Absentminded
by ScopesMonkey

Summary

With the Christmas season right around the corner, Sherlock is called in to investigate the case of a man whose assault has left him without his memory.

Notes

Cover art for this work by buckle.
Chapter 1

Lights – bright, white – glaring, searing. Red on white, obscuring, patterns and stinging and pain. Smearing – white again, so bright, from the ceiling, off the floor, too stark for shadows. Dizzy. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, white, white. Scuffs from shoes, from wheels, criss-crossing without patterns, all random, no direction. Light catching and glinting, glittering off the marks in the floor. Tiny diamonds cutting until there was darkness from closed eyes.

"Sir?"

Noise, noise everywhere – above, below, merge, teasing apart. Lifts, equipment, shoes, gurneys, voices, humming lights – it was the lights again, so bright. No looking away, not with the glare.

"Sir? Sir, can you hear me?"

Voices drifting, in-out, like the tides, filling, draining. Who needs what, where, how much, when, why. Distant, closer, distant. There was a name for that. What was it?

"Sir?"

Shifting fabric, heat, pressure spreading down his right arm to his hand. Across his shoulder. Merging, merging with the pain. Down his neck, down his spine. Inhale. Exhale. Remember those things. One at a time.

Another pressure, a pad of heat. Left arm. Tightening, drawing weight up and away.

"Sir, I need you to open your eyes, sir. Someone get a gurney, please! Sir, open your eyes. Look at me."

Bright, bright, wincing and more pain and shifting and unsteadiness. Brown, brown, black, blue. Blurred colours, resolving into a figure, blurring again. Smearing red on brown and black and blue.


"Sir, do you know where you are?"


"It's okay, I've got you. Can you tell me what happened?"

What happened? Ceiling tiles, white against white lights. Voices closer, something moving. Pain – why was there pain?

What happened?

Who happened?

"I don't–" Catching on the pain, swallowing, wincing. Curling forward– trying, being held up, held back.

"I don't know."
"You don't know what happened to you?"


"Who I am."

Pause, shock like it was tangible, concern.

"You don't know who you are?"

"No."

Deep breath, not his, voices right there now and other hands touching him.

"We're going to get you onto a gurney. Just relax, we know what we're doing."

Something hard, stiff, unyielding. Shifting so his back was stretched against it. Blossom of pain in his head, murmured protest.

"I know, it's only for a minute."

Then hands again and something softer. Sinking in. Groan – appreciation and pain. Can it be both? Dizziness again, blue and gold spots against the lights.

"Can you tell me how you got here?"

What was before here? Glimpses only – grey sky darkening. Wet brick. Movement in the shadows.

"Do you know where you are?"

Moving now, lights flickering past, voices carried along beside him. The same voice talking. Asking questions. He has no answers. Little pieces, disjointed information. Snowflakes. The sound of traffic. Bacon frying.

"Do you know your name? Will someone please get Doctor Bannerjee?"

Stopping suddenly. Scrapping, the rustle of fabric. Movement around the bed. Flashes of blue, white, burgundy, dark pink. Murmurs, hands crossing over him. Cool air. Pressure on his face, around his mouth – cool clean air.

Dark brown eyes.

"Can you tell me your name? Do you remember your name?"

There was – something. Just there. Teasing. Caught. Gone. Caught again.

"John."

"John? Your name is John?"


"Yes."
Chapter 2

Sally Donovan checked her watch discreetly. She didn't know who might be watching – some god or the universe or luck or fate, perhaps – but she didn't want any of them to notice.

Just past three in the afternoon. She was off at five. Then, god help her, she was going home, turning her phone off, opening a bottle of wine, running a hot bath and enjoying an evening to herself. She had nothing she needed to do that evening – no social plans, no family obligations. Her mother had recently been appeased by Sally going for tea and promises that she would do so again this weekend. An old friend – her first partner on the force who had since transferred to Manchester – was coming for a visit this weekend, too, and she had a baby shower to attend on Sunday. Between that and work and errands, her weekend was completely full.

But tonight was hers. She looked forward to an evening to relax, where she could ensure that everything went precisely the way she wanted it to go.

Since she was so often responsible for dealing with everything that went wrong.

But no one had mucked up spectacularly yet and they'd even resolved a missing person's case, bringing home a fourteen year old girl who had run off with her eighteen year old boyfriend. The rare reunions were a welcome change from her old stint in homicide; it was nice to see things end well once in awhile. So, nothing too unusual. Which might mean either nothing disastrous was going to happen at all or that the universe might just be waiting until 4:30 for the other shoe to drop. Things had a way of working like that.

Donovan took some time to get updates from her officers on their various cases. She made sure everyone was keeping an eye on new incoming reports; it was almost time for schools to be letting out for the day, which meant a large number of children potentially at risk. Part of her didn't like that she thought that way but she'd been a police officer for so long that it had become standard. None of that tonight, she promised herself. Just a bath, music, then telly. She'd bought a new jazz album that she'd been saving specifically to listen to on a night like tonight, had even dug out the vanilla scented candles her sister had given her last Christmas to make sure the relaxed atmosphere was complete. It was going to be a perfect night in.

She was about to head back into her office to hide from any fresh trouble when a constable materialized in her path, holding a file. Donovan sighed inwardly – the other shoe had dropped, then. No surprises there.

"If it's going to take more than two hours, send it over to DI Clarence," she ordered.

The constable, Phillips, raised his eyebrows.

"Sorry, ma'am, he said to do the same to you."

Of course, she thought ruefully. She was the newest DI in Missing Persons, only five months there. She had no seniority, not yet. In the meantime, she got the cases the other DIs didn't want to contend with, especially those that cropped up at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon.

"All right," Donovan sighed. "What is it?"

"St. Thomas' just called. They have a John Doe in their A&E."
"Shot?" Donovan asked. Phillips shook his head.

"No, ma'am, but attacked. He walked in of his own accord, but they don't know from where. No memories of what happened to him – no memories at all, actually. No ID, of course. The doc said head trauma so they're not surprised by the amnesia."

"He doesn't remember anything at all? Nothing?"

"Just his name – well they assume it's his name. John."

Donovan snorted and folded her arms.

"Good name for a John Doe," she commented. "Description?"

"White male, early to mid-forties, brown hair, brown eyes, average weight, average height."

"And may or may not be named John. Brilliant," Donovan said, rolling her eyes heavenward as if to beseech help that would never come. "That narrows it down."

Phillips smiled.

"Eliminates women anyway," he said with a grin. Donovan took the proffered file and skimmed its contents – nothing more than what Phillips had already told her. St. Thomas' hadn't seen it fit to fax over a picture – although since their John Doe had been attacked, a picture probably wouldn't help much.

"All right, Constable," she sighed. "Let's go sort this out in an hour and a half. You're with me."

Donovan recognized Doctor William Bannerjee as soon as she saw him. She could identify many of the central London A&E doctors on sight – as long as they were in their scrubs and lab coats and had stethoscopes around their necks. The doctor looked tired – hard to say if that was because he was nearing the end of his shift, though. In the Donovan's experience, A&E doctors always looked tired, especially when they were dealing with the police. It added a nice extra layer of complication to their jobs. But she didn't miss the flicker of relief in Bannerjee's eyes – the doctor was happy to hand off this problem to the police. Donovan would have been happy to reroute it to someone else. She wondered what their John Doe would think of being bounced around the system.

"Inspector Donovan, isn't it?" Bannerjee asked.

"Doctor Bannerjee," Donovan greeted in return, shaking the doctor's hand perfunctorily. "What have you got?"

Bannerjee sighed, giving her a rueful look.

"Not much more than you already know. White male, early to mid-forties, came into the A&E about six hours ago. Walking and responsive, but he had no memory of who he is beyond the name 'John'. We've been calling him that – but it could be anyone. No wallet, no phone, no identification of any kind. He'd been attacked, but we're not sure when – recently, I think. He probably came here after that, but god knows how long it took him to get here."

"I'll need to talk to security and review the tapes for the time he came in. We might get lucky – maybe someone dropped him off," Donovan said.

The doctor gave her a look that said he believed that as much as she did. Over fifteen years on the
force and she still held out hope. She swallowed a wry chuckle and wondered how she remained an optimist.

"He suffered some serious head trauma – not to mention some internal injuries. To be honest, I'm not sure how he managed to walk in or stay conscious as long as he did. We had him in surgery and he's in recovery now. Prognosis is tentatively good. He was damn lucky, Inspector. Could have been a lot worse."

Donovan nodded. She'd seen a lot worse in her time in assault victims. She wondered who had gone after their mystery man and why. Even after all this time on the job, it appalled her what people could do to one another.

"What kind of injuries?" Donovan asked.

"Mostly abdominal – some intestinal bleeding and associated trauma, no arterial bleeds in his abdomen, though. Broken ribs that were threatening his lungs – we think he's in the clear on that and he's been breathing well enough since coming out of surgery, but we need to keep a sharp eye on it. It's the head trauma that worries me the most and the fact that he couldn't remember anything before he lost consciousness. Someone took a special interest in battering his head. Wouldn't be the first time by the looks of him – he's been through some fighting before. Wars maybe. No swelling in his brain – like I said, he was lucky. Still… I can't say what he'll be like when he wakes up. Or what he'll remember, if anything. We're keeping watch for any swelling that might occur post-op, but all we can do is wait."

Donovan sighed. She wondered who might be missing their John Doe, who might be looking for him. Were they waiting as well, waiting on news, waiting for him to come home, waiting to see him again?

"No chance of talking to him anytime soon then?" she asked with undisguised resignation. Bannerjee gave her a knowing, sympathetic look.

"Not unless you can get information from an unconscious man, Inspector," he replied. "He should be out of recovery in about half an hour and then we're moving him to the ICU. I can't even guess as to when he'll wake up. Could be a matter of hours. Could be never."

"Brilliant," Donovan sighed. "Anything else you can tell me?"

Bannerjee shrugged.

"He wasn't showing any signs of exposure when he came in, so wherever he'd been, he hadn't been outside for too long. He wasn't wearing gloves or a scarf but his jacket was good for this kind of weather. That's it."

Donovan nodded, exchanging a look with Constable Phillips.

"I'd like to leave a constable with him overnight, in case whoever did this comes back to finish the job."

"Of course," the doctor replied.

