hummed, "for someone who so rarely wears makeup herself."

"I used to," she told him, sitting back from the table.

"I know you did."

"Of course you do."

Sherlock chuckled, flicking his gaze briefly towards Greg.
"Your turn, Sherlock," Anna challenged, reaching over to take Greg's hand. "Tell us something you
didn't already know. Go on."

He gave a minute shrug, then reached out and picked up the dead woman's purse, flipping it open
and glancing with an air of confident disinterest over the paper money and various cards inside. His
demeanour shifted after only a few seconds' casual scrutiny, however, becoming focused; he slid
two cards out of one of the little slots, and spread them apart on the table to reveal a little folded
piece of paper slipped between them.

"That, we didn't know," he said, unfolding the paper and scanning it with sharp eyes before passing
it over. "Look."

Greg took it with his free hand. "It's a claim receipt, from Roth and Sons Jewellers, dated the fifth
of May. 'Clean and restore: one vintage bracelet, engraved silver.' And it's got a personal note, too."

"'See you again next week, Ms P.' And a cute little happy face," quoted Sherlock, his eyes bright
and expectant. "For God's sake, Lestrade, don't you see what that means?"

"Well, I'd guess it was the reason she went into the shop on the thirteenth, yeh?"

"More than that! This changes everything!" Sherlock leapt from his seat, gesticulating excitedly
with his words. "They knew her by name, they expected her 'again'. She must have been going in to
them regularly, bringing pieces to be cleaned or repaired! She could have brought it all in at once
—but she lived well within her means; she was spreading it out to keep her budget on an even keel.
She could even have let the jewellers hold the whole batch, and just spread out the pickups—but
no, she enjoyed the trip; it was a pleasant little walk from her flat. She was a creature of habit, as
even Anna could see; the same candies, the same makeup, the same morning routine...she likely
arrived at Roth and Sons at the same time every week, dropping off or picking up!"

Greg's jaw hung open a moment as he considered this. "So...

"So, it was targeted. The killer expected her! Theresa Prentice was the only victim whose location
didn't make sense, and now she fits!" Sherlock punctuated his sentence with a sort of midair
pirouette.

"That's brilliant," said John from the other end of the room; he'd removed the headphones and
slung them around his neck.

"It is," agreed Anna, smiling and squeezing Greg's hand. "I wonder why she never went back and
picked it up?"
Sherlock needs just a few short hours for himself and John to recoup and refresh. What he gets, however, is entirely unexpected.

The cab ride between New Scotland Yard and Baker Street was fifteen minutes, on average. Twelve in ideal conditions, and with a driver who wasn't a complete dimwit. It looked to be pushing twenty-two, this morning rush hour, if they kept up at the pace they were going; there must have been a road accident somewhere ahead.

Damn.

Sherlock jiggled his knee, impatient. He was on edge, full of sparking energy that had no outlet—not the steady, baseline clarity of a Day One, nor the focused pinpoint burn of a Day Four, when all extraneous functions narrowed to the pure action of the mind. He was only about halfway through Day Two, now, and the drawback of Day Two always lay here, in hours thirty-two through thirty-six, the period during which his mundane biology never failed to try and assert itself. Without the distracting, immediate rush of tangible progress on the case, Sherlock was left with little defence against the unpleasant sensations that arose within this five-hour window; his thoughts tended to skitter and slide over one another, finding brief purchase in the problems at hand, but fizzling without warning as the chemical levels in his brain flared and faded, ramped up and dropped off, over and over.

Damn, damn.

He needed to be home; being cooped up in this vehicle was doing him no good, was in fact exacerbating the problem. If he could simply ride it out, and remain awake through hour thirty-six...thirty-seven was always an improvement, and by thirty-eight his body would have adjusted to the demands he placed upon it. As Day Two waned and neared Day Three, he could expect the sweet spot to arrive—generally right around hour forty-seven, sometimes as late as fifty-one—and then he’d have access to that perfectly balanced, floating awareness between external stimuli and his internal landscape that made him feel like a well-oiled mental machine. That was what he needed. Not this.

The cab wasn't moving at all, now.

Damn, damn, damn and blast!

Sherlock twitched his fingers on the door latch. We're nearly to Montagu Place, now. I could run,
and get there faster... But when he looked over, he saw that John had slumped into the window. His stubbled jaw was loose, his lips were parted; a chunky piece of his stone-blond hair had rucked up into the glass, and as Sherlock watched, his loosely crossed arms slipped slowly free of each other over his stomach.

For a second, three seconds, five, in a faulty surge of memory—in the erratic imbalance of hour thirty-three—Sherlock felt as if none of the past eight months had been real at all. All at once, he was back in the dark, ugly place where his heart had lived before last October, when the very idea of confessing more than a desire for renewed friendship from John Watson had been implicitly forbidden—when moments like this had made his stomach churn with longing and dread in equal measures.

Don't look, he told himself, displaced fear choking him suddenly, freezing him in his seat even as the cab crawled into motion once more. If I look it's real, if he sees he'll leave—wait, but I did, didn't I? I told him. I did, and he said...

Sherlock pulled in a long, sighing breath as the flash of wrongness passed, leaving him firmly in the present. His heart was pounding as if he really had jumped out of the vehicle and run. Is Day Three worth this? Yes, he answered sternly, even before the question could fully form in his mind.

"All right, Sherlock?"

He must have made a noise; John had lifted his head from the glass and was blinking at him dazedly.

Sherlock grunted and turned his head to stare out his own window. "Fine." The silence John returned felt too expectant, so he added: "...Thirty-three," not really caring whether his brusque explanation was understood.

The tiny, wet squeak of John sucking his teeth in thought was almost lost under the sound of the traffic and the cab's engine. Eventually, he seemed to put the pieces together enough to say, "Yeah, okay. Well, a shower and change will make you feel better."

"I suppose anything is possible."

When they arrived home at last, John allowed Sherlock the first turn in the bathroom, a kindness Sherlock repaid by making a fairly concerted effort not to use all of the hot water. Some time later, he emerged, freshly shaven and damp-haired, with his red dressing gown layered over a pale blue shirt and dark grey trousers: mildly refreshed, but still almost unbearably twitchy. He returned to the sitting room to find John dozing again in his low, soft armchair, his head fallen sideways into his shoulder.

Sherlock stood and watched him sleep for a minute, until the soothing pattern of the man's breathing threatened to lull him into the rest his body so frustratingly demanded. Snapping his head upright, he called out more sharply than he'd intended. "John!"

The reaction was immediate. "Right! Yeah! Sorry, what?"

"It's your turn. In the shower." He blinked down at John's stiff, startled perch on the edge of the
John shook his head to clear it and stood. "Oh, 's alright..." he mumbled, padding off down the hallway.

Left alone, Sherlock sat down—then popped right back up again. Relaxing was inadvisable. Pacing, that was better, yes. No, not just pacing, too rhythmic, he needed to wake himself fully with movement as erratic as his mind...the window (traffic still heavy below), the stairs (quiet: Mrs Hudson away at her cousin's since Thursday), the kitchen (very messy), the window once more...

At the far end of the hall, the door opened and John emerged in only his dressing gown, a towel still slung about his neck. He stood in the doorway between the sitting room and kitchen, watching with a damp yawn as Sherlock hopped and circled.

"Thirty-three, you said?" he asked at last.

"Nearly thirty-four, now," Sherlock answered, stopping before his partner and looking down, flexing his bare toes against the edge of the sitting room rug.

John's eyes were red-rimmed from rubbing sleep out of them in the steam of the shower. "That means you only slept three hours Saturday when you promised me you'd get some rest, you twit. No wonder you're having a bloody hard time."

"It's fine."


"No. I don't need—Toast? I'll take a little toast," Sherlock amended quickly, seeing the reprimand looming in his expression.

"All right, then." John set the kettle, then took up his towel and rubbed it vigorously over his head, walking away to toss it into the open bathroom door with none of his usual care. When he returned, his hair stood out in all directions. "You do realise you haven't moved, yes?"

"Am I in the way?"

"No. I just thought you'd want to be doing callisthenics, or at least something more strenuous than staring at my arse." He growled under his breath at the cabinet he'd opened, tipping his head up towards the ceiling in exhausted frustration. "No bread, 'course not, I was too busy minding you Friday and Saturday to get the bloody shopping, wasn't I?"

Sherlock raised his eyes as the words slowly registered—he hadn't been staring at John's arse at all, his bare calves were more captivating by far—and cleared his throat. "Biscuits, then?"

"Got those." John turned to set the package on the kitchen table, pausing with his arms braced on a chair back as he was overtaken by a massive yawn that appeared to lock every muscle from his waist up.

Frowning, Sherlock thought back. He came downstairs just before nine on Sunday morning; he'd had nightmares for a third night running. He's on hour twenty-five now, but with compensation for continued poor rest... Stepping forward, he placed a hand on John's back, feeling the slight cool dampness of the dressing gown warming beneath his palm. "Sit down, John. Go on. Have a biscuit."

John twisted his head to look up at him, bleary-eyed, before pulling out the chair and slumping
"For what?" Suddenly full of purpose, Sherlock moved to the worktop. *Coffee. Right.* With hurried hands, he grabbed the mug that sat beside the kettle, fixed John's coffee and spun to present him with it. "I've clearly failed to take your needs into proper account. Why didn't you sleep when Lestrade did?"

"Because..." He shifted in the seat, resting one elbow over the back of it as he took his first sip. "Well, just because."

"A truly enlightening answer, to be sure," Sherlock hummed offhandedly; he turned to scan the length of the worktop, then the open-fronted cabinet where the dishes were kept. "No more clean mugs, either?"

"Again, you've been keeping me busy. You just might have to wash one," John muttered into his drink.

"No, there must be one here somewhere," Sherlock insisted, running his hand absently through his damp hair.

He heard the rustle of the biscuit packaging behind him as his eyes lit upon his prize: a single coffee mug, dark blue with a pharmaceutical logo in white, sitting upside-down on the very top of the furthest cabinets, tucked beside the wall and far too high for John to reach without standing on something.

"Well, *here's* one, why is it all the way up here? It's clean on the inside, I'll use this—"

As he snatched it down and spun away from the cabinet, his moist fingers slipped on the ceramic; the mug fell and shattered loudly on the floor.

"Damn! Can you grab me something, John, I'm in my bare feet...John?"

John had dropped his half-eaten biscuit and was staring down at the smashed mug, a maelstrom of awful emotions crossing his features in a way that made Sherlock's stomach flip and tremble.

"What's wrong? John?"

"...No," he breathed. His cheeks had gone pale, and his hands were clutching white-knuckled at the chair and table edge. "No, no."

Sherlock took a heedless step forward, too shaken and confused by his friend's reaction to remember that he shouldn't; the shard that lanced into the sole of his foot caused him to hiss and pull back. "Tschh!—John, what's the problem? It was just a coffee mug!"

"Just a coffee mug. Just a bloody coffee mug! Nobody uses *that* mug! And now look—"

"I don't understand—"

John's face twisted horribly; his eyes had squeezed shut. His breathing had sped into an irregular gasping, and when he spoke again, it was harsh and frightening, interrupted by choking gulps of air as if the words were being torn out of him. "I can't take it! You all think it's—easy, you think I can just—move on, just set it aside—and wake up!"

*He's not addressing me,* realised Sherlock, a cold weight settling in his gut. *What have I triggered?*
"You can't sit with me all night, every night—and I don't fucking care if it runs in the family, he's gone and nothing—fucking matters—"

"I'm not gone, I'm right here. John." He cast his eyes about desperately, balancing on his uninjured foot to lunge precariously and retrieve a dish towel from the cooker door.

"And I see it—over and over, in every—possible way, and nobody—understands, do they, he wasn't—the whole world and I could never say—"

"John." Sherlock bent and used the towel as a sweep, quickly switching aside fragments to create a mostly clear area where he could kneel before his friend. "John! I'm here, I'm with you. I did not die. Look at me," he pleaded, reaching out impulsively to touch but stopping himself and drawing back at the last moment.

John's eyes cracked open, focusing on Sherlock slowly and hazily as his lungs continued to heave. "Oh God. Sh-sher-lock..."

As John's shaking hands flew up to Sherlock's cheeks, the detective recalled that this had been the same short sentence John had uttered when he'd first returned, in the very same stammering whisper. One year ago today, he realised, jarred by the coincidence. But on that day, only John's fist had made contact with his erstwhile flatmate's face.

And he didn't have some sort of dissociative flashback, then; at least not while I was present, Sherlock remembered, frozen in a sort of shock; he was frantically skimming through file after file in his mind, trying to dredge up some sort of useful reference to guide his actions, but nothing was coming to him. What do I do now? How do I bring him back? Where is the information? I can't think!

John was stroking both his thumbs over Sherlock's cheekbones, back and forth, gazing straight through him. "You were dead," he rasped, his blue eyes bright with unshed tears.

"But I wasn't," Sherlock responded, tentative. He became aware of a sharp pressure at the edge of one knee, and shifted very slightly to sit further back on his heels, carefully taking his weight from a ceramic fragment he'd missed.

"But you were," insisted John, "and even worse..." His pupils were like pinpoints, and his hands were cold.

"What? What's worse?" An idea struck him, and it was very likely a bad one, but he couldn't think clearly enough to rationally argue against himself. "John," he murmured gently, "please, please tell me about it."

There was a long silence, and Sherlock rose up on his knees to bring his face near John's; hardly breathing, he tipped inward so that their foreheads lightly grazed each other.

After a second or two, John closed his eyes and reciprocated the gesture, pressing their brows together. When he spoke again his voice was small and distant, barely carrying across the scant space between their lips but hypnotic in its steady, slow rhythm:

"Falling. So high, far away and I can't shout loud enough. Kicked in the stomach and rolling down a flight of stone stairs, stumbling in a snowdrift and too cold to move, slipping on a wet tiled roof. Staggering down a neon-lit alley, head hitting the wall, Cold hands with loose fingers. Blood. Thick from the shattered skull, dripping down a shoulder blade, pulsing from one arm while wet fingers slip from the tourniquet. Red drops pulling into a syringe, they ignore the struggles and
push the plunger. Blood on gashed knees, split knuckles, bright pavement, matted hair. Blank eyes staring to the sky. Fighting, and running, and killing, and dying and nearly dying and already dead...and I'm alone..."

Sherlock's arms had risen, finding their way to grasp desperately at the sides of John's torso as the words had washed over him. "Oh, John," he murmured. "You're all right now, you're home, I promise you're safe..."

Some of the images had been familiar. Sherlock recognised certain details as what John would have seen after his staged fall—oh, how he regretted the necessity of that performance—and a few others could translate to things John might have experienced in Afghanistan, perhaps inflated and exaggerated by the power of his dreaming mind. Sherlock couldn't be sure, really; there had been precious few occasions when John had ever spoken to him of that time, and what he had told Sherlock had left more space for inference than fact. But, snowdrifts? Neon lights? Those didn't sound like anything Sherlock could recall him ever mentioning, and they didn't ring any bells in his own memories either. Something wasn't right...

It came to him with the force of a physical blow, and his tired mind reeled from the impact. He tried to pull his head away, but John had him held fast, and the flinch somehow ended in their being even closer together.

"This is all my fault," Sherlock whispered, pressing his eyelids tightly closed. "I did this, didn't I? These were my—"

"I promised," John choked out, cutting him off.

"No, oh John, not like this, I should have known, I'm so stupid!"

"—promised—tried to—" Now John's words were more like sobs, and the fingers that had been clamped viselike over Sherlock's cheeks slid down and dropped helplessly into his lap. "Never meant to—alone, so long—"

Sherlock felt the muscles of John's sides beginning to tremble violently beneath his palms, and he couldn't bear to keep the two of them where they were any longer. "You're not alone, John, not anymore. I'm going to let go now, but just for a moment, I'm not going anywhere..."

When he lifted his hands reluctantly away, John hunched over on himself, shaking; Sherlock frantically groped on the floor and found the towel. He dragged his eyes away from his distressed partner only long enough to swipe haphazardly around the chair, sending blue ceramic bits sliding across the floor to tinkle and click at the base of the cabinets and underneath the fridge. Crawling on hands and knees, he made a rough path to the hallway in a matter of seconds. Then he got to his feet, ignoring the sting, and returned to stand behind John, placing his hands gently on the man's heaving shoulders.

"Can you stand, John? Will you move with me? Come on, now."

"Why." His voice was faint and strange, still broken here and there with deep shuddering breaths. "...Why d'you keep coming back?"

"What?" Sherlock got his arms under John's and levered him carefully upright, focusing more on steering his half-conscious stumbling than on the strangeness of the question. The belt of John's dressing gown was coming loose, as well, but this was of little concern.

"You should be—out getting your job back...making up with your wife..."
"Should I? Come on, John, walk with me, that's it—"

"Don't see the point...saving me. I'm no good to you, now, am I?...M nobody..."

Their progress towards the bedroom was torturously slow, with John stubbornly lurching in the opposite direction with each questioning phrase; Sherlock decided to try a new tactic. "Lad, don't test my patience," he grunted, in his best impression of Lestrade's rough Estuary accent. "Friends do for friends, yeh? Now come on, move your feet!" The urging seemed to have an effect, this time, confirming that Sherlock's choice of character had been correct.

John turned his head up towards Sherlock as they neared the end of the hall, his eyes still locked in the unfocused haze that meant he saw only the past. In a tone that seemed both confiding and accusatory, he mumbled, "You took it...and I know why. Shouldn't even...know I have it..."

Sherlock's feet froze in place, just inside his bedroom door. "You wouldn't have used it," he insisted, the imitation of Lestrade forgotten all at once, though he knew that it was still the DI being addressed.

"Oh no?" A short, awful whine caught in the back of John's throat. It might have been intended as a laugh. "There are lots of ways..."

"No." Sherlock sat John firmly down, pressing him to recline and quickly guiding the man's shaking limbs into position. Then he threw off his own robe and clambered awkwardly over the footboard to fit himself in alongside. "No," he said again, speaking it into the still-damp shell of John's ear like a prayer. "You wouldn't, John. Tell me you wouldn't, promise me you won't, no matter what!"

John made no response to this but for a long, faltering breath, and a shiver that travelled through the entirety of his short, solid frame.

Sherlock gathered him close, closer. "John...please, come back to me now? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for everything. For falling, for making you believe it was real, for being away so very long..." He felt his face heating, and forced himself to keep talking; the steady stream of low words seemed to be physically calming John a bit, and the raw, imbalanced state of his own mind made their embrace feel like a surreal confessional. "I'm sorry for not understanding so much sooner how I felt, and not realising that you might feel the same, and for—for being so backwards, still, so slow to reciprocate the affection you've shown me. I'm sorry I don't have the same sorts of desires as you...I've caused you to forego your own needs on my behalf, and I know that's not fair, whatever you say. And oh, god, John, I am so sorry I asked you to keep memories so awful that I couldn't bear to retain them myself; I've been selfish and stupid! Forgive me, John. Please come back?"

"...Sherlock?"

"I'm here, love," Sherlock murmured, the endearment feeling natural and easy in his mouth for the first time. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered vaguely how much of that might be the lifted weight of the guilt to which he'd given voice, and how much was the unfiltered nature of hour thirty-four. "Are you?"

"I...I think I am," John whispered, nodding into Sherlock's chest. "I'm sorry."

Sherlock shook his head, stroking a hand along John's neck and down his shoulder, bare where the dressing gown had opened and shifted. "How can you be sorry? How is this not my fault? Everything about it is entirely my doing, up to and including my idiotic clumsiness in breaking your mug..."
"Your mug," corrected John. "The last one you used before you—left me."

"Oh, of course. I see, now. And the blame is on me, there, as well. I'll hear no further apology from you, John, is that clear?"

A warm breath huffed against the side of his throat as John shifted his position. "And I've heard all the apologies I care to from you right now, too, so hush," John told him, mouthing sleepily at the pulse point above his shirt collar. Each word was a slow kiss as he murmured, "God, I'm so fucking tired."

"Rest, then. A ninety minute nap isn't going to hurt anything." It was close enough to true, considering their stalled progress, and besides, they both knew that John's skills might be required again. The doctor clearly needed to be better refreshed.

"But, Sherlock, what about you?"

"What about me?" hummed Sherlock in reply, lazily letting his hand trail up and down the path of John's exposed skin.

"You surely don't want to sleep now. You're on your way out of that bad spot of yours,"—a yawn shook him, and he snuggled even closer—"and I don't think lying here with me is likely to keep you going."

On the contrary, it's all I ever need to keep me going... "I'll manage. I have enough things to think about. You don't want me to move, do you?"

"Mmm. God, no. Er, just—um, sorry if I—" John squirmed a bit, making Sherlock aware of their entangled legs, and John's state of undress.

"Oh. Well, you can hardly help that if it happens, can you?"

"Possibly not, but I don't generally, um, confront you with it."

It was true: though they'd gotten into the habit of pleasant intimacy, John nearly always left his lower half entirely out of the equation. Sherlock was already gnawing over the problematic difference in their respective sexualities, and this situation made it clear that John regarded his own urges as something to be ignored or denied.

Frowning, Sherlock tilted his head to rub his cheek against John's mussed hair. "There's an important discussion to be had here, and I plan for us to have it very soon. But you're in no state for it now, and frankly, neither am I. Please don't worry about...this," he murmured, letting the frown melt softly into a smile as he gave his own knee a little nudge, feeling the fabric of his trousers brushing bare skin.

"You promise, love?" slurred John, his breathing softening and becoming deep, with only a slight hitch left to betray the distress of the morning.

"I promise. Go to sleep awhile now." Sherlock kissed the top of his head, and curled an arm protectively around his back, quietly trying the words on for size once more; "My love."
ANNA: Yours Always...

Chapter Summary

She promised to tag along; she's intrigued to have the opportunity to watch her friends work. But Anna still doesn't quite feel like she belongs...

36. ANNA: Yours Always...
(15 June 2015)

Anna looked out the side window, tipping her forehead close to the glass to peer up at the tops of the taller buildings moving past outside: smooth glass and stone spires and the occasional carved ornament, standing dark and solid against the thickly clouded sky. Some were slowly beginning to seem more familiar, especially in the areas she traversed most often, but there never failed to be something new to catch her eye. Smiling, she returned her attention to the inside of the car, and the handsome driver beside her.

*This* was an experience she had never expected to have—even after she'd both gotten herself into a serious relationship with the Detective Inspector, and rekindled her old friendship with a man who had *also* turned out to be a homicide detective. It had simply never occurred to her; in her mind, it would be like dating a postal worker and demanding to help sort deliveries, or becoming friends with a stuntman and expecting to get a turn jumping out of a building. One just didn't get *involved* with other people's jobs. That was simply a fact of the world, as she'd always seen it, and so she'd never seriously pictured herself riding in the front seat of an unmarked police vehicle.

Now, she was doing exactly that, for the second day in a row. And she could list off a dozen other things that she'd gotten to see and do, since the previous afternoon, that she would never even have thought to put on a bucket list.

*And it all seemed perfectly natural to be doing at the time, just like trooping around with Sherlock and the others has always seemed entirely normal, until I actually stepped back to think about it.*

Anna rested her chin in her hand and turned back to watch the passing city with a bewildered smile. *What exactly is my life becoming, anyway?*

Even now, Anna was in continuing violation of her internal logic. She and Greg were on their way across the city, their destination the little jewellery shop in Bethnal Green...but less than twenty minutes ago, they'd been at Greg's flat in Shepherd's Bush, and Anna was certain she should probably have just stayed there.

*Greg had* given her the opportunity, after all.

He'd emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam just as she'd been choosing a new outfit for the day. "God, that makes such a difference," he had grinned, pulling her in for a kiss.
She'd pulled away coyly before he could dampen the ivory fabric of her blouse too much. "Feeling more human, are we?"

"A bit, yeah." He had given his bare chest a cursory wipe with the towel he carried, and reached out for her again, unrepentant...but this time he had been the one to eventually break the kiss, reaching past her into his closet with a little sigh. "Right, so it's ten thirty now." He'd grabbed a cotton T-shirt, trousers and a striped button-down, tossing the towel to the rumpled bedclothes. "If we leave pretty soon, we should be able to get out to the jewellers right about when they're opening up."

Anna had watched the cotton pull over his torso with a tiny pang of regret, and looked down to finish pulling on her long wine-coloured skirt. "No problem, honey, I just need to get shoes on and I'll be ready."

Greg's quick fingers had paused in fastening the button below his collar. "I mean, of course you can stay home...if you really want to..."

"What happened to I'm not letting you go'? Change your mind?"

"Well, no." He'd shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "But, I realise that may've been a bit rash of me. Honestly, I'm prepared to do whatever you want me to. I don't have to like it."

She had tilted her head and regarded him seriously; he'd returned the look solemnly, hands clasped behind his back as he stood perfectly still to await her response. Oh, but he is really that good, isn't he? she had thought.

"I'll come along, of course I will," she'd assured him, watching the set of his shoulders change with the words, and the way his dark eyes had flashed with satisfaction.

And now, looking back on that moment of decision, Anna could easily see the way Greg's presence pulled at her better judgment. It certainly appeared that her presence had an effect on his, as well. How else could she rationally explain the events of the past eighteen hours?

Soon Greg slowed the vehicle and pulled over to park. "Here we are," he said, breaking the thoughtful silence with a smile. "Likely won't amount to anything, but it's one more loose end to tie up."

He walked around from the kerb and opened the door for her, but Anna didn't move to get out.

"I can just wait in the car," she told him, clasping her hands over the bag in her lap.

"Don't, you don't need to wait out here, it's not...just, don't?"

They exchanged a look. Greg didn't seem upset, or clingy in the entirely excusable way he had been when he'd thought her in danger. In fact, he seemed entirely confident and in control; when he held out his hand to help her from the seat, she took it without giving the matter any further thought. Clearly, he didn't believe that it was out of line to have her walk in with him, to wait while he took care of a few minutes' official business.

She upbraided herself for her hesitation as she walked beside him the thirty-odd metres to the storefront. It's just picking something up; it's not as if there's a dead body in there. Besides, maybe he's just concerned that it would draw attention to have someone sitting and waiting in the front seat of a police car. There are all sorts of reasons, probably. Don't question it, Anna, just do it!
It felt to Anna as if she had stepped back in time, when Greg held open the door and she passed beneath the little tinkling bell: Roth and Sons Jewellers was tastefully dated, inside. The royal blue carpeting bore wear patterns marking clear paths around venerable brass-fitted display cases that surely hadn't been shifted in decades. The wallpaper was a cozy dark grey damask, broken occasionally by small gilded mirrors and wall-mounted light fixtures reminiscent of gas lamps. Even the ceiling was coffered in burnished tin, and only the tiny halogen pendant lights that floated below it to illuminate each display dispelled the illusion of temporal displacement.

Well, those, and also the shiny black dome of an omnidirectional surveillance lens, protruding from the centre of the ceiling. Greg lifted his chin in its direction and raised his eyebrows meaningfully at Anna, his message clear: That's new.

"Good morning, sir, miss!" The greeting came from a tall, thickly built man who bustled from the back room. He dabbed at his large nose with a handkerchief, tucking it quickly into a pocket of his suit jacket before reaching them. "Welcome to Roth and Sons. How might I assist you today?"

"Morning," began Greg, smiling pleasantly as he pulled out his warrant card and showed it. "I'm Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade of the Metropolitan Police, and you are?"

"Patrick. Patrick Roth, sir, it's a pleasure to meet you." His dark hair held a tight, wiry curl, and the gray in it seemed to place him in his late forties.

"I'm sure that Detective Sergeants Donovan or Patel have been in contact with you recently, in regards to your attempted robbery in May?"

"I believe it was Sergeant Patel. He met with my father, though, not me. Was there a problem getting the videocassette? After the incident, I convinced Papa to have a new system put in, right away, but I didn't have the forethought to ask the installer to return the old tape to us. Terrible mistake on my part, I'm afraid; still, the police had originally told me it wouldn't be needed."

"Well, the initial investigators weren't aware at the time of its link to a few other crimes. However, we were able to get the tape sorted out, eventually; no worries."

Another male voice filtered into the room, preceding the arrival of an elderly man in a fine tweed suit. "Where have you put my new set of buffing tips? I looked in the second cabinet, already—Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't hear the bell! Welcome."

"Papa, these aren't customers," Patrick told him, gesturing him over. "Inspector, meet Laszlo Roth, my father; Papa, this is Detective Inspector Lestrade, here about the robbery, and..."

Anna quickly took a half-step further aside, ducking her chin and dropping her eyes to the carpet.

Without missing a beat, Greg took the prompt to introduce her. "Ms Clark is riding along with me, this afternoon." It wasn't a dismissal of her, but his tone of voice clearly communicated that they shouldn't focus on her presence or lack of official title. She smiled wanly and murmured a quiet greeting, and then stepped over to one of the nearby cases to casually remove herself from the circle of conversation.

While Greg explained the purpose of his visit, and produced Ms Prentice's claim ticket, Anna slowly walked among the displays, pausing here and there as a pretty necklace or brooch caught her eye. The shop was quiet and calming, and she let the sound of Greg's competent, self-assured
working voice wash over her as he answered the shopkeeper's questions and made enquiries of his own. The younger Roth slipped to the back room, and reappeared with a bag that presumably held Theresa's bracelet; Anna looked up, expecting to be called to the door. Before Greg could make any move to leave, however, Patrick spoke up with another request.

"If I could possibly ask your advice, before you go, Inspector? I'm just not sure we have the settings on this fancy new system the way they should be. Surely you've got experience in looking at security footage; if you might be willing to take a look, I'm certain I'd feel better about it."

Greg met Anna's eyes with the facial equivalent of a shrug. "Sure," he answered, following Patrick into the back, "I can spare just a minute or two..."

Anna continued to quietly admire the jewellery, but after a moment she sensed that she wasn't alone.

"I think, hm, the pear cut might suit you best, my dear. Let's see..."

Surprised, she pivoted to face Laszlo Roth. The jeweller's snowy hair was bent low before her as he unlocked the lower drawer of the case; straightening, he smoothly pulled out a tray and set it between them with a kind smile.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I wasn't really shopping..."

"Oh, of course not," he replied, unfazed. "But, your Detective Inspector, on the other hand..." Mr Roth trailed dancing fingers over the tray and chose out a ring. "Try this one for size."

"Um. How did you—?" She allowed him to slip the ring onto her finger, not even really looking down at it; she felt it would be impolite to refuse this charming old man, but she couldn't think of anything either she or Greg had done or said while in the shop that might have given away their relationship. "He didn't say anything to you," she asserted uneasily.

Mr Roth looked at her hand, then her face, then her hand again with a practised, critical eye. "No, dear, he didn't. But I've run this business for thirty-six years, and apprenticed for eight before that; I've learnt to trust my instinct. I'm not wrong about the two of you, am I?" He hummed, and slipped the ring off. "No, that one's not right..."

Anna's right hand moved of its own accord to worry at the bare skin where the jewellery had been. "Yes, we're together. But I doubt that we're—I mean, I don't know if—"

"Distance, and pragmatism, and the ghosts of past loves, yes. You're still unsure; it's written all over both your faces. If you listen to your heart, though, I think you'll find you know your answer, after all. Ah, this is what I was looking for!" He took her hand again, and his gentle, spidery fingers covered the ring he held as he slipped it on. "Don't think too much, my dear; imagine his face, and his voice. Imagine that your Inspector Lestrade is on one knee before you. Can you picture that?" He waited until she gave a reluctant nod, and then released her hand with an expectant smile that crinkled his eyes. "Now look down."

She obeyed, and her mouth went dry in an instant. The ring Mr Roth had chosen was understated and clean, with two pear-shaped diamonds nestled together in opposite directions atop a delicate band of white gold.

"I..." Try as she might, Anna couldn't find words that would pass the lump in her throat. "It's, it's beautiful," she eventually managed, flexing her hand to make the modest stones sparkle in their settings.
"Thank you, dear. That setting happens to be one of my own design. I'd be pleased to see it grace a hand so suited to it." Nodding, Mr Roth gently pulled the ring off and returned it to its place, bending to tuck the tray back into the drawer below its display; he locked the case and stood, his eyes merry, just as the voices of his son and the DI filtered into the shop floor once more.

"All right, Anna, we're ready to go," said Greg, approaching and looking between them with an apologetic smile. "Thank you again for your cooperation, Mr Roth. You and your son have been a great help to our investigation."

"We're glad to be of assistance," replied the older man, shaking Greg's hand cordially. "Ms Prentice was a valued client of mine for years, and I'm terribly saddened to learn of her passing. Might I ask for your card, Inspector?" Tucking the business card into his breast pocket, he leaned in and took up Anna's hand, clasping it between both of his. "It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms Clark. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in London."

A minute later, as they stepped out onto the pavement once more, Greg glanced over at her with a raised brow. "I was afraid you'd be bored in there, but it looked like you had a nice chat?"