"And I might as well see him, since I'm here. I'll get onto the reports back at the Yard, see if they have anyone matching his description in the last twenty-four hours."

"I hope they do, Inspector. I hope they do."
Donovan sighed and nodded. She and Phillips fell into step with the doctor as he led them toward post-op recovery. Donovan consented to put on a mask and gloves outside the room. Phillips took up a position near the door without being prompted and she wondered how much of that was anticipation of her orders and how much was a desire not to go in and see a ward full of patients who had just come out of surgery.

She nodded to Bannerjee and followed the doctor inside to meet their John Doe.
Chapter 3

John let himself into the house, exhaling a grateful sigh as warmth enveloped him – god, he hoped Sherlock had remembered to leave the heat on. He'd noted the front windows of their flat were dark, so the detective was probably out somewhere. A case, maybe? If so, it was a bit odd that he hadn't received any texts about it. He sighed again. It had been a long day at the clinic – too many sniffles, sore throats, coughs, annoyed looks upon being told “it's a virus and there's nothing I can give you for it”. All the territory of the season to be jolly.

But tomorrow. Tomorrow he had a day off for their anniversary. And after the year they'd had, it was definitely cause for some celebration.

Trudging up the stairs, his right hand trailing on the banister beside him, each step was punctuated another plan for the evening – hot shower, fresh clothes, food, beer, telly, sleep…

He frowned when he noticed the small square of yellow paper affixed to the door. John shucked his gloves, shoved them into his coat pockets, and reached up to pull the sticky note from the door.

*Come if convenient. If inconvenient, come anyway. Could be dangerous.*

John stared at the note, then flipped it over. There was nothing written on the back and he gave it a small, confused frown. He remembered those instructions from when he'd first met Sherlock. Almost eight years ago now.

John opened the door, flicked on the light, and stopped.

The same small yellow squares were scattered around the flat, standing out against the familiar backdrop of their home. John frowned to himself again, then closed the door, glancing back to lock it.

There was another note on the door. He pulled it off and read:

*In the lab at Bart's with your cane.*

"What?" John asked himself. He reread it, feeling a smile stretch across his lips. Toeing off his shoes, he removed his coat, hung it up and rolled up his sleeves. He glanced around their living room – where to start? Was there was some kind of pattern? Maybe he was supposed to go clockwise or counter clockwise. Maybe it didn't matter. He crossed the room to their framed wedding picture where it had sat on an end table next to the couch ever since they'd received it. The note stuck to the top of the frame read:

*Standing outside the restaurant in the cold, looking as though you'd made a terrible mistake (you hadn't).*

John grinned. He remembered that day so vividly – it would be hard to forget. He'd asked Sherlock to marry him in the middle of a crowded restaurant and Sherlock had walked out of him. John had chased him down outside, convinced he'd ruined their entire relationship, but Sherlock had said yes. Later he'd learned that the detective had left to keep from throwing himself at John in full view of the other diners.

He glanced up and saw a note attached just above the couch where a smiley face had once been spray painted on the wall.
I'm never bored.

John chuckled; that wasn't true. Sherlock was bored less often since they'd become partners and then spouses but he still couldn't be kept entertained all the time. It was a nice thought anyway.

He turned toward the small bookshelf tucked against the wall to the left of the couch. There was a note attached to one of the books, the sticky part of the paper turned sideways so it could be pressed along the book’s spine. He pulled it off and noted it was a book he'd received from his mother as a birthday present years ago. Apparently Sherlock remembered this as well, because the note read:

You grumbling about turning 40.

John grinned again. He thought back to his fortieth birthday, how he'd grumbled and moaned, and gave a rueful smile – in February he'd be forty-six.

How did I get this old? he asked himself with a wry chuckle. In his mind, he still thought of himself as thirty-seven. It wasn't really surprising to realize that was how old he'd been when he'd met Sherlock. Did Sherlock still see himself as thirty-two?

He crossed the living room to the desk that was still a disaster area despite the fact that Sherlock had no cases at the moment. There were a few files, a scatter of paper and pens, a magnet with a thimble and a paperclip stuck to it for some reason, Sherlock's wallet, a handful of coins and – a waving plastic cat. John heard his own startled laughter ring around the flat.

He managed to compose himself enough to pick up the lucky cat and take the note from the base.

I really don't think my wife would like it.

John kept chuckling, adding the note to the pile and picked the cat up. He crossed to the mantle and cleared a space for it, setting it beside the knife that was stuck in the mantelpiece – the one Sherlock had put there on their very first case together. The knife had a note stuck to the handle.

Can I be clever and an idiot at the same time?

John laughed out loud again, the sound warm in the flat.

"Oh yes you can," he murmured to himself.

It occurred to him to wonder for the first time where Sherlock was, if he was hiding somewhere in the flat. Well, he thought with a grin, If he's here, he'll just have to wait.

He turned to his chair, which had a note resting on the arm. His laptop was on the seat, a note attached to it as well. John read the one on his computer first:

Your passwords are still too easy.

He rolled his eyes and added that note to the pile then read the next one on the arm of the chair.

I believe this is yours.

John’s expression was a little more serious this time. He remembered having the chair taken over by the McKinney case that past summer – it has been one of the things they'd fought about.

He looked back up and saw another note on the television screen.

There are only two doctors really worth listening to.
John laughed, shaking his head. He turned back to the mantelpiece, picking up the skull on impulse. There was a note stuck to the mantle beneath it. John took the paper and replaced the skull carefully.

*Mrs. Hudson can't nick you, at least.*

He grinned again and checked for more notes in the living room but none were immediately visible, so he went into the kitchen. He opened the cupboard where the tea was kept and, sure enough, there was a note on the small sugar tin. He pulled the tin down and set it on the counter and took the note from it but didn't read it right away. John studied the old tin – he didn’t remember where or when he’d first got it. It had just been a tin in which he’d put sugar, not something he’d ever given much thought to. It was odd to think that so small a thing had started everything they had now. Because the sugar tin had been empty and they'd been out of sugar altogether, Sherlock had barged up to John's room, shirtless, and demanded John stop playing games with him. And he had – of course – noted the way John had looked at him.

He read the note.

*It all started here.*

John read it again, then smoothed his thumb over the words. He stared at it a moment longer, remembered trying to convince himself out of the ill-conceived crush on his flatmate, remembered telling himself to move on, remembered the detective sneaking into his room in the middle of the night, ostensibly because he couldn't sleep. They hadn't slept much that night at all.

He left the tin on the counter and moved to close the cupboard but noticed a jar with a note on the bottom shelf. John smiled at the honey container.

*Confused as to why we were in Bristol.*

He shook his head and closed the cupboard, turning to the fridge. Sherlock had dug up his dog tags from the back of his sock drawer and hung them over the souvenir magnet he'd bought in Edinburgh on their honeymoon. The note with them read:

*Afghanistan or Iraq?*

John rolled his eyes but slipped the dog tags on. He opened the fridge and found a note beside the milk.

*No heads!*

He shut the door again with a chuckle and went into the bedroom. It was no surprise that there were more notes in there and he wanted to change as well. He put his small stack of notes down on the bed and picked up a new one from his pillow.

*Your tanned skin and blond hair against your pillow in our room at the villa.*

John smiled – Sherlock had been particularly insistent that they go back to Frontignan on a more regular basis now so John could tan and let the sun bleach his hair. He didn't mind; he loved having a holiday at the villa and the lighter his hair was, the more it hid the grey he knew was coming in.

There was another note on the duvet.

*Not nearly enough space to write everything I remember.*

John's smile widened – he felt the same. There were countless hours of good memories in that bed.
He wished Sherlock were there suddenly, so he could make a few new ones. He wanted to lay Sherlock down and kiss him everywhere for this, to let him know how much the gesture and the memories were appreciated.

He noticed their marriage certificate on the nightstand beside Sherlock's side of the bed and picked it up.

*Signing your name on the certificate, trying not to smudge the ink with your hand.*

John smiled again and set the certificate down, adding the note to the pile. He saw a flash of yellow out of the corner of his eye and glanced up at the closet. There was a note on the door instructing him to look inside. It wasn't hard to identify what Sherlock wanted him to see; the garment bag with his kilt had been turned so it rested against the other bags that contained his and Sherlock's suits.

*You have no idea how sexy you look in this.*

John laughed. The first time Sherlock had seen him in it, the detective had pounced on him. That had been particularly memorable since they'd still been in the tailor's shop. Sherlock had forced John back into the dressing room, pushed him up against the wall, and snogged him mercilessly. By some miracle, John had managed to keep his husband from shagging him then and there. Sherlock had barely been able to keep his hands to himself during the cab ride home. As soon as they'd returned to the flat, he'd insisted John put on the kilt again, then had tumbled him onto the bed and shagged the hell out of him.

He pulled the hanger from the bar and shuffled through the rest of the clothes until he found the red jumper that Sherlock loved that went with the kilt. John changed and found his kilt hose – it was too chilly even in the heated flat to go without socks. He glanced around the room again but saw no more notes.

He headed toward the stairs to the spare bedroom – there were bound to be some notes up there, as it was the first place they'd been together. John stopped at the bottom of the stairs, a hint of yellow catching his eye. He saw another note on his umbrella, which was leaning against the wall next to the coat rack. He crouched down and plucked it off, then smiled.

*Coming up from the tube station in the rain.*

Oh yes, he remembered that. Sherlock standing in the pouring rain, his dark curls sodden and matted against his pale skin, his grey eyes frantically searching the crowd. He remembered the expression on the detective's face when he'd spotted the doctor, that look of utter relief like the entire universe had been righted again. When the electricity had failed in large swaths of the city, John had been trapped in the tube. Sherlock had asked Mycroft divert all the resources he could in order to have search and rescue teams locate John in the darkness underground. While other parts of London were still without power, he'd made Mycroft ensure the lights came back on for John.

He remembered the kiss in the rain, both of them soaking wet and cold, neither of them caring about the crowd pressed around them, the people who might be watching.

It had been then that John had decided to ask Sherlock to marry him.

John ran his left thumb over his wedding band. It had been the best decision of his life.

John pushed himself to his feet and clicked on the stairwell light. He was unsurprised to see another note on the door at the top of the stairs. He read it and grinned hugely.

*I said dangerous and here you are.*
There was something written on the back, so he flipped it over and his smile softened.