"He's a very kind man," she replied, walking with her gaze trained on the laces of her leather boots, feeling oddly dazed. A spear of sun broke through the heavy, shifting cloud cover and brightened the street before them, and she looked up in time to watch the glint of silver in Greg's hair catch under the brief light. "Very, very kind."

Fifteen minutes' drive brought them back to New Scotland Yard, and they reentered the second floor conference room to find only Patel seated within.

"Ronny," greeted Greg with a curt nod, "how goes it?"

The young sergeant raised his head from the papers spread before him, lifting his left hand to tuck a pencil into the soft black hair above his ear. "I've still not come up with any names in common, sir, but I'm working on a better way to organise the lists. Afternoon, Ms Clark."

Anna sat down on the opposite side of the long table with a friendly smile. "Hi." Though she'd only just been introduced to Sergeant Patel the previous evening, she already liked him. He had a studious, polite air about him that contrasted quite a bit with the more outwardly forceful personalities of the others in his team, but she suspected that he must have a backbone of steel to work as successfully and smoothly with them as he seemed to.

The door opened behind them just as Greg pulled out a chair near her. With a pointed look down at his watch, he raised his brow at Sherlock and John and commented, "Thought you two were planning a quick turnaround? Didn't expect we'd beat you back."

The two men exchanged a fast, expressionless glance, and Anna wasn't sure what to make of it. Then Sherlock turned smoothly to Greg and said only, "John needed a nap."

"Oh, right. You didn't actually sleep, last night, did you John? Well, it's no problem."

John nodded fairly pleasantly, but he neither made any reply to Greg nor even met the eye of anyone else in the room. He walked past them all and settled himself a few seats apart from the
group, pulling over one of the laptop computers and opening it without a word.

Sherlock stood and watched him do it, and Anna watched Sherlock, feeling a concerned frown pull at one corner of her mouth. When the detective noted her scrutiny, he met her eyes and sent her a miniscule shake of his head before seating himself closer to Greg at the near end of the table.

*Wonder what that's all about.* Anna couldn't help speculating, as she sat quietly and watched the others get back to the business of their case. Sherlock may have warned her off saying anything, but she didn't have the distraction of lists and theories to draw her attention away: while Greg related the details of his conversations with Patrick and Laszlo Roth, and Ronny passed the latest of his research results over to Sherlock, Anna kept one careful eye on John.

Greg opened the bag they'd brought from the jewellers, and then the velveteen box inside it, revealing a wide silver cuff bracelet. A delicate chain looped from the small tab clasp opposite its hidden hinge, and the outer surface was covered in detailed engraving, depicting five-petalled flowers among swirling foliage and geometric bands. Turning the cuff in his hands, he read aloud from the inscription on its polished inner surface. *"My darling Violet - Yours Always, Timothy Dewey. 1970."* He hummed under his breath, setting the bracelet down in the open box. *"Violet was her sister, right?"

"Mm, yes," replied Sherlock, scanning at high speed over the new pages he held while he distractedly recited and extrapolated upon the details of earlier research. "Violet Prentice-Dewey was nine years Theresa's elder, married in 1968. Her husband died in 2010 at age seventy-four, and she passed away herself in late January of this year, presumably leaving all of her vintage jewellery to her sister, who then began bringing the pieces to Roth one by one for restoration..." The shuffling of his pages slowed, then stopped; Sherlock looked down the table, eyes wide and intent. "John? The pending patents you researched. What were the applicants' names?"

John bit his lip and leaned forward, working with an air of determination until he'd retrieved the needed information. Within a minute he answered, "Jackson R. Bowland, Wisconsin USA; Michael C. Nobler, Edinburgh—that's the one you said was too large—Timothy J. Dewey, Edgware, deceased."

A long breath hissed inwards through Sherlock's teeth. *"The nephew..."* he murmured on his exhale, then turned to face the sergeant. The speed of his speech increased with each word, until the words seemed to trip heedless from his tongue: "Patel. I need everything you can get me on Timothy Dewey's connections, and those of his wife and son. The son, most especially. Find out the manner and circumstances of the parents' deaths, as well."

Ronny glanced across and waited to receive his supervisor's small, subtle nod of approval before standing to retreat upstairs to his desk, and Anna's estimation of him shot up another few definite points—but Sherlock either didn't notice or didn't care, being out of his seat already and around the table to commandeer John's computer. The team's prevailing mood had shifted, all at once, from dogged determination to edgy anticipation, and Anna marvelled at the smoothness of the change.

Only a few minutes later, the door opened again, and Sally strode in from the hall. She got straight to business without wasting time on greetings. *"Good news, sir; I've found no report at all of any robbery or demonstration incident on June the second matching the MO of our trio. I checked June third, as well, in case it was the threes rather than the tens: nothing. Looks like they may've stopped at four."

"Oh, good," sighed John from the far end of the table; when Anna looked over to him, she thought he looked almost a little queasy in his relief. Sherlock glanced up from the computer, and she saw a strange tightness around his mouth and eyes as he regarded John, as if he wanted to say or do
something but was restraining himself.

"I hope to hell they have," agreed Greg softly, leaning forward on the table and interlacing his fingers beneath his chin. "Glad to have you back, Sal. Everything okay?"

Two heads stilled in the corner of Anna's eye, but she didn't turn to see; instead, she casually averted her own gaze, just as she assumed Sherlock and John were doing, to allow the other woman her fragile sense of secrecy.

"It's fine now, no worries," was all Sally said, her voice a shade too bright around its clipped edges.

"Okay, well, good. We'll talk later, all right?" With that gentle assurance, Greg neatly shelved the subject just as the phone in the centre of the long table began to ring. Standing, he stretched his arm past Anna to hit the speaker button. "Lestrade."

The voice that piped into the room was recognisably Ronny's. "I'm getting names and histories together on the Deweys, and it'll take a little while, but I thought you'd want to hear this. Violet Dewey had been in an assisted living home up in Enfield since about six months after her husband's passing. The management confirmed Violet's sister visited regularly, once every two months or so, but her son Trenton was seldom seen. This January she passed away suddenly, and the report places cause of death as an unexplained respiratory arrest. Trent Dewey is recorded as her last visitor, just before Christmas: roughly four weeks earlier."

Greg's hands came up to cover his face, and he dragged them harshly downward over his cheeks with a grunt. "Fucking practice run, innit? On his own mother. Jesus. This is the guy, tell me it is, Sherlock?"

"It would seem plausible," Sherlock agreed, now typing furiously as John watched from behind him. "There must be some connection to the other two known victims, but his name hasn't come up in any of the data we've gathered..."

"Right. Sal, go get the paperwork going. I want search warrants for Trent's home and place of work, and I want them fast. We need to be on this guy first thing in the morning!" He spread his fingertips on the tabletop as he leaned forward once more. "Thanks, Ronny. I'll be up there in ten."

Anna watched in mute fascination as Greg stabbed the button to disconnect the call, and Sally strode briskly out of the conference room. The atmosphere in the room had become electric, charged with a sense of growing inertia. John rested a hand on Sherlock's shoulder briefly before walking over to join the DI; without a word spoken, they moved as one to divide Ronny's piles of printouts between themselves and renew their search for the elusive links, now with a specific name in mind.

*You don't get involved in other people's jobs,* Anna reminded herself, folding her hands tightly on her lap, even as she positively itched to lend some sort of assistance. *It's not your place to ask!*

But then, John brought two thick sheaves of paper around the table and sat down in the chair at her right side, and Greg carried the remaining pile to resume his seat to her left; the doctor silently scooted one stack over in front of her, while Greg gave her knee a short, reassuring squeeze. Somewhere in her mind, there was a little cartoon Anna, whose friends were all stuntmen...and apparently, she was getting ready to jump out of a window.
JOHN: Holding It Together

Chapter Summary

They've got issues to work through, and it's all coming out, tonight. Perhaps it shouldn't take John by surprise.

37. JOHN: Holding It Together
(15 June 2015)

It was only about eight thirty as John walked home from Tesco, and traces of sun still lingered low behind the light cloud cover. This was the time of the evening when John might normally find a little crap telly to zone out to, or possibly try and run a quick load of laundry to stay on top of things; now, however, John could tell he was very close to being done for the day. Sure, he'd managed to stay fairly functional all afternoon and evening, once Sherlock had roused him from his embarrassingly unplanned nap; after they'd returned from the Yard he'd even motivated himself to go back out and finally do the shopping, leaving his flatmate at home to continue his research on Trenton Dewey. However, no amount of dutiful busy work could cover up the fact that John was exhausted.

More than exhausted, really—he felt emotionally wrung out. The previous two days had been a roller coaster that had ended in a hard, abrupt crash, and although Sherlock's care had made recovery from it far less unpleasant, it was distressing on a basic level that it had happened at all. Terrifying, even. To have lost the control of his own mind while fully awake, to have opened the door onto all those awful things and given voice to the worst of the dark, fearful spectres that woke him shaking at night—just thinking about it, now, was making his palms sweat and his teeth grind together.

So stop thinking about it, you idiot.

John carried his shopping bags up the stairs and into the kitchen, quietly puttering around to put everything away. In the interest of simplicity, he'd bought just the essentials: bread, milk and eggs, a pre-packaged tray of ready-made baked ziti he could heat up the next time they had the chance for a quick supper at home, and some assorted veg for a stir-fry he hoped he'd have the opportunity to make before too much longer.

"I can make you some tea, if you want it, Sherlock," he called out as he bent to slide the pasta into a clear area on the lower shelf, "but I'll be going to bed shortly."

There was no answer, which John didn't find all that odd, considering that his partner had clearly been deep in thought when he'd walked in with the bags. When he straightened up and closed the refrigerator door, however, he registered movement in a sudden rush of air behind him; he spun, startled, just as Sherlock reached him.
Sherlock fit himself up against John in one smooth motion, aligning them from head to toe so quickly that John had no chance to protest. With his back pressed flat against the cool surface of the fridge, the contrast to Sherlock's sudden warmth was dizzying; the taller man's legs were straddling one of his, and they were in full contact in all the places he'd become accustomed to avoiding.

"Oh!" he yelped, and his instinct was to step aside or back, but there was nowhere to go—and when he tried, Sherlock only hemmed him in closer, with warm hands on his shoulders and smiling mouth at his ear.

"Problem?" purred Sherlock, and the sound of his voice was like crushed velvet, its vibration rumbling directly into John's chest where they were pressed together.

"—Yes, you're—" John gave up moving with a little whimper; it was too late, now. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing at full attention, and so was something else. "Sherlock. What exactly are you playing at?"

He answered with his lips around John's right earlobe, so that each slow syllable was a precious torment. "I'm making a point."

"And—aah—what point would that be?"

"You've been imposing restrictions on yourself. I'd like to make it clear that they're not required."

John's jaw dropped, then clicked shut as he sucked a shaking hiss in through his teeth. "You don't want this..."

Sherlock chuckled lowly at the edge of his clavicle. "I should think that in this case, analysis of my actions should provide you with a fair idea of what, exactly, I do and do not want."

Now he was just being frustratingly technical. Why, exactly, was that even more of a turn-on?

"On the contrary. I may not derive physical pleasure from the acts, personally"—he moved his leg deliberately, again, and several of John's synapses threatened to short out—"but my parts don't need to be involved for there to be mutual enjoyment."

"Sherlock, you really don't mind if—ah!"

"Am I acting as if I mind?" teased his partner, letting his long fingers trail down the sides of John's shirt sleeves in a perfectly maddening fashion.

"No," John managed, his voice squeaking just a little; "no, but—this isn't exactly conducive to, mmh, rational discussion on my part..."

Sherlock shrugged, and the eloquence of the movement was such that John didn't even need to open his tightly closed eyes to see it. "In my experience," he rumbled, "the most honest responses always come through unexpected provocation. A rational, controlled discussion is all well and good, of course, but given the time to prepare, you would purposely filter the expression of your own needs through a value judgment based on your preconceived expectations of me. You're too conscientious to be fully honest, and your strength of resolve is entirely geared towards self-denial. We've limited time to wade through such a tedious negotiation, at the moment, and your increasing level of distraction necessitated action. Therefore..."

John gasped as the long stream of words received its emphatic punctuation. "So—this is the
discussion, then? *Fuck.* All right—ah!—you win, I'm listening. Why don't you just—tell me what it is you expect from me, then?"

"What I expect?" questioned Sherlock, a warm laugh colouring his tone.

"Well, you've sort of got me in a—compromising position, so if I were to hazard a guess—Christ, *Sherlock!*—I'd say you're the one making the rules right now..."

"Ah, yes. Very well, then." There was a long pause, while the detective thought on the request; or, at least that's what John *assumed* he was doing, because the thought that his partner was simply trying to bring him to the edge of full incoherence before he continued was entirely too much to bear.

Finally, Sherlock disengaged his lips from the shell of John's ear with a satisfied sigh, and began to speak softly against his cheek. "First. When you find yourself with a...*situation*”—he rocked inward and up onto his toes to make his terminology clear, and John couldn't hold back a shaky moan—"I don't want you hiding it, or ignoring it, or running off to deal with it alone as if it's something shameful. I want you to talk to me; there are any number of ways we could do something about it together, to our mutual satisfaction. Certainly, there are activities in which I've no desire to partake...but I'm not disgusted by this."

John clutched gracelessly at the back of Sherlock's shirt and let a thin whine escape his lungs as they moved together. "Clearly—not," he gasped.

"And secondly...*mmm*..." John felt the curve of a wicked grin shifting the man's face. "Sometime very soon, I want you to tell me what it was, exactly, that had you hot and bothered enough to pull me into the stairwell, the other day at Bart's. I'm willing to bet that must have been quite an *interesting* little fantasy..."

"Oh, *God!*" That was all the talk John could stand; he turned his head abruptly and caught Sherlock up in a searing kiss that lasted until he was left panting and weak-kneed, stumbling over to collapse into the nearest chair.

Breathless and a bit flushed himself, Sherlock stepped away and poured himself a glass of water, downing it in one long draught before refilling it and offering it to his partner.

"Ta," John grinned weakly. "Have to say, that was *not* what I expected."

"That was basically the idea," his partner replied, smiling smugly down at him. "And it worked, didn't it? I've succeeded in shifting your basic assumptions on the whole matter, in the quickest and most efficient method available to me. Later, when we take the opportunity to discuss it in more detail, you'll be prepared to address the issue with far more honesty."

"I suppose you're not wrong," allowed John; he emptied the glass gratefully and handed it back. "But I certainly hope you don't expect me to start thinking with my dick from this point on."

"Obviously not. But neither do I want you to think as if you don't *have* one!"

A chuckling sigh escaped John's lips; he stood up, carefully adjusting his damp jeans, and pulled Sherlock in to kiss him fondly. "Oh, I've got one, all right. Thanks for the reminder, love."
At first, John wasn't sure what had woken him.

His room was dark and silent when his eyes popped open. Without moving, he catalogued his senses—sight, sound, smell, touch—and finally realised that he was not alone. Sherlock had slipped onto the bed behind him and laid one palm across John's scapula, warm through the thin T-shirt he wore, and so lightly that he might have slept right through the contact if his rest had been a little deeper.

"Love, I do appreciate your sudden interest in my gratification," he mumbled, "but it's really not necessary to prove your point twice in one night..."

"No. It's not that." Sherlock's voice was almost too quiet to hear, but it sounded subdued and tense.

That was all it took for John to blink his eyes wide open. Rolling onto his opposite side, he stared blindly across the bed until he imagined he could pick out the shadowy form of his partner. "What is it, then?" he asked, his voice hoarse with sleep.

Sherlock was silent and still for a long time, so long that John's awareness began to shift and stretch. Just after the third time he forced himself up from the edge of sleep, blinking at the shape in the darkness that he'd nearly forgotten was real again, Sherlock's voice quietly brought him back to the world.

"I have to fix it, John."

"...Fix what?"

"What happened this morning, it was my fault. And I know that the problems you've been having are my fault too."

"Did I actually say that?" His own memories were a sort of haze, after the vivid image of Sherlock's shattered mug on the lino. He recalled the feeling of the episode, more than any actions or words spoken: despair, and fear, and a hopeless, impotent rage that had pulled at him like a riptide. The echoes of it were still turning his stomach.

"Not in concrete terms, but the imagery you described was more than enough to be conclusive."

When John had awoken in the early afternoon, wrapped around Sherlock's still, thinking form like a climbing vine, his immediate embarrassment had eclipsed any desire to fill in the gaps in his memory. They'd discussed the incident only as much as was necessary to get them on even footing, to allow John the recovery of his dignity before he'd dressed and accompanied his partner back to the Yard. He'd been fighting with himself, nearly every moment since, to retain that shaky equilibrium—to hold it together well enough that Greg and the others wouldn't say anything.

"Look, Sherlock, I know you want to analyse every little thing I said—"

"Not 'want to', already have done."

"—but I really don't know exactly what came out of my mouth this morning. And I really don't want to know, either." John knew he sounded childish, saying that, but at least it was honest.

"All well and good, John, but the fact remains. I did this, and I need to fix it." Sherlock had so far lain motionless before him, but now he reached out.
John held himself still beneath the tentative touch on his upper arm, but it took effort not to flinch, and the fact of that was almost worse, really. "You don't." He cleared his throat, pressed his eyes shut, and tried again. "You don't get to just fix it. Do you understand? You can't take those things away from me, Sherlock. They might fade over time, but they won't go away."

"But you obviously need them to go away," Sherlock protested quietly; his hand slipped back to the mattress, and John curled his own arms protectively around himself, silently reclaiming his personal space.

"Well, my mind doesn't work like that. I can't delete things the way you can, and no, I don't want to try and learn—don't even ask," he interrupted himself, and he waited until Sherlock swallowed his retort before continuing. "Look, you asked me for this. You didn't delete that, did you?"

"I didn't." The answer seemed reluctant. "But it was wrong of me. And you must have suspected it would cause you problems. Why on earth did you say yes?"

John shut his eyes again, as if one darkness could be better than another. "When have I ever said no to you?—Shut up, I don't mean like that and you know it. When it's really mattered, Sherlock. When the choice was to follow you into madness, or danger. When you've asked me to run with you, and when you've asked me to stay behind,"—his voice cracked a bit on the last word, and he paused to master his breathing—"I have always, always."

"John..." Sherlock reached forward again, his large, cool hand finding John's hip in the dark—

This time it was too sudden. The sensation seemed to merge with the wave rising to choke John from within; he twitched away from the contact. He couldn't help it.

The hand lifted immediately, and Sherlock rocked back on the mattress as if he'd been burnt, muttering quickly under his breath. "Oh god. I'm sorry; I'm sorry..."

"Wait. What?" It wasn't that Sherlock didn't have things he might apologise for, but that reaction struck John as wrong enough to startle him abruptly into confusion, while the memory of his grief slipped like smoke through his fingers.

"You—didn't want to be touched! I should have realised; you might have stopped me earlier, had I not taken advantage, and I shouldn't have assumed that you would want—"

John sensed the other man's body sliding away from him; he grabbed out blindly, and snagged a bare arm just before Sherlock could slip completely out of reach. "Stop," he demanded. "What are you talking about?"

"You always say yes, to me, even when it's something you desperately don't want. You've just said so, John! Clearly I was too aggressive, in the kitchen, I practically forced myself upon you—and to think, you were afraid it would be the other way around!"

It sounded like Sherlock had got his feet on the floor, and he was still trying to pull out of the hold on his arm. Tugging hard, with his right hand clutching his headboard for leverage, John dragged the unwilling man back onto the bed. "Whoa, hey—hush now! Okay. I'm sorry, okay? It wasn't that. I promise. Sherlock, stop."

He stopped. "It was...all right, then?" he asked tentatively.

The pure, open innocence in Sherlock's voice made John's breath catch. Utterly gone was the sultry self-assurance, the commanding physical presence that had drawled with such smouldering confidence in his ear just hours before. John had been so caught up in that moment, letting his own
desires carry him along, his usual barriers weakened by exhaustion; he hadn't even stopped to think
that it might all have been an act on Sherlock's part. *Bravely forging ahead into unknown territory,
putting on a show simply because he felt he needed to satisfy me...oh, fucking hell.*

John coughed and pulled him in close. "Yes, love, it was all right. It was...possibly not the best
timing for either of us, and it was not in any way expected or required of you...but it was good. For
me, anyway. Um."

"It wasn't bad for me, either," Sherlock confessed shyly at his ear. "I find that I very much enjoyed
pleasing you."

"God, okay, now see: you need to not give me any ideas right now. One thing at a time, yes?"

"All right." Now that they lay in a full embrace, Sherlock tightened his arms around John's back, as
if declaring his adamant refusal to let John pull away again. "I misinterpreted your action. Please
explain?"

"It was...well, you were asking me about the dreams. I guess I just got a little twitchy."

"But you weren't talking about the dreams directly, then. You said—"

"No, I was," John broke in. "It's all the same thing, it's all mixed up together. I know that doesn't
make sense."

"I feel like I *should* understand, but you're right; I don't."

"Just..." Swallowing and wetting his lips, John searched for words. "You came *back* to me. You
showed up in our flat, out of the blue, with bruised ribs that you thought I didn't notice. You asked
me to accept that you weren't dead, and I did. You asked me to forgive you, and it took some time,
but I said yes. You didn't want to talk about where you'd been—and I agreed to that, as well,
because I thought it would be somehow easier to have you back, alive, without *knowing.*"

"And it still would be," stated Sherlock flatly, but John shook his head firmly against the man's
bony shoulder.

"I was wrong, Sherlock. I needed to know, and I still do. I hate it, but I need you to tell me. There's
more, isn't there?" John asked him.

It caught Sherlock off guard, clearly. "What?"

"How many stories have you told me, and how many are left?"

"I—I don't know how many I told you. The room, it's changed, I lost track." He sounded ashamed.

"That's okay," murmured John, rubbing a slow circle into his back. The loose T-shirt Sherlock
wore had ridden up around his ribs, and John gently smoothed it down. "Let's see. You've told me
about Chicago, of course; Paris, Brisbane, Istanbul, Barcelona...Miami, Moscow, Hong Kong, Las
Vegas, Warsaw...Berlin, and Manila."

"You certainly didn't have to give that list much thought," Sherlock pointed out, his voice low.

"Nope." John realised that his hands had clenched tightly in the thin cotton; he silently ordered
them to relax, and let out a long, sighing breath that made Sherlock's curls shift and tickle his nose.

Sherlock was quiet for a long moment. It was the sort of quiet that John always half-expected
should come with the sound of gears. Eventually, he made a small, unhappy noise, and said, "You remember all of the things I've told you."

"I do," John confirmed.

"And they weren't all equally terrible. But your physical cues tell me you had serious problems hearing a few of them. The last few you listed, especially."

"Well spotted."

The deep frown was audible in Sherlock's next statement. "You say you need to keep this knowledge, whatever it is. And you say you want to know the rest. But I see the effect it has on you, John! I know you're not sleeping—and I know you don't want me to know that, but I can't help knowing—and, the things you said to me this morning, they were—"

"I may not remember exactly what I said today. But I can tell you for sure, it's not just about the things that you've told me." One of John's hands slid up into Sherlock's hair of its own accord. "It's because I should have been there. I should have been by your side, every damn step of the way! It hurts to think about the moments when I might have lost you for good, without even knowing that you hadn't really been gone. And, yeah, it hurts to know that you've deleted those things, even while I'm glad they aren't hurting you anymore. It's like...I've been carrying it all alone, and I can't even say anything to you about it, because I'm not meant to remind you..."

"I have done you so many wrongs," whispered Sherlock, the words thick and strained; "I don't deserve to be forgiven..."

Hearing that sent a stab of pain through John's chest. "But—I do forgive you. It's okay, love."

"It's obviously not! I want—I need to fix this, John. Please. There must be something I can do?"

John twisted his torso within the circle of Sherlock's arms, turning his head to bring them nose-to-nose. "You're on a case. Why are you even worrying about this now? You barely even feed yourself when you're working a case, he added, silently. It hardly needed to be said.

"If you really need to ask me that, then you truly are an idiot, John Watson."

He huffed a silent laugh and leaned in to taste the lips he couldn't see. "Fine," he conceded when they eventually broke apart, "all right. I obviously don't know how to fix the damned nightmares on my own. And I know, I've been far too stubborn about it...especially recently, because of this whole Hunt thing..."

"It made sense to you, that you should try so hard to hide it," Sherlock observed. "You were merely attempting to keep your promise to me, as misguided as it was."

"Well, it's high time I get control of myself. You're the most important person in my life, Sherlock. I trust you more than anyone. If I can't put aside my insane fear of exposure when I'm with you, then what the hell is wrong with me?"

"I have a few theories," murmured Sherlock teasingly, and he stole another kiss.

John laughed and tugged at his hair. "Prat." They kissed again through Sherlock's deep chuckle, but finally John sobered, returning to the matter at hand. "So. You're really serious about this?"

"Intensely."
"Then, after this case, when we have free time again...let me tell your own stories back to you."

"Do you think that will help?"

John shrugged and tilted his head downward, smiling a little when he felt soft lips on his forehead. "I think it might. And I still want to hear the other ones. All of them."

"I fail to see how that could be a good thing," Sherlock protested.

"It happened to you, and that means it's important to me. I still want to help you, too, remember? Just, don't delete them, this time. Maybe neither of us should have to do it alone." He yawned widely; he had no idea what time it was, but there seemed to be no sign of the rising sun yet. Perhaps there was time yet to get a few more hours' rest, before they needed to return to the case.

"I think..." Sherlock hummed quietly. "I think I can agree to that. On a trial basis, of course."

"Oh, 'course," John replied, yawning again and snuggling a bit lower in his partner's warm arms. Now that the high emotions had passed, he felt sleep dragging him quickly and pleasantly down.

The low, rumbling baritone seemed to caress John's jaw, where it rested against the other man's chest. "One other thing..."

"Hmm?"

"I should begin staying with you, when you sleep. I mean, if that's all right. I don't mean to impose upon you, if you don't feel comfortable with such a step, but taking our experience in Chicago into consideration, contact might improve—"

"Sherlock?"

"—Yes?"

"Hush, and get comfortable, love."

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At five thirty in the morning, Greg's alarm went off. That wasn't an unusual occurrence in the slightest.

When he rolled over to silence it, the bed beside him was empty: this was much further from normal, at least recently, and it gave him pause as he reached up towards the bedside table. The hand on which he braced himself noted that the mattress was distinctly cool, and for a strange, surreal moment Greg imagined that he'd somehow gone back in time to Sunday—when the lack of Anna beside him had put him in a foul mood that had lingered all morning, and then shifted abruptly into harsh, protective fear in the afternoon.

*Wake up,* he told himself, banishing the unpleasant memory; *don't be an idiot.* He sat up and twisted to free his legs from the tangled sheet, retrieving his phone from the low bookshelf that sat on the nearer side of the bed; on impulse, he swiped it awake, but no message awaited him.

Yawning, he stood and picked up the trousers he'd set out for himself the previous evening. As he stepped across the room to reach into his closet, he was distracted by the faint sound of speech from down the hall.

Grabbing a shirt at random, he quietly opened the bedroom door and poked his head out to listen. It sounded like Anna's voice alone, but one could never be sure, what with having befriended a genius with truly unnatural sleeping patterns and a proven penchant for breaking and entering...just to be safe, Greg ducked back into the room long enough to throw on his thin flannel dressing gown before he padded barefoot towards the kitchen.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he could hear Anna saying softly as he got nearer. "But it doesn't make it any less weird for me, you know?"

There was a silence after that, and a soft clink like a spoon in a mug; Greg stood still and silent in the middle of the hall, hardly breathing as he waited to see if there would be an answer in the same room.

When she spoke again, he let out a faint sigh of relief at not having to worry about dealing with Sherlock this early.

"I'm not saying I don't like it. Don't get me wrong," she told someone. "It's just—how far is too far?
How long do I let it go on? Should I have said something already?"

Greg froze a second time, only a step closer to the spill of light from the kitchen doorway. His mind was racing, suddenly, trying to fill in the spaces left by the other side of the call. What's she worrying about?

"Well, no, I have to think it's pretty obvious that that's not going to happen. If he tried that, I'd really be questioning his sanity!" Anna let out a breathy little laugh with the words, and then went quiet once more, listening to a longer reply.

In a possibly illogical leap, Greg's thoughts went straight to the strange phone call he'd had from Laszlo Roth just before dinner last night. The venerable jeweller had talked a smooth spiel, acting as if he were half psychotherapist and half fortune teller, and insisting that he had something in his shop that he knew would interest Greg personally.

"Hah. Fat chance. I'd say it's got to be a little late in my life to be considering that sort of thing, wouldn't you?"

Greg hadn't missed that he'd come from that back-room chat with Patrick to find Mr Roth standing beside Anna over a case full of engagement rings. He was a lot of things, but unobservant wasn't one of them, no matter what Sherlock liked to say. But if what he was hearing right now was anything like what it seemed, perhaps Laszlo didn't have quite as much of an "instinct for lovers" as he'd so boldly professed...

"Eh. I guess I'll just try to keep an open mind, you know? I'll let you know how it goes, anyway."

God, he wished with every fibre of his being that he could have heard the first part of this conversation!

"Well, I should let you get some sleep, hon. Thanks for listening; I don't know what I'd do without you. Good luck with What's-his-name, tomorrow night...see if you can get yourself laid, this time, why don't you? You get so snippy when you're frustrated." She laughed again, and if Greg hadn't guessed it was Chaz Garvey on the line, he was sure of it now.

As she began saying her final goodbyes, Greg flashed on an image of being caught standing in the hall in an open robe, clutching folded clothing to his chest like a ninny and eavesdropping on her obviously private phone call. Eyes widening, he quickly stepped into the bath, shutting the door behind himself before he could be found out.

After a shower and shave liberally peppered with equal amounts of self-deprecation and determined optimism, Greg had worked himself around to a state of cautious unconcern. He hadn't quite managed to come up with a second theory as to what Anna may have been discussing with her friend—nothing seemed to fit as well as what he'd first imagined. Still, he hoped he was wrong, and he was perfectly willing to assume that was the case.

That is, at least, until he observed something that proved otherwise.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he smelled more than just coffee. He couldn't help smiling at his girlfriend as he turned the corner into the kitchen, still buttoning up his shirt.
"Ooh, black on black today? How very Johnny Cash of you." Anna ran her palms appreciatively over the dark shirtfront, trailing her fingers around his waist as she moved to embrace him from behind, resting her cheek against his shoulder blade. "Sexy man."

"Ah, it was luck of the draw," he demurred, dropping his hands to clasp hers at his belt buckle. "I'll have to wear the grey jacket now, won't I, or I'll look like the Grim Reaper."

"Mm, that's Detective Inspector Grim Reaper, and don't you forget it," she said.

Chuckling, Greg spun and caught her upturned mouth with a kiss, playfully grasping the tightly tied belt of her quilted red spa robe and using it like a handle to draw her close. "Morning, my love. Problem sleeping?"

"No big deal. I woke up for the bathroom around quarter to five, and I could tell I wasn't going to get back to sleep before your alarm. Instead, I decided it was still early enough to catch Chaz on the phone."

"Oh yeah?" Play it cool, you didn't hear anything. "How's he, then?"

"Good, good. Busy; lots of murder lately. And he's started dating again."

"Well! Best of luck to him, on the murder and the mayhem." Rather than pry for more details and risk giving himself away, Greg switched quickly to a safer topic. "Now, more importantly: there seems to be a divine aroma in here...but I see only one divine thing in the room,—he made a show of playfully sniffing and nuzzling at her neck—"and, nope, she doesn't smell like that."

"Stop!" she giggled, squirming at the tickle of his nose; he stayed there, but stopped tickling. "Ahh...mm, or don't stop, assuming you enjoy burnt frittata..."

Grinning, he released her immediately, making her laugh again as she turned and bent to check on the pan in the cooker. "All right, this is almost ready. Maybe another minute or three."

"Such a treat. You absolutely spoil me, love...but here, I'll watch it and take it out for you. It'll need to sit and cool for a bit, right? Should give you time to get dressed to go."

She gave him an odd look over her shoulder, as if she was about to say something; instead, she smiled and handed over the potholders. "That's fair," she agreed.

Soon enough, they were seated together with their breakfast; unsurprisingly, Anna's creation was exactly as delicious as it had smelled. As he ate, Greg found that he couldn't stop grinning across the table.

"Will you please stop staring at me like I'm dessert?" Anna eventually scolded, sipping at her coffee with a playfully stern face and twinkling eyes.

"I'm sorry," he joked, very much not sorry; "can't there be dessert after breakfast?"

"No, there can't, not if you want to get out the door in anything close to good time."