7 years and 32 days ago, I stood here, trying to decide if I should enter. I'm glad I did.

John pushed the door open.

Sherlock was lying on the bed in a small pool of warm yellow light from the lamp on the bedside table. He was reading but put the book aside immediately when John came in. The doctor caught the flash of lust that flared in Sherlock's eyes at the sight of him in the jumper and his kilt. John felt it mirrored in himself; Sherlock was wearing that purple silk shirt and jeans – John's favourite outfit on him.

"I'm aware that I am a day early," Sherlock said. "But I did want to surprise you."

John grinned.

"I was very surprised," he said, crossing the room and climbing onto the bed. Sherlock didn't move over for him and John didn't want him to. Instead, he straddled his husband on his hands and knees and leaned in to kiss him. Sherlock kissed back hard, sitting up a bit so he could run his hands up John's legs, up the bare skin of his thighs, under the kilt. He grimaced slightly and pulled away, giving John a disapproving glare for having kept his pants on. John just grinned and nipped at Sherlock's lip, enjoying the soft, sharp intake of breath.

"I'd like to say thank you," John murmured. "But I'm afraid the way in which I do so won't be that surprising."

"I'm certain I won't mind," Sherlock said.

"Mm, good," John said, dipping his head to work his way along the underside of Sherlock's jaw. The detective gave a small gasp and then a quiet moan, tilting his head back to give John better access. John sucked on the pulse point and felt one of Sherlock's hands weave quickly into his hair, trying to pin him there but he managed to move slowly upwards to suck on Sherlock's earlobe, tugging it gently between his teeth.

"I'm sure I can think of a surprise or two to throw in," John whispered. Sherlock shuddered at the sensation of John's breath against his skin, the words, or both.

"Oh, I encourage you to try, Doctor Watson," Sherlock murmured, turning his head for another kiss.

"You're on, Mister Holmes," he replied.

John stretched lazily, burying his face in his pillow with a contented smile. He snuggled under the duvet and let himself drift in that fuzzy state between asleep and awake. He could hear the hum of traffic from outside, dampened by the snow, and the sound of Sherlock moving around the flat. John took a deep breath; the smell of frying bacon invaded his nostrils and his smile widened. He heard footsteps heading toward the bedroom and then felt the shift on the mattress as Sherlock leaned against it, his lips brushing over John's ear to whisper:

"John, wake up."
"Ma'am? He's awake."

Donovan snapped her head up to see one of her sergeants, Morris, standing the door to her office.

"St. Tom's just called," Morris clarified at the same instant the connection clicked in Donovan's mind. She nodded and reached for her phone.

"Greg? He's finally awake. Meet you downstairs." Ringing off, she looked back up at her sergeant. "Let's go."

Nine days had made him look slightly more human, although Donovan had found his slow return to consciousness unnerving. He'd looked awake; good eye open, roaming the room without ever focusing on anything, murmuring incoherent nonsense as though he were carrying on half a conversation with an unseen companion. At other times, his words were indecipherable, little more than moans. She'd wondered if he could feel pain through the haze of semi-consciousness and morphine.

He looked like he could feel it now, she thought. His features were blurred with fatigue where they weren't masked by bandages. His uncovered eye slid toward her as she entered the room, registering her for the first time. Morris stayed back near the door, but Lestrade stepped up to the foot of the bed with Donovan. She saw her former boss' eyes flickering over their victim's features, looking for some hint of familiarity. Lestrade had done this each time he'd been there. Donovan did it too, despite herself.

But there was nothing that clicked in her memory, no hint of him in all of the witness statements from a twelve year old unsolved murder case. Nothing but a partial match to a fingerprint found at the scene.

"Hello," he said weakly.

"Hello," Donovan replied. "I'm Detective Inspector Donovan and this is Detective Inspector Lestrade. We need to ask you a few questions."

He regarded her tiredly, then gave a slight nod.

"Yeah, they said the cops were coming." He had a Mancunian accent, softened by the weakness of his voice. She raised her eyebrows; that might explain why they'd had no missing persons reports for him. It was possible no one in London knew he was missing.

"Can you tell me what happened?" she asked.

He closed his eye and sighed, shaking his head, the movement faint and weak.

"No," he replied, opening his eye again. "I don't – I don't remember."

"Can you tell me what you do remember?"

He sighed again, his attention drifting away. A frown and a wince creased his features and he stiffened before visibly forcing himself to relax.
"Snow," he murmured. "It was snowing. And lights."

Donovan cast a quick glance at Lestrade who raised his eyebrows wearily in return.

"It was snowing the day you came into the hospital," Donovan said. "You told one of the nurses your name was John. Do you remember that?"

He met her eyes again, searching her face.

"No," he whispered.

"Is that your name? Is it familiar? Someone you know – brother, father, a friend?"

He sighed and shook his head again.

"No, Inspector, I'm sorry. I don't remember– I don't remember anything." Sudden panic filled his features and Donovan held up a hand to calm him.

"It's all right," she assured him. "You were seriously injured. Give it time."

"The doctors said I was attacked."

Donovan nodded.

"Yes, we think so, given the nature of your injuries."

"The person who did it – they must know who I am."

Donovan repressed a sigh.

"I'm sorry, but we don't know who they are. You walked to the hospital but we're not sure from where. We're working on it."

He looked mildly surprised and glanced down at himself, at the bandages that were visible under the blankets and hospital-issue pyjamas.

"I walked?" he murmured. "How?"

"People can do amazing things in extreme circumstances," she replied.

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

All three officers and the patient froze at the same time. He locked eyes with Donovan, looking startled and confused.

"How did I know that?" he demanded. She saw how much that sudden hint of strength had cost him; he looked drained, slumping further into his pillow. But his gaze stayed trained on her, his expression bordering on panic again. "I don't know anything – how could I know that? I don't even know my bloody name!"

Donovan took another step toward the bed, holding both hands up this time.

"It's all right," she said. "It's all right. You remembered the name John. Why don't we go with that for now?"

He gave a sharp, barking laugh that failed into a groan. Lestrade circled the bed and filled a cup with
water, helping him drink it. Donovan waited, watching him calm. He took a deep breath, winced, closed his eye and turned the good side of his face into his pillow.

"John Doe," he said, flexing his right hand slightly, drawing her attention to the medical bracelet on his wrist. "That's what this says. Easy for you, eh?"

"John's a common name," Lestrade said and Donovan nodded. "Know a number of them myself."

"It could be yours," Donovan agreed. "It's a start. And you remembered the snow and lights. You just need to give it time to come back."

"And until then?" he muttered.

"We'll keep looking. We'll start with Manchester when we get back to the Yard."

He opened his eye again, turning his head to look back at her.

"Why Manchester?"

"Your accent. It's Northern. Mancunian probably."

He sighed softly.

"Oh." He tilted his head back slightly, looking resigned. "What am I doing in London?" Donovan didn't answer; the question had not been for her. She heard the undercurrent of frustration slip into his voice, saw it touch the edges of his features.

He paused, glancing past Donovan to where Morris was standing by the door.

"What happens to me? What if they come back?"

Donovan shook her head.

"We're keeping you under watch and that will continue until we're satisfied that you're safe. We will get to the bottom of this, John. It's our job. In the meantime, you should sleep. If you remember anything, you can tell the nurses or the constable outside and they can get contact me directly."

He looked skeptical but managed a slight nod.

"All right," he agreed, his voice fading.

"We'll come back later," Donovan assured him, but doubted he'd heard her. His good eye had drifted shut and his breathing had slowed. She glanced at Lestrade, who nodded. They followed Morris out the door and Donovan gave instructions to the constable keeping guard and to the nurses on the ward to call her on her mobile should he remember anything.

On the way back to the Yard, her phone rang. Donovan pulled it out, surprised to see the number was from St. Thomas'.

"Donovan," she answered.

"Ma'am," the voice of her constable said on the other end of the line. "John thinks he's remembered a name."

"Thinks?" Donovan asked.
"He's not sure, ma'am. If it is a name, it's an odd one."

"What is it?" she asked impatiently.

"Sherlock Holmes."

She didn't quite manage not to curse out loud.

John woke up to a rhythmic thump... thump... thump and groaned, rubbing a hand over his face.

It was Sunday. He was supposed to be able to sleep in. He was pretty sure he'd established that as a rule years ago. He sighed. Sherlock and rules tended not to mix well.

"Sherlock!" he called. Another wall-shuddering thump was his only reply. "Sherlock!"

"Bored!"

"Sleeping!"

"Clearly not, John!"

John sighed and dragged himself out of bed, muttering under his breath. He fished around for some socks, pulled them on and padded blearily into the living room to find Sherlock slumped on the couch, absently throwing a small rubber ball at the wall. He groaned then reached over and caught it in mid-arc. Sherlock made a disgusted noise and crossed his arms, slouching further down against the cushions.

"Where did you get this?" John demanded. "Is this Jo's?"

Sherlock muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "it might be".

John sighed, raking his free hand through his hair.

"If you're bored, do an experiment. You don't need to steal toys from a four year old girl. You have plenty of your own."

At this, Sherlock's eyes widened and he looked affronted.

"I didn't steal it, John. I borrowed it. I did ask. She said yes. And," he added indignantly, "My equipment does not count as 'toys'. It is expensive and delicate and, in the wrong hands, could cause considerable damage."

"Oh, your hands then?" John asked. Sherlock shot him a dark scowl and slithered down all the way onto his back, pressing his feet against the arm of the couch, wiggling his toes. John ignored him, stowing the ball in his jacket pocket to return to his niece later.

"If you're bored, there's plenty that needs to be done around the flat. Cooking, cleaning, getting out the Christmas decorations." With each item, Sherlock scoffed. He hooked his two big toes together and shot John another glare. John sat down and shifted using a bit more elbow than necessary to stretch out over his recumbent husband; Sherlock hissed and grumbled but wound his arms round the doctor's waist, his fingers interlacing on John's stomach.

"I need a case, John," Sherlock muttered. John tilted his head back and met Sherlock's eyes. The doctor nodded; there hadn't been a case since late November and that had been a fairly simple one tracking down a man trying to steal his soon-to-be-ex-wife's jewellery.
"Well, something will come up," John said. "It always does."
Sherlock groused and shifted a bit against John, tracing absent patterns on his stomach.
"But today we need to go Christmas shopping."
"I've already done all my shopping," Sherlock said primly.
"What? No you haven't!"
"Yes I have. I did it last week."
"Where is it, then?" John asked. Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes.
"In the post. I did it online."
"Of course you did. Well, what did we get for Jo?"
Sherlock glared at him.
"We didn't get her anything, John. I got her something. If you want to ensure she has a present from each of us, then you will have to buy her something yourself."
"We always get her a joint gift."
"Not anymore," Sherlock sniffed. John grinned and rolled his eyes.
"All right, fine," he agreed. "I'll get her something, too. Now, come on," he elbowed Sherlock lightly in the ribs, earning a quiet 'oof' in response. "Breakfast is your job and since you woke me up early, I expect some extra effort."

John tried to get his weekly chores done but was hindered by Sherlock following him around the flat, whining about being bored, latching onto John's clothing and tugging lightly as if he were a three year old looking for attention. The doctor did his best to ignore it but it was difficult to move with Sherlock always behind him, getting in his way, making him stumble. Finally, he gave up and dragged his husband to bed, stripped him out of his pyjamas and tied his hands to the headboard. He spent an entertaining half hour torturing Sherlock with touches and kisses and teeth before shagging him senseless. With Sherlock sleeping off the euphoria and the relief, John managed to shower, get the cleaning done and even start their laundry.

He came back upstairs to find Sherlock stirring in their bed, stretching lazily before opening his eyes, his movements languid and sated.
"Better?" John asked.
"Mm," Sherlock replied and burrowed his face into his pillow with a sleepy, satisfied smile. John knew it wouldn't last and he wished a case came would in soon; he did his best, but he couldn't keep Sherlock distracted all the time. He hoped Sherlock could be convinced to go shopping with him or that he'd get a brilliant idea for a new experiment that would both keep him entertained and not cause any fires.

The sound of the buzzer made Sherlock grumble into his pillow. John left him in bed and clattered down the stairs, wondering who it might be. Most of their friends would have called before coming over. He thought it might be for Mrs. Hudson, who almost never heard her doorbell anymore. John was going to have a serious talk with her one of these days. She needed a hearing aid. He was
beginning to worry she'd miss something serious, like the smoke detector.

He pulled open the door and was surprised to find Lestrade waiting for him on the stoop. The DI had that familiar reluctant and exasperated look about him that meant he was coming for Sherlock's help. John grinned.

"Just the man I wanted to see."
"Murder case. Just celebrating its twelfth birthday."

"Mm," Sherlock said with feigned disinterest, tapping his index finger absently against his lips.

"Locked room in an art gallery in Mayfair," Lestrade continue. "One of Donovan's first big cases, actually."

At this, Sherlock deigned to look up, arching an eyebrow curiously. He stayed silent and Lestrade sighed.

"The victim, Patrick Connolly, was found dead in a locked office only three gallery staff and the cleaning woman had access to. The coroner put the time of death around midnight but Connolly wasn't found until the next morning. We interviewed the three staff members and the cleaner but they all had good alibis and we couldn't find any connection between them and the victim."

"And you think this John in the hospital did it?" John asked. Sherlock scowled slightly; he disliked that the current victim shared a name with his husband. Objectively he understood that John was a common name but he felt protective nonetheless. John was his.

Lestrade shook his head.

"I wish we did," he replied. "The case went cold because there were no prints on the knife used to kill the victim, nor anywhere around him. But there were a number of prints in the office that didn't belong to anyone who worked there. At least five different people. One of them may have been John Doe."

"May?" Sherlock enquired.

"It's a partial match."

"How close?"

"Ten points."

Sherlock scoffed.

"Useless."

"It's the closest thing we've had to a lead in twelve years."

"You didn't work this case before, Sherlock?" John asked. Sherlock shifted his eyes to Lestrade, raising both his eyebrows.

"It was right before I met you," Lestrade replied.

"Hmm," Sherlock said noncommittally. "Not much of a lead, Lestrade. Twelve years and a partial fingerprint which may or may not tie your man to an unsolved murder in which he was likely not involved. He could have been in that office for any reason. Could be entirely unrelated. Maybe he was a thief. Maybe the gallery was being used for other purposes the staff did not know about."

"We did interview the gallery owner," Lestrade said. "She knew nothing about it being used for anything else. If it was him, though, I'd like to know why he was in London."
"What do you mean?"

"His accent. He's from up north, we think in or around the Manchester area. It would explain why we haven't been able to track him down yet."

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"And it's not at all possible that he has good reason to travel to London on a regular basis? It's hardly a suspicious activity."

"It's all we've got."

"What you've got is nothing," Sherlock snapped. "Tenuous at best and unlikely to be of real value. It is equally possible that the fingerprint you've so tentatively matched to your current victim is not his and the two events are entirely unrelated."

"Sherlock, we have a missing person —"

"No, you've found a person. He can hardly be missing if you know where he is."

"His family will be missing him."

"You don't know that he has a family!"

"He's wearing a wedding ring!"

"He's wearing a ring. You assume it's a wedding ring because it's on his left ring finger. Could be divorced. Could be a widower. He could be wearing it as affectation. Maybe he has children. Maybe he doesn't have children. Maybe he has a spouse. Maybe he doesn't. You don't know because he doesn't know."

"Just come interview him. See what you get out of him."

"What sort of information do you imagine I'll get from a man with no memory? Any deductions I make will be based entirely on what he's thinking now and may not reflect any previously held opinions or preferences. And you seem to be doing surprisingly well for yourselves; you've already determined where he may come from."

Lestrade gave him one of his put upon looks, which Sherlock ignored. John was far more proficient at those. In fact, John was giving him quite a pointed look now. Sherlock attempted to dismiss this as well, but he could feel John's level gaze focussed on him. He thought he ought to feel more annoyed by how easily John could wear down his resolve, but part of him found a paradoxical pleasure in it.

"He asked for you specifically," Lestrade said.

"What?" Sherlock demanded, sitting up straighter in his chair, noting automatically that John stiffened as well and uncrossed his arms. Lestrade had an irritating gleam in his eye, a moment of triumph at being able to startle the consulting detective.

"He remembers a grand total of four things: snow, lights, the name John, and the name Sherlock Holmes."

"What?" John echoed. "How?"

"Good question," Lestrade sighed. "One of your clients?"
"I did say I didn't recognize him," Sherlock retorted, nodding the file that Lestrade was holding.

"You remember all your clients' faces?" Lestrade arched a disbelieving eyebrow at him and Sherlock scowled.

"I don't need to," he sniffed. "I have a laptop."

"Care to explain how he knows your name then?"

"Lestrade, I have a website and a memorable name. John has a blog with a very active readership – you should know, you read it religiously. Anyone with access to the internet could find me."

"It's possible he was coming here to see you."

"It's possible. If he were, I did not know about it." Sherlock paused then sighed. "Oh, very well. I will go round this afternoon and speak to him."

"And you'll call Donovan before you go," Lestrade warned. "This is her case."

"And yet, she's not here," Sherlock pointed out, spreading his hands slightly.

"Call it a favour for a friend," Lestrade replied and Sherlock smirked.

"We'll call her," John promised. The detective repressed a sigh. John was always so accommodating of Lestrade. Occasionally it was good to put the DI off his stride. It built character.

"Thanks," Lestrade said. John showed him out and Sherlock waited until John was back in the flat before pushing himself out of his chair at the doctor. He grabbed his husband's face, planting a triumphant kiss on John's lips, then began pacing the flat, a gleeful smile tugging at his lips.

"A man with no memory and a connection a twelve year old unsolved murder?" John asked. "You really expect Lestrade to believe you find that boring?"

"I can hardly allow Lestrade to think he'll catch my attention with every case. He must muddle through on his own occasionally," Sherlock pointed out, ignoring John's sarcastic snort. He paused in his pacing, tapping his index fingers together, then pressing them against his lips.

"Imagine, John, just imagine! Over a decade and the first lead they have is a victim who remembers nothing. A man who does not know himself but who knows me." He gave John a bright grin. "This is going to be brilliant."

"You'll have to go easy on him," John said on their way into the hospital. Sherlock glanced down at him with a mild scowl. "I mean it. He's been badly hurt and has no memory."

"Yes, John, I'm aware of that," Sherlock said dryly.

"Just reinforcing the point," John replied. Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes but John gave him one of his sharp Behave looks.

They were met outside the room by a displeased Sally Donovan, who shot her normal glare at him, dark eyes narrowed.

"Yes, good afternoon to you, too, Inspector," Sherlock drawled. She raised her eyebrows at him, pursing her lips. He could see her withholding a retort about how he should not be here and it delighted him that his presence galled her.
"Don't upset him," she warned.

"What could be upsetting to a man with no memory?" Sherlock enquired. "He doesn't remember what he likes or dislikes."

"Holmes!" she snapped and he gave her a bright little smile. The constable guarding the door let them in and Sherlock saw Donovan hesitate for a moment, as if she meant to join them, so he shut the door behind him with a definitive click, catching her aggrieved expression through the small window.

Sherlock evaluated the patient rapidly as he began to stir at the sounds of people in his room. Precisely as Lestrade's file had described him: early to mid-forties, average height, average weight. His hair was hidden by bandages, as was one of his eyes. From the file, Sherlock knew these were both brown. He glanced at John and frowned slightly: the entire description – except the height – matched his husband.

Difficult to tell anything else, not while the victim was lying down and injured. Any stiffness from old injuries was masked by the new ones, any hint of how he carried himself was wiped away by the present inability to stand. Silver ring on his left ring finger, plain – could be a wedding band, could just be a ring. Impossible to tell unless he could look at it more closely. Nothing distinctive that he could see, no visible scars or tattoos but most of his body was covered with blankets and pyjamas where it was not masked with bandages and tubes.

He opened his good eye and focussed on them slowly.

"Oh," he said, his accent discernable despite the exhaustion in his voice. "More police?"

"No," Sherlock said, giving him a tight smile. "Sherlock Holmes. I believe you asked for me."

He blinked, frowning, before realization settled slowly into his bruised and tired features.

"Oh. Yeah. Remembered your name."

"Do you remember why?" Sherlock enquired coolly. The man stared at him and gave his head a single shake.

"No," he whispered, then cleared his throat. John, ever cognisant of a patient's needs, circled the bed and helped him with a glass of water. The victim's gaze moved to John curiously. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Doctor John Watson," Sherlock replied and John Doe looked back at him.