Standing, Greg gathered their empty plates. He bent close and purred into her ear, "But dessert looks so utterly scrumptious, this morning," taking a moment to press a long kiss to the exposed spot above her nape. He loved when she wore her hair up in this artfully messy twist...

Anna made a soft noise and tilted her head in a helpless invitation, and he seriously considered dropping the dishes in his hands to take it. But in the next second she slipped sideways off the seat,
standing and smoothing down the skirt of her grey-dappled sundress. "You had dessert last night, darling. Twice. You should pace yourself, you'll rot your teeth."

"Is that so," he laughed; as he walked to the sink, he revelled in the weightless spring in his step and the fizzing pleasure singing through his veins. Anna could improve his mood a hundredfold, just by being near; when she was in the mood for naughty banter, it really felt like nothing could possibly bring him down.

_Vertheless, she told Garvey, doesn't matter does it? I have to try, whether it means I get shot down or not. She's bloody well everything to me,_ he sighed happily to himself, smiling wide as she took up her bags and joined him to go out the door.

The drive up to Edgware was a little over a half hour, and Greg spent it with Ronny in the passenger seat, talking through the information the sergeant had collected on Trenton Dewey. Copies of Ronny's work had been left at the Yard, spread out on the second-floor conference table with which all of them had become overly familiar in recent days; Greg knew that John was there right now, with Sally and Anna, probably poring over the same facts that he himself was trying to soak in.

"So the father was a veterinary doctor," he mused.

"Yes," answered Ronny, "Tim Dewey was trying to patent the delayed-release dosage system for use with horses, mainly. One dose of a medication right away, and one inserted beneath the animal's skin to repeat the dose a few weeks later, without having to make a second house call."

"Stable call."

"Something like that."

"Right, and this Trent...no criminal records, no warning signs?"

"Doesn't seem so. He was possibly a bit of a loner, from what I can find, but it's hard to say. He runs his business alone—people ship him antiques, radios mostly, to be restored—and he works mainly from home, so there's nothing much to search besides this house."

"Which he inherited from his parents, and where Tim had presumably developed his veterinary prototype and tested the microcapsules. We know Violet was likely Trent's first victim, but Dad died of a stroke. Nothing suspicious there." Greg reached the road he was looking for, and slowed to cautiously approach the Dewey home at number sixty-four.

Occasional small trees broke the monotony, but at first glance the street appeared to be surreally bland. From one end to the other, both sides of it were filled by identical semi-detached homes, lined up behind nearly identical front gardens. Each two-storey duplex was painted in one of three dingy, toneless shades of dishwater grey, and the rows of them sat like silent warts beneath the flat, overcast sky. Even their roofs somehow managed to be sad and ugly.

"What a depressing neighbourhood," Greg murmured, taking the car down to a crawl as they got closer. "Almost expect identical kids to come plodding out of every door, and start bouncing their balls in synchronised time, like we're in bloody Camazotz..."
The young man gave him an odd look. "What's that, some old Doctor Who episode?"

"Nah, it's a book from when I was a kid—oh, never mind!" He parked in front of number seventy-one, and they sat and looked across at their destination, three doors down; they'd requested a backup of uniformed officers, in case the man was at home. The backup hadn't arrived yet.

The next vehicle to come up the road wasn't them either: it was a black cab, and it stopped to disgorge a familiar dark-coated figure directly in front of the house they were watching.

Sherlock stood still and expressionless on the pavement as the cab pulled away, looking intently towards the house.

"Don't you dare," growled Greg under his breath; he grunted in exasperated relief as the man turned at last and strode up the street towards their plain fleet car. Sherlock tried the handle for the rear, then tilted his head to meet the DI's peeved glare; Greg held the man's eyes and waited until he felt his point was made, and only then hit the button to pop the door lock.

"Temper, temper, Lestrade," chided Sherlock, sliding elegantly into the back seat.

"You're an arse and you know it," he snapped, gripping the wheel in lieu of a long, posh neck.

"Come now, are you still insulted when I don't feel the desire to ride along in the back of your police car? Tiresome. I've lowered myself to being carted around quite enough lately, and John isn't here to press the issue. It's frankly none of your concern if I prefer to travel alone, rather than as a common criminal."

Greg flexed his fingers and gritted his teeth. "It's an unmarked car, Sherlock. You know we don't transport suspects."

"Oh, don't you? Because I have a very clear memory of having been handcuffed..."

"That was one time! One bloody time! Let it go!"

Sherlock sniffed. "What about you, Sergeant Patel? Care to weigh in?"

Ronny's head jerked up in surprise. "No; no, I've got nothing to say!"

"But, you did miss this," added Ronny, in a tone that somehow came off as both timidly respectful and brazenly deadpan: it was a special talent of his, that artful voice. He reached over his shoulder and offered the file from which he'd been reading out loud.

"Don't need it. I was briefed on my way here, as well," replied the detective. "Now, why don't we get on with this, already?"

Greg turned his eyes resolutely back to the road ahead, and its continuing lack of any sort of response vehicle. "We're waiting for local support."

"They're being quite slow. Maybe they've forgotten about you, Lestrade. He's not home, anyway; it's blindingly obvious."

"Uh-huh. 'Course it is. But that's not to say he might'n't come home, is it? We'll follow procedure, Sherlock." It grated on Greg more than usual, today, playing the responsible adult in their
functionally dysfunctional team; he wanted to get this over with just as much as Sherlock, if not more. It wasn't lost on him that they were still working against time.

Thankfully, something in his tone had apparently warned Sherlock off; the man fell blessedly silent rather than push any more buttons, and so the three of them waited.

And waited.

When movement at the far end of the street resolved itself at last into familiar grey-and-orange, it was a near thing to judge which of them sprang from the car first. Oddly enough, Greg was willing to bet it had been Ronny.

The two arriving support officers, who appeared to believe themselves perfectly punctual, split up at Greg's request: one accompanied Ronny to interview any neighbours they could raise, while the other went inside along with Greg and Sherlock. This northern borough was one that hadn't seen very much of Holmes' presence, at least officially, and only one of the constables had even heard of him; that one went off with Ronny, of course, while PC Whitney gave Sherlock the side-eye at every opportunity, and Greg too, by extension. It wasn't well-calculated to improve Greg's mood.

Sherlock seemed impatient, as well, though utterly unconcerned by Whitney's apparent opinion of him. As he stalked through the home, deductions sprang from his lips tersely, one after another, without their usual elaborate explanations.

"Hasn't been home in four days."

"Suspicious nature. Likes to peer through the blinds at the neighbours."

"Cuts his own hair."

"Idolised his father, despised his mother and his aunt—grudges held from a rebellious youth..."

"Time in the countryside. Take a sample of this dried mud, Lestrade."

"He recently rekindled contact with an old friend about whom he cared romantically. This person—this man had broken things off in the past, and Trent had pined after him."

And only a few seconds later, while carefully tilting a desk blotter to peer beneath it: "The love interest is dead, now. Not Trent's doing."

PC Whitney turned to Greg, at that. "How's he know that, then? You believe this guy?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," he snapped in reply, "now, shut it!"

Sherlock paused, raising a silent eyebrow at Greg; the message might have been my, you're cross this morning or he's hardly worth the effort or a bit of both. Then the sleuth was off through the door to the cellar, calling out behind him, "He locks the cellar door from inside when he works. Paranoia."

Greg and the constable followed, reaching the bottom of the stairs just as Sherlock observed, "Recently increased paranoia, in fact. He's moved equipment out."
"It looks pretty full to me," said Whitney, doubtfully.

Sherlock snorted softly. "Dust patterns indicate a very different arrangement of items. Here—and here—and here."

Only their long history of working together allowed Greg to understand that in this instance, a pointed finger meant "photograph this, Lestrade." He did so without question for each place indicated, ignoring the looks that Whitney sent his way.

The contents of Dewey's home, while clearly eloquent in Sherlock's eyes, hadn't been all that telling to Greg. But here in the cellar, he found himself seeing more; it was perhaps only an inkling of the greater picture, but it was enough to distract him from his bad mood.

"Dewey shifted the stuff from his mail-in antique radio restoration business, to try and fill in the table he'd cleared a bit," Greg said slowly, "but he never wiped down the tables. This old radio, and the pile of tools beside it, they were over on the other side, yeh?"

"Precisely. Visualise this workbench without the extraneous items, and you can clearly discern the footprints of his father's equipment. Racks, flasks, a burner. And see, here, the clear outline of a DRE Standard tabletop centrifuge."

"I'll have to take your word on that, Sherlock." Greg leaned over to get a better angle, and dutifully photographed the dust smudges.

"Surely you'll do better on this one then, Lestrade," he hummed, throwing Greg an expectant glance as he gestured to another pattern.

Greg centred it in his viewfinder: a distinctive pair of shapes, like a horseshoe and block. Snapping the picture, he guessed the first thing that came to mind: "A microscope?"

Sherlock smiled, just a slight curve of his lips, and sketched a curt nod of confirmation before whirling away from the workbench. "We need to get into his emails, next. The dead man he loved is almost surely a direct link to either Leighburn or Cornish, and possibly to the fourth victim as well!"

"Well, when he went out of town he took his laptop with him," Greg pointed out.

"Won't be a problem. He used email addresses provided by his ISP for his home and business. They can be accessed through a Web portal."

*And you likely already know the login information,* he thought, smirking as Sherlock shooed the unpleasant constable ahead of him up the stairs.

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Sherlock sifts through new data, in the company of a crowded office, and reaches a few new conclusions.

"Afternoon," murmured a polite young detective constable, stepping to one side of the hall out of Sherlock's path as she passed. She was short and athletic, with frizzy ginger hair that grazed her shoulders, and she shifted her gaze ahead of her after only a second's eye contact. He thought he'd seen her before, but that was an unsurprising suspicion, whether or not it was true. They all tended towards a degree of sameness, here, after a while.

It was an interesting thing, the variety of reactions Sherlock evoked from the denizens of Scotland Yard. Depending on how far he strayed in the building, and what sort of posture and mood he exhibited, he could observe a full range: confusion, suspicion, wary acceptance, amusement, indignation, misinformed fear. Possibly there was a touch of technically justified fear, as well; after all, not all of the rumours that had spread regarding him were false. More rarely, the face of an officer or employee here gave him a passing glimpse of frank admiration, or pity—and while the admiration tended to unsettle him, it was the pity that bewildered him.

What is she thinking? wondered Sherlock, giving in to the urge and spinning after the ginger DC had passed him; he stared at her retreating figure as if scrutinising her back would reveal her thoughts about him.

It told him that she owned two dogs, had sprained her right ankle three months prior, and had recently moved in with her girlfriend. It did not explain what she found so pitiable in the sight of Sherlock Holmes.

John looked up from a legal pad to see Sherlock approaching. "Where've you been?" he asked. He was standing in the small clear area that made a not-quite-hallway between the workstations of Donovan and Patel, swaying slightly from foot to foot in the way that he did when trying to process large amounts of information.

Twitch in his cheek, slight dilation of his pupils: glad to see me. "Walking the halls to think."
Seventh floor suited me, today."

"All right," John hummed affably, and looked back to the pad. When Sherlock stopped near him, he swayed again, but this time the subtle movement went in only one direction.

Noting the tiny, almost inconsequential tells that signalled John's reaction to his presence was almost second nature for Sherlock. Now, of course, he knew them to be intentionally muted, overlaid with a casual sense of space. Not formality—never that, from John, outside of the fraught weeks of cold anger after his return last year—but friendly professionalism: it was John's way of keeping their secret. It impressed Sherlock, in some ways. The doctor tended to be a poor liar, but in some situations he showed himself to be a fair actor—skilled enough to maintain a basic disguise, or take a convincing pratfall when necessary. Here, however, and in the various other arenas of their work, John seemed to maintain the façade effortlessly, acting almost exactly as he had done in the days before Chicago, before the forged weapons at the palace, before...

Well, we're clearly not fighting. So, before my fall and return, too, I suppose.

Sherlock tried to do the same, himself. He knew that he was well able to play a part, and so for the last five and a half months, when they were working, he'd assumed the role of Sherlock-without-John. He knew how that man acted, what that man said. The memory of being that man was clear as day, and still felt as raw and real here in this building as it had over three years ago.

It wasn't nearly as easy as John made it look.

Invariably, Sherlock found himself looking too long, standing too close, twitching his fingers with the urge to straighten John's collar for him; John, for his part, deflected the gazes and fidgeted away, pleasantly and unerringly adapting every moment into something that would pass muster to the outside observer. And pass it would...although Sherlock's own control seemed to slip in and out, depending on his mood, John appeared confident, even long-practiced in the art of hiding his relationship. It was enough to make one wonder.

Sherlock's thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the office door across from them. Sally emerged briskly, carrying a light bundle of clipped papers, and went off in the direction of the copy and fax area without a word. Behind her, the desk was offset from the open doorway, but Lestrade was clearly visible between the open slats of the vertical blinds. He didn't appear to be on the phone—not that it would necessarily matter if he were—and so Sherlock saw nothing to stop him going in. John flipped a page of his notes over, and chewed on the inside of one cheek, and didn't follow.

"How goes it?" asked Sherlock, throwing himself into one of the seats facing the DI's desk. The door blew mostly closed behind him with his sweeping movement, briefly ruffling a few loose papers.

Lestrade stroked blunt fingers over his chin. "The stuff we found out at Dewey's place wasn't much, but it was enough to go on with. I just got the go-ahead from the magistrate to access his bank account history and emails, so we can move forward with that, now. Assuming you haven't gone ahead and cracked his email already in the ninety minutes we've been back, that is!"

"I considered it," he replied breezily. "But my conscience apparently got the better of me."

Lestrade had automatically set his face into a mask of resigned suspicion, but this comment caused him to look up sharply; he glanced out through the glass to where John waited, and then back to Sherlock's guileless face. At last he murmured, "He's good for you, I'll say that."
Sherlock frowned and was silent a long moment; the older man turned his attention to his computer, and began to calmly type something. The memory of the ginger constable's expression still hovered in Sherlock's mind, and when he spoke again, it was quiet enough that Lestrade didn't even look over from the screen right away.

"Nobody here knows, do they? About us?"

One of Lestrade's eyebrows raised a little, and his brown eyes twitched into the beginning of another glance outside his office, but he controlled it. "No," he answered, his voice careful and soft. "Just me, and Anna."

It wasn't a surprising answer. He trusted Lestrade to respect the broad principles of privacy, even though the man had a proven penchant for taking embarrassing videos of him. Still, he found that his shoulders hitched down a notch at hearing it.

"Do you..." Sherlock swallowed, and shook his head slightly as if to clear it of cobwebs, and resisted the powerful urge to turn and look over his own shoulder. "Do you think they should?"

Lestrade sat back in his chair, his hands abandoning the keyboard entirely. "Not for me to say," he finally replied. "I assume you've discussed it."

It felt, somehow, as if time had stopped in this little glassed-in room.

"We have," Sherlock said; he added a little motion, half a shrug and half something else: the subject isn't closed.

"Well...you'd likely not get one consistent reaction from everyone here. Some people are bound to want to give you grief, and it's between the two of you how important that is to you. But, the people I know, and my team especially...they'd adjust, and they'd work with you just the same. I can't imagine it would cause any lasting problems." Lestrade crossed his arms with the last part of the quiet little speech, and his steady expression read as a promise to personally ensure the truth of his statement, by whatever means necessary.

A tiny warmth bloomed within Sherlock's chest. He nodded, and opened his mouth to make a reply, but just then he saw Lestrade's gaze fly abruptly up over his shoulder. It was just enough warning to stop the words in his throat before the office door banged open.

"Whoops, sorry!" laughed Anna; her boyfriend quickly jumped up and shifted a stack of folders and paperwork to the top of the file cabinet behind him, clearing enough space on his desk for her to set down the takeaway bag and drinks carrier she bore.

Ronny filed in after her with a second bulging bag. Sherlock stood, a bit indignant at the interruption, and moved aside to make way for the sudden parade: John and Sally and even Anderson followed, and they all crowded around Lestrade's desk in a cloud of distracting chatter and aromatic Chinese food.

"I thought we had a room for this," sniffed Sherlock, crowded further to the side as Sally reached past him to claim a container of lo mein.

"Pushed out to make space for a major Organised briefing," Sally informed him. She accepted chopsticks from Ronny, and popped the flaps of her meal open with relish. Sherlock could tell from the seafood-heavy aroma of her noodles that Ronny had taken Anna with him all the way out to Fong's Bistro. It was a bit out of the way of the usual quick-service establishments near the Yard, but Ronny was clearly trying to ingratiate himself by choosing one of Lestrade's seldom-
frequented favourites.

Sherlock edged around the group, unable to hold back a scowl—he didn't like to weigh himself down with heavy meals during cases, but that didn't make the food smell any less appetising—and he had nearly made it to the door when Lestrade called out to him.

"Oi, Sherlock; I pulled up the web portal for Dewey's email, d'you want to take a crack at it now, or wait?"

"Take a crack at it?" he retorted. "Do you really believe I would find it difficult to determine the man's passwords? After what I've observed in his home, this will be child's play!"

"Come on then, take my seat and have at it."

"Oh, fine." Sherlock completed his circuit around the office, passing the door and returning up the opposite side. He carefully squeezed past Anna and John as he moved to join the DI behind his desk.

As he did, John made a nonchalant little movement of his own, bringing their hands into contact briefly while Sherlock's back shielded them from view of the Yarders; Sherlock looked down in surprise at feeling the warm crinkle of wax paper against his palm, and found himself clutching a packet containing a single slim and perfect spring roll.

Accessing Trent Dewey's email account took very little effort indeed. Enduring a pleased bump of Lestrade's fist against his shoulder, Sherlock opened up the inbox and archived message folders, tiling them across the monitor. As he began skimming with purpose through the headers, he nibbled delicately at his spring roll and tuned out the bulk of the inane chit-chat among the six people lunching in the room. Every now and then, discussion turned back to the case, and a few sentences filtered through his concentration.

At one point Sally told everyone, "Haven't found a direct connection so far, but Dewey went to uni very close by to the video store that employed James Leighburn as hiring manager in those same years."

Ronny made a muffled, contradictory noise, swallowed, and pointed out, "But he never worked there."

"Well, what if he applied, and Leighburn refused to hire him?" John asked. "They probably don't keep records of the rejected applications very long, do they?"

There was a general murmur of agreement from the group, and everyone ate in blissful silence for approximately forty seconds.

Not to be left out of the case discussion, and clearly not content to let Sherlock enjoy a few moments' peace, Anderson spoke up next. "The mud sample you gave me to analyse is substantially similar to the soil composition found in Gloucestershire—specifically, the Forest of Dean."

"Fast work; thanks, Phil. Tim Dewey grew up in Mitcheldean, and that's not too far from the forest
proper," Lestrade recalled, pausing in the act of picking a bite of chicken from Anna's lunch, while she took one of his prawns in exchange. "Wasn't there some old deed you'd turned up, Ronny?"

"Yes, sir; it's some sort of small cabin property passed down from a few generations back, but I haven't been able to place it on a map, just yet. It's possible that it's a paperwork relic; the actual structure may not be there anymore."

"It is," Sherlock interjected, and six pairs of eyes immediately centred on him. "Trent mentioned spending time there to his ex-boyfriend, no less than three times since they got back in contact last March. He hinted—rather clumsily—that his cabin boasted a large enough bed to share; the object of his affections appeared to remain largely unmoved."

"Oh! This would be the guy you said is dead now, right?" Handing his takeaway container off to Anna, Lestrade stood up from the low filing cabinet upon which he'd been perched, and moved around to peer over Sherlock's shoulder.

"Bill Epping was his name," he answered. "An old school mate of Trent's. They lived together for at least a year, but it ended badly, and Bill stayed out of touch for a decade or more. Judging by the earliest emails between them here, I'd say they got reacquainted by chance, then began meeting for drinks once every week or so. Bill was mostly standoffish when it came to rekindling romance, but when drunk he took much more to reminiscing; it appears they had a number of alcohol-fuelled discussions about people who had stood in the way of their relationship in one way or another, over the years."

Lestrade rested a hand on the chair back and leaned in a little. "That sounds promising. Have we got an outright motive in here? Or better yet, a confession?"

"Trent's a bit unhinged, certainly emotionally unstable, but not stupid. He never states any details outright, but look here, in the middle of a message in early July: 'The things we talked about...I've come up with a way to get back, and it's brilliant.' He'd given deliberate thought to revenge as much as a year ago."

"That's pretty vague, no kidding," John commented.

Sherlock looked up, and his thoughts were momentarily stalled. There was a small smear of Kung Pao sauce on John's upper lip; instinctively, Sherlock's tongue flicked out, and he watched John echo the movement without hesitation. Dragging his eyes down and clearing his throat abruptly, he clicked over to show Lestrade another email. "This one just before New Year's neatly avoids details, as well, but is a little clearer on motive: 'I saw my Mum, yesterday. Remember the time she kicked you out on your arse, when you needed a place to crash? Fucking slag. Well, Happy Christmas.' Bill's response was: 'Dunno what you're on about, mate. Wanna get together for drinks again?' Clearly he hadn't been fully informed of the plan."

Lestrade moved from behind the chair, nodding brusquely. "Right. Bill Epping, then. Okay, Ronny, soon as you've finished eating, you know the drill."

"Full background and all connected names, searching for commonalities between him and the two loose victims, plus every customer who was at the clothing shop. Present company excepted," Patel grinned, quickly scraping up the last few morsels of his Hunan pork and tipping them into his mouth.
After their early lunch, the crowd in Lestrade's office thinned out at last. Sherlock remained seated behind the desk, having moved on from analysis of the suspect's emails to studying the newly released bank records. Patel had set himself to work on round umpteen of the Name Game, while Anderson had scuttled off to wherever it was he went when he wasn't wanted. Back at her own desk, Sally was juggling a few tasks, including contacting the appropriate local authorities to get assistance in plotting the likely location of Dewey's cabin, and making a round of friendly, carefully subtle checks once again on all of the boutique hostages, to make sure nobody had yet dropped dead. Anna had pulled a seat up to her workstation, and the two of them appeared to be chatting casually in between Sally's calls.

Lestrade glanced over the figures and dates that were beginning to scroll over his monitor, then stepped back away from Sherlock's shoulder. "All right, it looks like you've got what you need. If you're missing anything, I can make another request in a bit." He patted the breast pocket of his grey suit jacket to check for his phone, and glanced down at his watch. "You two will be okay in here for a while? I have a few calls I need to make."

"Of course we will be," Sherlock scoffed. "What trouble, exactly, do you think we'll be getting up to in your office?"

"Don't answer that," John put in quickly. "We'll be fine, Greg. Go ahead."

Sherlock watched as John traded a brief look with the DI: something that was half a shared joke, and half a silent, serious exchange he'd seen frequently between them in the past year. He knew that they had become friends, while he'd been away, but in the last twenty-four hours Sherlock had gained unexpected insight into just how deep that care had gone, and what actions it had entailed. As he watched Lestrade's greying head bend down beyond the office window, speaking into Anna's ear before straightening and striding off down the hallway, Sherlock found himself considering how he might go about offering the Inspector his thanks.

The clatter of John dragging one of the small chairs around the desk pulled him from his thoughts.

"I wonder if he'd rather have made his calls from his own desk," John mused, settling himself in at Sherlock's side.

"Not while he thought it unlikely he could make them without interruption," he replied dismissively. "One is personal; something to do with Anna, and he doesn't want her to overhear. The other call, he's feeling antsy about, but it's something official—and not the sort of official business he likes to talk about from his desk. It always makes him feel less trapped, more in control, if he can be pacing about somewhere when he's speaking to my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Hm. One more deduction than I'd been expecting, there." Sherlock frowned briefly in the direction Lestrade had gone, then returned his attention to the monitor with a shrug.

"Huh."

He sensed John's eyes upon him for the next few minutes, but he remained intent upon the numbers as they formed themselves into groupings and rhythms in his head: here were the shipping costs of his antiques restoration business; here were the dinners and pub nights with Bill Epping. Council tax, grocery budget, phone bills, all quite boring...charges at petrol stations were slightly more useful, showing long trips becoming more and more frequent over recent months, presumably to
his cabin in the woods...

*There's something else. Something I'm not seeing. What doesn't fit?*

"Ah! Here!" he exclaimed, as the figures he was searching for slotted into place all at once.

Picking up the handset on the desk phone, he hit the button for Patel’s direct extension. When the sergeant answered, he gave instructions without preamble. "Two more names. Stephen Blake, Nathan Felder. Both received odd payments from Trent Dewey on four separate occasions. Start with height and weight; I think we'll find that these two match our mysterious henchmen."
Anna has some one-on-one time with Sally Donovan, and it's a perfect opportunity to look for answers to some of her questions. It seems that Sally feels the same way.

Out in view of the bustling expanse of cubicles and workstations that made up the fourth floor, New Scotland Yard seemed an entirely different place than what Anna had so far experienced. She'd spent hours tucked away in the quiet solitude of the conference room, and then some more time in Greg's office, where their little group had filled the room completely enough to block out her awareness of the others working outside. Now, she had a seat tucked in at one side of Sally Donovan's desk, and while the low walls on two sides afforded a modicum of privacy, she found herself almost bewildered by the chaotic buzz of voices, ringing phones and purposeful movement that filled the floor.

When she had walked through it, before lunch, it somehow hadn't seemed this intense. From her seated position, Anna almost felt as if the office was spinning around her.

She must have made a face. Sally looked over, tilted her head, and said, "You get used to it. Tuesday afternoons get a little weird some weeks."

"How do you think?"

She shrugged. "Talking to myself helps, sometimes..."

Anna wondered how many people in the division were contributing to the noise problem by talking to themselves, but dismissed the thought quickly. It couldn't possibly be that many of the people she was hearing.

"I'm surprised you invited me to come sit with you," Anna commented next. "You've got a lot to do right now, don't you?"

"It's fine; a lot of this will be wheel-spinning, since we're bound to have a better idea of the target soon. I just thought you might enjoy a change of pace, is all. A little female company." A secretive smile spread across Sally's face. "You seem to have a pretty high tolerance for all of these guys, but I know that after this many days working one case, Greg usually tends to get a little..."

"Single-minded?"

She laughed, reaching for the phone to begin dialling her first call. "I was gonna say strung out, but yeah. At least you got him to go home last night; he needed rest, and he usually doesn't listen to me..."
when I try to tell him!"

A touch of heat came into Anna's cheeks, as she thought about exactly how much potential rest they'd chosen to sacrifice, in favour of other activities.

Greg chose that moment to emerge from the office behind them, straightening the collar of his grey jacket as he bent close to speak without disturbing Sally's work. "Gotta go make a couple calls, and pick some stuff up downstairs. Might be a little while, sorry."

"Okay. Don't worry about me; Sally's keeping me company."

A warm puff of a laugh tickled her ear. "Of course she is. You realise she's pushing for another dinner invite."

"I don't see why she shouldn't," she giggled softly. "Now, go on..."

He pecked a furtive kiss onto her cheek, lightning quick, and walked away with a grin on his face just as Sally hung up and rang the next number on her list.

Anna spoke up in the next pause between calls. "Has he always been that way? So driven, I mean. It strikes me as a long habit."

"Uh-huh. 'Course, I've only worked under him a little less than eight years, and I'm sure he pushes himself a fair bit to keep up with Holmes, 'cause he thinks he bloody needs to. But I can tell you there was one time, in the late nineties, when Detective Sergeant Lestrade got so tied up in a rape case he was working that he ran himself straight into the ground, half-dead with 'flu. Albert Underhill had to drag him home, practically unconscious, and his wife threw an absolute wobbly."

"Wait, so you knew Greg before you worked with him?"

"Well, not personally. My sister Hannah did. She was best friends with Tracy ever since uni, and she and Tracy would tell tales when I was by...you know..."

Sally wore the beginnings of an uncomfortable expression, and Anna could sympathise. She backed off, with an easy, calming gesture, and let Sally dial the next witness on her list.

This time, as soon as she rang off, Sally turned to Anna purposefully. "So...can I ask you a question?"

"Sure you can. I can't guarantee I'll have an answer," she responded, smiling.

"Right, maybe not. But...okay, I'm just gonna ask. Is there something going on with Holmes? Between him and John?"

"Really?" Anna did her best to let the shock she felt at having been put on the spot come through in her face, hoping it would be read as shock at the idea of John and Sherlock hiding anything. She didn't know Sally all that well yet, but she had to assume the woman had at least a little experience in determining whether she was being lied to. *What the hell do I say to this?*

"Really," the sergeant answered. "I swear, I've been picking up on something. I can't quite put my
finger on it, but something's different. And when we were having lunch in there, I thought I saw...and I just thought...well, you're friends with him, aren't you?"

"Um..."

"Ah, yeah, never mind. I guess nobody's really friends with him, 'cept the doctor."

That is so not the direction I was hoping this would go, Anna thought, frowning. "No, no; I am friends with Sherlock. Granted, I'm not really sure how that happened, but...look, if there was something going on. Why do you want to know?"

"Basic curiosity? I dunno." Sally pursed her lips and glanced away. "No, see...I used to give him a lot of shite, all right? The way he was, back when I came into Homicide, he had no respect, no tact—a blatant disregard for proper procedure and evidence handling; he treated half of us like scum, and the other half like spots on the wall! He'd go out of his way to air your private life in front of everyone, just to show off—and god forbid you had anything you'd rather keep a secret, that was like dangling a piece of bloody candy—"

"—Okay, okay, I get the idea! Calm down."

She took a deep breath, looking down and smoothing her spread hands along the edge of the desk as she slowly exhaled. "Sorry, Anna. Someone had to try and take him down a peg or two, you see? And that was me; I guess nobody else had the guts to stand up to Sherlock bloody Holmes. Well, there was Greg of course, but that was a whole different thing, and I'd be lying if I said I ever really understood it."

"Yeah, they've got an...interesting relationship," mused Anna, tapping a finger against her lips. "And Greg has the patience of a bloody saint, but that's beside the point. What I'm trying to say, here..." Sally rolled her eyes to the ceiling while she searched for the right words. "You'll hear us sniping at each other, right? And he still pisses me off, it's pretty much his fucking superpower! But...it's different, now. He's different. And I've seen how it is, here, without him around. How Greg is. Three bloody years Holmes was gone, and even though Greg let me off the hook for how it all went down, well, I couldn't help but blame myself, could I?"

Anna made a soft, noncommittal noise of sympathy. She still didn't really have a good understanding of the events that had led up to Sherlock's false suicide. All she knew for sure was that it had clearly left an indelible mark on each of the people she'd gotten acquainted with here, and that it wasn't a topic that any of them really felt comfortable discussing.

Sally started to glance over her shoulder towards the closed door of Greg's office, but stopped herself with a sigh, setting her focus onto her interlaced fingers as she pushed through the last of what she felt she needed to say. "I may have resented the hell out of that arsehole, maybe even hated him a little bit, but...it's looking like he's human, after all this time, you know? I guess that's why I'm asking. I know, it's none of my business."

A gentle smile lifted Anna's lips; she reached over and laid a hand on the other woman's arm. "Well, I'm pretty sure he's got one more person on his side than he thinks..."

The phone on Sally's desk began to ring. With a glance at the caller ID, the sergeant straightened and reached out for her notepad. "Oh, that's the Forestry Commission office in Gloucester calling back about tracking down that cabin, sorry—"

"It's fine," Anna quickly assured her. "I'm just going to go to the restroom, okay?"
She looked through the plate glass wall of Greg's office as she made her retreat. Between the vertical blinds' open slats, she could clearly see John's blond hair bent low over the desk; he appeared to be scribbling notes as Sherlock read aloud from the computer screen. They didn't glance up at all while she strode past.

*You guys have no idea how lucky I just got,* she thought pointedly in their direction. *Your secret may not be safe with me much longer!*

Having dawdled as long as she could in the ladies' room, Anna made her way back towards Sally's workstation. This time, she was determined to stay on the offensive. If she could just keep Sally distracted, maybe their topic of discussion wouldn't drift back into dangerous territory. She didn't want to have to lie; she really did enjoy talking with Greg's colleague, and she was hoping they would become better friends.

Slipping back into her seat, she restarted the conversation abruptly, and on her own terms. "So, honestly, Sally. What was Tracy really like?"

Sally blinked and shrugged. "I guess I liked her, at first. She and my sister are a fair bit older than me, so the first time I met Tracy, I was only about thirteen years old. It's not as if Hannah spent all that much time with me while she was in uni; who wants their little sister hanging all over their friends, right? But a few years later, after I was away from home myself, we got a lot closer. So I was around her mates more..."

Anna felt as if she were positively bursting with questions, but she didn't feel right asking any of them. Surely it wasn't appropriate to wish she'd been a fly on the wall to witness her boyfriend's previous marriage. Instead, she kept her mouth shut and a pleasantly curious look on her face, waiting for Sally to sort through her memories for something to say.