"One of my doctors?"

"No, I work with him," John replied. "Do you mind if I have a look at your chart?"

The patient shook his head and John plucked the clipboard from the end of the bed, eyes skimming over the pages. The victim watched him in confusion for a moment, then turned his gaze back to Sherlock.

"Sorry, why would I know you?"

"You don't," Sherlock replied. "Never met you before in my life."

"But I knew your name."
"Yes."

"Why?"

"You tell me," Sherlock replied, earning a brief, sharp glare from John. The patient looked at him, tired and puzzled, then sighed softly.

"I don't know," he replied. "If I don't know you, then why do I know your name? What do you do?"


"I don't know what that is," he said.

Sherlock gave an irate sigh.

"No. You wouldn't."

John looked up at him again, brown eyes quizzical, and Sherlock flashed him a disgusted look.

"Useless," he said.

"What?"

"Lestrade asked me to come see what I could deduce – the answer is nothing. He remembers nothing, so there's nothing to determine. A partial fingerprint and a man whose memories average out to one per decade? Could be anything, so probably nothing." He huffed, throwing himself into one of the uncomfortable hospital chairs, slouching down and folding his arms.

"Sherlock –"

"Oh, by all means, review his chart, John. See if you can determine anything about his past based on incomplete medical information. There's nothing here for me. Boring."

"Sherlock!"

"Boring!"

It had been so promising, too. He felt cheated and slouched down further, shooting John an angry glare. John gave an exasperated sigh in return, expression demanding that Sherlock be reasonable, but what John considered reason was often simply pandering and overly patient. He'd been close, so close, to an interesting case, one that might have made him really think – only to run up against a wall immediately.

The victim might be interesting if he were hiding anything. But he wasn't playing at ignorance. He was ignorant.

"Sherlock –" John tried again.

"I could stand here all day going round and round in a circle with him because I don't know anything about him and he doesn't know anything about himself. What would you have me do, John? There's nothing here to work with!"

John gave him a warning look and Sherlock glanced at the patient again, who was watching with shock and dismay. Why dismay? He knew he remembered nothing – surely hearing it from someone else was not so unexpected.
He scowled, annoyed with Lestrade. This was all his fault.

John narrowed his eyes at him and Sherlock huffed in return, refusing to be put off. He was not about to waste his time chasing uselessly after wispy phantom leads.

"Can you tell me what you do remember?" John said, turning back to the patient on the bed. Sherlock swallowed on his irritation; they were wasting their time. He was well aware they had nothing better to do that day – Christmas shopping did not count as better – but he had no desire to stay.

The patient shook his head.

"Just snow and lights," he said.

"Well, what about the snow?" John asked. "Was it on the ground or falling?"

The patient frowned slightly, then sighed, tilting his head back into his pillows. Sherlock was tempted to point out that John had been the one to insist on going easy on John Doe.

"Falling," the other man murmured. "Slowly, y'know? Big fluffy flakes."

"What about the lights?" John asked. "Were they outside with the snow?"

John Doe was silent for a moment and Sherlock could see he was beginning to drift off but forced himself back awake with hard effort.

"No," he said, his voice laced with fatigue. "Like those." He pointed upwards vaguely, to the humming fluorescent lights above them.

"Probably in the hospital then," John said. "That's a good sign. You remembered the name John, too."

"They told me that," he murmured. "I don't remember saying it."

"It says you have some previous injuries that are consistent with military service. Does that ring any bells?"

"They said I was shot in the leg," the other man replied. He coughed lightly, wincing as he did so. John gave him so more water, helping him drink it slowly. Sherlock sighed and tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling, feeling a flash of annoyance that John was ignoring him in favour of a man with no memory. "I don't remember that."

Of course he doesn't, Sherlock thought with an inward scowl but John asked he could check the old injury anyway. Sherlock closed his eyes, refusing to be put off. He heard John pulling back the blankets and shot his eyes open, sitting up and refocusing quickly. He was not about to let John undress a strange man in his bed without supervision.

"Here," John said and the other man's eyes focussed just above his right knee. "Looks about five or six years old, healed well." The patient nodded but there was no flash of recognition in his eye, no indication in his features that he had any memories of the wound.

"Sorry," he whispered. "Nothing."

John nodded.

"It takes time," he said. "Don't worry."
The patient managed the barest of small smiles, his good eye starting to droop closed.

"That's what the DI said, the woman."

"Donovan," John supplied.

"Yeah, that's her."

"Get some rest," John said. "It's the best thing you can do for yourself. We'll be back. Don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of this."

John Doe nodded vaguely and closed his eye as John spread the blankets back over him. He watched him carefully with that Doctor John expression, until he had fallen asleep, his breathing deepening, the heart rate measured by the monitor slowing. Sherlock heaved himself out of his chair, tugging vaguely on his coat.

"Can we go now?" he snapped.

"What was that?" John asked as they strode out of the hospital. He was hurrying to keep up with Sherlock's quick pace, looking up at the detective, squinting slightly in the weak December sun.

"What?" Sherlock snapped.

"That!" John repeated and Sherlock glanced down at him with a mild scowl. "This morning it was all 'John, this is brilliant!' then five minutes in and you decide it's boring? What's so boring about a locked room case where the only connection is a man with no memory?"

Sherlock stopped abruptly, slipping his hands into his pockets and sighing, his breath condensing as it escaped his lips. John had to stagger to a stop and turn back, frowning up at him.

"I suspected he was lying," Sherlock said.

"Sorry?"

"Lying, John, I thought he was lying. Rather, I thought he was lying to Lestrade and Donovan, faking the lack of memory. If he had been, we may have had a starting point. The question would have been why lie to the police? What would he have to hide? If he is connected with this unsolved murder, then likely quite a lot."

"But you don't think he's faking it," John said.

"No, he clearly is not," Sherlock replied. "None of his reactions were based on established preferences or opinions. Every single reaction he gave us was in response to a prompt we gave him."

"What do you mean?"

"He volunteered absolutely no information. Not because he's attempting to convince us that he has none, but because he does not remember anything."

"Couldn't that be too perfect?" John asked.

"Only if he were an exceptionally capable actor able to use his skills following a severe assault. He was waiting for us to give him clues as to how to react because he does not know how to react. My name clearly means nothing to him despite the fact that it is one of the few things he recalled on his own. He was able to provide you with some scant details concerning his visual memories, but only"
after you enquired. He showed no emotional connection to his old wound. He might as well have been looking at a stranger's injury. If he were faking this, he would have tried to make the responses seem more genuine by adding a touch of detail. This was not lack of reaction because he's attempting to deceive us, it was lack of reaction because he has none."

"But – aren't you interested in why he knows your name?"

"Not especially."

"You're one of four things he remembers, Sherlock! It must be important!"

"Why? Do you think remembering the snow or the hospital lights is important? Do you imagine those play into his assault? His recollection of my name could be entirely coincidental – perhaps he knows someone whose case I investigated or perhaps he read it somewhere. His memories are nonsensical and unrelated."

"That would be a hell of a coincidence," John said.

"Just as it would if it were his fingerprint at Lestrade's old crime scene," Sherlock sighed. "But coincidences happen all the time, John. What if another DI had taken the case rather than Donovan, one who does not know me? Then we wouldn't be here having this discussion and his memories would amount to two names and two visual recollections. Nothing more."

John sighed and bundled his hands into his pockets.

"Well, the police have his fingerprints. If he was in the military, Mycroft could run them."

"If you wish to offer my brother's services to Lestrade, feel free," Sherlock sniffed. "I am not being dragged into that. Any contact with Mycroft before Christmas always results in him insisting we celebrate the holidays together."

John tried to repress a wry smile but failed.

"All right, I'll ask him," he said. "Come on. It's freezing. Let's get a cab and go home."
Chapter 6

On Monday, after the last of his patients were gone for the day and his paperwork was caught up, John went back to the hospital. He had heard nothing from Donovan – of course, she wasn't obliged to tell him anything. Even if Sherlock hadn't turned down the case, getting information from Donovan would probably be like pulling teeth. She had mellowed over the years, but hadn't ever warmed to Sherlock being on a case. John thought she probably never would.

He sent a quick text to Sherlock saying he'd be late and was mildly surprised when he didn't get a reply. Either the detective was busy or he was sulking about John's delay. John shrugged it off as he pocketed his phone and walked across the Westminster Bridge. Sherlock would guess – accurately – where he was going. And he could deal with it.

He made his way through the hospital to John Doe's room, which was being guarded by a constable who appeared to remember him from the previous day – that, or John was on some approved guest list. He still had his coat searched and was carefully patted down before being admitted; it was just as well he didn't carry his Browning everywhere.

Doe was dozing when John shut the door gently behind him. He hadn't been a surgeon in over eight years now but he still recognized the difference between a deep sleep and a light sleep in a recovering patient. The sound of John's soft footsteps as he crossed the room made Doe stir and he shifted slightly, a grimace of pain flickering over his features before he blinked himself awake. It took him a moment to focus his good eye on John and another few seconds for recognition to set in.

"Oh," he murmured, his voice laced with sleep and analgesics. "I remember you. You were here–earlier."

"Yesterday," John confirmed.

"The doctor, right? The one who works with Sherlock Holmes."

"That's right. John Watson."

The barest of smiles ghosted across pale lips.

"We have something in common, then," he murmured. John draped his coat over the back of a chair then did a quick evaluation of Doe's features. His good eyes was still glassy from the painkillers but his features were a touch more alert than they had been yesterday – insofar as they were visible beneath the bandages, bruises, and cuts.

"More than one thing," John said and Doe gave him a puzzled glance. "Mind if I sit?" The injured man shook his head slowly and John settled into the padded chair. "I was shot, too. And I've been in the hospital more times than I care to remember."

"Oh," Doe said. John smiled slightly; he knew he'd have to carry most of the conversation but that didn't bother him. He knew how frightening it was to be bedridden, exhausted and injured – and utterly alone. He had craved company beyond that of the other patients – who mostly slept or were lost in their own misery – and the doctors and nurses with their incessant questions.

And he's got the police to deal with, too, John thought.