After a thoughtful moment, Sally spoke again, her eyes focused on a point in the distance. "I'd hear stuff now and then about Tracy's police officer boyfriend. This would have been starting around ninety-four? Ninety-five, maybe? She seemed head-over-heels to me at the time. I still remember the day I was over at Hannah's, and Tracy burst in practically squealing, waving her engagement ring in our faces. That was the thing about her: she was nothing but energy, whether she was in a good mood or bad. A loud, stubborn little pixie, made entirely of perk and sarcasm. She was funny, but she could rub you the wrong way, you know? You had to step lightly, with her."

"Huh." Anna tried to imagine Greg matched with that kind of woman. She knew he could be stubborn, too, as long as he believed the facts were in his favour. And with his sense of humour... "They must've been quite a pair."

"Hey. Would you stop that?"

"Sorry, what?"

"Stop comparing yourself to her! Sure, Tracy wasn't evil incarnate; you're smart enough that I'm sure you weren't expecting her to be. But she was short-sighted, quick-tempered, and demanding. And she cheated on the best man I've ever known, so as far as I'm concerned, she's not worth a second thought, yeh?"
Anna dropped her head with a grimace. "Yeah, okay. I'm sorry, Sally."

"Don't apologise to me," Sally told her. She looked as if she wanted to say more, but aborted whatever it was with a blink and a quick pursing of her lips. Instead, she turned decisively to pick up the handset of her phone once more, allowing them both enough breathing room to step back from the suddenly weighted subject.

Sally hung up the phone, scratching a checkmark next to Esther Newbury's name on her list. She swivelled her chair back towards Anna, stretching her arms overhead as she did so. "I need a break. Fancy a walk across the street? A proper latte would hit the spot."

"Great idea."

They crossed the still-busy department floor together, waving on their way past to Martin Dane—he was talking on his cell phone, but he smiled and mouthed something at Sally that looked like I'll call you later—and were lucky enough to catch an empty lift going down.

The closing doors blocked out most of the buzz of noise; Anna breathed a sigh of relief. "Well. Now that I can hear myself without straining my throat...I have to ask you one more thing. I'm sorry to keep prying, but this one isn't really for me. Not entirely, anyway."

"I'm listening," Sally replied, eyeing her warily.

"When I stayed at Bert Lestrade's, the first time, he asked me to help him mend the rift between his sons. I've been trying to figure it out, but every time I've brought it up, Greg's gotten really upset. So I backed off, of course. But I really don't want to let Bert down."

"And you want to know if I can help you."

"If it's not too much to ask?"

"Well, what have you figured out already?"

Anna frowned thoughtfully as they strode through the lobby and out onto the pavement. "I'm certain that whatever it is started over twenty years ago. Greg's sister-in-law Frances said they were already fighting at her wedding, and that was only a few months after he started dating Tracy."

"Okay, so at that time, you were nineteen, and I was eighteen." When Anna shot her an annoyed look, Sally put her hands up defensively. "Look, I'm just trying to put it in perspective! D'you really think anyone told me?"

"I also overheard the two of them going at it that weekend...it sounded as if it was a difference over their value systems and career choices. Brian's got money, lives in a fancy house, doesn't get why Greg trifles with the dirty work of law enforcement and justice, that kind of thing."

"All right. Makes sense to me, but I can tell by your tone of voice that you aren't buying it?" Sally held the door open to the Starbucks, and they joined the waiting crowd.
"It doesn't sit right. Greg's not usually so shallow; it doesn't make sense to me unless there's more! Fran told me that Brian never explained the fight to her, either, and he's maybe a bit of a slimy salesman type, but he doesn't strike me as secretive. If anything, I'd guess Brian might not really see what's kept Greg at such a distance. Or, maybe he sees but doesn't understand it? Ugh, I don't know! The more I think about it, the less sense it makes."

They reached the front of the queue, placed their orders, and moved off to the side. Sally produced a hair tie from her trouser pocket and began pulling her wild curls into a ponytail while they waited. "I tend to agree with you about Greg," she mused. "But if it was a childhood grudge, or a problem that started when they were teenagers...maybe that's all it is, y'know? If you're immature when you form a strong resentment, it can stick with you even when you mature."

"Maybe." Anna fell silent; something was still nagging at her, and she cast her eyes aimlessly around the coffee shop as she tried to place it.

Her gaze fell upon a couple near the window: the man was standing behind the woman's chair, and massaging her neck and shoulders for her. The visual was enough to suddenly spark Anna's elusive memory.

"Oh!"

Sally turned from the counter, with a coffee in each hand. "What's that, then?"

"Greg must have had another major ex, besides Tracy! I heard him muttering to himself about her in Norfolk—while John was examining me for that poison. Something like, 'I can't bury the woman I love, again.' So whoever it was must be dead, right? I guess it could have been someone he dated after his divorce..."

"No, it couldn't. I would've seen that; it would've been obvious, not that he would have told me."

"Wouldn't he?"

Sally rolled her eyes as she followed Anna back out to the street. "Remind me to tell you about the Policy, sometime. Greg hasn't been much for sharing his personal life with me, not 'til fairly recently."

Anna pushed a breath between her lips disbelievingly. "Well, that was pretty idiotic of him. You're clearly one of the best friends he's got."

The sergeant was quiet, after that, all the way back into the building and up in the crowded lift. Anna glanced over a few times to see Sally moving as if she'd just looked away, and the one time their eyes met, Sally simply smiled wanly over the rim of her paper coffee cup. The silence persisted until they reached her workstation once more; Sally hesitated oddly before sitting down and swivelling her chair to face Anna's head on.

"Anna..."

"Yes?" she responded, clutching her drink uneasily in both hands.

"I like you, yeh? You're sharp, and funny, and you've got a good heart. I'd like for us to be friends, and I want you to understand that if we'd met another way, I think I'd still have wanted us to be friends."

"I feel the exact same way, Sally. Thanks," Anna smiled, but the smile was shaky: she could hear the but looming large in Sally's words.
"...But."

*There it is,* she thought, covering an instinctive wince.

"I was here, you know. When things went bad with Tracy, I watched it all happen—from both sides, some of it, though that wasn't my first choice—and there was nothing I could do! I wasn't meant to be Greg's *friend,* not in his mind, since he was always trying so hard to keep his work life separate from all that. I took up the slack for him, here, as much as I was able, but that was as far as he'd let me in; in the end, I had a front row seat to see him hurting, and it wasn't pretty. So I want you to believe me when I say, Anna—if you *hurt* Greg Lestrade, if you *ever* treat him as anything less than the outstanding and worthy man we both know him to be—I will *not* stand by and watch, and our friendship will have never been."

Anna looked across at the other woman's defiant dark eyes, at the stern set of her jaw and the hard, compressed line of her lips; she knew that she was meant to feel apprehension in response to such a warning, or perhaps indignation at the idea that she might require it. What she felt, instead, was a rush of warmth and gratitude that caught her off-guard, bringing tears to her eyes inexplicably. She quickly swiped them away, reaching out blindly with the other hand to set her cup on the desk, and lunged forward to catch Sally up in a tight hug.

"He is so lucky to have you," Anna whispered into Sally's ear. "Thank you for caring so much. You'll *never* need to act on that threat; I promise."
JOHN: Who Knows It

Chapter Summary

The careful steps, the well-chosen words, the evidence slowly gathering: John knew it all had to end eventually. Now, it's time to show their hand.

41. JOHN: Who Knows It
(16 June 2015)

It was almost a quarter of two, now; the early afternoon had pushed on at its usual invariable pace—sixty seconds per minute, sixty minutes per hour—but to John, it felt longer. Longer, and at the same time far too short: somewhere in the city, there was a man or woman walking around with a poison time-bomb ticking away in his or her back, and they needed more time to figure out who.

He glanced away to the corner of Greg's office, his eyes drawn to the medical bag waiting on the floor beneath the coats on their hooks; for the hundredth time since he'd placed it there, John visualised its contents. He ran down his checklist, laying out the steps of the procedure, imagining his most likely course of action and what could go wrong.

"Do stop that, John," murmured Sherlock from the seat at his left, not looking up from his work. "It's becoming tiresome."

Sighing, John shifted his gaze to look outside of the office instead. Out on the other side of the plate glass, Sally and Anna sat talking, facing each other with serious expressions. They certainly have been getting on, haven't they? thought John, a little bit sourly. Even knowing the explanation for Donovan's recent nasty behaviour, he found it difficult to condone or understand. Even as he watched, John saw the sergeant's face become hard and intent, taking on a scowl he'd seen countless times, and his own mouth pulled into a frown in response—but suddenly, Anna jumped up from her seat and grabbed Sally in a hug.

"Wonder what that's about?" he muttered under his breath.

"Hmm?" Sherlock responded distractedly; by the time he raised his eyes, the strange emotional moment had passed, and Greg was approaching the workstation. Both women stood to greet him, and after a few brief pleasantries, Greg turned to open the door to his office.

"All right, boys?" he greeted them, holding out a pair of folders. "Ronny tells me you got names for the accomplices. He sent this."

John took them with a sigh. "I'll add these to the stack, shall I?"

"On the bottom is fine," answered Sherlock, "they're unlikely to have any real tie-in, as far as motive. They were merely directionless former drama students, only barely smart enough to
restrain themselves from using any of the stolen credit cards. Felder had written a short play with anarchist and anti-capitalist leanings—that was his contribution to the fourth robbery, the dramatic touch—and Blake was more interested in funding his stoner lifestyle than anything else. They were both fresh out of uni, and looking for something to amuse themselves with. Hardly important.”

Greg snorted. "Yeah, okay. 'Cause you're obviously having no trouble finding a connection with the files you've already got, right?"

Sherlock glared across the desk at him and continued typing.

"I'll read through them," John assured the DI, flipping open Nathan Felder's file.

Nodding, Greg turned and pulled the second audience chair up closer to the front of the desk. He carefully adjusted the front of his suit jacket as he sat, but didn't unbutton it; John saw, and narrowed his eyes briefly before returning his attention to the folder with an internal shrug.

Greg crossed his arms over his chest and addressed Sherlock again. "These other two guys, they'll be brought in. It shouldn't take long to run 'em down. Think they might know who Dewey's target was?"

"Unlike. You saw the videos, Lestrade. Blake and Felder herded the groups about, and split up to do it, but Dewey handled everyone, and I could see no cues that would indicate that either of the other men even knew who was being targeted. I'm willing to bet he wouldn't trust one of the other men to perform the injections; he will have done that himself. It's entirely possible that the accomplices were unaware of the murders taking place...perhaps they were executing theatrical plans, engineered public disturbances in which they knew nobody would be seriously hurt."

"Huh, well this Dewey guy thought of everything, didn't he?"

"Pfft, clearly not. If he had, we wouldn't be about to catch him."

"You needn't sound so disappointed!" scoffed the older man.

"You mistake me, Lestrade. If anything, I'm frustrated. You know as well as I do that the identity of the fourth victim should have presented itself to me by now!"

"Well, if all else fails we can get him to tell us who it was himself, yeh? Sally's pretty sure she's got a good location on the cabin now. You're still thinking he's holed up there, right?"

Sherlock nodded, but his focus had shifted to the door; Anna entered the office with three paper cups carefully arranged in her hands. She shared a subdued smile with Sherlock as he reached out to accept one.

"Thought you guys might like some tea. Nothing special, I'm afraid," she said, offering the other steaming cup from the kitchenette to John with a wink. The third cup was the one she'd brought back from Starbucks, and she kept it for herself.

"Thanks, Anna," John said, standing and fully shifting his attention to her as the other two moved on to discussion of Dewey's cabin property. "Have you had a nice time chatting with Sally, then?"

"I have, actually. She was just telling me in the kitchen about the guy she's been seeing; we're considering trying to convince him and Greg to agree to a double date."

John glanced over at Greg, trying to picture that situation, but the image wouldn't gel. "You have fun with that."
"I think we will." She lowered her voice and leaned in closer. "And stop giving me that look, John. She's not as bad as you think she is."

John modulated his own voice to a murmur in return. "Isn't she? You weren't here when she was accusing Sherlock of committing crimes just to show off solving them, or when she convinced the Chief Superintendent to arrest him..."

"No, and I'm glad I wasn't! It means I can take her at face value, and know her as she is now. What happened four years ago changed you, didn't it?"

"Yes, of course it did," he muttered, feeling his left hand tensing into a fist at his side.

"You're not the only one it changed. Just think about that." Anna held John's eyes for a long moment, resting a hand on his shoulder until he twitched his head in a reluctant nod. Then her intense expression shifted into something sweeter, and she smiled at him before turning away to speak to Greg; John sank back into his seat, feeling wholly dazed.

"...What about the Stevensons? Have you double checked them?"

John pressed his lips together and flipped back a few pages in his notes. "The newlyweds with the toddler? No, Sherlock, it's not them. Neither Pat nor Sandra Stevenson has any connection to Dewey whatsoever."

"Or Epping? Or, hell, even Blake, or Felder?"

"No, none of them." Sighing, John threaded the fingers of one hand through his hair. They were alone in Greg's office once more, and Sherlock's questions were beginning to circle back on themselves, probing endlessly for weak spots in the brick wall that stood in their way. At this point, it felt as if they'd been throwing themselves at that same wall over and over again for days; even with the new possibilities provided by the addition of three new names, they were getting nowhere fast on finding the fourth victim.

"Damn. All right, it's the curly-haired young woman, then. Jessica something?" A hint of desperation coloured Sherlock's tone. He sat with his elbows bracketing the keyboard of Greg's computer; the first two fingers of his partially interlocked hands were pressed around the bridge of his nose in a pose reminiscent of a gun at his head.

"Ustridge. Jessica Ustridge. Unless she's using an alias, no, she's not connected."

"Good, yes, perhaps she changed her name and went on the run—"

"I was being facetious!"

"Right. Of course." Sherlock sat back abruptly, blinking his pale eyes owlishly at the screen. His shoulders were visibly tense.

John wanted to put his hands on them. He wanted to knead and push the tension from them, smooth his fingers over the pale skin of that neck and dig his thumbs into the tight muscles until Sherlock was groaning and gasping, falling loose into his hold, dark head lolling forward in pleasure. Then
John would lean in, grazing his lips across the vertebrae with utmost care, gently pressing kisses into the precious hollow behind his jaw and breathing deeply of the rich bergamot-and-almond scent of his expensive shampoo—

"Are you even listening, John?"

"Sorry, what?" John cast his mind back over the last minute, and made a wild guess as to what his partner had asked him. "It wasn't the other student either."

"I know that. I asked you to hand me those other two files!"

"Oh. Here you go. You didn't want them, before."

"Yes, and in the twenty minutes since Lestrade left us again, have we made any progress?" It was practically a growl. Clutching the files on the accomplices, Sherlock pushed away from the desk and shoved roughly past John's chair—John leapt up to avoid bashing his knee into the desk, and watched with consternation as Sherlock began pacing the office in a tight circle.

"Right, Sherlock, just calm down, and talk me through where you're stuck."

Sherlock didn't calm down, but after a moment he did begin talking. "Dewey's pattern is clear: each victim has been directly connected by some perceived wrong committed against Epping, some remembered action that was an interference in their relationship. Dewey's mother and aunt vocally disapproved of Epping ever since their friendship began in secondary school; Violet refused to allow him in her home, and Theresa backed her up. James Leighburn was hiring manager at the video rental store near their university; Epping worked there, but was fired after being caught in the back room with his boyfriend, whom we now know to have been Dewey. In addition, you'd theorised that Dewey had at one point applied to work there as well, but that Leighburn had rejected him...there's no way to prove that now without asking Dewey himself, but it does fit. It's not a bad theory at all, John."

"Er, thanks," John managed, slightly dizzy at following both Sherlock's rapid speech and his erratic circling. The space was so small that it was more spinning than pacing, and Sherlock was somehow managing to flip through the papers at the same time, which seemed to John quite a feat.

"George Cornish was Bill Epping's upstairs neighbour after uni, and he filed a noise complaint that ended up getting Epping evicted. The police report mentioned 'his roommate' but didn't give a name; my research has turned up that Dewey was the roommate in question, living there without having been officially added to the lease. The eviction made both young men effectively homeless, and appears to have been the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak; Epping ended the relationship, while Dewey was forced to move back in with his parents."

"That must've stung. And with Cornish's health issues what they were, Dewey probably regarded the man as a peevish, intolerant hermit."

"Exactly. So. All of these motives make sense. They fit together to create a clear picture. Do you agree?"

"Yes, of course I do," replied John, keeping his voice purposefully calm and smooth. If Sherlock didn't tone it down, they were bound to draw unwanted attention.

"And so the pattern should persist. There is no rational reason for Trent Dewey to have suddenly chosen to kill someone outside of his own established motives. If, by chance, either accomplice wanted someone killed in return for assisting with all of this, he would take that as payment."
Dewey's bank account shows without question that this is not the case. Therefore, the two accomplices are worthless, as I've already determined!" Sherlock flung the folders away, and they skidded across the carpeting to land with a messy thud against the leg of the desk.

"Told you, you didn't want those files," muttered John, stepping around to pick them up and return them to the pile behind him.

"But no matter the angle from which I come at this, none of these ten people show any sort of connection to Epping or Dewey whatsoever! If I keep on running in circles like this, we'll only know when one of them drops dead!" Sherlock snarled, tugging violently at his own hair with both hands.

John blinked, and blinked again. "Wait, how many did you just say?"

Sherlock glared at John as if he were particularly slow, and held up fingers one by one as he spoke. "Ten. Ten people at the boutique besides Anna. Two university students, three utterly boring housewives, one middle-aged couple, the newlyweds, and poor old Esther. Ten."

"Sherlock...there were eleven," John told him; he dug his notepad out from beneath the stack of files and turned it all the way back to the first page before shoving it into Sherlock's hands.

"What? There's not—oh, God! The shopgirl!"

"Assistant manager, yes. You really weren't taking her into consideration?"

"Susan Reesor. Is her file one of the ones here?"

"I thought—wait," John quickly shuffled through the pile. "No, no, she's not in here..."

"And she hasn't been, not for days! It's probably Patel's oversight, but nevertheless, I should have noticed when she was inadvertently dropped from the list!"

"Well, by now we're juggling at least eighteen different lists, with every detail and connected name we could scrounge up for each person. And that's not including the files on the four others at the cash machine, the seven others at the jewellers, and the eight at the chemist's! I think even you could be forgiven for not catching the loss of one."

Sherlock shook his head vehemently. "Stupid, stupid! How could I have been so incredibly dense?" He exclaimed abruptly, taking John's face between his palms. "Oh, what would I do without you, John!" he exclaimed, his eyes alight, and then he caught John in a hard, exuberant kiss.

John's eyebrows rose in shock—but just at that moment, there wasn't a thought in his mind for stopping Sherlock.

This was worlds apart from the slow, sweet kisses they so often tended towards at home, in which John tested the waters and drew his partner along; even their more intense embraces usually tended to place John more or less in control. Now, however, Sherlock was taking full advantage of his imposing height, and every thrust and sweep of his tongue proclaimed that he was in charge.

John felt utterly claimed and possessed. He couldn't help the soft, wanton sounds of pleasure that bubbled up in his throat, escaping with each momentary break in the hard seal of their lips, only to be bottled up once more as Sherlock renewed his efforts. John's hands gripped and kneaded Sherlock's sides; one of Sherlock's hands cupped the back of John's head, while the other spread across his lower back, pressing him close. It was glorious.
After a time—seconds, or even minutes later—dimly, reluctantly, John began to regain awareness of his surroundings. They were standing directly in front of the glass walls of Greg’s office, and the blinds were open—surely, someone would notice. *Sherlock has to realise what he's doing. Doesn't he? We'll be seen, almost certainly!*

Sure enough, when the taller man released him at last, spinning away to the desk and setting excitedly to work at the computer, John looked through the open slats to see Sally Donovan, Ranjit Patel, and no less than three other officers all staring their way, mouths agape.

He grinned, made eye contact with Sally and gave a little shrug. Her lips closed and opened slowly in response, like a fish.

*Well then, I guess that's out, now, John thought. Funny, but it doesn’t seem like a big deal, anymore.* He raised two fingers to brush meditatively against his swollen lips, still smiling as he turned back to watch his mad, impossible boyfriend put the last pieces together.
When it comes right down to the wire, Greg's ready and willing to see it all through—even when the outcome seems uncertain.

The silver fleet car sat idling at the kerb; Greg stepped out and spun smoothly on his heel to open the rear door. Anna took his outstretched hand with a warm smile, rising gracefully from the backseat to step out onto the pavement.

"Home sweet home," she chuckled, giving his hand a squeeze.

Greg could easily have left it at that, but he couldn't stand to let go so quickly. Instead he found himself escorting her chivalrously up the walk to his own flat, as if it were the goodbye at the end of a formal date. Their steps slowed before they reached his door; Anna turned her face up to him as she reached down to fish the keyring from her handbag.

Their silence felt suddenly awkward, and she broke it cautiously. "So," she murmured, "have I been glued to your side long enough that you're feeling a little better, now?"

"Yes," he replied, feeling a bit sheepish. "I'm sorry about that, sweet."

"It's okay; it made me feel safer, too. But we're both going to have to get used to your leaving me behind, from now on; you definitely won't be able to drag me along on any of your other cases!"

She wore a teasing smile, but something serious beneath her words stopped him short. "I know. I'm —glad, in a way," he told her hesitantly, resting his hands lightly on her shoulders. "I mean, I'm not at all happy that you were at that shop, that you've been caught up in this. But, having had the chance to let you really see me..."

"See you?"

"Well, yeah. It's who I am, right? My work, it's me. And maybe if I don't let you see that, then—I'm not really being honest with you. Or, you won't ever know me, truly." It barely scratched the surface of his self-doubt, but it was all the explanation he could manage.

"I do see you. Yes, it's,"—she searched for the word—"exhilarating, to be with you and see your job close up. But did you really think I didn't get who you were, before?"

"Well, you didn't, did you? Not really. I mean..." Words failed him, as well, and he trailed off into a sort of hapless gesture.
"Do you seriously expect me to underestimate you, so completely? After all this time?" Anna looked surprised, and hurt. "Not every part of your history is doomed to repeat itself, Greg. Don't try so hard to avoid your past mistakes that you start making new ones!"

"Ah, Christ, Anna..." His upper lip curled in distress.

"Hey." She grabbed his hand tightly, stopping him before he could say any more. "It's fine. I think I understand what you're saying, and I get that it's important to you. Just—I think we need to really talk about this, you know? But not now. You need to get your head back in the game; there's a killer to catch..."

Greg knew it was true, but her teasing grin took any possible sting from her words. He chuckled despite himself, tugging her in close to place a kiss on her forehead.

In response, Anna wound her arms about his waist, and tilted her chin up to claim a real kiss; breaking away after a long, sweet minute, she took a half-step back and scrutinised him. She reached out and adjusted the collar of his black shirt, dropping her hand to rest briefly over his heart. "Now. Go get him, honey. And be careful!"

When Greg slipped back into the driver's seat, Sally snorted. "I was about to honk the horn if you two didn't break it up soon. Didn't realise you were just having me along because you needed a chaperone!"

"Ah, stuff it Sal," he replied, grinning wide at nothing in particular as he put the car into gear and pulled away.

The first part of their trek out of town was spent with Sherlock and John on speakerphone, going over the details that had become clear in the past hour: the killer's motives and connections to his chosen targets. When Greg had come back up to his office with Anna earlier, ready to fetch Sally and leave, he'd found a loud commotion happening outside his door; Dewey's fourth victim had been identified at last. Sherlock had been keen to leave right then, but Greg and John had managed to convince him to let Ronny drive, to keep an official presence with them for the sake of believability. Now the three of them were in a fleet car of their own, on their way to find Miss Reesor, and Sherlock's hyperactive rush of triumph had eased enough to allow Greg the chance to catch up.

After they hung up the call, the car remained silent for a few kilometres.

"So," Sally began, too casually, "Sherlock and John."

"What about them?"

"Kissing. Full-on snogging, in fact. In your office, in full view of me, Ronny and all of Dimmock's team, not five minutes before we left."

Greg went completely still for a second or two, eyes fixed on the road ahead, before drawing in another breath. "So?"

"You knew?" She watched him for a response. "You bloody knew! How long?"
Grimacing, he glanced her way. "You can't blame me for keeping it from you, Sal. Surely, you understand it wasn't mine to tell! But...yeah, I knew. It happened in Chicago."

"Hah! So Anna knows, too."

"Yeah, of course she does! I'm pretty sure they'd never have got their act together, without her. And it was about bloody time they did, anyway." With those words, the memory of the moment he'd found out came back to him, and he couldn't hold back the broad smile it provoked.

"I knew she was trying too bloody hard to change the subject! You two, I swear, you're incorrigible together. And so are they. Practically indecent, that was! You should've seen them going at it!"

"Have you got a problem?" Greg asked, and it was a challenge, although he tried hard not to make it sound like one. The smile had dropped from his face.

"Yeah, you," he fired back, turning his head to fix her with a serious stare before looking back to the road. "Will this be a problem for you, Sally?" Now he enunciated his words distinctly, allowing just a hint of a threat to show through.

"What—? No. No, of course not. If they're happy, more power to 'em! I won't hassle them, if that's what you're asking!"

"Good. I don't want to hear any cracks about it."

Sally shook her head and looked out the side window; after a moment, she uncrossed her arms and changed the subject.

"We'll have another two hours to drive before we get out there. How long do you want me to wait before calling backup to meet us?"

"We don't know if he's there, Sal. I'm not running extra personnel out there unless we know we need them."

"Holmes didn't give you a detailed itinerary, then?"

"He's a genius, not a bloody clairvoyant! Dewey could be off hiking in Scotland, for all we know. If he's not home, we look for evidence. If he is..." Greg tilted his head meaningfully.

"There's no guarantee we can get backup out there in any sort of good time. Park service, maybe, but that'd be a long shot. Gloucester Constabulary's only got one station in that territory, and it's over twelve kilometres out. Twenty minutes, minimum, if they're not shortstaffed today, and actually getting even one Strategic Response officer around there would be an incredible stroke of luck."

"I've got my tac licence, remember. No worries." Greg had worn his suit jacket buttoned securely closed, ever since he'd been away from his office after lunch, but now he popped the buttons free beneath his seat belt and dropped his left shoulder, letting the lapel fall open enough to reveal the black nylon strap of the holster he wore.

"...Oh," Sally breathed in response, sitting back abruptly, and he knew she'd forgotten. That wasn't a surprise; it had been quite some time since he'd armed himself on a case.

It was entirely out of the ordinary for any CID officer to have certification for firearm use. Under
normal circumstances Greg wouldn't even consider carrying a weapon. But Mycroft had pulled some strings, years back, when Sherlock had gotten himself involved in a worrying and prolonged situation with a drugs ring—an early instance of "but it's for a case" which had nearly gotten the young man killed when his cover had been blown, and which actually had put him into a terrible relapse.

Greg didn't like to think too hard about the sort of power that rested behind the unorthodox paperwork in his own personnel file...and although he took regular turns at the official practice range, and reported for his biannual recertification testing in the Met's usual way, he remembered that his initial training and testing had taken place in a highly secure location. To this day, he still didn't know where Mycroft's lovely, taciturn assistant had been taking him, in those two tense weeks before he'd been sent in alone to rescue the young genius. At any rate, it meant that when needed (or, more often, whenever Mycroft called to pronounce that it was needed—as in the case of Dartmoor), he could requisition a gun with very little official hassle.

And now, on his way out to the back end of nowhere, searching for a man twisted enough to have cruelly poisoned his own mother and aunt... Yeah. There was no way I was gonna go without it, he told himself, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he drove.

For a while, they both stayed silent, lost in their own thoughts.

The bulk of their westward drive passed uneventfully. Being alone in the car with Sally for so long still seemed to invite awkwardness—it had been only a matter of months since their friendship had become more solid, and Greg had worked with her on the principle of enforced privacy for years—but they were beginning to feel things out. The conversation meandered from topic to topic, touching on their respective significant others more than once; they discussed her boyfriend Theo's last football season and Anna's widely varied tastes in music, and argued good-naturedly over whether or not a double date would be utterly absurd. It was undoubtedly a distraction tactic, a cooperative strategy they implemented without hesitation. It kept them both from dwelling on anything less pleasant.

Eventually they reached Soudley, just a few kilometres in from the eastern edge of the Forest of Dean. It was a tiny, picturesque little hamlet, nestled in rolling forested hills, boasting a quaint stuccoed inn and a neat string of small homes that appeared perfectly isolated. They kept on past the last of the cottages, following Sally's scribbled notes through two branching forks, and found themselves on a road too small for lane markings. The trees towered on both sides of the narrow asphalt as it veered to the south. At one point a battered and aged delivery van came upon them from the other direction, and they had to pull over far into the fern-laden verge to let it pass; while Greg concentrated on keeping the car from bottoming out in the soft earth, Sally put sharp eyes on the van's driver and then craned her neck to make note of the plate number.

"Never can be too careful," she shrugged, and he tossed his head in agreement before bumping the left wheels back up onto the road with a lurch.

After another kilometre or so, the road they were on branched into two again, with Forestry Commission guideposts marking the new road off to the left as a trail leading to a picnic area; Sally straightened in her seat. "Here, slow down..."
"This it?"

"No, to the right...wait...there, there it is! This one, turn here."

"God, it's barely a set of tyre tracks!" Greg grumbled, hauling the wheel around to take the hairpin turn.

"What'd you expect, parquet pavers and a wrought-iron gate?"

"I'm not gonna dignify that with a response..."

The car crunched slowly up a steep and rutted incline, curving deeper into the forest, and Greg dipped his head to see up through the trees on the hillside to the left. "Look," he pointed, "the red up there—likely Dewey's hatchback. Right, okay, that's good enough for me. Make the call."

"Finally," Sally said, reaching for the radio; the inflection she gave the word made it clear she'd hoped to dispatch their support much earlier, but beyond that she didn't express her disapproval. Greg halted the car while Sally got in touch with Coleford station; he didn't want to approach the cabin until they had reinforcements on hand. The most prudent course, he knew, would be to return to the road and await the other officers there. But there was no place on this rough track wide and level enough to turn around. He twisted his head around, contemplating throwing it in reverse and backing down... Too dangerous, he decided with a frown.

Sally finished detailing their location and signed off, only then realising Greg's silent dilemma. She pursed her lips, glancing around before meeting his eyes. "Might be a wider space a little further on?"

He nodded, stifling a frustrated sigh at himself, and continued forward at a crawling pace. He hit the window controls, letting the sedan's quiet interior fill with the sounds and smells outside: fresh, clean air, birdsong, and far too much crackling and crunching beneath their slowly advancing tyres.

"I don't like this," he muttered.

"I don't blame you," his colleague returned, just as softly. She leaned her head slightly out the window, peering up towards the clearing where they'd seen the parked car.

He winced as a dry branch popped beneath the front wheels, seeming loud as a gunshot; suddenly Sally threw her hand out to tap his arm, and he took the signal to stop immediately.

Pulling her head back in, she turned to report, "Cabin's visible up there. And I just saw a curtain twitch."

"Fuck." Line of sight: if we can see him... Greg put up the windows and quickly killed the ignition. He was at once aware of the shifting patterns of bright late afternoon sunlight flashing over the silver sedan's bonnet. "I should've picked a dark coloured car today. This is as far as we go."

"We're not going to just sit here and wait, are we?" Sally asked, still looking up the hill.

He heard Sherlock's deductions from that morning echoing through his head. Suspicious. Peers through the blinds. Recently increased paranoia. "No," he told her, unbuckling his safety belt. "Too risky. Warn Coleford we're going up."
There was nothing for it. They had to go on.

If Trenton Dewey already knew someone was approaching his cabin, he wasn't likely to react well. Assuming Sherlock's determination of his mental state was correct, he might already have expected law enforcement to be on his trail, no matter how carefully he'd laid his plans—a sign of suppressed guilt—or perhaps he'd caught wind of the investigation surrounding his three victims, and had realised they were being treated as one case. Either way, he had the protection of the structure, the higher ground, and familiarity with the local terrain. His car was up there too, and from where Greg and Sally stood, there was no way of knowing whether there was a further driveable path leading away from the cabin on the other side.

Setting his jaw, Greg stepped decisively away from the car and its relative safety, and Sally followed him up and around the last steep switchback leading towards the old cabin. As they approached the building from below, they could see its rough L-shaped layout, and the closed windows with their plain, light-coloured curtains drawn; the car that sat in a turnaround area at the far end of the small clearing was verifiably Dewey's.

He spurred himself to walk a little faster, angling his path to quickly get himself and Sally close to the building and between its windows, out of easy sight. The fact that those windows were closed meant that whatever twitch Sally had seen hadn't been just a breeze. Within a minute they had positioned themselves on either side of the door; Greg knocked and spoke out firmly. "Trenton Dewey. This is Detective Inspector Lestrade, Metropolitan Police; will you open the door please?"

Silence, and then a muffled crash. He tested the doorknob, shared a glance with Sally and tried again. "Mr Dewey! Open the door!"

Silence again, this time more ominous. Frowning, Greg gave a curt nod, and as the sergeant stepped out of the way, he took a quick pace back and aimed a hard kick at the door. Thankfully, the weathered wood was as old as it appeared, and the frame gave way easily around the bolt.

"Mr Dewey, we're coming in," he called out, almost as an afterthought, letting his hand hover over his holstered gun as he stepped forward.

The interior of the cabin was dim and close, crowded with odds and ends. At first glance, Greg could see a chair tipped away from a small table, numerous plant cuttings strung up on lines at one wall as if to be dried, and a cluttered shelving unit that acted as a room divider—and behind those shelves, the dark eyes of Trenton Dewey glared out at them.

The man's face and body were partially obscured by the jumble of books, beakers, and other items piled on the open shelves. Before Greg and Sally had even cleared the first step ahead of the doorway, he growled, "Stay back!"

Greg stopped where he was, but made no move to retreat. "We don't want to have to use force, Mr Dewey, but be advised. We've come to bring you in."

"Well that's too bad," bit out Dewey, his voice high and taut with a hint of mania at its edges, "because I'm not going!"

Sally added her strident words to the confrontation then, stepping up to Greg's side. "You'll want to rethink that. We've got you for four murders and a fifth attempted; resisting arrest won't do you any
There was a sudden movement—Greg's fingers closed reflexively around his weapon's grip as an assortment of glassware was pushed out to smash on the floor. In the next second he'd drawn, and was confronting the gun that Dewey had brought to bear on him and Sally.

"Don't do something you'll regret, now, Trent," Greg warned, his focus pulled tight to the slight waver of the barrel facing him. He felt his heartbeat kicking up hard, and it seemed as if the hair on his neck was dancing, but he forced his hands to stay steady. "You know I don't want to have to use this."

They faced off for a handful of tense seconds, and Greg watched intently as the other gun began to shake and bob nervously. The three of them stood in a silent tableau, the only sound the increasingly ragged rasp of the younger man's breathing. Finally Dewey's resolve broke with a sudden, strangled yell, and he shoved hard at the shelving unit, toppling it towards them with a resounding crash before turning and making a dash for a screen door at the rear of the cabin.

"Sir!" Sally was rushing ahead, picking her way over the wreckage that blocked their way. The shelves had twisted as they'd fallen, scattering their contents quite effectively into what would have been the open area between the two small rooms.

Greg paused before moving forward, himself: just long enough to stuff his gun back into its holster, pull his mobile from his breast pocket and rip the suit jacket from his shoulders. Tossing the jacket vaguely in Sally's direction with a jingle of car keys, he hurriedly slipped the phone into the right-hand pocket of his trousers instead, opposite the cuffs he already carried in his left. The manoeuvre took only a second or two, and before it was done he was in motion. "Don't follow us, too risky. Make sure he doesn't get to his car. And gloves on, Donovan!" he yelled over his shoulder, gun in hand once more as he cleared the mess and leapt for the door.

"Bugger it," she cursed vehemently behind him. "Watch yourself, then!"

He burst from the rear of the cabin in time to see the flash of Dewey's pale blond hair in the sunlight, just before it disappeared into the woods. There appeared to be a narrow break in the trees, there, and Greg sprinted across the cabin's small clearing to reach it before the other man could get too far out of sight.

The track was narrow and shady, leading steadily uphill as it wound around to the north, and the warm splashes of sunlight against the left side of his face became less frequent as he plunged deeper into the forest. Ahead and above him, Dewey's flight was an uncontrolled crashing along the path, clearly audible even in the long moments when the man's light coloured hair and clothing was hidden from sight. Greg jogged more slowly and steadily in pursuit, keeping his attention split between Dewey's movements and the uneven, unpredictable terrain beneath his own feet, with one arm held up before him to sweep the occasional branch away from his head.

By the time Greg cleared the steep ridge, it had been more than ten seconds since he'd last caught a glimpse of his quarry. The rough trail he'd been following pattered out into a deeply shaded thicket; the ground was no longer sloped, here, and Greg took a second to catch his breath while he tried to guess which direction Dewey had run. His black dress shirt clung damply to him; he plucked at the front of it with his free hand to pull a little cool air onto his chest.

The foliage was dense at eye level, here, and the trees so closely spaced that the killer could be nearly invisible standing only two metres away. Greg quickly determined that his gun would be of little use, and he hoped that Dewey had come to a similar conclusion—he'd warned Sally not to follow, in order to keep her safe from any possible crossfire, but the thought of bullets flying his
way was certainly no less unpleasant. He kept the weapon in his hand, nevertheless, as he edged around the hilltop to the right.

There was a clumsy rustling in the undergrowth somewhere not too far away.

"Dewey, I know you're here," he said sternly, squinting into the trees.

The sounds of movement abruptly stilled. Obviously, the man had decided to hide, relying on the overgrown thicket to conceal him.

Greg found himself thinking back to his teenage years: vividly recalling the months of his father's early book research, and the repeated hiking trips later on, once that first abandoned story needed to be rewritten for the Stone series. One scene, in particular, had required hands-on testing that had become a game between father and son. Greg remembered it well, how Pop had learned to direct his voice through the woods well enough that his hiding son couldn't anticipate his movements.

If I can get him upset enough to talk, he mused, maybe I could use the same trick now...use the woods to my own advantage...

"Look, I know why you did it," he called softly with his eyes closed, his low words seeming to sink through the tree trunks, as if he spoke from everywhere at once. "You're done now, though, aren't you? You've said your piece."

"Fuck you! You don't know anything!" The response was sharp and clear, cutting through the foliage from a distinct source.

He opened his eyes and spoke again. "Oh, but I do, Trent. I know all about the uppity shop manager, and the cranky neighbour, and the prejudice your own family showed you." Greg kept his own voice even and deep, just loud enough to carry and spread—just loud enough to cover the small sounds of his movement as he turned to slowly advance towards the other voice. With his last word, he stilled and closed his eyes once more to listen.

"They hurt him, damn it! They hurt us!"

Left. "And you hurt them. Did you tell him, Trent? Did he know what you were planning?"

"He—"

Come on. Keep talking.

"—I tried to tell him! He never understood, never saw how much I cared! He didn't even want to listen!"

"Bill was battling clinical depression, Trent. You had to know that," Greg hummed, smoothing the words out like honey as he carefully placed his feet and ducked beneath a hanging branch. Let him not see me coming. Let him be facing the other way...

"I wasn't even going to do it all," Dewey babbled next, his voice strained and cracking with obvious desperation; it sounded as if he had moved a little deeper into the copse of trees, and Greg adjusted his trajectory accordingly. "It was just an idea! I thought Billy would get a laugh out of it! That—that he'd let me be with him again, that we could have what we did before!"

Greg sucked on his teeth and spoke, gently, one more time. "But then, Billy killed himself..."

There was no reply, but he could hear a noise close ahead of him, a heartbroken keening that
tugged at something in Greg's stomach even as it made his skin crawl. This man had channeled his grief into the cruel deaths of four, maybe five people, and no amount of empathy could outbalance that fact...

Silently, cautiously, Greg peered around a thick vine-covered trunk to see the back of Trenton Dewey, his shoulders hunched and shaking as he stared off into the woods before him, his gun dangling loose at his side. The image of the bruises that this man had given Anna rose unbidden before Greg's eyes—and if the knowledge of Dewey's murders hadn't already been enough to harden Greg's heart, that memory spurred him into motion with no further hesitation.

In the space of two heartbeats, Greg had him pinned, wrestled to the ground with a firm knee at his back, pulling the man's wrists up and into the cuffs.

"I am arresting you for the murders of Violet Dewey, Theresa Prentice, James Leighburn, and George Cornish," he ground out. "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. Do you understand?"

The only response was an impassioned grunt, muffled in the dead leaves underneath Dewey's grimacing face.

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Sherlock found a certain dark amusement in his current situation.

Sergeant Patel was clearly nervous about being trapped in a police vehicle with the consulting detective; it had been only seven hours since Sherlock's argument with Lestrade in Edgware, in regards to his distaste for that particular mode of transport. The young man's hesitancy was oddly endearing, although Sherlock would never admit to it. But Lestrade had made a good point, when he'd insisted on their use of the fleet car: however easy it might prove to track Susan Reesor across the city using cabs and public transportation, and however simply they could expect to get the information they needed through the application of strategic charm alone, Sherlock and John would get only so far on their own. There was little to no chance that any self-respecting woman of even moderate intelligence would believe a story like the one they had to tell, without the reassuring presence of an official to lend it credibility. And without an understanding of the situation, and the danger she was in, she surely would not allow John—a complete stranger spouting far-fetched nonsense—to perform an examination of any kind upon her person.

The outburst in Edgware that morning, which had so unnerved the sergeant, had in fact served a purpose beyond self-indulgence. Many of Sherlock's actions did—as a rule, he felt it inefficient to do anything for just one reason, when one could accomplish so much more with a bit of careful finagling—but he was more than content to be perceived as snappish, selfish, overbearing and antisocial by most. Easier that, than for the truth to be known: that he had noted an underlying tension apparent in Lestrade's demeanour, early that morning at the Yard, and had deduced that a brief and meaningless argument would provide the man a needed outlet. It was hard enough reconciling his inexplicable urges towards sentiment with his consuming desire for logic and order, when fully three-quarters of his ulterior motives went unrealised from day to day. The thought of
Lestrade realising the full depth of his esteem...or worse, wanting to *talk* about it...

Sherlock came back to himself, covering a slight shudder. At his side, John looked up to him briefly, and smiled exactly as if he knew the thoughts that swirled within his friend's head. Obviously he had no idea; Sherlock blinked and twitched his lips slightly upwards in return, just as the lift doors opened and released them into the Yard's parking level.

"Right, car three-oh-nine today." Patel chattered nervily as he led the way down one of the aisles, checking the key he'd been given against the identifiers on the vehicles they passed. "Oh good, it's a blue one. I like the blue ones."

"Why am I not surprised?" sighed Sherlock, and John elbowed him.

He was tempted to sit in the front seat and stretch his legs, but he saw the flustered look that Patel was trying hard to hide—ah, so it's not all about the car, after all. He's not sure if he's meant to have seen what he did. Further amused by this, Sherlock couldn't resist goading just a little more. Seating himself in the rear beside John, he waited until the sergeant had begun backing out of the parking bay, and then made a point of taking up John's hand in a move that would be unmistakable in the rearview.

"Sherlock," hissed John, more out of startlement than discouragement.

"Yes, John?" he replied sweetly, with an impertinent smile and a flutter of his eyelashes.

By the time the car emerged into the sunlight outside New Scotland Yard, its interior was beautifully filled with the bright and utterly perfect sounds of John's giggling.

Sherlock had watched the boutique's security footage once more, while the group had prepared to split their forces and leave the Yard; giving his full attention at last to the slender blonde shopgirl carried along in the midst of the group, he'd determined that she most often worked weekdays. The line there had rung engaged, so they hadn't been able to check ahead, but it was the closest to the Yard and had been a logical first destination in their search.

Of course, it had been the wrong destination. By the time they'd spoken with the sales clerk on duty, confirmed that Ms Reesor had the day off, and rejoined Patel to continue on, Lestrade and Donovan had dropped Anna off and were on their way westward. This fact became clear when Patel's phone rang, and within a minute the sergeant had put them all on speakerphone together.

"Catch me up," the DI requested, his deep voice sounding more gravelly than usual when filtered through the mobile phone's exterior speaker. "You've fit together the reasons behind all this now, haven't you? I want to understand."

"The connections have become clear, yes," answered Sherlock. "There's enough to determine plausible motives for almost every murder...although any man who sets out to kill his own mother surely has a far-reaching motivation that goes much deeper, everything ties back to Bill Epping on the surface."

He went on to explain everything he'd told John earlier, in those last minutes of violent frustration before their oversight had been brought to light. Occasionally Lestrade or Donovan broke in to ask
for a clarification, or John prompted him on a small detail he'd omitted. Meanwhile, Ranjit Patel drove them on towards Ms Reesor's flat, and blatantly failed to take an active part in the conversation. The sergeant knew, of course, that the mistake he'd made had delayed Sherlock's progress by as much as twenty-four hours, and he was almost certainly trying to remain unobtrusive in the hopes that Sherlock would not take him to task for it. (Sherlock hadn't decided yet whether it was worth the trouble to do so, honestly. He supposed he was feeling rather benevolent.)

Having explained Prentice, and Leighburn, and Cornish, Sherlock concluded, "Finally, Susan Reesor. Records show that she was in the same class as Epping and Dewey up through secondary school; beyond that, there's really nothing in writing to tell us about the nature of their interactions with each other."

Lestrade made a soft noise that barely carried over the background sounds of the two cars. "Well, she must have done something, eh?"

"Something that caused Bill Epping emotional pain, or some other harm, yes. With all three of them having been at school together, it's quite likely that whatever it was directly affected Dewey as well." Sherlock sniffed, opening the web browser on his own phone. "That's neither here nor there, though! It hardly matters what youthful indiscretion or vicious slight caused Ms Reesor to become a target. At this point, our only concern is preventing her from becoming a corpse."

When John's hand came up to rest on his shoulder, he knew he'd probably spoken a bit too harshly. After a long pause, Sally's voice came over the line. "The fastest death so far has taken four weeks. Theoretically, shouldn't we have at least three more days to track her down?"

John spoke up with an immediate answer. "It's not that simple; the rate of polyglactin absorption varies from person to person. There are too many factors to predict."—Sherlock's head twitched at that, and John squeezed his shoulder as he qualified his statement—"accurately within our limited knowledge and scope, and nobody but Sherlock would probably ever think to make an attempt at such a prediction. Base metabolism and activity level are a good starting place, though."

Sherlock tilted the screen of his phone towards John; he'd pulled up photos from Susan's Facebook page and was scrolling through them. "She's younger and far healthier than any of the other victims; she runs regularly and belongs to a tennis club. We may not have much time at all. Were physical activity the only determining factor, I might guess it's already too late."

When they rang the bell at Susan's flat, her flatmate answered the door wearing a ratty T-shirt and brightly patterned pyjama bottoms, and blinked up at them with a bland, vacant expression as they introduced themselves.

"I haven't seen Suzie since yesterday morning," she yawned, scratching at her mussed hair. "She probably stayed over at her boyfriend's, she's been doing that a lot lately."

"I can't imagine why," muttered Sherlock, receiving a glut of mostly unwanted information from his glance over the mess of the sitting room. "The boyfriend must not be on Facebook. I'd call it commendable, if it weren't so inconvenient."
"All right then, could you tell us who that would be, and where his flat is?" asked John, more politely than she deserved. "We really do need to find her, right away."

"Name's Bobby something. Don't know his address. Sorry."

Sherlock practically growled in frustration. He'd already deduced that this woman would be of no use to them; she was only confirming it with proof of her apathy. "Show me Susan's bedroom," he demanded.

"How's that?"

"Her bedroom! The room where she sleeps, when she can bring herself to bear this place. Quickly, for God's sake!"

John's reaction was somewhat less than pleased, but he remained silent as the flatmate led them sullenly down the hall—and it was just as well, anyway. Sherlock could already recite his partner's usual admonishments verbatim, but he was in no mood to waste any more of their precious time.

It took Sherlock less than a minute in Susan's room to find the two pieces of information he required; as soon as he was satisfied, he hurried back out to pass the two men waiting in the hallway and gestured for them to follow.

"Sergeant Patel, her boyfriend is one Robert Bell of Southwark; you'll want to track down his exact address, and have it on hand in case we need it."

"In case we need it?" John questioned, plainly confused. "Isn't that our next stop?"

"Tennis practice. Clearly marked on the calendar above her desk, and her duffel and racquet bags are missing." He held the door for John, while Patel briefly lingered behind to thank the bewildered woman they were leaving.

John's jaw tightened as he met Sherlock's eyes; it was clear they shared similar misgivings.

Susan Reesor belonged to an amateur tennis club which was presently ramping up its practice schedule ahead of a small tournament series. Their courts were located in an athletic complex inconveniently far from her flat; stuck in the unmarked car for yet another interminable drive across the city, Sherlock and John had plenty of time to ruminate on the situation, and they did so silently.

All of the data they had told them that they were squarely in the danger zone, during which the dissolving walls of Dewey's microcapsule were most likely approaching their weakest. Additionally, at least two of the three victims in London had been suddenly taken by the poison's effects directly after a physical exertion or stretching of the back muscles. It was only logical to assume that the rigours of a tennis match would increase the risk significantly...

Looking over, Sherlock could see the tension and self-doubt writ large in John's features. The answering discomfort turning his own stomach was a largely unfamiliar sensation; it was unusual for him to empathise so intensely with another person's fears. This was John, however. If there was one thing certain in this world, it was that John Watson could inspire Sherlock to truly incredible
levels of sentiment.

Simply assuring John that his medical skill was sufficient to the task hadn't been enough to comfort him, the last time he'd been caught in the grips of these problematic emotions...and although Sherlock had been quite demonstrative with his affections only a short while earlier, he knew that this was neither the time nor place for the sort of physical reassurance that he'd used in that stairwell. *I need to give him something to increase his confidence,* Sherlock thought; *there must be something I've observed that will help...*

He sifted through his memories, searching, quickly replaying everything he'd seen in the library, in Cornish's front garden, in Dewey's empty home—*Yes, there!*

Sherlock cleared his throat softly to gain his companion's attention. "You know, John, it was quite dirty in Trent Dewey's basement. There was dust absolutely everywhere."

Startled from his pensive stare out at the passing city, John turned to face him, plainly confused. "Yeah, okay. So?"

"He'd been using his father's makeshift home laboratory to formulate the polyglactin mixture, but in its recent state the environment would have been nowhere near sterile."

"Well, it wouldn't need to be, would it? I mean, the guy was planning to poison people. It's not like he needed to be concerned with sterility, right? Sure, he was smart enough to follow the steps laid out in his father's research documentation, but he didn't have any training on laboratory protocols."

"Exactly." Sherlock twitched his eyebrows up promptingly, but John's expression did not change. "Come on, John, you see it, I know you do..."

"See what?" His partner frowned. "It sounds like you're trying to make me feel better about my chances, but I don't understand how knowing Dewey worked dirty helps anything—oh!"

"Yes, John," urged Sherlock, grasping his hand where it lay on the seat between them.

"There would be a high probability of contamination in the microcapsule material. What would the odds be like?"

"Certainly as high as twenty-five percent, in my estimation. Likely higher."

Sherlock watched approvingly as the implications sank in. Within seconds, John began sitting straighter in the seat; the anxious rhythm of his breathing relaxed, and the hint of a tiny smile touched one corner of his mouth.

You can do this, Sherlock told the doctor with a squeeze of his hand, and was rewarded with a tight squeeze in return.

John's bulky brown medical satchel bumped against his side while the three of them strode briskly into the athletic complex, with Sergeant Patel leading the way.

As they approached the tennis courts, it was clear that a doubles match had just wrapped up. Three
tired players and their coach passed them, talking amongst themselves animatedly about some point of form or another; Sherlock didn't bother listening, because the fourth player lagging behind them had already caught his attention.

Susan was sweaty and obviously exhausted. Her blonde fringe was plastered to her forehead, and the muscles of her legs trembled slightly as she mounted the stairs leading up from the sunken courts. She'd worked herself hard in this session—*driven to improve her performance*, Sherlock noted.

"Excuse me, Ms Reesor?" Patel took the lead, as they'd agreed, providing his identification and making quick introductions.

She frowned and wiped at her face with her towel. "Something to do with that hostage thing? Well, I suppose I'm happy to help you with your investigation, but maybe it could wait 'til I've got changed?"

Just as John began to speak, she held up a finger, hung her head and began to cough, bracing her hands on her knees. John shot a wide-eyed look at Sherlock—*have we come too late?*—and crouched low to look her in the eyes; startled by his sudden proximity, she reared back. Brow furrowed, she took a long drink from her water bottle, and when she could speak again she rasped, "What the hell was that about?"

"Sorry, sorry," John said quickly, stepping away with a flustered expression. "Er, I can explain..."

Sherlock broke in to give his partner time to collect his thoughts. "We've been repeatedly attempting to contact you by phone for the better part of three hours. Clearly your practice hasn't gone that long."

She looked confused, reaching for the side pocket of her racquet bag and pulling out her mobile. "Oh, damn. Sorry, I had my phone plugged in at Bobby's last night, but I think that cable must have a short. It must not have taken a charge at all; it's gone stone dead, now."

John had managed to regain his poise. "Susan, we know who accosted you and your customers last month. As it turns out, the incident was a cover for the last in a string of murders."

"A murder! Oh my God. Whose?"

"Yours, as it happens," quipped Sherlock, extending an arm to encourage her to walk with them. "*What?*

"Sherlock! A *little* tact?"

As they made their way slowly towards the locker rooms, John explained the gruesome details as delicately as he could, shooting quelling looks towards Sherlock each time he sensed a comment about to burst forth. It took a few minutes—the woman was hardly all that bright, and John insisted upon treating the issue far too gently, in Sherlock's opinion—but eventually she got a grasp on things.

"So, you've come to take me to hospital?" she asked.

Sherlock scoffed loudly. "Have you heard nothing Doctor Watson has *told* you? Time is of the essence! You would rather sit and wait while we explain the whole thing again to some incompetent NHS drone in the A&E, and then hope for the best?"
"I do still work under NHS credentials, Sherlock," John protested, rounding on him.

"And somehow you take umbrage, even so. Truly, John, would you disagree with my assessment, as to the quality of care with which she's likely to be saddled? We would be hard-pressed to raise a specialist with your qualifications on such short notice!"

His face went through a few rather interesting contortions as he blinked up at Sherlock.

"It's me you need to convince, remember," Susan reminded them, and they both turned to face her once more. "So you have good credentials, Doctor Watson?"

"Most relevant would be his four years of field surgical experience in Afghanistan," answered Sherlock, before John could take the opportunity to belittle himself, "during which he saved countless lives; and since then, five years' work as a clinic GP, in the course of which I can attest to the fact that he saved my own life more than six times, under various extraordinary circumstances. Believe me when I say, Susan, this man is your best chance for survival."

John took a step closer to lean in at Sherlock's side. "Three times, at most, surely?" he questioned in a low voice.

"I stand by my count," he murmured back firmly. *Granted, not every one of those was strictly medical. If he wants to dispute my criteria later, fine.*

Susan chewed on her lower lip, looking back and forth between them. At last she nodded, turning decisively to the door of the locker room and pausing with her hand upon it. "We—we can't do it here, obviously. Let me just shower and get my things; one of the trainers is a good friend, and he left me a set of keys..."

Within a few minutes, they ended up in a small trainer's office, set up for basic sports medicine and first aid needs. It was complete with a padded examination table. Sergeant Patel was placed within earshot outside the door to stand watch, prepared to call 999 if needed.

"The lighting's not what I would call ideal," said John, looking around intently, "but I've worked in much worse conditions. Right, it'll just be half a moment, Susan, while I get ready..."

John set about prepping the room and himself: pulling out sterile paper to cover the table, rolling up his sleeves, washing his hands, neatly setting out his supplies. Sherlock stood by silently, relishing the opportunity to observe the man's methodical descent into full concentration. He'd witnessed it first-hand before, of course, but usually from the perspective of the patient receiving care.

"You scrub up too, Sherlock," John instructed.

"What?—Oh. Yes." Blinking, he removed his suit jacket, carefully setting it aside on the little chair, and went about rolling up his own sleeves.

Susan faced away from them as she quickly peeled off the loose T-shirt she'd put on after her hurried shower; she held one of the towels they'd brought from the locker room self-consciously across her chest.
"Will it hurt?" she asked nervously.

"Don't worry," John assured her; "you'll barely feel a thing." Susan heard the care she was meant to in his voice, but Sherlock knew him well enough to hear that he said the words distantly: already three steps ahead and focused on what he was about to do.

*Oh, it is incredible to watch.*

At the doctor's direction she lay on the table, face down, and Sherlock stood close by her head. In this small room, everything John had laid out was within easy reach of them both.

"Look, Sherlock." John passed him a pair of latex gloves, then indicated the swollen, red mark near the centre of the woman's back, speaking in a hushed, almost husky tone. "It looks as if you were right; thank God."

"Is that what that is?" questioned Susan, incredulously. "I thought I'd just got a pimple from my sports bra. Hurts like hell, and I can't even reach it."

"Yes; that must have been painful. However, it appears you're very lucky to have had it."

Sherlock nodded in agreement. "The surface infection has effectively created an insulating layer around the intrusion. This reduced the active circulation around it; the dissolution will have been slowed. Quite fortunate."

"Still, by no means a cakewalk. Okay, get ready for a pinch..." After gently swabbing the area with disinfectant, John took up the syringe of lidocaine and began to administer it very carefully. "I'll need you to do your best to keep still, Susan. And Sherlock, you'll be my extra hands; be prepared."

"Of course."

As the anaesthetic took effect, and John prepared to make the first incision, Susan's hand shot out and grabbed at Sherlock. His mouth fell open in shock, but he allowed the woman to keep her tight grip upon his left hand. He hoped that whatever assistance John might need could be managed with only the right.

Finally, it was the moment of truth. Delicately, oh so delicately, John's blade dipped, and dipped again; the skin parted beneath it like layers of silk; the world seemed narrowed down to these few square inches of flesh, and the concentrated intensity on the face of the doctor poised over them.

"Grab one of the saline pipettes," John muttered after a minute's work.

Sherlock released a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding and obeyed. John had twisted open three of the translucent plastic vials, standing them on end on the tray; Sherlock took one up in a cautious grip.

"Now flush from the left; try to come at it from underneath, you see it?"

"I see it."

"Good, like that—wait, there's an adhesion—okay, again..."

"Wait, I need another. All right. Same way?"

"Just a touch further to the right, and a little more pressure in the jet if you can. I've got the top, I can't squeeze it—okay, okay, good—"
A little shudder went through their patient as the cool blood-tinged liquid ran down her side and pooled beneath her stomach. John's eyes flickered up and back down; he raised his voice slightly to tell her, "You're doing very well, Susan. Very well. Not much longer, now, hang in there."

A few moments more and the deed was done: the small and deadly mass came free at last, and John's shoulders drooped for a second in relief. Then it was on to the business of cleansing and dressing the incision, and soon enough Sherlock was helping Susan to sit up, and handing her another towel.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?" he asked, shaking the circulation back into his abused left hand. "Congratulations, you've been officially downgraded to an attempted murder victim. I'm sure this will make a lovely story to impress your boyfriend, and that moronic flatmate of yours."

"Sherlock," scolded his partner, looking up from his prescription pad...but he wore a tired smile.

Brilliant, he thought, and he tried to make the words that bubbled up within him visible in his gaze. Extraordinary, amazing, fantastic.

My John Watson.
Two weeks on from the close of the case, Anna's arranged a surprise for Greg...and the evening's end comes as a shock to almost everyone.

"Knock knock—who 'dere? Butt! Butt who? Man wif no butt!"

A peal of rollicking laughter filled the speaker of Anna's phone, then after a muffled prompt in the background, Kyle spoke again. "Miss 'oo Auntie Banna! Love you!"

Ryan's voice took over on the call. "So, yeah. Knock knock jokes are his current phase. And you got a real classic, right there; you should save this voicemail and sell it to his biographer when he's famous someday!" Her brother laughed. "Anyway, we just wanted to see how everything's going over there...we're all good here. Best wishes from Mandy and Mom too. Tell Greg we all said hi, including Kyle of course, and, y'know...call me back when you get the chance, okay Banana? 'Bye!"

Anna lowered the phone to her lap, gazing down at it as fondly as if it were the faces of her youngest brother and nephew.

"All right there, sweet?" asked Greg from the seat beside her. When she looked up, the moving glow of the streetlamps outside their cab caught in his dark eyes, making him look positively mischievous.

"Oh...yeah, just a sweet voicemail from Ryan and Kyle. Everyone says hi."

"That's nice," he hummed. "You going to call back?"

"Tomorrow, probably. Tonight's about you, birthday boy."

"Be advised...if you insist on encouraging my massive ego, I won't stop you."

"That's fine, because I wouldn't dream of being stopped," she grinned. "Oh good, we're here."

The hotel Anna had chosen was sleek and fashionable, and had been highly recommended for the beautiful bar and high-quality tapas restaurant paired on its ground floor. In the lobby, Greg automatically turned his feet towards the restaurant, but Anna caught his elbow and steered him to the reception counter instead, so that she could check in.

As the clerk turned away to retrieve their key cards, Greg leaned in close to give a mild protest.
"You got a room, too? You didn't have to do that, love! I've no problem going home after."

"Once you see the bathroom in our suite, you'll be singing a far different tune, I promise. It's part of your birthday gift, and there's no getting out of it!"

They strolled across to the restaurant, and Anna squeezed his hand as she addressed the host. "Reservation for Clark, please."

The smiling man led them past numerous empty two-person tables, and around to a seating area consisting of a large oval of high-backed red leather sofas with low tables. As they came closer, Anna imagined she could sense the exact moment when Greg began to suspect something was off; his slight hesitation turned into a dead halt, though, when heads began to pop up over the sofa backs with a cheerfully rising shout.

She rose on tiptoes and joined the cheer, with a kiss on his cheek. "Surprise!"

"You," he breathed.

"...You," he said, louder. "You daft bastards!"

John and Ronny stepped forward and dragged him into the spacious seating circle, and he looked around with smiling bewilderment at the group. They numbered nine, including himself and Anna, and food and drinks were already on the tables along with a number of wrapped packages.

"I can't believe you all thought this was a good idea," Greg grinned. "And Sally, you liar—you told me you were visiting your sister tonight!"

As Greg made his way around the group greeting people, Anna accepted a little hug in greeting from John, moving past Mrs Hudson and Molly to settle herself in a free seat. She looked around everyone gathered there with a vague smile, touching the phone that still rested in her pocket, and couldn't help but wonder. Is this little circle of people really enough for me? Could they possibly take the place of my family—and my best friends back home? And would I even want them to? She knew it wasn't really an either/or choice, of course, but with such great distances involved, it certainly felt as if it could be. Whatever I do, I'm effectively leaving out half the people in my life, now, she sighed to herself.

"Here you are, Anna," came a deep voice at her side, and she turned to find Sherlock offering her a cocktail.

"Thanks," she responded, deliberately shaking herself from her thoughts; doubts could wait for later.

By the time the party had worked its way around to the giving of gifts, two rounds of small plates had come and gone, and everyone was on their second or third drink. The atmosphere was festive and relaxed as packages began to work their way towards the sofa where Greg and Anna were lounging; she kept them gathered by her side, parceling them out to him one by one.

After everyone had finished laughing over the series of gag gifts that Phil, Ronny and Sally had collaborated to present, and admiring the socks Mrs Hudson had knitted, Anna put a thin, flat box
in Greg's lap.

Greg paused to take a swig of his scotch, then tore into the thin damask-patterned paper. "What's this then, gift cards?" he guessed as he opened the lid. "Oh-ho, no—Sherlock! Ta for these, you arse." He slipped the cards into his pocket without further explanation to the group, but not before Anna caught a good look; three versions of Greg's photo, at a range of apparent ages, graced what were presumably his own old warrant cards. The only other item in the box was a letter-size envelope of heavy, creamy stationery.

"I thought you might appreciate them," said Sherlock, crossing his legs indolently. "And don't you dare open that envelope with anyone present."

"All right, all right. Keep your shirt on, I won't touch it 'til later." Greg looked across to him and squinted a little. "No, really, Sherlock, keep your shirt on!"

Anna turned to see that John had wound his arm around Sherlock's shoulders, and was toying idly with the man's wide-open collar. At Greg's comment, John sat straighter, flushing a bit redder than the drink had already made him; on the other side of the oval, Molly and Mrs Hudson stifled tittering laughter into their glasses.

A booming voice called out, then, drawing everyone's attention to a new group of arrivals. "Sorry to be late! Still have seats for us, I hope?"

"Brian?" Greg stood up, clearly shocked. "And Frankie and the kids too! You all really came in for this?"

"Well, we said we would, didn't we?" Fran replied. "Come on, we wouldn't miss it for the world."

His niece and nephew rushed over to give him hugs, and Greg spoke over their heads to make introductions. "Everyone, er, meet my brother Brian, and his wife Fran—and these two are Sophie and Ian, who I am beyond thrilled to see," he finished, squeezing them both tight and dropping a kiss on Sophie's head.

The group shifted about a bit as everyone got resettled; rather than sitting down straight away, Brian stepped close to hand over a wrapped box. "Brought something for you."