He thought it might be nice to have someone who wasn't demanding answers, either legal or medical.
"I was in the army," John continued. "Afghanistan. About halfway through my second tour there when I got shot in the shoulder then discharged. Came back here to find almost all of my friends here had changed – or I had – and that everyone I really knew well was still over there." He gave a light shrug, almost to dismiss the situations, but he could easily remember how stunned he'd been at how different his old friends had seemed. How unaffected by – almost unaware of – the war they were.

"But you're still a doctor."

"Yeah, but I never went back to being a surgeon. Got a job at a surgery – routine stuff."

"Why?"

John grinned.

"Sherlock, mostly. Being a surgeon means being on call, hectic schedules. Living with Sherlock means the same thing. I need a break sometimes. It's nice to have some routine in my life."

"Work together and live together?" Doe murmured.

John nodded, realising that of course it may seem strange. He'd grown so used to life with Sherlock, where strange was normal, that nothing really struck him as particularly odd anymore. The few things that did tended to be things that everyone else took for granted.

"Yes," John said. "We're married."

"Oh," Doe said, nodding slightly. John sat back somewhat, unable to prevent the movement or the flash of shock. He'd adapted to the reactions, too – as much as they sometimes annoyed him. It was usually surprise, but sometimes shock or disgust. He always got something because he knew being married to another man wasn't the typical assumption and it probably would never be.

But this – this was just a straight acceptance of new information.

_God, he really doesn't remember_, John thought, suppressing the urge to shake his head, keeping his expression clear through years of experience dealing with post-op patients.

He had no frame of reference for the idea of same sex marriage and no opinions on it. Sherlock had been right – he was waiting for cues from others because he had no preferences or ideas of his own.

Doe licked his lips then coughed, wincing and curling in on himself as much as possible. John stood, helping him with a glass of water and Doe sipped it slowly but managed to finish the whole thing before lying back on his pillows.

"Thanks," he murmured tiredly. John raised his eyebrows as he put the glass aside – there was something. Doe had done that without thinking. He wondered if anyone else had noted the ingrained social nicety. How far back did habits have to go to so close to instinct that they weren't lost? How much had he retained that most people would not even notice as significant?

"You're welcome," John replied, unwilling to push the subject. He could mention it to the nurses to pass onto the doctors, but there was no sense in pushing Doe about it. It would most likely agitate him more than it would help him.

"Do you think– if I were married, wouldn't someone be looking for me?" Doe asked.

"Why do you think you're married?" John replied, sitting down again, propping his elbows on his knees and leaning forward somewhat. Doe lifted his left hand slightly from where it rested on the
blanket, curling his fingers to draw John's attention to the ring.

"You've got one," he said, nodding to the gleaming band on John's finger. "The DI-- the woman--"

"Donovan."

"Donovan. She said they were checking to see if anyone had reported me missing. A spouse, maybe. That's what this means, right?"

"Maybe," John conceded. He knew it was highly likely -- but there was an off chance that Sherlock was right. Maybe Doe was wearing it as a cover. Or maybe he was just wearing it as a ring.

"Can I see it?" he asked. Doe nodded and John watched carefully for any hesitation, any reaction to being asked to remove his ring, but there was none. It was the same his response to seeing the scar on his leg the day before -- as though he was dealing with a stranger's body.

John stood again and worked the ring off carefully. Doe's hands hadn't survived the attack unscathed but his right hand had borne the worst of the damage. John eased the ring off of Doe's left ring finger carefully and held it up to the light. Eight years with Sherlock had taught him exactly what to look for in wedding bands. This one wasn't particularly dirty but nor was it cleaned on a regular basis -- at least not as regularly as Sherlock cleaned their rings. The inside was no more polished than the outer surface, so he did not take off much, either.

"What are you looking for?" Doe asked.

"An engraving," John said. "Someone's name or a date, maybe. Sorry, nothing."

"Would that have helped?"

"Maybe. It might have given the police a name to start with."

Doe gave a resigned nod and John slipped the ring back on his finger, keeping a smirk to himself.

*Just as well Sherlock isn't here,* he thought. He hadn't missed detective's sudden and undivided attention when he'd examined the scar on Doe's leg. But he'd let it pass; he knew what real uncertainty from Sherlock looked like and that hadn't been it.

"Donovan said they think I might be from Manchester?"

"That's right," John confirmed.

"Why?"

"Your accent. Puts you from somewhere up in that area, most likely."

"Oh," Doe said again, then licked his lips, his gaze distant for a moment. "Where's that then?"

John blinked in surprise then nodded to himself. It was jarring to realize precisely how much he took for granted in terms of knowledge and memories. Was anyone else really even thinking about it? Or were the police and the doctors just giving Doe information that, to him, had absolutely no context?

*It must be like trying to follow a conversation in another language if you only knew one or two words,* he thought. He remembered his own time in the hospital and how much easier it had been to deal with the doctors and nurses because he was a doctor. He understood what they meant, he could read his chart, he knew the language. He realized he could not at all imagine what it would be like to
have no frame of reference – or how terrifying that must be.

John pulled out his phone, called up a map of the UK and positioned himself next to the bed so that he could hold it and Doe could see it.

"We're here in London, England," he said, his index finger hovering just over the screen. "Here's Manchester, to the northwest. It's a city. Still in England. There's Scotland at the top, Wales in the west, and Ireland and Northern Ireland over here."

Doe nodded slightly and John caught himself again.

"England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are part of the United Kingdom. Ireland is independent. Sorry, this probably isn't making much sense to you at the moment…"

Doe studied the display for a moment, then reached up with his good left hand, placed his thumb and forefinger on the screen and brought them together to zoom in on the map. John fumbled, so startled by the action that the phone nearly slipped through his fingers.

"What?" Doe asked.

"That! What you just did there. That–"

"What?" the injured man repeated.

John strained to keep his voice steady despite the sudden shock. "You didn't even think about that, did you? You just knew how to zoom in."

Doe stared at him and John grinned.

"It's called body memory," he said. "It's often unconscious. But it means you remember something. It means you're familiar enough with the technology that you probably use it on a regular basis. You probably have a smart phone – who doesn't nowadays?"

"I don't think I have one," Doe murmured and John opened his mouth to ask why not before realizing the other man was looking around the room.

"You weren't carrying one when you came in," John confirmed. "It doesn't mean you don't have one. You didn't have a wallet, either, and you definitely own one of those. But we could identify you by your phone and wallet. You'd keep things like credit cards – for buying things – and maybe a driver's permit in there, if you drive. But that– I'm not a neurologist, but I think that was a very good sign."

Doe was watching him with a hint of hope behind the fatigue in his features. John gave him a grin before putting his phone away.

"That's two things you've remembered since I've been here," he said, deciding to just go for broke.

"Two? What was the first?"

"You thanked me when I got you water."

"Oh. Is that odd?"

"Only because it's not odd at all," John replied. "It's something you had to learn to do. Saying 'please' when you want something, saying 'thank you' when you're given something. We all learn it – well, most of us learn it – when we're small. So you would have been doing it your whole life. But the
phone... you're about my age – I'm forty-five – but these kind of phones have been around for–
what? Maybe ten years? Fifteen? So it's something you had to learn to do much more recently."

Doe looked mildly surprised and John gave him another grin.

"Again, not a neurologist, but I'd say it means you're retaining more recent memories, too."

"Oh," Doe said again. "Good."

"Brilliant," John replied.

"Too bad it's not useful. Wouldn't my name be better than knowing how to zoom in on your phone?"

"Give it time," John said, then paused when Doe grimaced and began coughing again. He waited
until it passed, listening carefully to his breathing. There was some congestion and wheezing, but
nothing that alarmed him, especially given the extent of his injuries. He'd suffered his own coughing
bouts after his surgery, the gasps wracking his injured shoulder until he'd had to swallow on the
coughs to avoid passing out from the pain.

"Here," he said, helping Doe with more water once the worst of the spasms had abated. The other
man drank gratefully – small sips only – and John could tell he was on the verge of falling asleep
again. The doctor set the glass aside and gave Doe a reassuring smile.

"Get some rest," he said. "Right now, it's the best thing you can do for yourself."

"I hear that a lot," Doe murmured.

"Sound medical advice, believe me. If you'd like, I can stop by again tomorrow."

Another pale smile tugged at Doe's lips.

"Yeah," he said. "It's nice to have some company."

"I know," John replied. "Get some rest. I'll see you again tomorrow afternoon." He doubted the other
man had heard the last sentence – he'd closed his good eye and his body had relaxed as his breathing
had slowed, all before John had finished talking. He waited a couple minutes to make sure Doe
stayed asleep and that the coughing fit didn't return, then gathered his jacket and went home.

When John got home, the flat was dark and silent. He clicked on a light and glanced around;
Sherlock's coat was hanging on the back of the door, so he wasn't out. There were no yellow notes
peppered about the flat this time – although the memory made him smile – so he assumed his
husband was downstairs helping Mrs. Hudson with something. He was just about to head down to
check when Sherlock's voice came ringing up the stairs.

"John! Come down here!" he called imperiously, his tone leaving no doubt that he'd be obeyed. John
smirked when he heard his husband's footsteps retreating toward Mrs. Hudson's flat. He toed off his
shoes and hung his coat before heading back downstairs. The door to the A flat was open, soft
yellow light spilling out into the common corridor. John peered inside and saw Sherlock watching
him from the archway that led into the living room. He waited a couple minutes to make sure Sherlock's voice came ringing up the stairs.

"John! Come down here!" he called imperiously, his tone leaving no doubt that he'd be obeyed. John
smirked when he heard his husband's footsteps retreating toward Mrs. Hudson's flat. He toed off his
shoes and hung his coat before heading back downstairs. The door to the A flat was open, soft
yellow light spilling out into the common corridor. John peered inside and saw Sherlock watching
him from the archway that led into the living room. He waited a couple minutes to make sure Sherlock's voice came ringing up the stairs.

Sherlock was watching John expectantly, as if waiting for him to do something.
"Yes?" John asked.

"Well? Come in!" Sherlock said, beckoning impatiently with one hand. John stepped inside and Sherlock rolled his eyes, gesturing again. He moved next to his husband, peering into the living room where Mrs. Hudson turned from hanging decorations on the tree to give him a warm smile.

"Hello, John," she said.

"Hullo, Mrs. Hudson," John replied. "Sherlock behaving himself?"

He heard the soft impatient huff from beside him and resisted a smile.