"Oh yeah? Thanks..." Greg sat forward to take it, replacing his dwindling drink on the table; when he opened the package, he found a pair of currant-coloured leather gloves.

"Italian lambskin, lined with cashmere," Brian told him, reaching across to accept the drink that Fran offered. "I have a pair; they're incredibly warm. Thought you'd be able to use 'em."

"Too rich for the likes of me," he murmured quietly, as he cradled the box and caressed the buttery soft leather with two gentle fingers. He looked up to his older brother, and Anna was struck by the subtle play she saw between them: for just one second, both their faces were unguarded, and soft, and neither held animosity towards the other.

Then Brian glanced to the side, and laughed shortly. "Well, someone's got to show you how to appreciate the finer things."

Greg blinked, and his eyes seemed to shutter over; he turned away to accept the package Molly was passing his way, and the moment was gone.

"Yeah, yeah, open that one," called John, tipping his head back to drain his glass. "I've been waiting long enough."
"Well, this one sloshes, that's a good sign eh?" he chuckled, tearing the paper away to reveal a bottle of Macallan scotch. "Oh, this is the eighteen year—good stuff! Marvellous, far better than what I'm ordering here. And, ah, the tag says, 'May I be used in far happier times than the bottle I replace.' Aw, John."

"Cheers, Greg," John said, raising his own glass in response before realising he'd just emptied it; laughing, he set it down and raised Sherlock's wine glass instead, through the simple expediency of grasping Sherlock's wrist.

Three sofas away, Sally shook her head and smiled in mute disbelief.

Popping a succulent morsel of stuffed olive into her mouth, Anna took a break from socialising and surveyed the continued success of her gathering with satisfaction.

Sally and Molly appeared to be getting on famously, a far cry from what she'd heard about their first meeting in Molly's laboratory; they were already exchanging stories about their respective boyfriends, neither of whom had made it to the party. Fran had roped John into conversation along with Ronny, something about how to choose a quality carpeting; while the sergeant seemed to actually be interested, John seemed a little out of his depth. He couldn't easily escape the chat, though, since Sherlock had taken advantage of the comfortable seating and was leaning quite heavily into his side, wearing a distant smile as he casually cradled his glass of red wine. Anna couldn't recall ever having seen Sherlock so relaxed, and certainly not in public. It was so priceless to see that she almost couldn't bear to turn her head fully in their direction, for fear of breaking the spell.

While Brian engaged in quiet, jovial conversation with Phil Anderson at the other end of the seating group, Greg seemed mostly at ease at Anna's side. He happily fielded questions from his niece and nephew about his police work; Ian, especially, seemed to have an interest in learning about the current police training procedures. When Greg's phone rang, the teenagers turned their full attention to her instead, with various inquiries on what it was like growing up in America. She did her best to satisfy their curiosity while Greg talked.

After a few minutes, she turned to Greg, still smiling and chuckling into his phone, and gestured at the tapas plate nearest them. "Honey, did you want any more of this, or can I take the last—oh, okay, sorry, I guess I'm taking the phone now, hello!" she laughed, with the second half of her sentence spoken into the mobile being pressed into her hand.

"And so it is that I hear the voice of the inimitable Anna, at last," said the man on the other end, in a precise, lilting accent that held the hint of a smile in its soft edges.

"And this would be the legendary Professor Bosch, no doubt. I look forward to the day we finally get to meet! I've heard so many good things about you."

"As have I, Miss Clark. You've left quite an impression on my dear friend." His tone was so serious and earnest that it made her blush.

Greg grinned lopsidedly and leaned close, directing his words into the phone she still held at her ear. "Aw, Douglas, you're embarrassing her, you big softie!"
Douglas' laugh was warm and breathy. "Obviously Greg has been enjoying himself. I'll let you both get back to the celebration, shall I? Please tell him we'll speak again soon."

As it approached ten thirty, Mrs Hudson began to droop a bit. Anna noticed right away, but before she could say anything, Sally picked up on it as well.

"How about I see you home, Mrs Hudson?" Sally asked. "Unlike some lucky ducks, my team and I have to work while my boss takes the rest of the week off."

"Can't be helped," Greg grinned blithely, licking the remnants of a chorizo-filled date off his fingers. "Ronny, Phil, you boys should probably be off, too, shouldn't you?"

They grumbled good-naturedly, but were willing enough to make their farewells to the group.

"See you at the office next Monday, Greg; don't party too hard, yeh?" Sally winked.

"Don't worry, Sally, I'll keep him in line for you," Anna told her, standing to give her and Mrs Hudson goodbye hugs.

As the four of them made their way out, Fran tutted. "Oh my, it is getting late. Come on, kids, we'd best be off to our hotel; say goodbye to Uncle Greg, go on. We'll let your father stay out late awhile and have his fun."

Soon enough the group had shrunk; Greg and Anna moved down to the open seats beside John and Sherlock, who seemed quite content not to move. Anna couldn't believe Sherlock had been willing to stay so long, frankly; she suspected it had something to do with the comfortable sofas and the way John was leaning on his shoulder, idly kneading his forearm as he kept up pleasant conversation. On the other side of the doctor and his detective, Brian and Molly were the last remaining guests.

In all this time, the two Lestrade brothers had coexisted peacefully on opposite sides of the gathering, but in this more intimate arrangement the chat necessarily included them both. Anna was on the lookout for anything unpleasant, but all seemed well. It's far more relaxed than Fran's birthday dinner was, she observed happily.

It wasn't to last, though.

The turning point came when Brian addressed Greg with a tipsy grin. "Surprised me, really, to see you taking up with someone as smart and level-headed as your lovely Anna here. Sort of goes against your previous tastes in women, doesn't it?"

It wasn't the kindest thing to say, although there seemed to be a genuine compliment to Anna beneath the teasing—but Greg's face flushed at once and he all but leapt up from his seat, turning
away with a clearly disdainful mutter.

Brian jumped up as well, throwing his arm out to catch at Greg's shoulder and spin him around. "That's it; you know, I've had it with this childish shite," he snapped. "What's your problem? You're fifty-two!"

"And you're fifty-four, Brian. An' you have your life just the way you want. It's perfect, innit? You've got money, and a lovely house, an' Frances has stayed with you all this time, and you have two beautiful children. And it doesn't fucking matter, does it? It hasn't kept you up at night, these past twenty-seven years, that you got to live when she didn't..."

"What the hell are you even talking about, Greg?"

"You started Jo down that path. I know it was you. She was such a good girl, she was so..." His voice broke.

Anna saw Sherlock's head snap up to full attention, from the corner of her eye; she was too preoccupied with the plummeting sensation in her stomach to wonder why.

I never should have invited them, I never should have meddled at all! I can't believe I thought I could just do this for Bert, just make it better somehow when I didn't even know the story; what the hell was I thinking? Molly and John were stricken silent, right along with her, as the tension escalated and the air seemed to become thick.

"I don't know what it is that you believe I did to Johanna Farshaw. But it wasn't what you think." Brian's words were low and dangerous, and he gripped his glass tightly.

Greg tipped the last of his own scotch down his throat and turned to smack the thick-bottomed glass down upon the table behind him. "Wasn't it? All those years she went out with you, she knew you were a right arse but she always said you 'knew how to have a good time.' Don't think I don't know what that means! If I didn't know then, I sure as hell figured it out by the time she and I were halfway to tearing each other apart; when she wouldn't come see me unless she had enough to keep her high the whole weekend!" His shoulders were heaving under the force of his words, although the volume was still low enough that the rest of the lounge's attention hadn't been drawn. "She died, Brian, at twenty-seven years old, strung out and miserable and hating herself, and you, you get to live!"

Sherlock stood in one smooth movement; all of the group besides the Lestrade brothers swivelled their heads to stare. He stepped forward and placed himself between the men, forming the point of an invisible equilateral triangle; before he could intervene, however, Brian responded to the accusation.

"You know, I envy you your damn innocence, Greg," he ground out. "You still don't understand why we dated at all, do you?"

"Enlighten me then, why don't you." Greg spat the demand, his fists opening and clenching at his sides.

Brian turned his head to the side and gritted his jaw over a long exhale, focused on a point on the carpet, clearly steeling himself to speak. It was the first Anna had been able to see his face since the confrontation had begun, and she was shaken by the expression she saw there. Brian looked angry, yes, and insulted...but the usual veneer of casually smug superiority was entirely gone. This was more open, honest and vulnerable than she had ever expected to see him; she shuddered, fearful of what he was about to say.
"You really didn't know," he muttered, turning back to his brother and picking up steam as he spoke with more and more vehemence. "For God's sake, how could you miss it? Her Dad was abusing her! He made her life hell, for years. I wasn't the one who got her into the coke, dammit; she started all that shite after she decided to break up with me! It was out of my hands, Greg."

Brian dragged a heavy hand down his face. "We never even had sex except one time—half a time, really; never should have done, even, it was a bad idea all around. I guess that was something she only wanted from you, eh..."

Greg's face was frozen in a heartwrenching rictus of disbelief, his brow furrowed and his breath coming in little pants as if he'd just run up a long flight of stairs. "What are you saying?"

In the ensuing moment of pained silence, Sherlock tentatively raised a hand and placed it gently upon Greg's shoulder. Anna felt John's arm come up around her own shoulders a moment later, and that was when she realised she'd been holding her breath.

Brian took a long, deep swallow of his drink, and stared into the glass. When he met Greg's eyes to speak again, his voice was gentler, and slightly slurred. "We weren't in love. We never were. It would've been a lot easier, I s'pose, if we had been. If I'd had a mind to, I could've been stepping out with—well, prob'ly any girl I fancied. But y'know, we made a deal. As mates, Greg! Hell, it wasn't easy. She only ever broke up with me after I came home from summer term, and she figured out I'd fallen in love with Sara. I told her we could keep the sham up, y'know—just at home, let it ride 'til she managed to get herself out of Bristol for good—but she wouldn't take no for an answer!"

There was a long moment during which nobody spoke; Brian hung his head and finished his drink; Sherlock remained still and poised, his face a marble mask, and it appeared Greg hadn't even noticed the hand that stayed upon his shoulder. Anna had a clear view of him from her seat, and although she desperately wished to, she couldn't look away; the shifting waves of emotion crossing Greg's face made it clear that a large part of his worldview was tilting precariously beneath him. Shock turned to pain, and then visible, sickened guilt which hit him with enough force to make him physically stagger.

Anna bit down hard on the knuckle of her forefinger, and a tiny whimper escaped past her clenched fist; John gave her shoulder a small squeeze.

Sherlock broke the brittle silence by clearing his throat. "Perhaps it would be best," he began delicately, his brows drawing together in obvious discomfort at having impulsively placed himself in the position of mediator, "if this important discussion is shelved for another time. The amount of alcohol in play at the moment will rather interfere with Lestr—Greg's logic."

The sound of his first name from the detective's lips caused Greg to startle, looking first at Sherlock, and then his brother. He blinked hard and fast, trying vainly to clear away the moisture that gathered in his eyes.

Brian coughed. "I—yes, of course." He shifted his posture to something almost echoing his normal composure. "Please, Greg, let me know when we can meet, next week I hope? We have a lot to talk about, it seems."

Greg stared at Brian for a long moment before responding. "Yeah. I'll—yeah, all right," he breathed, his voice ragged; then a shudder ran through him, as if he were about to be sick. He managed a quick "Excuse me," before pulling away from Sherlock's steadying hand and rushing towards the lounge exit.

Left standing alone with Sherlock, Brian immediately became self-conscious; he turned to regard
his silent, shocked audience and pasted a wan smile across his tanned face. "I should get back to our hotel, Fran'll be worried if I stay out too long. Er. Good to meet you all; Anna, thanks for the invite. Sorry about all this...make sure he calls me, eh?"

She nodded, numbly, and levered herself awkwardly up to offer her hand. He took it, but instead of shaking it, he pulled her into a fast, hard hug that took her by surprise.

"He needs to tell you about Jo," he said softly at her ear, "it's going to eat him alive otherwise. I'm glad you'll be here for him." With a peck of a kiss on her cheek—even more surprising than the hug—he abruptly retreated, waving a mock-cheerful goodbye as he made his way quickly out.

Molly stood up next, and stammered out an embarrassed excuse, offering brief hugs to Anna and John before leaving herself.

Dazed, Anna stood next to the table and stared unfocused at Greg's empty glass; out of the corner of her eye, she registered John stepping over to his partner and speaking in a low voice.

"You called him 'Greg', love."

Sherlock shrugged, allowing the shorter man's arms to encircle his waist. "They were both 'Lestrade'. My personal preference was moot."

About ten minutes later, after settling the tab from their party, Anna entered the hotel's bar area cautiously; it was moodily lit and private, in comparison to the bright, comfortable tapas lounge. At first she didn't see the man she was looking for, but they were all fairly certain that he'd be here; John had begun to make a move to go after him, himself, but Sherlock had stopped him and asked her to go instead. Finally, she caught sight of the familiar silhouette, isolated near the far wall of the space.

Greg was slumped forward with his forearms on the bar, staring down into the glass of liquor between his hands. It was still mostly full, but she felt sure it wasn't his first drink since retreating back here.

"All that time. All those bloody years. Even when I thought it was getting better, she was always slipping away from me," he mumbled as she approached, more to himself than to her.

She sat down on the stool at his right side and watched him silently for a moment, not sure how to start the conversation based on that comment.

He took a swig of the drink, still muttering under his breath, not giving any sign that he even realised who'd joined him. "I couldn't asked her, couldn't I? Fuck's sake, even my brother knew enough to ask her!"

*He doesn't know that,* Anna thought sadly. *Maybe Brian was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and saw something. Maybe she wouldn't have ever admitted it.* Out loud she offered, "It wasn't your fault."

It was an entirely inadequate attempt at comfort; his eyes cut over to her dully and then returned to his scotch.
When he spoke, louder this time, his words were clearly slurred around the edges, but brittle all the same. "All those years, I hung around, I let it happen; an' in the end, I was good for nothing. Nothing. Couldn't stand up for myself, an' I couldn't help her at all. I'm weak, an' I always have been."

"No, baby, no. You're strong. You're so strong."

He turned and looked at her blearily, his eyes pleading through their drunken haze. "Sure. 'M strong, with you."

"You're strong without me too," she answered immediately; it was clearly the wrong thing to say, judging by the wave of pure hurt that passed over his face, but she couldn't help pushing on. "You always have been. You still could be."

"Don't wanna be," Greg ground out huskily, reaching forward and grasping her forearms. "Without you it's no good, anymore."

"Greg..."

"No, look,"—he leaned in a bit, speaking faster, and her breath caught at the almost manic intensity in his tear-glazed eyes—"see, this's the problem. I fall too hard, I need too much, I'll take everything you have to give an' I'll always be utter bollocks at givin' back! You—you'd be better off to run, truly. An' you should know it." His last words trailed off sadly, and he looked down in vague surprise at his own hands clenching at her arms; slowly, deliberately, he loosened his fingers, lifted them and pulled back.

Anna heard another iteration of Greg's voice speaking in her head: *Always been the one to take such good care of people, so good I cared them all right into running away.* She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and blinked, following his dropped hands with hers and trying to catch them up. She got the right, but the left closed around his glass, and he didn't look back up to her. "You don't mean that," she told him.

"No, I do. 'S what I'm good for, innit? I hang in for the long haul, but I don't ever give enough; an' then, when it gets too painful to keep on..." One shoulder lifted and dropped in a sad, crooked shrug, and he turned his body back toward the bar, lifting the tumbler and draining it in one draught.

Some very uncharitable thoughts directed at Tracy went through Anna's mind, and she tightened her grip on Greg's hand until she felt her fingernails pressing into the skin. "Stop, now. Whatever you're telling yourself, stop it. I am not her."

Greg's head swivelled around unsteadily, and he stared down at their joined hands, swallowing.

"I'm not either of them," she continued, willing her voice not to shake. "I'm not struggling with things you can't help. And I'm not trying to make myself into the centre of your life." *And I'd never cheat on you just to get back at you if it turns out I'm not,* she silently added.

"Anna," he said—and the sheer intensity of feeling he put into that one word sent a cascade of shivers over her; "you are so—I can't—Christ, I don't know what I can offer you, old and broken as I am..."

"Oh, honey..."
'But you need to know, you are *precious* to me that it fucking tears me up inside—an’—" He slumped forward, drawing her hand to his heart and hunching over it.

Anna slipped off the bar stool and wrapped him in a hug, feeling the long, wet shudder of his inhale as he buried his face in the crook of her shoulder.

"Come on, Greg. Let's go on upstairs, all right, love? John and Sherlock have our overnight bags, and they've taken all our things to the room. Let's just go."

"...Love you," he whispered faintly, tightening his fingers in the back of her dress.

"Sweetie, oh, I love you too."
Nights like this one aren't new for John; they're always therapeutic for himself and Greg. But tonight may prove a bit more illuminating than he'd expected.

The Thursday night crowd in The Old Duke, their usual pub, was thin and quiet. "Too quiet," John thought, looking around with a mild frown as he chose a table near the back. He'd honestly prefer it if there was rowdy weekend noise, or a game on the little screen behind the bar, or—well—anything to provide an easy distraction. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk. It was just that focusing outward was the easiest way to deal with their inevitable long silences, and they'd had years to refine that technique.

"Oh well, we'll make the best of it," he told himself. "Besides, it's hardly what it was a year ago."

"Here we are," said Greg from behind him, sliding into the booth and pushing a pint his way.

"Yeah, cheers," John nodded in return, and they took their first pull of lager in unison, a long-standing ritual of comfort.

"I know Thursday's not the usual thing. Thanks for coming out, anyway. Did you work today?"

"Just Tuesdays and Wednesdays at the surgery, still. Sarah seems to like that arrangement." He shifted to pull his phone from his jeans pocket, double check it for messages, and place it on the table. "Nope, the only thing you're pulling me away from is the incredible excitement of Sherlock's current experiment...and frankly, it's probably better for my blood pressure this way."

"What's the mad bugger up to, now?"

"You don't want the details, trust me. Suffice it to say, he's promised me no explosions, and no flames outside the radius of the kitchen table."

"Well, best of luck with that then."

They shared a grin.

"So what was your reason for choosing Thursday?"

"Molly's taken Anna out to some event with her crochet club," Greg replied. "They'll be out late, too; when it comes to yarn, those women don't mess about..." His smile faltered at the corners, then dropped away. "I invited you out because I met Brian for dinner, last night."
"Ah." The first thoughtful silence crept over the table between them, but John broke it fairly quickly. "That went all right?"

"It went. All right is a bit subjective," Greg sighed.

"Well, everything has to start somewhere. And getting over arguments with family can be the hardest," he said, remembering how awkward it had been to reconnect with Harry the previous spring. His lingering resentment over his sister's years of addiction had clashed with her understandable anger at his behaviour: he hadn't once voluntarily contacted her in the first two years he'd mourned his flatmate. Then, when Sherlock had returned from the dead a few months later, their shaky truce had wobbled all over again.

"Yeah, s'pose so. It was fucking awful, don't get me wrong. But I guess we're both still standing."

The simple fact that he never brought her up before, in all our talks... it must have hit him hard to have been buried so deep. John took a careful breath and prepared to casually step over the line. This was bound to be the toughest topic of the night for Greg; best to get it out there as quickly as he could... "So—stab in the dark here—you both dated the same girl, but he knew her secret and you didn't, and then he never mentioned it to you after she passed. Have I hit the mark at all?"

Greg snorted unhappily. "That's a pretty simplistic take on it. You've got the broad outline, though. She went steady with him three years, when we were teenagers back in Bristol; later on, she found me at uni in London. We had just a little over six years before she—"

"Steady," John murmured, taking a slow sip of his beer and waiting for his friend to do the same. He heard a manic sort of edge creeping into Greg's voice that he didn't like.

"Jo was already an addict by the time she came to London, or nearly so. Coke, uppers; whatever she could get her hands on, I guess. But I was young, and clueless, and blinded by love—by the time I realised, it was far too late." He pressed his eyes shut, replaying some memory, and when he opened them a haunted look lingered.

"You couldn't help her," guessed John softly, "because you never knew why she was broken."

"Brian really, truly didn't know that I hadn't been told. We'd never talked about her, all this time, and so for twenty-seven years I had this—fucking massive misunderstanding, about everything—and he just thought I was pissed about other stuff entirely! For God's sake, I was the one in a real relationship with her; I was never shamming it, even when I thought she was just using me. I was the one she was sleeping with, so when she eventually told him that we were together, he just assumed she would've opened up to me."

"Not a completely ridiculous assumption, I suppose. So where does that leave you and your brother?"

"It leaves me feeling like a bloody teenager, for one thing. Feeling like I based half of what I knew in my life on a couple conversations I misinterpreted under the influence of raging hormones, and there's no getting that back, is there?"

"Perhaps not, but you can still move forward."

"Maybe. Yeah. Never hurts to try, except when it hurts to try, right?"

Another silence overtook them, longer this time.

When Greg raised his head and spoke again, he seemed resolved to lighten the mood. "Look, John,
I'm sorry you and Sherlock had to see that, last week."

"Don't be, it was fine. I hope it didn't make you uncomfortable that we stuck around to help after."

He gave a bark of a laugh. "Good thing you did, innit! I assume it was you helping me upstairs, I don't think Anna would've had an easy time of it on her own. 'Course I was too bloody far gone to know, at that point, so you could tell me that Daniel fucking Craig got me into that room and I'd have to believe you."

"So I look taller and handsomer when you're drunk, is what you're saying. Cheers to that."

Greg grinned and clicked their nearly-empty glasses together. "And you'd brought overnight bags for us, too. It was pretty well done, I must say. Who was the mastermind of all that, anyway?"

"You could call it a joint effort..." John saw his phone light up at the corner of his eye, a second before it buzzed against the table. As he read it, he felt his brows climbing up his forehead.

**Just out of curiosity, where might you be keeping the SPARE spare fire extinguisher? -SH**

"Excuse me, Greg, I have a massive pyromaniac toddler to check up on. Won't be a minute."

Greg sniggered into his glass, shaking his head. "I'll just grab us another round, then, while you deal with that!"

After a brief and forceful phone conversation, conducted while furiously pacing outside the pub, the crisis was averted.

"Sometimes I could swear, he gets himself into unbelievable situations while home alone solely for the excuse to remind me of his continued existence," John reflected aloud as he slipped back into the booth. "I should really have a talk with that man about affectionate texting...it would be perfectly acceptable if I just got 'hey, I miss you' once in a while. It doesn't always have to be 'by the by, I'm trying to burn the flat down', you know?"

"Fire's romantic, right?" joked Greg, wagging his greying eyebrows. Then he picked up his glass, swirled it about a bit, and said, "He may not have the hang of sweet texts, but he seemed pretty affectionate last Tuesday. It was good to see, you know?"

"Yeah, that was nice. At first I thought he was just trying to make a point to your team, but as it turned out, he was genuinely enjoying himself."

"Make a point?"

"Well, yeah—he seemed to think they wouldn't take the news seriously unless they saw confirmation from both sides. Casual proof that we were together, right, not just some impulsive snog to release tension at the end of a case! Er...sorry about that, by the way. I didn't know it was coming."

"I got an earful from Sally about how Anna and I were wicked for keeping your secret so well, but that was about it really. I don't mind, in this case—I'll admit, I suspected something might be
coming, judging by our little chat that day before lunch. Just don't make canoodling in my office a regular thing, all right?"

"Oh, then it wasn't impulsive, after all?" John shook his head, laughing quietly. "I should've guessed; he does love a performance!"

"I'm willing to bet it was impulsive; he just never would have allowed himself the impulse at all, before he knew I approved of the Yard knowing."

"Hm. So he actually asked you permission?"

"Not exactly, but sort of, I guess. And I didn't tell him what he should do; he said the two of you had been discussing it, and he clearly wasn't decided. Well, I just promised him the people that mattered wouldn't take it badly. I did warn him the rumour mill would go a bit bonkers, but they'd been doing that for years, anyway. Someone actually went and dusted off the old pool they started back in 2010, you know that? If scuttlebutt is to be believed, Rhys Wallace down in Fingerprinting won the pot."

"Aw, now see? You should've put in a bet after New Year's, Greg, you could've made a tidy profit."

"What, and be accused of inside knowledge? Pshaw! I never went in on any of that, anyway. Didn't feel right, speculating on my..."

John quirked a little smile. "Your consultant?"

"My Sherlock," he clarified, dipping his head with an embarrassed shrug. "You—you didn't put eyes on that letter, did you?"

"What? Oh, his gift? No, I've no idea what was in that box he wrapped up for you. Why, what was it?"

Greg's cheeks actually turned a bit red; he took a long swig of his lager and a longer pause before answering, "It was...a thank you. For, well, a fair number of things that happened before you came along...and for taking care of you after he, ah, left." He studied the table intently, picking at it with a fingernail. "I didn't realise you'd told him about that stuff, John."

It was John's turn to drink deep, to offset the hot flush he felt rising on the tops of his ears. "I didn't mean to. There was an incident of sorts, during the case...I kind of lost it, a bit."

The DI narrowed his eyes. "Is this related to whatever was troubling you at Bart's? I thought we were agreed that you were gonna invite me out after the case, but then two weeks went by and I barely saw you until that party..."

That was how it worked, after all, in the strange symbiosis of their friendship. They could meet up any old day for a drink and a casual chat, with or without anyone else around, but meetings like this one were different. One of the pair of them would contact the other, and the words would be spoken or typed or tapped onto a phone screen: I'm inviting you out had come to mean I'm having a rough go of it. For long stretches in those dark years, it had been John's invitation over and over, while Greg's bad nights tended to be scattered more haphazardly, and more often precipitated by an event or an anniversary. Twice, they'd gotten on the phone together and burst out with it simultaneously. I'm inviting you out. And on each one of those nights, some bolstered heavily with humour and meaningless small talk, some thick with silences that threatened to choke them...they were both as honest as they could stand to be.
"...Yeah," John answered him at last, dispelling the weight of the quiet. "I was going to."

"But you didn't. You said it was a secret of Sherlock's, yeh? Look, you still don't have to say, it's fine."

"He started to tell me stories, two months ago," John blurted out, before he'd made a conscious decision to talk. "About his years away, what he'd been doing. How he disguised himself, where he travelled, every piece of Moriarty's network he tracked down and how he took them out one by one. Telling me was an experiment."

"An experiment?"

"He was...having problems with his Mind Palace. He wanted to forget about those places, and those people, but something wouldn't let him. It was driving him spare, 'til one night I asked him some questions that led to him telling me one story...and then he found that he was able to delete just that one."

Greg wore a vague frown while the pieces slowly fit together. "So while you were learning all about what he'd been up to, he was letting it go..."

"Completely. I never realised, you know—when he'd say stuff like 'I deleted the solar system', it was like, sure, unless he really needs it, right? Like it was still in there, somewhere. But Greg, when I accidentally mentioned something, there was no recognition. None."

"Jesus. And so you've been just racking up the stories. I'm guessing they aren't all nice ones."

"Very few of them include anything nice at all," John agreed, wetting his throat with cold lager. "But it was something I'd agreed to do for him. I'd promised, and I wasn't backing out."

They were quiet for a moment, until Greg traced the thread of John's words back to what he hadn't said. "What was this incident, then, that stuff about me was involved? 'Cause what you're telling me, that's all just between you..."

John set down his pint and tipped his head into his hands, bracing his elbows on the table. "It happened the morning you took Anna out to the jewellers," he explained in a low, hesitant voice. "The stories were getting to me. I was stressed; I hadn't slept well for at least three nights before that all-nighter at the Yard. So...there was a sudden trigger, and I guess it threw me into a sort of PTSD flashback or something—I've never experienced anything like it. Like a nightmare—except awake and talking, and apparently a lot of whatever I was saying was directed at you, as if it was one of those really bad nights, early on."

"Well, that explains how Sherlock knew the stuff in his letter," Greg said grimly. "But I hope to fucking hell he's doing more to fix this than writing nice notes..."

Raising his head, John nodded quickly. "It's fine, Greg. Well, it's not fine, but it's getting better. We're dealing with it. After I had that breakdown, Sherlock didn't even let it go another whole day before he started working on the problem."

"All right, then. If you tell me not to worry, then I won't. But, John..."

"I know." He managed a small, sincere smile. "I'm glad Sherlock thought to thank you. I don't feel like I've done it enough."

Greg shook his head with a resigned smile of his own. "You want to thank me? It's your round, go on."
When John returned to their table carrying two fresh pints, he found Greg sitting sideways in the bench seat, looking at something on his mobile.

"Photos Anna took last Tuesday," he chuckled. "Here, you'll like some of these."

John traded beer for phone and took his seat again, mimicking his friend's relaxed sprawl in the booth as he obediently began to flip through the album. He smiled at the waving Mrs Hudson, and a few of Molly in conversation with Greg. He swiped a bit more quickly through the shots of the Yarders, though he grinned for a moment at the shot where Greg and Ronny were holding up simultaneous rabbit-ears behind Sally's and Phil's heads. Then the next series of candid shots brought him to a pause. "Look at that," he marvelled, "my God, we really look like that?"

"Sometimes," Greg allowed, resting the back of his head against the wall.

"Huh. We just seem so...so..." It felt, all at once, as if a weight was pressing at his throat; his eyes prickled, briefly blurring the image of himself and Sherlock leaning into each other mid-laugh.

"John?"

"So—happy. Normal, even. I never—it just looks so different, seen this way. He looks so different." John shook his head a little, frowning deeply, and tried to pin down the elusive emotion. "This kind of stuff, it's like making what we have look normal. Acting like it is normal. When it was secret it was only ours, and so it was free to be only exactly what it was. But when other people see us, see this—they'll automatically assume we're the usual gay couple, sweet and homey, calling each other pet names, taking each other out on romantic dates and shagging afterwards..."

"And that's not what you are," finished Greg, turning to replace his own feet on the floor. John looked up and met his gaze, watching the wheels turning behind the dark brown eyes. "Not homey, not sweet and sappy, not 'gay'...not shagging?" He blinked, taking John's silent look as confirmation and filing the information away without any sign of surprise or distress. "Well, all right. Sorry if
any assumption of mine has ever made you uncomfortable."

"It's fine, it's just not in the cards, we're working around it," John assured him, waving away that topic quickly so that Greg wouldn't feel prompted to ask about it right away. "But I don't know how I could have ever thought that coming out about our relationship would really show anyone what our relationship was. As if I thought we'd look different, somehow, than any other couple in love."

"One set of photos isn't enough to tell anyone's story," he declared, leaning back and crossing his arms. "Anyone who watches you and Sherlock together, and doesn't think you've got something unique and special...well, 'they see, but they do not observe,' wouldn't that be the phrase?"

The words startled a short laugh from John. "Maybe so. And hey, I'm sorry, Greg; this is your night. And I wasn't expecting to get emotional over a photo of Sherlock smiling, for goodness' sake..."

"Pah! You know it doesn't work that way, John, don't be daft."

"I suppose it doesn't, at that." He huffed out a breathy laugh. "Whatever this is."

"Definitions are boring."

Glancing down at the phone still in his hand, John held it up questioningly. "May I—?"

Greg tipped his head sideways in a gracious gesture, mid-swig.

With a nod of thanks, John woke the device and swiped back through to his favourite of the pictures. Pursing his lips in concentration, he carefully went about forwarding it and three others to his own phone. After a moment, he did the same with an arm's length shot of Greg and Anna, laughing and posing cheek to cheek. The ping of the incoming messages sounded in his jeans pocket as he passed Greg's mobile back across the table.

They stayed wrapped up in their own thoughts for a minute; eventually, Greg spoke again.

"You know, in fifty-two years, I'd never had a surprise party thrown for me? It wasn't on my bucket list or anything, but it was a new experience."

"My mates at uni threw me one, once. Think they were just looking for an excuse to get plastered, though."

Greg chuckled, smoothing a hand over his hair. "Yeah, well, it sort of got me thinking, you know? About stuff I never did in my life."

"Making a bucket list now, are you?" John smirked. "Like what? Skydiving and such?"

"Nah!—Well, yeah, never did that. But I mean normal stuff. As in, say, how many wom—how many people did you ever just date? Casually, like?"

"Ah, so it's truth or dare now, I see."

Greg grimaced and made a dismissive gesture. "Forget it, I don't really care. Point is, there were some. I remember two of yours off the top of my head, that I knew about in that year or so after I met you."

"Yeah, there were some. A few more than just those two, that year. What are you getting at, Greg?"
You never dated?"

"Not really! I mean, I never just dated. Sixth form, three different girls I never did more than hold hands with for a night or two, and aside from them...my whole life, there was Jo, and then there was Tracy, and then there was Anna. In between all that, I never got myself out there. I never went into anything that wasn't serious, knowing ahead that it was just a fling or a one-night stand. You see what I'm saying."

John didn't, quite, but he tried to feel it out. "So you're upset because the only relationships you ever experienced were long-term...do you think you missed out on enjoying your youth? Sowing your wild oats, and the like?"

"Eh, not exactly. It's more..." Greg turned the half-empty pint glass back and forth in his fingers, staring down into it as if it were the dial of a particularly important combination lock.

"You think your tendency to commitment is pathological," John said quietly, watching the other man's face. "And you're worried that the situations you've committed to in the past are, what? Indicative of some failing in your judgment?"

"You make it sound as if that doesn't make sense," he muttered, not looking up.

"Well, it sort of doesn't. Come on. Are you really turning this into a reason to doubt Anna?"

"No. No, I don't doubt her. I just, I dunno, wonder if she realises what she'd be getting herself into with me."

This was too much—John actually snorted as he drained the last of his beer. "Let's see. She'd be getting into a stable, long-lasting partnership with a mature, intelligent man who absolutely treasures her...and who, occasionally, self-questions past the point of reasonable doubt, and requires a smack upside the head from his good friends." He stood, stretching. "My round again. You think about that while I'm gone."

It appeared that Greg had taken the directive to heart; when John brought the fourth pair of pints to the table and slid Greg's across to him, he was so deep in some private realm of thought that he hardly even reacted. John was no stranger to pensive silence. This one smacked more of Sherlock's distant ruminations than of the jagged, painful pitfalls Greg and himself were so often prone to, so he didn't interrupt.

Instead, when it became clear that Greg was off in his own world, and likely to remain so for a minute or two, he pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to check in with Sherlock.

Everything all right? -JW

He was feeling good, he realised; it seemed as if this evening's talk with Greg had already taken a weight from his shoulders. When a response came only seconds after his sent message, he smiled down at it fondly.

The results are promising; the second sample has proven quite productive. But you don't really want to hear the details. -SH
I'm afraid not. Sorry to disappoint. -JW

Then why are you texting me? I can see from your glaring typing errors that your evening with Lestrade has been nothing short of intoxicating. -SH

Part of that good feeling was the pleasant buzz beginning to hum along his nerve endings, no doubt. John grinned and put a little more focus into the control of his fingers.

Oh hush. I'm only lightly stewed, and we're just taking a little break from talking here. Just thought I'd tell you I miss you -JW

Sherlock's next response took longer. While he waited, John looked across the table and watched the other man absently stroke a pattern into the condensation on his glass, his eyes still distant.

That sentiment is unequivocally mutual. However, the problem is easily rectified: come home. -SH

All in good time, love. -JW

Greg stirred again just as John pressed Send. "I've had enough of wondering, and second-guessing," he muttered softly, gazing off towards a corner of the ceiling; then he snapped his head around and leaned forward. "I'm gonna do it," he abruptly declared, suddenly focused outward as if he hadn't just spent five minutes on another planet.

"Do what?" asked John, but as he looked at his friend's face—the glowing intensity that had kindled behind the dark eyes—he realised he didn't need to ask. "Finally," he crowed. "Sherlock's only been telling me since January! He was quite sure."

Greg blinked, startled. "I—really? Well, I mean, I guess I'd tried to sort of feel it out a bit around then, just a little hint of the idea. But I certainly hadn't been decided..."

"Whatever you say, Greg. But now, you're really ready, huh?"

"I am." He laughed, short and bright, as if the revelation remained a marvellous surprise. "I really, really am, John."

"Not frightened of the unknown any longer?"

"Bloody terrified. But I'll be damned if I let it keep stopping me!" Greg narrowed his eyes, then, and scratched at the back of his head. "I wonder...would you help me with it? I think I might need Sherlock, too, if you think he'd be willing."

John felt his smile spread wider, and he raised his glass in a salute. "I'm all for it. Whatever you need, we're your men. Let's talk about your plans..."
GREG: The Brightest Flame

Chapter Summary

It's meant to be a memorable evening; Greg's recruited assistance to help ensure that it is.

46. GREG: The Brightest Flame
   (18 July 2015)

"...do you think?"

The pause felt expectant, and Greg suddenly realised that more than one person was looking at him. Dragging his eyes away from the lit candle in the centre of the table, he attempted to rewind his ears, but to no avail. "Sorry. What was that?"

Sally tilted her head with a slight smile and repeated herself: "I thought you might have an opinion on the new shift regulations they've talked about rolling out next month."

"Oh. Oh, well, you know, that's going to affect the beat constables the most. It shouldn't have too much effect on our division," he answered quickly.

"Yeah, I know," smirked Sally, "that's pretty much exactly what I just said to you..."

Anna gave him a sidelong look. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Sure I am! Right as rain, love."

"Are you sure? You seem awfully distracted tonight."

Sally caught the tiny, panicked flicker of his eyes and smoothly pulled his feet from the fire. "You're still chewing over that Gresso case, aren't you? Don't mind him, Anna—you know how he is. Always trying to carry the work home."

Before Greg could respond, Molly chimed in from his other side. "He probably gets that from following after Sherlock for so long. I've never been tempted to do the same, myself. But then, bringing my work home would be a bit messier, wouldn't it?"

This brought a chuckle from everyone around the table, and then the conversation shifted to focus on Simon's work, taking the attention off Greg again for a few minutes. He was profoundly grateful that Sally and Molly were both covering for him. It's a lucky thing that I didn't actually tell Anna about Gresso this week, he thought, otherwise she'd know we closed it in two days...

Greg took a bite of his tandoori chicken and tried a little harder to follow the talk, silently kicking himself for his inattention. He hadn't expected to have such trouble, really—he wasn't a bad
listener, generally speaking, and he genuinely enjoyed the company of everyone there. Even Sally's footballer boyfriend Theo Travers, whom he and Anna had just met, seemed pleasant and personable. The group outing seemed to be a nice change of pace for everyone involved, and Greg was glad to be there.

It wasn't at all surprising to him that Anna would pick up on his distraction; he'd always made a point of being fully present and involved whenever they were out together, leaving his phone for incoming work emergencies only—a concession he'd rarely made for his ex-wife, and to which he held himself almost superstitiously now.

Still, it was taking quite a lot of restraint, tonight, to keep from pulling his mobile out under the table.

Near the end of the meal, Anna excused herself to the restroom; Sally and Molly got up, as well, in the inscrutable way of women the world over. Greg's eyes followed Anna until she disappeared at the rear of the restaurant.

"There she goes," Simon murmured, "the love of your life..."

"Sorry, are there stars in my eyes?"

"A constellation or two," said Theo from the other side of the table. "But I'd say you're excused for the night."

"So you're both in on this, then." Greg looked to the other two men and saw conspiratorial smiles.

"Well, Sal told me what was up when we were trying to decide which restaurant to book," Theo replied. "I think she figured if I didn't know, I'd say something to give it away."

Simon chimed in, "And I went along with Molly, when she took care of that favour you asked her for." He leaned in across Molly's empty seat, between them; Greg looked down to see the box he passed over.

"Ah." Greg accepted it with a short nod and stuffed it into his pocket. "Thanks very much. Would've done it myself, you know, but I haven't had a lot of chances to get away. It wasn't strictly true, of course—he could surely have gotten away under pretence of errands or work. It had just been all too easy to convince himself that the more time he spent with Anna, the less she might suspect he was planning something. Besides, when he'd chatted with Molly to get advice on the best sort of romantic gesture, she'd practically insisted on being given a way to help out.

Greg suddenly remembered his phone, and pulled it out to read the message he'd received earlier.

Ready to go whenever you are. Will need 10 minutes' notice, remember. -JW

He quickly typed an affirmative response and fired it off, tucking the mobile away just as the three women made their way back to the table.

"Sally's had a lovely idea!" chirped Molly, as they resumed their seats.
"Yes," Anna agreed, "you guys aren't tired yet, are you?"

Theo grinned and squeezed his girlfriend's hand. "I bet I can guess what that idea was, Sal. And I could stand to stay out a while, yeah!"

"There's a dance club not too far from here," explained Sally, "Theo and I have been a few times. It's a pretty relaxed place; we thought it might be fun to go out for a few drinks—that is, unless either of you boys were hoping to turn in right after dinner..."

"I don't mind at all, if that's what you ladies want to do," Greg answered promptly. "What about you, Simon? Ready to go out dancing?"

The slender man smiled nervously, pushing his spectacles higher on his nose with one finger. "Uh, sure, I guess so. Far be it from me to be the party pooper!"

And as simply as that, the agenda was off in a new direction. Greg allowed himself exactly one frustrated glare in response to the teasing wink Sally sent his way, when nobody else was looking at them; on their way out of the restaurant, he managed to hang back just far enough to send out a hurried text.

**Change of plan, dancing next. Hang tight 1-2 hrs maybe, sorry -GL**

Sally hadn't been wrong, when she'd assured Greg he wouldn't dislike her choice of venue. He wasn't entirely pleased with the crimp she'd deliberately put in his plans, but this impromptu addition to their evening seemed to be making Anna happy. He couldn't possibly argue with that; Sally had known he wanted the night to be special from start to finish, and so far it seemed to be going well.

Although this kind of club wasn't exactly his normal haunt anymore, he'd done detective work in enough of these sorts of places—searching for people, watching for people, and occasionally overseeing the removal of former people—that even knowing he might well be the oldest person here didn't faze him. Actually, he was quite enjoying the atmosphere, especially in comparison to the frenzied, thumping crush of gyrating youngsters he'd experienced in other establishments.

Their group of six had found a free table within easy sight of the dance floor. The open central space was populated with enough moving people to keep their group from feeling exposed, but the crowd was sufficiently sparse that there was plenty of room to really move. A frenetic dance tune was playing currently; Greg sipped at the tail end of his drink while he scanned the room, listening with half an ear to Theo recounting a dramatic moment from one of last season's matches.

Greg's foot tapped against the leg of the barstool, happily following the rhythm of the music. He gazed at Anna over the rim of his glass; she leant close for Molly to say something in her ear, and laughed brightly.

"My round," announced Simon, standing with a grin. "All the same, folks?"

Everyone nodded, and he left their table to move away toward the bar, wobbling only slightly. Greg watched after him for a moment, remembering John's warning that the young optician was a lightweight. Then the music changed; when the first few isolated beats of the new song reached his
ears, Greg knew he needed to get up and move.

"Dance with me?" he asked, already standing and holding out his hand.

Anna raised her eyebrows, startled mid-sip, her lipsticked mouth delicately pursed around the straw in her tropical drink. "Sure," she said after a quick swallow, hopping off her stool to take his hand.

Greg led her out, weaving around a few people to place them in a fairly open space. On the way, he cheerfully warned her, "You'll have to bear with me, love, I dunno what I'm about here..."

The tune they were playing was a modern pop song he'd heard a few times, with a sparse but heavy beat—some German indie group, he seemed to recall—and Anna clearly didn't know what to expect from him. He pulled a couple dopey moves: swinging their joined hands back and forth, bouncing on his toes a bit, grinning, hamming it up.

Exactly as he'd hoped, Anna threw her head back and laughed. "Oh my god, Greg!"

Just as she broke down into giggles, he switched his grip on her hand abruptly into a leading hold: he drew her into a closed position, aligning their torsos, curving his other arm gently around her waist, stepping back and forth with the steady thumping of the kick drum.

"Oh..." she gasped, and her laugh turned nervous.

He'd taken her by surprise, he knew, and so Greg kept his pattern simple and informal, letting the last of the startled laughter die away and giving her confidence a few seconds to build. Then, when he judged her ready, he led her into a close, fast walking turn that spun them around the floor. She wasn't well-practised, and he knew that his skills were a bit rusty, too—but they'd danced together before, and he already knew how easily she would respond to his lead. After the chorus he returned them to the straight pattern, pressed close together, forward and back, moving in steady, confident steps—her eyes were fixed on his, bright and trusting.

There were eyes on them now, he was certain, and not just those of their friends; none of the other people on the floor were doing anything like what they were to this music. Anna sensed the attention, too: she bit her lower lip and twitched her eyelids, not quite glancing to the side.

No, he told her with his eyes and a squeeze of his hand at her waist, mine—and a flush rose on her cheeks, but she didn't look away as he slid her into another spinning turn.

God, it felt good to be in control, to hold her so close, to feel the heady pulse of the music connecting them. Greg felt a little thrill as Anna took each signal he gave her; she was perfectly receptive, moving in tandem with him as if they were a single unit. The smile on his face was heated, silky; her lips were parted, and he watched her tongue emerge to wet them in a tiny flicker.

When the song ended, she clung to his arm, breathless and smiling, and blushing like a beacon.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed in her ear; "you perfect, precious thing..."

"You're unbelievable," she answered, and her hand trembled a little in his.

A smattering of applause followed them from the dance floor as he escorted her back to their table. Sally and Molly were both grinning wide, giving them little mock-cheers; Theo's and Simon's faces were more interesting, a sort of reluctant admiration and slight concern. Well, their own girlfriends might possibly expect more from them from here on out, true; still, that was hardly Greg's problem. The younger set needs to learn to step up their game, anyway, he laughed internally, giving the men a winking nod while Anna and Molly giggled together.
"Now that was something to see," Sally told him, leaning over from the seat beside him to be heard over the pounding beat of the next song.

Greg shrugged, adjusting his own stool, and fiddled nonchalantly with the cuff of his dark red shirt: a birthday gift from Anna. "I've learned to play to my strengths, over the years," he answered his friend.

It seemed like Sally's idea had been a fairly brilliant one, after all.

Greg had witnessed the uncanny skill Sherlock had in texting without looking, and over the course of the past week he'd tried practising to do the same; after a while he'd given up. His fingers were too clumsy, and his damned autocorrect refused to cooperate with him; that was, of course, if he managed to pull up the messaging application by blind chance. In the frustrated hours he had fiddled with it, he'd managed to email some gibberish to his bank, pull up a week's worth of weather reports, and take three flash photographs of the interior of his pocket. Finally, he'd pulled Sherlock aside after the close of the Gresso case and reluctantly confessed his ineptitude. The younger man had seemed far more amused by it than Greg would have liked, but after a moment's thought, he'd given new instructions.

Now it was time to see if Sherlock really was as resourceful as he seemed. Their group had split up outside the club: while Molly and Simon had hailed a cab, and Sally and Theo had walked the few blocks to Theo's nearby flat, Greg had decided on the expediency of a quick Tube ride and the short walk afterwards. As he and Anna strolled out of the Shepherd's Bush Market station and crossed the street, Greg casually curled his left arm around her shoulders. At the same time, he lifted his right hand behind his back, as if he were idly scratching an itch, forming his fingers into an "okay" signal and holding them there for a count of five.

Before they'd walked even halfway to the corner, he felt the pulsing vibration in his trouser pocket, signalling his confirmation, and he smiled.

"Feet not too sore, I hope?" he asked, glancing down at Anna's serene profile.

"Only a little. I didn't expect to be on a dance floor tonight."

"Well, mine are killing me. Let's walk slower," he suggested. Gotta give 'em enough time...

She clicked her tongue and chided him, "You need new shoes, Greg; those beat-up old things you're always wearing can't be comfortable anymore! I know you hate shopping, but you're going to have to break down and do it sometime."

"Yeah, all right, I give in! We'll go together, and I'll let you help me pick out a nice pair."

"Three or four nice pairs. Your back deserves it," she insisted, when he made a little face.

"Aw, you take such good care of me, sweet."

Anna turned her face upwards and paused to kiss him on the cheek. "Somebody has to."

Greg's stomach did a little flip, and his steps faltered. For a second, he wanted nothing more than to
just stop right there, between the corner shop and the flashing crossing signal. Don't be an arse, he told himself. Where's the damn romance in that? Hold it together!

"Earth to Greg, come in Greg," she joked a minute later, looking up at him playfully. "Seriously, you're in and out every few minutes, tonight! That must be some case you're working."

"I'm so sorry. I really don't mean to drift," he said, shifting to take her hand, and surreptitiously checking his watch as he brought his arm down to do it. "I promise, I truly have enjoyed myself tonight. I've just been thinking about a lot..."

"I had a really good time, too. They're nice company."

"Yeah."

"But now it's just the two of us," she continued. "Look, I wouldn't presume to get involved with another case of yours—God forbid!—but you know you can talk it out, right? I don't care if you bring work home, sweetie; if you haven't figured it out yet, I like being a sounding board."

They were still a few buildings away from his block of flats, strolling at the lazy pace he'd set, and Greg was torn between the urge to rush the rest of the way to his door, and the worry that he hadn't allowed enough time. But Anna's offer was so heartfelt, so unexpectedly perfect that he felt the words rising out of him ahead of schedule, out of order, too fast, swelling within his chest like a balloon.

"Anna," he burst out, turning to look down at her, halting his feet on the quiet pavement within the yellow corona of a streetlamp, and helplessly searching for a shred of restraint within himself.

She blinked, and pursed her lips; reaching up with her free hand, she touched the side of his face in a gentle brush of fingertips. "What is it?"

Greg looked down at the hand in his, and made a final, desperate attempt to organise his thoughts, to execute the steps he'd imagined. He did manage to turn, and get them slowly walking towards the flat once more—but he couldn't hold his tongue any longer.

"You're an incredible person to spend time with," he began, hesitantly. "And yes, of course I know I can talk to you about—my work, my past, anything. I dunno if I can express how much I appreciate that..."

Anna laced her fingers with his in silent response, and leaned into the warmth of his arm a little bit as they walked.

"But...what you've given to me is more than companionship. It's more than pleasure; it's more than friendship. I've been trying to find the right description for what you bring to my life, Anna, and it's been hard for me in a lot of ways—you know I'm not much of a wordsmith."

"You seem to be doing just fine," she assured him, but she seemed very slightly concerned.

Greg swallowed and pushed on. "You...you've shown me, Anna, that I'm not too old for a second chance. You've shown me that it's okay for me to need someone, and trust someone. That...even though I'm marked and shadowed by the life I've led, there's enough good left in me worth sharing with someone."

"Of course there is," she breathed. "Of course there is."

They had reached the little wrought-iron garden gate, at last. Greg drew her up the walk and into
the narrow vestibule before his door, speaking low so as not to disturb the upstairs neighbour.

"And I'm so very lucky. Because you're so much more than just someone, Anna. You shine so brightly in my heart that it makes those shadows seem to disappear. You make me feel young again, and more whole than I can ever remember feeling..."

With these words, he turned his key in the lock, took a deep, steadying breath, and pushed the door open. Anna stepped forward with a quiet gasp, her gaze roaming over the scene inside; Greg ignored the expected profusion of lit candles and kept his eyes firmly on her, rushing to say the last of what he'd prepared as he followed her into the warmth of the living room and closed the door behind them.

"I understand that I'm not the first to love you, and I don't ever want to change the place that David holds in your heart. But I want nothing more than to give you the happiness you deserve, and if you'll have me, I promise to care for you in every way I can, for the rest of my days."

He stepped around to face her, taking the little royal blue box out of his pocket and pulling its lid open with a tiny creak of hinges.

"Anna Cecilia Faber Clark...will you honour me with your hand in marriage?"

The countless reflected points of light in her eyes shimmered in a sudden glaze of tears; natural highlights in her hair shone like threads of burnished bronze in the wavering glow of the hundred or more tea-light candles. Greg held his breath, watching the trembling fingers of her right hand rise to her mouth. Everything seemed to be in slow motion, as he waited for a response...

"Kiss me," she whispered, reaching out to him.

He leaned in without hesitation, and brought their lips together with reverent care. Even with his eyes closed, Greg could see the shifting radiance of the candlelight that filled the flat, flickering from every available surface. Perhaps it was the nervous twisting in his stomach, or the weight of the words he'd just spoken...but it felt as if each brush of contact between them was an electric spark that tingled all the way to his toes.

When he eventually pulled back, breathless and dazzled, Anna's hands were clasped behind his neck. He raised his head far enough to see the wrecked expression she wore: her eyes were shut tight, her cheeks were flushed, and her gorgeous mouth hung slightly open as she panted softly.

"Um, darling?" He grinned self-consciously, stroking her back a bit with the hand not holding the ring box. "Was that meant to be an answer?"

Anna's eyes popped open at once. "Oh! Oh, god. I'm sorry. I mean, not sorry, that's not..." She snapped her jaw closed and dragged in a long breath, clearly trying to calm herself and regain communication between brain and tongue. "I mean, yes. Yes, yes!"

They sat on the sofa, pressed close together; Greg took the ring from its box and carefully placed it on her finger, sliding it back over the knuckle in a slow caress.

"I don't know what to say," she murmured, staring down at the yin-yang of the two small pear-
shaped stones. "I feel like I'm dreaming."

"I know the feeling. I think this might have something to do with it," he smiled, gesturing vaguely around them at the myriad tiny flames.

"It's beautiful. How did you manage—no, I don't need to ask that, do I? John and Sherlock, of course."

"Right in one." Greg reached forward to the coffee table; in addition to tea-lights, it bore one long ivory-coloured taper candle, situated between a vase of white roses and a bottle of champagne on ice. In front of that, two flute glasses waited beside a covered platter. "And it seems they went a bit overboard, as well; I didn't specify—"

"No, that had to be from Mrs Hudson. She knows I love that pound cake of hers," Anna laughed as he lifted the lid. "You've really covered all the bases, haven't you?"

"How d'you mean?"

"It just wasn't enough for you to propose to me, was it? You got practically every other person I know here to help out. It's basically as if the entire city of London just asked for my hand!"

"Ah." Greg saw the teasing twinkle in her eyes. "Well, if I may presume to speak on our behalf, the entire city of London is quite thrilled that you've said yes."

"The entire city of London was very persuasive, I'll say that. But really, I'd be surprised if they didn't already know what my answer would be."

"Well..." He tilted his head in a half-shrug as he considered the champagne. "I don't know about the rest of the city, but from where I stood, it seemed like it could've gone either way."

"You're kidding me, right? There was only one way this was ever going to go, if you asked. I can't even imagine any other choice."

Greg's smile dropped away, and he turned to her abruptly. "You always have a choice. I won't have you thinking otherwise, Anna."

"Of course I do," she replied gently, taking the bottle from his hand and replacing it in the ice bucket unopened; "what I mean is—I couldn't be happy, if I were to choose anything else! Chicago isn't my home, Greg, no more than Columbus is, now. I'm only home when I'm with you."

She took up his hands as she said it, and he stared at their intertwined fingers, wetting his lips. "Why do I feel like you just proposed to me, love?" he asked.

Anna giggled. "Ooh, can I do that?"

He smiled slyly and pulled one of her hands up to his mouth. "Don't see why not, though I sort of beat you to it."

"Mm, and I don't have a city backing me up..."

"I'll lend you mine."

"I do like yours."

"That's lucky for me..."
"And, I like that. Mm."

"What, this?"

"Ah...yes...Greg?"

"Yes, dearest?"

"I have a proposal for you..."

"Oh?"

"Want to find out whether they've lit candles in the bedroom, too?"

"...I do."

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SHERLOCK: Full Circle

Chapter Summary

She gave Sherlock the advice that brought his world into focus; he's determined to help her in return.

47. SHERLOCK: Full Circle
(3 August 2015)

Sherlock was gathering steam in the second minute of the Capriccio movement of the Stravinsky Violin Concerto in D when he saw the top of Anna's head approaching on the street below.

"John, she's here," he called over his shoulder, not breaking rhythm.

"Can you get it, love?" The voice was muffled.

"But...Stravinsky! I'm busy!"

"Not too busy to yell for me, clearly! I'm busy; I'm scrubbing the bathtub!"

"Couldn't that have waited?" Triple groups ascending into a repeated falling scale, crescendo...

"You were using it to test shoe prints in four types of farm animal feces! No, it couldn't wait. Now, are you getting the door or not?"

"Oh, fine then!" huffed Sherlock, spinning away from the window and striding down to the ground floor, playing all the while. The energetic galloping syncopation of the piece carried him to the entry hall, and he played through the next phrase, waiting until a bowing break to quickly pull the front door open.

Anna stood on the pavement, already grinning up at him. "What a welcome," she giggled.

He pulled his lips into a slight smile, and backed away from her to turn and mount the stairs again. She followed behind him, laughing gleefully when he paused upon the landing to execute a lively arpeggio. When they entered the sitting room together, she set down her bag, slipped out of her shoes and curled on the sofa, watching with rapt attention for the next four minutes as he returned to his stance in the centre of the floor and played through the music's vivacious end.

"Bravo!" she cheered, clapping.

He executed a small bow before moving to replace the instrument in its case. "One of my favourites."

"Personally, I tend to prefer Vivaldi," John said, wiping his hands on a small towel which he threw
over the lip of the sink as he came through the kitchen towards them. "But the Stravinsky is quite impressive, as long as you're in a good mood when you play it." He put an arm around Sherlock's waist, pulling him close for a quick kiss before turning to Anna with a grin. "And how are you, dear?"

"Happy, sad, nervous, stressed. Ugh, everything at once! I can't believe I only have a few days left already," she answered, standing to accept the offered hug.

"Time flies," hummed John. "But before you know it, you'll be back."

"It'll be months. Don't even try to sugar-coat it, John, I know it's going to suck." Anna sighed as she said it, but she was smiling as she stepped back into her shoes.

Sherlock nodded, crossing the room to take up his coat and John's light jacket. "You'll have plenty to keep you occupied, at any rate."

"Yeah, probably too much. For one thing, I can already tell I'll be in high demand with my family. I'll need to spend a lot of time in Columbus, and I should really try to squeeze in a trip to Seattle, to visit with Justin and Becky. Then there's Christmas to worry about; Greg and I were talking about doing every other year in Ohio. We'd thought at first that we would wait 'til after the wedding to have Christmas here, but considering when his paid holiday time resets, it looks like it might be best to switch that around. Mom says she's not upset about that, but I can tell she sort of is..." She shrugged, following John as they made a little procession down the stairs. "And I have to think about the house. I just don't feel right selling it, so soon after Andy willed it to me—but I don't see how I can possibly manage it from overseas, even with help from Chaz!"

"It's a lot to think about," John agreed, opening the front door and speaking over his shoulder as he stepped out. "Just take one thing on at a time. Don't let it overwhelm you."

As they turned to begin the five-minute walk to Angelo's, Sherlock tipped his head casually towards Anna and murmured, "It's a tad simplistic, but it's good advice for the most part, you know."

He had his eyes trained across the street, practising his lip-reading skills on a pair of arguing tourists, but he sensed the movement beside him when she turned her head to study him silently; he allowed himself a very slight upward twitch of his lips.

They settled in for a pleasant lunch; Angelo was effusively pleased to see them, as always. The restaurateur was in fine form, this afternoon, remembering Anna on sight and noticing her ring straight away, which led to a round of excited questions and jubilant exclamations. He insisted that she come back with Lestrade for a romantic dinner on the house, when she next returned to London. Only after she promised to do so were they finally left alone to converse; they casually discussed the more obscure museums London had to offer, until their food arrived.

As John cut eagerly into his chicken parmigiano, he commented, "Do you know, Anna, in the six weeks since that Dewey case wrapped up, Donovan hasn't said one rude word in our direction? In fact, last Thursday I actually overheard her tearing into one of the techs on DI Fowler's team, and I'm almost certain it was about a joke he'd made at Sherlock's expense."
"Well, John, I did try to tell you. I'm personally not surprised at all," she told him.

"Nor am I," said Sherlock. "Sally and I came to an understanding, of sorts, within eight weeks of my return last year. Our recent reveal to Scotland Yard simply served to confirm her suspicions that I was no longer quite the unpleasant, heartless addict she met eight years ago. As well, her social circle has grown significantly since Anna has been here; it seems she no longer feels as desperate for a good fight when she's under stress."

John shook his head ruefully. "I just feel like the world's turned upside down, you know? At least I can still count on a sneer from Anderson; otherwise I'd be watching the street for meowing frogs —" His mobile chimed, interrupting him; he pulled it from his pocket and read the incoming message. "Damn. Dr Bressler's daughter broke her leg; they need a quick fill-in for the afternoon rush." He checked his watch, frowning. "I'm the only floater available, as usual; I should really go in."

"You've barely eaten any of your meal," protested Sherlock. "They can wait, surely?"

"Have Angelo wrap it up for me. Here, I'll take the bread and eat it on the way, I'll be fine."

Leaning over, John rested a hand on Sherlock's leg briefly. "I'll be home by seven, I promise. And then you can make it up to me for what you did to the bathtub."

He shifted towards the comforting touch. "I'll plan on it," he murmured, and was rewarded with a kiss on the cheek before John quickly wrapped the contents of the bread basket in the cloth napkin and stood to leave.

After John wished Anna goodbye and bustled out the door, she turned to Sherlock with an inquisitive smirk. "So what exactly did you do to the bathtub?"

"An experiment you would consider inappropriate for mealtime conversation."

"And I'll be perfectly happy to leave it at that," she laughed, waving a hand.

Their talk came to a natural break, then, and they ate in companionable silence for a minute or two. It wasn't the same sort of silence he often shared with John, at home, the sense of deep connection and safety; rather, with Anna, Sherlock understood that there were closed doors and mysteries between them, and that they were each comfortable to let those boundaries remain in place. Where Molly chattered endlessly in an effort to draw him out—where Mrs Hudson made assumptions and pressed until she was challenged on them—where Lestrade rode out silences with a slowly deepening frown that betrayed his inner conflicts, Anna simply was, and it was refreshing.

Sherlock's thoughts circled around this novelty, until they settled on the subject he'd planned to discuss with her; he idly moved bits of his Caesar salad around on his plate as he spoke again. "You haven't commented, in regards to myself and John."

"No, I guess not," she said, washing down a bite of linguine. "I didn't think you were searching for my approval; you already know you have it, anyway."

He dipped his head in a brief nod. "And if I were to ask you for advice?"

"Then you have that too, if I'm able to give it." She paused, narrowing her eyes. "You're not looking like you're about to ask me for advice."

"Not just at the moment, no. I'm merely establishing the parameters of our association. And if you felt I needed advice, but hadn't directly asked for it?"
"Then, assuming you were receptive to listening, I would offer it."

"And would you prefer that those conditions be reciprocal?"

Anna set her fork down at the edge of her plate and laced her fingers together. "You've given me good advice in the past, and I'm fairly sure that you approve of me and Greg together. So, yes. I trust you to advise me, whether or not I've asked directly. Is that what you wanted to establish?"

"Yes."

"While I'm back in the States, you can contact me whenever you want, too, you know. I mean, if you ever need—"

"The concerns you brought up earlier were only a few of your worries. You're focusing on the minor complication of your property assets, and the vague problems of family dynamics, as a way of avoiding your greater fears."

"Well. That'll kill my appetite," she quipped, pushing the plate away slightly. "Okay. Yes, there's a lot for me to be worried about! There's a wedding to plan, with attendees on two continents, and every stressful detail that comes with that; there are requirements to be met for a fiancée visa, and further requirements to deal with if I'm to be allowed continued residency. There's the fact that Greg's still got this complex about his exes, which we're working on, but it's going to be tough when we're long distance again. And in the middle of all this, I have to figure out what possessions I truly need to keep, and how whatever I do save is going to make it across the ocean, and whether we'll even have room for any of it. Have I listed enough yet?"

"Plenty."

"I thought you agreed with John's advice?"

"Simplistic, as I stated. Focus your own efforts on one problem at a time, yes; additionally, however, I believe you should practise delegation."

Anna leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest and staring at him with an air of frank disbelief. "I must be mishearing you, Sherlock, because it certainly sounds as if you're offering to plan my wedding."

The logistics, the aesthetics, the hundreds of coordinating details...it would be an intriguing challenge, but most definitely not my area. "No, sorry," he answered, raising his hand to signal the waiter.

"Then why did you just make me bring all that up right now? An experiment to see if you can give me indigestion?"

"Let's go get a cab," Sherlock suggested with a smile, standing and pulling out her seat for her.

Sherlock apprised the driver of their destination, and then sat serenely for the duration of the ride; on the way, Anna received a text from Lestrade, checking in from the office, and spent a few minutes exchanging sentimental messages. It was perfect timing, as far as Sherlock was concerned.
He'd broached the topic he'd needed to, and gained what amounted to tacit permission to provide assistance; it was fine with him that she be too distracted to pursue the line of thought.

The red brick and white cornices of the terraced houses near which the cabbie delivered them were sure to seem familiar to Anna, being substantially similar in appearance to the block of flats in which Lestrade had his current residence. Here, however, the atmosphere of the street was different; healthy, lush trees lined the pavement at regular intervals, and many of the residences boasted pretty plantings in their front gardens. The buildings themselves were in good condition, less shabby and utilitarian than Lestrade's.

Once Anna had stepped out of the cab, she quickly realised the difference. "This isn't our street. Where are we?"