"He's been a godsend," she replied. "That height! I don't trust myself on ladders or chairs anymore."

John nodded, glad to hear that. Her hip gave her more grief when the weather was colder, and the years had made it worse, too. He didn't like to think of her alone in her flat on a ladder or a chair. If she fell, it was unlikely that either he or Sherlock would hear it – if they were even home.

"It's not working," Sherlock complained and John glanced up at him but his husband was looking at Mrs. Hudson now. She smiled back at Sherlock with a warm patience that reminded John suddenly and sharply of Sibyl.

"Well, I don't think he's noticed it, dear," she replied.

"Noticed what?" John asked.

Sherlock made an impatient noise and pointed to the ceiling above him. John looked up to see a little sprig of mistletoe dangling from the archway. He grinned and rolled his eyes.

"Obviously your theory that it– mmph– " Sherlock managed before John leaned up and shut him up with a kiss. He saw Mrs. Hudson smile out of the corner of his eye as he swallowed on Sherlock's shock and kept kissing him until he relaxed.

"I'd say it works just fine," John replied. He saw Sherlock attempt a scornful expression but the light in his eyes gave him away.

"Then these will be useful," Sherlock said and John glanced down to see him opening his left fist, which contained two small branches. The doctor's grin widened. One was going in the doorway to the kitchen and one in the doorway to their bedroom if he had any say in it.

"Why don't I take these and hang them up?" John asked. "You finish up down here. I'll order dinner while I'm at it. Thai sound all right?"

"Yes," Sherlock replied. "I won't be long."

John smiled. "Good night, Mrs. Hudson."

"Good night, dear."

John headed back upstairs and ordered the food before hanging the mistletoe where he wanted it. He thought he'd get another sprig for above the door to their flat – and maybe the bathroom door as well. He grinned at the idea of not being able to pass through any door without claiming a kiss. Not that he couldn't anyway – Sherlock was happy to oblige.

While waiting for the food and for Sherlock to come upstairs, John dug out their own Christmas...
decorations and set the box in the living room. They'd need to get a tree and he'd have to do that sometime this week. One year he'd sent Sherlock, which had not ended well. They did have high ceilings but the detective had not seen the problem with buying a twelve foot tall tree and expecting it to fit in their flat.

There was a knock on the door just as Sherlock was coming up the stairs, so John tossed his wallet down. Sherlock joined him a few minutes later, putting the takeaway bag on the counter.

"Beer?" John asked.

"No," Sherlock said coolly. His beer moods were few and far between.

"Wine?"

"With Thai food? I don't think so, John."

"Suit yourself."

"I always do," Sherlock murmured.

"You're telling me," John said, snagging a beer for himself as Sherlock filled both their plates. He never gave John enough but John didn't mind – that's what seconds were for. He followed Sherlock into the living room, stopping for a requisite kiss in the doorway under the mistletoe, and settled onto the couch with him. Sherlock propped his feet on John's legs and John rested his plate on his husband's ankles. They ate in companionable silence, then Sherlock put his plate on the floor and slouched down a bit.

"You went to the hospital," he commented.

John raised his eyebrows, waiting for the explanation, and Sherlock waved a bored hand.

"You smell of hospital disinfectant – not strongly, so you were just there long enough to pick up that rather unfortunate scent. You will have to shower before bed, you know."

John grinned.

"I don't mind showering."

"I know you don't. But you will wash yourself thoroughly if you have any hope of a good shag."

"All right," John agreed. He didn't note or care about the smell much but Sherlock had developed a strong aversion to it after being hospitalized following the crash.

"Yes, I was at the hospital," he said. "I wanted to see how John was doing."

Sherlock scowled and slouched down further.

"He's not John, you're John," he said, digging a big toe into John's thigh. The doctor rolled his eyes.

"It is a common name," he reminded his husband. Sherlock made a derisive noise.

"Presumably he has doctors." John pinched the arch of Sherlock's left foot and his husband scowled, pulling his feet back. John took the opportunity to get up so he could help himself to more food.

"Of course he has doctors," he called from the kitchen. "And police working on his case. But the doctors and nurses have other patients and the police have other cases. I thought he might want to see
a friendly face who just wanted to talk to him."

"I want to see you, too," Sherlock sniffed as John came back into the living room.

"Move your feet or I'll sit on them," he said and Sherlock did because he knew John would make good on his threat. "You're seeing me right now. You can see me all night. As much of me as you want."

Sherlock waggled his eyebrows suggestively and John smirked. The detective pressed the soles of his feet against the sides of John's thigh, wiggling his toes.

"He's in the hospital alone and he has no memory. If it were me, I'd be terrified. I just thought he might like a bit of company. It's almost the holidays. Can you imagine spending Christmas without your family?"

As soon as the words had left his lips, John realized what he was saying and froze. His stomach twisted and he wished desperately that he could pull them out of the air where they hung between him and Sherlock and erase their existence altogether.

Sherlock had stiffened against him, expression blank and shut down.

"I– " John started but Sherlock spoke over him.

"Yes," he said softly. "I can."

"I didn't mean--" John tried again but Sherlock swung himself up and padded into the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him, not bothering with the light. John cursed to himself and put his plate aside quickly before hurrying after him. He found Sherlock stretched out on the bed, hands folded on his stomach, looking through the darkness at the ceiling.

"Sherlock--"

"Please don't, John," Sherlock sighed. John hesitated, biting his lower lip. If Sherlock had moved at all, curled up on his side facing away from him, sat up against the headboard and sulked, John would have reconsidered. The softness in his voice and his stillness made the doctor nod. Sherlock needed to be alone now.

John went back into the living room, feeling numb and stupid. He took his plate into the kitchen, his appetite having vanished, and dealt with the leftovers and then the washing up. This didn't take long, so John went through the fridge, getting rid of expired food and making a short list of the things they needed to replace. With that done, he tidied up the rest of the kitchen, avoiding the biohazard zone that was their table. He was almost finished when he heard Sherlock come into the living room and then retreat into their bedroom again. John wiped his hands on a towel quickly and hurried back toward the bedroom.

Sherlock was lying on the bed again, holding his violin bow carefully. John hesitated in the doorway, watching carefully.

"I'm not going to break it," Sherlock said without glancing up. John sighed, pushing himself away from the doorframe to cross the room and climb onto his side of the bed. He sat down cross-legged, regarding Sherlock thoughtfully. Sherlock kept his eyes on the bow, his expression unreadable in the low lighting.

"I'm sorry," John said. "I didn't mean that."
"I know you didn't," Sherlock replied. John sighed again. He wasn't going to run from this now – but he didn't think it would be a confrontation, either.

"I'm not angry," Sherlock continued.

"No," John agreed. "You're sad. That's worse. Because there's nothing I can say to make it any better."

"I don't need you to say anything, John."

John nodded. He sat still for a moment, then took the bow carefully from Sherlock, whose grey eyes flickered to him questioningly. John got up and set it on the dresser then returned to the bed. He lay down, stretching out beside his husband, gathering Sherlock into his arms. The detective stayed stiff and still for a moment, then sighed and rolled onto his side into John's embrace. Sherlock wrapped an arm around John's waist then nuzzled his face into the doctor's neck. John felt the warm brush of air against his skin and the soft kiss of eyelashes as Sherlock shut his eyes.

John rested his chin against the top of Sherlock's head and closed his eyes as well. He held on, keeping the silence, for a long time.
Chapter 7

As he crossed Westminster Bridge toward St. Thomas', John pondered his options. Hands tucked in his pockets against the chill night, breath condensing against his skin, he wove his way between the other pedestrians instinctively.

He supposed he could talk about Patrick Connolly, see if the name rang any bells – or about Dublin, Connolly's birthplace. Or perhaps art, and galleries in Mayfair.

He didn't think that was fair, though. The police would already be pushing, wanting answers they couldn't have. The doctors wouldn't be making it easy, either, for their own reasons. John wanted to help, and he didn't think it would help to badger a recovering patient about information he didn't remember and most likely never knew in the first place. But he wanted to do something that might help them figure out who the man was.

John stopped in the gift shop and bought a *National Geographic* and a novel that was apparently on some best-seller list. He had no idea if Doe would like them. But then, he reasoned, neither did Doe, so it didn't much matter.

He thought about the problem of how to proceed as hit the call button for the lift, watching the button light up under his thumb, catching the faint gleam of his wedding band as he drew his hand away.

*You're looking at him like a doctor,* John thought, but it was Sherlock's voice in his mind. *You looked at his ring yesterday. Why did you stop?*

*What?* he asked himself with a frown as the lift arrived. John stepped inside and tried to chase down the thought. Something was nudging at him mind about Connolly and about the way Doe had zoomed in on John's phone the night before.

*His hands!* John realized with a jolt. He hadn't looked at the other man's hands. He thought about his own hands – and Tricia's. Surgeon's hands, steady under pressure. He thought about Sherlock's hands, expressive, mobile, trained after a lifetime of playing the violin. Connolly had been a construction worker, that would have left its marks – calluses, strong muscles, rough skin, strong grip.

He didn't think he'd be able to pin down exactly what Doe did for a living, but at least it could provide some differentiation. If he worked with his hands on a regular basis, it would show.

John was checked outside the room again before being admitted. Doe was already awake and greeted him with a genuine if tired smile. The telly was playing a repeat of *Coast.*

"I used to watch this," John commented as a helicopter provided a panoramic view of a rocky coastline somewhere.

"I guess the good thing about having no memory is that it's all new to me," Doe said and John didn't miss the resignation in his voice.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked, taking off his jacket.

"I don't know. The same. Headache. Itchy."

John smiled sympathetically.
"Itchy is good – means the wounds are healing."

Doe's lips twitched into the ghost of a wry smile.

"I brought you a magazine and a book in case you get bored with the telly," he said, passing them over. He watched the movement carefully – Doe reached out instinctively with his left hand; there was no hesitation there. He'd noted that yesterday but it had been lost in the shock of realising Doe knew how to use a smartphone touch screen.

"Thanks," he said, settling the purchases on the small wheeling table beside his bed.

"You're left handed," John commented.

"What?"

"You're left handed," he repeated. "Most people are right handed. I'm not, though."

"Is that important?"

John shrugged.

"Probably not for finding you, but it's one more thing you know about yourself. Actually, can I see your hands?"