"We're walking towards Lestrade's flat right now, it's not far," he assured her. "This is Goldhawk Road. Only one stop further along on the Tube than what you're used to—you're already comfortable with the general area; this is just a bit further to the south-east. You'll find that the businesses along the main road to the east quite conveniently satisfy the culinary tastes you and Lestrade share."

"You have such a fixation on what people like to eat. Has anyone ever told you it's quite odd?"

Shrugging, he admitted, "I couldn't care less, most of the time. But you'd be surprised how incredibly easily food preferences translate into observable clues. It reveals personality and temperament, as well, which comes in handy now and then."

She broke into a lopsided smile. "And it's an easy way to freak people the hell out, when you're looking to impress them quickly."

"That, too," he chuckled.

Anna walked beside him without comment for another half a minute; when he stopped them in front of one of the well-kept terraced houses, she looked up at him quizzically and waited for the explanation she assumed he was about to provide.

Instead, he asked, "What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"This flat, of course," he said, gesturing sharply at it.

She raised an eyebrow and turned on the pavement, giving it a moment's study. "...Pretty," she eventually observed. "Looks like the building is in good shape. The hydrangea in the garden is very nice. Um, assuming it's a rental, the landlord is probably pretty attentive to upkeep. But...if this is some kind of test, Sherlock, I'm not up for it. I can't deduce anything for you about the occupant, that's for sure. Who lives here, a suspect in a case of yours?"

Sherlock shook his head. "No. I've never had a case in this neighbourhood. And although your declaration of incompetence is merely laziness, the occupant is irrelevant: the current lease is nearly up."

"Then what's the deal?"

"There are two green parks within ten minutes' walk of here," he told her, choosing to avoid the direct answer to her question. "And the mix of neighbours along this street is one that many might find desirable: some young professionals, a few pensioners, a number of middle-aged married
couples and new families. Young children in five of the flats, and infants in three, but none in this building."

Anna's voice was beginning to betray definite suspicion, but she played along. "Okay. If you're practising on me for an undercover role as a realtor, you've almost got it right, but you should work on your tone. Try to make it sound like you might find it desirable, not like you're condemning normal folks' compulsion to socialise."

"I've analysed the crime statistics for this area of the neighbourhood," he continued, unruffled; "it happens to be one of the quietest areas on this side of the borough. I've also checked that there is suitable CCTV coverage; granted, it's unlikely to become an issue, but it's best to be prudent..."

"Translation: you're making sure that whoever lives here can easily be watched by your brother. But of course, I'm sure it's only because you care for our safety!"

Sherlock didn't answer right away. Obviously she had caught on; as she rounded on him he thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets, causing the plastic bag containing John's lunch to bump and swing against his leg.

"I really...don't know what I'm feeling right now," she breathed through gritted teeth. "I'm not sure if I'm touched, or outraged. Probably both! Sherlock...do you really think we're just going to move into wherever you tell us?"

"I'm not telling you," he said, scowling. "I've simply applied complex logic to determine the most important factors influencing your choice of a new residence. You will most certainly require one."

"Sure, yeah. At the minimum, both our names are going to need to be on a lease in order for me to stay legally, and you know that. And I assume this place is bigger, right?"

He nodded. "Ample space to accommodate your art, as well as a third bedroom for any visiting family or friends. In light of its generous layout, the rent is surprisingly reasonable."

She silently studied the building a moment longer; then she sighed and turned, hooking her arm through his elbow and setting them to walk north once more. "I don't know. Thanks, I guess; I mean, it looks nice. But I don't know. I'll show it to Greg and ask him to look into it soon, okay?"

"He'll have approximately eight weeks to decide; assuming he'll require thirty days' notice to his current landlord, he should be able to begin settling in with plenty of time to receive the first of your belongings from overseas. All in all, I'm certain he'll eventually agree with me that Goldhawk is ideal."

They reached the corner and turned towards Lestrade's street; as the surroundings became more familiar, and Anna realised just how close they'd been to the area she knew, she seemed to relax significantly. Sherlock found himself relaxing, too; all in all, the outing had gone nearly as well as he might have hoped. Perhaps this was a strange way to express his gratitude for the changes that this American woman had brought about in his life, after all. But during that evening he and John had spent in Lestrade's flat a few weeks earlier, setting the stage for a ridiculous romantic gesture, Sherlock had suddenly realised the enormity of the coming change...and the idea of finding concrete solutions to at least a few of the couple's pending concerns had been impossible to resist.

A bus pulled into motion, trundling past them to the east with a long, loud hiss of its air suspension, and it reminded Sherlock of one more relevant item he'd neglected to mention. "The commute for Lestrade will, of course, be roughly equivalent to what he has now; your commute will be an easy ten minutes' walk, or six via the convenient bus route."
"Wait. What? My commute?"

Sherlock was pulled backwards by his elbow as Anna stopped short. He turned to her and explained in as patient a tone as he could muster. "It's a simple extension of reasoning. When the time comes that you may legally work in London, you will feel obligated to do so, in order to contribute to the household budget. You'll look for something part-time and conveniently close, to give you freedom to focus on your embroidery commissions, but you'll need a good wage—Lestrade has put a considerable dent in his savings, in the past year, and the inheritance and profits from your sold house in Ohio won't last forever. Your preferences in terms of eventual employment are entirely clear; taking into account both what you consider your marketable skills and your actual skill set, as well as your inherent distaste for certain types of work, I was able to quite easily pinpoint where you should apply..."

"Oh my God. You manipulative brat. I just...I don't even have words for how patronising that is, how—intrusive! Do you even hear yourself? Do you realise you're telling me how to live my life?" She was utterly fuming, now, turning away from him to pace in a tiny, truncated circle on the pavement. Her cheeks were flushed, and she clenched her hands spasmodically as she continued in a voice loud enough to draw attention from passersby across the street: "I don't know how you think it works on this side of the ocean, Sherlock, but where I come from there's this little thing called free will, maybe you've heard of it? When I decide to look for a job, if I decide to—it'll be on my own terms! And I don't want to hear anything from you about how we handle our money, or whether the plans I've made fit into the little logical boxes you've set out!"

His mouth opened and closed silently as he blinked at her furious stare. A handful of possible responses rose up in his mind, and were discarded one by one. The one that came closest to passing his lips was defensive and indignant. There are a great many major problems facing you, and I solved TWO of them. I shouldn't have to feel guilty about that!

But...he did, now, against all logic. Beneath her righteous anger, Anna's expression seemed deeply hurt. I did that to her. I intruded on her sense of agency, I shook her confidence to make her own decisions...

He was still trying to find better words, and failing, as Anna closed her eyes and blew out a long breath through her nose. In the next moment, she threw her arms about him and pulled him down into a punishingly tight hug.

He brought his own arms up around her and squeezed back, hard. He felt as if he was being offered a chance to explain himself without the embarrassing encumbrance of words.

"Oh, Sherlock," she eventually sighed at his ear. "What the fuck am I gonna do with you?"

He responded sardonically, but not without a modicum of hope beneath the humour. "Miss me?"

"That, too."

After John returned from work at last, their private evening in had progressed rather pleasantly. Dinner conversation—over reheated pasta for John, and toast with honey for Sherlock—had
centred on the afternoon's little outing with Anna; the post-meal discussion had then been turned sternly to the topic of biological hazards in the bath, and the sort of thoughtful warnings that John expected to receive in future. The mildly apologetic snog that Sherlock initiated had escalated quite smoothly into a long interlude in the bedroom. (John had eventually pronounced him forgiven, of course, and in fact was brought to concede that he could do what he pleased with his experiments—"as long as you keep doing that, oh god, right there"—which Sherlock considered a distinct success, on more than one count.)

Afterwards, Sherlock returned to the darkened sitting room alone. While he listened to the comforting sounds of John's shower running, he reclined on the sofa, drawing his silk dressing gown closed around himself. Aside from the rushing water, the creaking of the pipes, and the ticking of the few clocks within range, the flat was almost silent; somewhere at the very edge of his awareness, Sherlock could hear the murmuration of Mrs Hudson's television downstairs. She'd turned it up a bit louder than usual; the canned laughter of the programme rose up occasionally in a faraway counterpoint to the noises in the bathroom.

_Perhaps we were a bit too loud tonight_, he thought, but the idea of having disturbed their landlady entirely failed to induce guilt; on the contrary, it kindled a sort of triumphant pride that warmed him from within. That he had reached such a level of comfort with John—with _anyone_—was something he could never have predicted. It had been years and years since Sherlock had completed his careful experimentation, had confirmed the state of his orientation and closed the door firmly upon the idea of ever again pursuing a relationship, sexual or otherwise. And the aplomb with which John had learned and accepted Sherlock's needs, and had worked to find ways to indulge and satisfy the small desires he experienced...

_**John Watson, the incredible exception to my every rule.**_

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock started, raising his head from the little pillow in surprise. He'd let his thoughts wander, and failed to note the cessation of the water. "Yes?"

"I'm done cleaning up. Are you coming to bed?" He sounded hopeful, and expectant, and Sherlock knew why: another aspect of their relationship which they'd been slowly developing over the past weeks involved sleeping in each other's arms nearly every night. It hadn't eradicated John's night terrors entirely, but the impact had been significant, and their continued talks showed promise to improve the situation.

"It's the third Monday. If you don't mind, I'd like to take some time."

"Oh. Right, of course. I need to start marking a calendar for myself, don't I?" John chuckled as he said it, crossing the room to stand near Sherlock's head.

John hadn't closed his flannel robe; though the room was lit only by the distant glow from the hallway, Sherlock's mind filled in the details. The sandy trail of fine hair leading down into the waistband of John's low-slung pyjama bottoms, and the miniature constellation of freckles a handspan above his left hip, were invisible in the darkness—but Sherlock found himself captivated by the knowledge of them, and the memory of their feel and taste.

"It won't take long," Sherlock said, reaching cool fingers out to bracket John's waist and pull him closer. His skin was soft and steam-warm. "I won't disturb you, will I, if I slip in later?"

"It'd disturb me more if you didn't." Bending forward with a soft sigh, John dropped a kiss on Sherlock's forehead before settling his head lower. He nuzzled into the hollow of Sherlock's neck,
and whispered, "Thank you for tonight, love."

"You know I don't require thanks each time we do this."

"I know. I can't help feeling like I'm getting the better half of the deal, though."

Sherlock curved his lips into John's damp hair, and briefly tightened the arms around his waist.
"I'm fairly certain we're both getting what we want. Now go on; the sooner I get this done, the sooner I'll come back to bed."

John acquiesced with a yawn and padded off to the bedroom—now ostensibly their bedroom. Smiling faintly at the thought, Sherlock resettled himself and began the methodical process that would allow him to slip into the hallways of his inner sanctum.

Each time he did his third-Monday session, Sherlock began by undertaking the same basic tasks. The news, the crowd of strange faces, the meticulous data of cases and current events: all were sorted, classed by importance, and deleted if unnecessary. This time there were a few fairly unique memories to be categorised and tucked away, including the long evening spent in John's company at Lestrade's little flat, and the confusing emotional clutter of the talk he'd had with Anna.

He carefully moved this last to the room that had appeared some months ago, right beside Lestrade's dark blue painted door. The new door was also coloured, but its sky blue was a light, delicate stain, through which the fine grain of the wood was clearly visible. Inside, Sherlock was unsurprised to find that the two rooms had become connected by a set of glass-paned French doors, one of which stood open.

I've always had a tendency towards ridiculous romantic symbology, after all, he sighed to himself, filing the conversation away in a little basket of embroidery tools that rested on a carved side table. With one more bemused look around the room, still sparsely furnished but filled with sourceless sunlight that spilled warmly into the cluttered office beside it, Sherlock stepped back out to the main hall.

At last, it was time to work on his final task of the night. With a deep breath, Sherlock moved into the circular room which had been the bane of his Mind Palace for over a year. He paced in a slow circuit around the edge of the space, studying its details with interest: there had been visible changes here three weeks ago, but now the difference was highly apparent.

The original thirty-eight riveted metal doors in the dark, colourless arena had dwindled to twenty-four, still silent and forbidding with their hasty paper file tags. However, in a number of the spaces among them, new doors had taken the place of ones that had been eradicated. The nine new doors were of wood, with utilitarian labels of routed plastic, reminiscent of university lecture halls: not particularly inviting, but neither were they unpleasant. Five empty stretches of curved grey wall remained.

His careful count complete, Sherlock turned to focus on the centre of the round space. Where once there had been only a dimly lit expanse of rough cement floor, a circular Oriental rug now sat under a bright reading lamp, with a comfortable armchair situated upon it. And seated on that chair...

"I was wondering when you'd get around to actually looking at me."
Sherlock smiled. "Just saving the best for last."

The John of this room was barefoot, wearing jeans and a white cotton T-shirt, in a strange mix of his daytime attire and the clothing he usually wore to bed. John had begun to appear all over his Mind Palace lately: reading in the sitting room with a steaming cup of tea, standing by attentively in the lab where Sherlock stored data on his experiments, popping his head out of rooms along the hallway to make offhand comments or to remind him of something. Those versions of John wore a wide variety of jumpers and shirts, but this one had so far remained constant—always slightly sleep-rumpled, always smiling that soft, amused half-smile.

John stood as Sherlock approached the circle of lamplight. "Are you ready?" he asked gently.

"I am. We're only changing two today." It had been a busy few weeks, and they hadn't found much time for these difficult conversations.

"That's all right. It isn't a race."

Beside the wooden door marked "Berlin", there was a metal door with "New York" on its label. They walked across to it side by side, silently.

As Sherlock opened up the room, he felt John's hand slide into his and squeeze.

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"Sweetie, have you seen a blue knee sock anywhere?"

Greg called back to Anna from the vicinity of the kitchen. "Wasn't that pair on the pile this morning? I swear I saw you rolling them together."

"No, those were the teal ones, I'm missing one of the blue—I don't understand where the hell it could've gone—"

"Well, I haven't seen it. You did laundry last, not me."

Anna turned in place, running her eyes around the room—open suitcases, folded clothing upon the rumpled bedclothes in disorganised piles, and nowhere in sight was there a flash of blue to match the sock dangling from her hand. She looked with increasing desperation over the bookcase, the open closet door, the chest of drawers and the glass dish where Greg laid his watch at night; three brand-new pairs of men's sensible leather shoes blurred before her eyes...

"Ah, dammit," she spat, wadding up the sock in her hand and firing it viciously at one of the cases. Lunging forward, she swept a clear area on the bed, violently sending a teetering stack of shirts to scatter across the floor; in the next moment she was curled up there on her side, her knees toppling a pile of jeans as she buried her face in a handful of bedding.

"I'm supposed to be getting all my shit together, here, and instead I'm apparently having a damn breakdown..."
"That's allowed, love."

She snorted into the covers. Maybe it was more of a sob, actually.

"Will it help, if I tell you I don't want you to go, either?"

"...No."

"Didn't think so," he sighed, shifting to fit himself in along her back and wrap an arm about her waist. His nose rested beside the ponytail at the nape of her neck as he murmured, "It won't be all that long."

"I know. But that doesn't make it feel any better!"

"Oh, darling. I'm hurting too. But it's simply the way it has to be, yeh?"

Anna squeezed her eyes shut tighter, sniffling; she reached down to cover his large hand with hers. "I'm being ridiculous. This was going to happen, no matter what, right? I mean, even if you hadn't asked..."

"If I hadn't asked, you could at least go knowing I was a right idiot."

"Oh, hush. You didn't have to ask." She was smiling, now, but only slightly.

"I'm sure I didn't. But I was too afraid not to." He hitched himself up a little closer, lifting his chin to rest it upon her shoulder. "If I'd let you go again, not knowing if you'd ever come back to me...living like that, like I did all this spring—I couldn't do it. You can ask John, and Sally: it nearly broke me, the first time around."

"Honey, I'm so sorry I put you through that," Anna whispered, fresh tears springing to her eyes. "No, love, please don't feel guilty about that, I don't mean to—God," he broke off, burying his face into her neck as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm utterly crap at this, aren't I?"

"At what?"

"Take your pick, really. Comforting, boyfriend-ing..."

"You mean fiancé-ing."

"Yeah, s'pose I do don't I? And that leads to husband-ing, which, well. That's clearly proven not to be a strong suit of mine."

She wriggled against him, pushing him off just enough to twist around in his arms. Another pile of folded clothing toppled to the floor, and they ignored it. "Oh no you don't," she said, shakily. "Less than three weeks, and you're already second guessing this? I'm the one with the history of cold feet; it can't be on me to hold this together!"

He blinked, and something pained passed over his face. "No, it's not. It's on me, too; I'm well aware. I get that you're scared. Well, so am I."

"What the fuck are we doing?" breathed Anna; her fingers tightened in the front of Greg's black T-shirt, and she could feel the pounding of his heart against her knuckles. "What is this, huh? What exactly are we afraid of?"

Greg tipped his head forward to rest against hers, and shut his eyes; for a long moment they lay
together in a silence that was anything but calm. His hands began to stroke slowly up and down her spine; when his breathing had settled sufficiently to speak, he murmured, "I know what I'm scared of. I'm scared to lose you; I'm scared I'll make mistakes that'll drive you away...that I won't be able to keep you happy. That's what I have to get over. What're you frightened of?"

Swallowing, she answered in kind: "I'm afraid of something taking you from me without warning, an injury or—or a health condition. I'm afraid I won't be with you when you need me to be...and that somehow, I might end up being a liability that endangers you in your work..."

His eyes flew open, and he met her gaze intensely. "We can't see the future, Anna. I won't deny that if it came down to it, I'd put your safety before my own. But I trust you to understand what it would mean. And I need you to trust me to take care of myself, otherwise."

"Okay. Well, you need to trust me on this, too; I promise, I swear that if you make any kind of misstep, if anything makes me unhappy, I'll talk it out with you, and we can fix it together. There won't be any nasty surprises coming to you from Sherlock, all right?"

Smiling gently, Greg placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. "All right. Sounds like a fair deal."

Their lips met then, tenderly and quietly, and they lost themselves in each other for awhile; when Greg hummed a long, low growl against her throat and spoke again, Anna barely registered the words. It felt as if she were floating, fizzing, tethered to her own body only at the tingling points of contact where his warmth blazed against her.

"We should really..." he whispered again along her jaw, "really think about..." his broad palm skimmed her waistband, "getting 'round to your packing; it's getting late." His teeth caught at her lower lip and then dragged downward to nip gently at the hollow of her throat.

Anna gasped, rucking up his T-shirt to slide a hand up and over the hard, shifting planes of his shoulder blades. "Fuck packing," she managed breathily. "I'll just do a carry-on in the morning. I have other clothes at the house—"

The heated, helpless noise Greg made cut off her words, and then he was rolling, flipping her onto her back and reclaiming her mouth with a deep, gravelly moan; the last pile of clothing was shoved roughly aside, and the small hard-sided suitcase tumbled from the foot of the bed with a loud thump.

They took no notice of it, of course.

Afterwards, Anna surfaced slowly from the hazy, syrupy glow that filled her limbs; the brightness of the room pulled her eyelids open, and she gazed down at Greg's face where it lay against her chest and shoulder. Even relaxed and sated, mostly asleep, his jaw slack and lips slightly parted, his short, dark eyelashes a soft smudge above the fine hollowed lines around his eyes—even now, he bore a faint crease of worry or sadness between his brows. His arms behind and across her felt comfortingly heavy, determined to keep her safe and close, determined to somehow stave off the inevitable passage of time.

A short, silent sob rose up in her throat as she was hit by a wave of desperate affection. She moved her hand to the unruly tuft of silver-grey hair that stood up on the back of his head, delicately smoothing it down. Then she glanced up, squinting at the lamp; she judged her arm barely long enough to carefully stretch up and hit its switch, leaving the strewn mess of the room visible in only the weak spill of light from the open door and the kitchen down the hall.

Roused by her movement, Greg shifted against her, sleepily sliding his face up closer to her neck
as he kneaded lazy fingers at her side. "Anna," he mumbled, a warm puff of breath caressing her collarbone, "don't want you t' go..."

"I know, baby," she whispered.

"...Four whole months."

She nodded, pressing a light kiss to the side of his forehead. "We're strong enough for this," she said, giving the words voice for herself as much as for him. "We have to be."

At some point during the night, Greg had gotten up—finding the forgotten suitcase with a muffled curse—and ventured out of the bedroom briefly to use the toilet and shut off lights. Anna had woken blearily at the loss of his comforting touch, but when he'd returned and gathered her into his arms once more, she had drifted off into a peaceful rest. Unfortunately, the timing of the night's activities meant that her bladder roused her just before the sun; picking her way carefully back into the room in the faint pre-dawn greyness, she paused for a long moment at the sight of Greg's sleeping figure. The temptation was great to crawl straight under the covers again, but she knew she'd left herself at a distinct disadvantage with the previous evening's snap decision.

Sure, I can get away with leaving most of my clothes here, she thought with a silent sigh, but I have to have everything else together before eight thirty...

As quietly as she could manage, Anna crouched at the foot of the bed, searching through the disarray to find a few items by touch alone: a pair of jeans, a bra and panties, a random T-shirt, her favourite black cardigan with its distinctive nubby texture. While she dressed in the near-darkness, she kept her senses focused on Greg, the shadows of his still form and the faint rasp of his breathing.

He's tired, she told herself, tiptoeing closer and kneeling to feel around for any matched pair of socks. And he has every reason to be. He's used up every bit of his spare time on me, every day of the paid leave he gets before New Year's!

In the last two weeks, Greg had pulled case after case without a full day off—and every time he'd returned home, he had devoted his complete attention to Anna. They'd gone out for romantic meals, seen films, and even spent classy evenings at the ballet and the symphony—that last along with Sherlock and John, who had been gifted box seats by the executive director of the London Philharmonic in gratitude for their work on a potentially scandalous case. On the few nights they hadn't stayed out late, he'd insisted on cooking for her; it had been the least she could do to offer him a back rub before bed, and even that relaxing activity had often gone in a direction which had left him physically spent, though happy. It truly was no wonder that he was exhausted.

Anna frowned at the thought as she crept out into the hall, pulling the door quietly closed behind herself. She'd gathered up a haphazard armload of small items, mostly socks and underwear, and slung an empty soft-sided bag over her shoulder; she dumped the whole mess on the sofa before turning on a small lamp. Then she performed a brief search for her phone, finding that Greg had thoughtfully plugged it into the charger in the kitchen. It was before six, on a Saturday morning, and she knew it wasn't likely to be a good time...but she couldn't resist picking up the device and composing a message.
Are you up? *A*

After a brief delay, there was a response.
I am now. -SH

Sorry. I guess I don't imagine you as much of a sleeper. *A*

It's a fairly recent development. I sleep lightly, at any rate. What do you need? -SH

Anna sighed and bit her lip, staring down at the phone in consternation.

What do I need?

She began to answer three separate times, deleting each hesitant, awkward message before finally sending a more tongue-in-cheek reply:
I might have walked over to see you this morning, but I left my lockpick kit in Chicago... *A*

Then let's both make ourselves some tea. Turn your ringer down. -SH

He understands, she realised with a flush of relief. Obediently, she made sure the mobile was silenced; it pulsed in her hand shortly after she'd set the kettle.

"Hey, Sherlock," she greeted him softly. "Thanks for this."

"I've hardly done anything worthy of thanks," he said, speaking equally as low. "As you're aware I prefer to text, but your slow reply suggested a difficulty articulating your question. It was bound to be a frustrating wait."

She smirked at the dryness in his tone. "Yeah, I guess so. I'm not even sure if I have a question, exactly, I just feel like...I'm worried."

"About Lestrade?"

"Yes. He's been going a little overboard, the last few weeks, you know?"

Sherlock was briefly silent; then he said, "An attempt, conscious or not, to somehow make up for your coming time apart. Perhaps he fears you'll rethink your decision."

"He should know better," Anna sighed. "But okay, I can hardly complain about all that now. It's been nice."

"As you say. A temporary madness, but nothing harmful. What worries you, then?"

"Something he said to me last night. He mentioned that John would remember, and Sally...that when I was in Chicago, he was doing a lot worse than I ever realised." She was intensely conscious of Greg's sleeping presence down the hall; by the end of her sentence, she was barely whispering into the phone.

Sherlock didn't seem to have any difficulty hearing her, but his response seemed stilted, and perhaps a little uncomfortable. "Lestrade didn't directly confide in me during those months. If he's told you that John and Sally can tell you more, that's surely true."

"But I know you. You made observations," she pressed. She knew that either of their other friends would certainly give her answers, if she asked. To be honest, though, she felt as if they would each be unintentionally biased. Only with Sherlock, out of them all, did she truly feel that she had forged
a solid connection outside of her relationship with Greg.

"You needn't be concerned that he was a danger to himself. Nothing so dramatic. But...yes. He was quite clearly distressed, by the end of that period," he answered grudgingly.

"Was it only—" She hesitated with a slight shake of her head, her eyebrows drawn low. "Was it only that he couldn't predict what I would choose? Or was it the distance?"

His voice became sharp. "Anna. This isn't my area of expertise. I am neither your gossip-mate nor your therapist!"

"So you don't have an answer? Of any kind?"

Sherlock was silent for a long moment. Anna waited him out, imagining the man's complex thoughts spooling out before him as they both quietly drank their tea.

At last he spoke again, his words a distant murmur. "When I was travelling, when everyone thought me dead...for much of that time, I wasn't able to contemplate or admit to the sentiment you so correctly diagnosed after you met me. But even after I'd eventually accepted it as my reality, it continued to eat away at me. In Hong Kong, I remember standing for more than half an hour before a shop window, staring at a globe—a child's toy: rudimentary but not inaccurate."

He paused again, for so long that Anna began to be concerned he had forgotten he was telling the tale aloud, but she didn't dare interrupt.

"I imagined I felt the bite of each individual kilometre that separated us. Nine thousand, six hundred fifty-three invisible cuts across my skin, between my tired feet and where John Watson slept. At that moment, in that place, distance was the greatest of all my hurts. But only hours later, I was entirely sure that the time we'd been apart was far, far worse. And before the dawning of the next day, I was instead dwelling exclusively on the assumption that no matter what, John would never appreciate nor return my affection." Sherlock drew and released a harsh breath that rattled over the connection. "Surely, if you care as much for Lestrade as you seem to, you already have the answer to your own question. It isn't one or the other. It's one and then the other; it's everything at once without a place to breathe! And yes, if you must know, I did recognise that desperation in him, in March and April of this year. He exhibited mannerisms that I had never once seen in a decade of observation. And I can give you no advice!"

"Sherlock," she rasped. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to stir things up for you."

He cleared his throat, and began to say something in response, but a noise and then quiet speech in the background interrupted him. "I—John, sorry I woke you...Oh, no, everything's fine. Only Anna, wishing us goodbye. You can go back to sleep."

The murmur came nearer the phone, and she heard part of John's sleepy reply: "...glass of water anyway. Tell her—oh, fine, I will then—Safe journey, Anna. You'll keep in touch, won't you? Email us?"

"Of course I will. You can count on it, John."

"Right. Good. Here, over to Sherlock now; I'm going to bed again 'til at least seven thirty..." Once he had returned the phone to Sherlock, John's voice faded into the distance.

There was a beat of awkward quiet, and then Anna exhaled slowly. "I see what you were trying to show me, Sherlock. And I do understand—I think I was simply hoping it would be different, somehow."
"Different?"

"It's silly. I mean, those mixed up feelings are something I've been dealing with, too. But I'm a woman, so stereotypically the confusing emotional shit is expected to be on my end of the relationship, isn't it? I guess I was hoping that at least one of us could have it simpler. Hoping that it might be true, all that crap about men being easy to comfort."

"Whatever magazines you've been reading, stop."

She laughed a little. "Yeah, I probably should. Look, Sherlock, can I ask you and John for a favour?"

"I'm certain I can't prevent you."

"Watch him for me, will you? And, I don't know, talk to him if he needs it? Maybe I shouldn't worry. But I feel like he's been in a pretty tough place, lately; this next four months won't be easy on me, but for him..."

"I'll discuss it with John. I'm sure neither of us would be inattentive, at any rate, but we'll keep you in mind. All right?"

"That's all I can ask, I guess. Thanks."

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Greg woke within a half hour of Anna's phone call; after their breakfast, already hurried packing became a near-frantic dash, and even their heartfelt goodbye ended up rushed, through no fault of their own. Greg had already planned to go in to work for the afternoon, but a call came in from Sally as their cab pulled into the line approaching the airport drop-off.

"Look, I'll be on my way in after I see Anna off, it'll be forty-five minutes, an hour, tops—what? How many?" His eyebrows rose, and he glanced Anna's way with a mildly horrified expression. "Bloody hell. Yeah, okay, Sal, I'll call you back in a few minutes."

"It's fine," Anna told him, before he even began to explain.

"It's really, really not. They're dragging the Thames near Blackfriars Pier; looks like five women, maybe more."

"Oh my God. Well, you should go. They need you, clearly."

"But I wanted—"

"I know. It can't be helped. I remember my way through here, I promise I'll be fine. I'll text you before I board, and again when I've landed; as soon as you can get a break from the case after that, call me, okay?"

"You're sure?"

"We've talked about this, honey. Work comes first," she reminded him.

The cab came to a stop just then, close to the busy terminal doors. Greg jumped out to help get her
bags unloaded; she'd folded her large soft-sided suitcase inside the rigid one to fly them home empty, so the help was hardly needed. The task took mere seconds, and then he pulled her into a tight hug.

"I don't deserve you, love," he breathed at her ear.

"Mm, Greg,"—she placed hands at either side of his face, and looked deep into her fiancé's eyes —"I'm pretty sure that's where you're wrong."

One last kiss, lingering and sweet, and their time was up. As Anna gathered up her bags, the cab pulled away; Greg twisted his head around to meet her eyes through the rear window, and she stood at the kerb and watched until she couldn't see the vehicle any longer.

*Well, that's that,* she told herself, turning with a little twitch of a nod and making her way into the terminal, dazed.

"So that was it, then? Not even a proper goodbye?" Liz Biancardi's face was wide-eyed and disbelieving; she leaned forward from the centre of the backseat as if she might crawl up into the front between Anna and Chaz.

"Well, no, not exactly," Anna admitted. "But it's not a big deal."

"I beg to differ; that gorgeous ring on your finger is telling *me* it's a very big deal."

"Shut up, Lizzie. They've got a system," said Chaz, not sparing a glance from the road ahead. "It clearly works for them. I'm impressed, frankly."

"Thanks, Chaz. At least I can count on the moral support of another workaholic like Greg." The phone Anna clutched vibrated in her hand, then, and she looked down eagerly to read the response to the "landed safe" text she'd sent nearly twenty minutes before.

Glad to hear. Miss you terribly, but S is doing his best to distract - throwing himself in harm's way. Git. Hope to call about 17:00 CST, will you be up? -GL

Anna did a quick calculation, smiling, and composed a reply.

*I'm sure I can stay awake that long even jetlagged, but I won't mind if you wake me up. :) Keep safe (and S too, tell him I said so). Love you. *A*

"Awwww," Liz cooed from a point disturbingly close to Anna's left ear. "Aren't you both sweet!"

"Geez, Liz, thanks for the heart attack there," she snapped, twisting around in her seat to glare at the blonde as Chaz snickered softly. "And I'm sorry, you never explained to me: why are you here and not in Philadelphia? Not that I'm unhappy to see you, but I was definitely not expecting..."

Gesturing vaguely, Liz said, "Philly wasn't coming together for me. The rental I'd lined up fell through while I was in Italy. I needed a place to stay, just 'til I could get my feet back under me; Chaz here was a doll, and offered to let me share house-sitting duties for a couple weeks."

Chaz immediately threw up a defensive hand. "Sorry! I was gonna tell you. I swear I was! But the
last few times you called, you had so much on your mind, and you were so busy we didn't have a lot of opportunity..."

"It's fine," Anna laughed. "Actually, I'm glad. I've spent all summer living with someone, it's probably a good thing that I won't be rattling around alone right away. Heck, I was almost expecting you to say you *planned* it this way, so I'd have company!"

She didn't miss the subtle, secretive glance her friends shared in the rear-view mirror, but she chose not to call them out on it.

*It's nice to see my support network is just as well-prepared as Greg's,* she thought instead.

"So," she grinned, sliding the phone into her handbag, "I'm *starving.* Who's up for a margarita?"

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Chapter End Notes

Well, that's it for this one! Don't worry, the chapter title isn't lying: there will be more Needles and Pins. Eventually. And more to come in the Sewing Box, too! :) Many, many thanks to my small and lovely army of betas: HarmonyLover, solrosan, and NW. Your unflagging support has been so very much appreciated! <3 And thanks, as well, to all of you who have read, and most especially to anyone who's left comments. It's so lovely to know that there are other people out there who have enjoyed reading this story even half so much as I enjoyed writing it! <3

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