Bemused, Doe held up both hands and John took them carefully, feeling a bit like a fortune teller. He could almost hear Sherlock snickering in his head.

*Are you going to be watching over my shoulder the entire time?* he demanded of the mental image. It was a bit disconcerting talking to his own imagination, which had decided to resolve itself into the detective. Well, maybe it was keeping him on his toes.

John let Doe's right hand go gently; it was too bandaged to be of real use and he didn't want to hurt him. He turned the left hand over carefully and examined the nails – cut, probably by the nurses judging by the quick job of it, but nothing underneath that would suggest he was the type to take care. Uneven cuticles, dry skin around the nail beds. No manicures then – and John knew what those looked like, because Sherlock got them.

He turned the hand over again, checking the skin, feeling roughened calluses under his fingertips. Doe was giving him a quizzical look when he glanced up.

"You work with your hands for a living or you have a hobby that involves a lot of physical work. I'm going with the job being physical, given how even your calluses are and how many you have. You do something with your hands on a very regular basis, probably all day long, every day."

Doe raised his eyebrows in mild surprise and the Sherlock of John's imagination beamed at him.

"Oh."

"Seem familiar?"

Doe replied with a slight scowl and a shake of his head.

"Well that might help the police track you down," John said. "I'll let them know."

He saw a flicker of something unexpected on Doe's face and it took a moment for him to place it. Hope. John smiled slightly; he had something to talk about now – he'd known a number of people in
the army whose jobs entailed physical labour. And if Doe had been in the military, either topic might spark something. At the very least, it was worth a try.

He sat down in his chair and pulled a small notepad and pen from his pocket. Doe looked at them questioningly.

"I thought we could play twenty questions—sorry, it's a question and answer game. If I write down what you say, you'll have a record of your answers. Might help spark a memory."

"I don't know anything," Doe said.

"You don't remember anything," John corrected. "There's a difference. And actually, you do remember some things. This might help trigger something."

Doe frowned, looking doubtful, but nodded—much to John's relief. He didn't want this to seem like he was forcing anything but he also wanted to give the other man an opportunity to remember.

"Okay, we can try," Doe agreed.

"I used to have a friend—we served together in Afghanistan—who was a mechanic. His hands were pretty rough, too. He complained about it sometimes, especially when the weather was cold."

"What happened to him?"

"He died," John said levelly.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It was seven years ago, but thanks," John replied. "It happens in war sometimes. Too often."

"Yeah," Doe agreed and John raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah?" he asked. The other man frowned, then looked somewhat flustered. John made a mental note about that was well as a written one. Doe's expression was pinched and he pursed his lips then hissed at the pain caused by the action.

"Dammit," he muttered, then met John's gaze again. "That—seems almost familiar. You said maybe you thought I was in the military?"

"Maybe," John agreed. "What seems familiar about it?"

Doe shook his head slightly but said: "People dying." He sighed. "What a bloody stupid thing to remember."

"I don't know," John said. "It stays with you."

"But I don't remember who," the other man said and John heard the sharp hint of frustration. "I don't remember bloody any of it."

"Okay," the doctor said, stopping the panic before it started. "Let's switch the subject."

"Sorry," Doe muttered.

"Don't be. We've all lost people—soldiers generally more so than most. But you're in a hospital and I don't want you to worry about that. Let me—well let me tell you about my name, since we might share one. I was named after my dad; his name was John, too. His father's name was Harold, so my
parents named my sister Harriet after him, but my great grandfather's name was also John. He was a doctor, too, back when treatments I use daily without thinking about them were new or not discovered yet."

Doe nodded.

"Does 'John' mean anything to you?"

The other man hesitated, then shook his head.

"Everyone keeps calling me that but it's almost like someone just decided it was my name." He raised his right hand slightly and John glanced at the medical bracelet on his wrist. "The police, they said that 'John Doe' is what they call people who don't have names."

"That's true," John agreed.

"What do they do for women?"

John grinned despite himself.

"Jane Doe."

"Oh." Doe was silent for a minute before asking for some water, which John got for him before settling back into his chair. "What about– your husband?"

John noted the lack of hesitancy at the designation again – he'd been trying to remember Sherlock's relationship to John, not stumbling on the less common use of the word.

"Sherlock's an unusual name. But he comes from an unusual family." He grinned again, shaking his head. "It's his grandfather's name on his mother's side. They're keen on odd names."

"And your kids? Oh– wait– do you have kids?"

"Nope," John replied.

"'Course, you can't, sorry," Doe said and John made a note of that as well. He still seemed to have a basic grasp of fundamental biological concepts, which was good. That was not a conversation John wanted to have with anyone, let alone an amnesiac stranger in a hospital.

"Well we could have adopted –" He managed to stop himself from including surrogacy because he would almost certainly have to explain that one. "But Sherlock's not at all what anyone would consider parent material."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Does it bother you?" John asked by way of reply.

"I – think so. I don't know. I –" he looked down at his left hand, frowning and flexing his fingers slightly. "There's something about that – like I can feel it in my hand. That doesn't make any sense."

"It might," John said. "Holding another hand, holding a baby. Something like that."

Doe was silent for a long moment.

"Maybe," he agreed. He frowned, then started coughing and John poured him some more water, listening to the congested sound with a sharp ear. The other man managed to get his breathing back
under control and sip some water, slumping back into the pillows wearily.

He sighed, pushing the cup away slightly.

"Are you from London?" he asked.

"Sort of," John replied with a smile. "I grew up on the outskirts – the edges of the city – in an area called Buckhurst Hill. I moved into the city to go to university. Trained at a teaching hospital called St. Bart's. When I enlisted, after I finished school, I served at the veteran's hospital in Birmingham." John paused, waiting to see if he got a reaction to that, but there was none. If Doe had been in the army and injured overseas, it was possible he hadn't been shipped back. Unlikely in John's opinion, due to the nature of his old wound, but still possible.

"Then after I came back from my last tour overseas, I was a patient up there until I was well enough to move back here. Wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world, not for any amount of money."

"I'd like to see it," Doe murmured, turning his face toward the window, over which a heavy blind had been drawn. "What's Manchester like?"

John shrugged lightly.

"Smaller, bit more industrial, but not too different."

"Wouldn't bigger be better?" Doe murmured.

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. More people– wouldn't that be better? It seems like it would be better."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Doe sighed. John nodded, then shrugged his right shoulder.

"Some people like smaller places, fewer people, no crowds."

Doe looked back at him and nodded, but John thought it wasn't really agreement, just something to do. He winced and started coughing again, reaching instinctively for his water. John waited until the fit had passed then refilled the glass. By the time he was done that short task, it was clear his visit was over. Doe was struggling to stay awake so John gave him a smile and shook his head.

"Get some rest," he said. Doe nodded and was almost immediately asleep. John waited a few minutes as he had the night before to make sure the other man's breathing didn't falter again. The situation felt uncomfortably familiar – it had been almost six years but he could still remember too clearly how often Sherlock had fallen asleep without warning – sometimes in the middle of a sentence – following The Crash.

He remembered, too, how enraged and terrified he'd been that Jim Moriarty had orchestrated the whole thing – just to see what would happen. John felt the same sort of anger now. Someone had done this deliberately, had made a point of battering this man so badly he didn't even know his own name.

With a sigh, John gathered up his notebook and jacket and went to see if he could charm one of the nurses into making some photocopies for him.

Crossing the bridge in the other direction, John checked his phone again and was suddenly
concerned that he hadn't heard from Sherlock. He had texted to say he was going to the hospital again and hadn't thought much of it when there had been no reply, but that had been a couple of hours ago. He chewed on his lip, picking up his pace, feeling a subtle guilt settle into his stomach. Maybe he shouldn't have done that – after last night, maybe he should have gone straight home to spend some time with Sherlock.

John fought a mounting sense of anxiety on the tube ride home and hurried up the stairs to their flat. He fully expected Sherlock to be sulking on the couch – his two recent texts had been completely ignored – but instead, the detective was sitting at the kitchen table, engrossed in some experiment. His phone, John noted, had been abandoned on his chair, the tiny message indicator light blinking forlornly.

"Pass the nitric acid," Sherlock said without looking up.

"Please tell me you're not serious."

"Of course I am. Hurry up, John, I don't want this to be ruined."

John sighed and headed into the kitchen, fetching the requested acid carefully from Sherlock's supply cabinet.

"You're home sooner than I expected," the detective commented, accepting the liquid and never once looking up. John watched him, wondering how features that were often pinched into a frown of concentration never actually wrinkled. He wondered if that was an old wives' tail and chuckled to himself as he heard his mother's voice in his head admonishing him – if you aren't careful, your face will get stuck like that.

"It's almost eight," John said. The tube ride had eaten up some time with its standard delays.

"Mm," Sherlock said, clearly not listening to him. John rolled his eyes and checked the fridge for some leftovers, glad he'd had the foresight to make up a few meals over the weekend. Sherlock probably hadn't eaten since breakfast and probably wouldn't even notice.

He settled into his chair and flipped on the telly, finding something fairly mindless to watch while he ate, keeping an ear on Sherlock's work. After a while, Sherlock came into the living room with some stains on his fingers but no obvious burns, and picked up his phone before sitting down.

"Done?" John asked.

"It needs to sit overnight," Sherlock replied and the doctor groaned.

"It's not going to explode in the middle of the night, is it?" he asked in response to the detective's raised eyebrow.

"Of course not," Sherlock sniffed. "At least, it shouldn't." John rolled his eyes and didn't miss when Sherlock deliberately changed the subject. "How is your new friend? Still not himself?"

John sighed, setting his plate aside, and shot Sherlock a look that was completely ignored.

"He's regaining some memory," the doctor snapped and Sherlock just raised both eyebrows in response.

"His name? Where he's from? Whether or not he murdered a man in an art gallery twelve years ago?"
"No," John said sharply then subsided when Sherlock did. He pushed himself to his feet and fetched his notebook from his coat pocket. He'd made some additional notes in it on the way home about the things Doe had remembered the day before and some of his own musings as well. Sherlock took the proffered book and flipped it open, skimming the information John had jotted down.

"Left handed, works with his hands, no inscription on the ring; very good," he murmured.

"What about the feeling he had in his hand when we were talking about children?"

Sherlock shrugged lightly.

"Most people have children, John, it isn't indicative of anything. A man his age – your age – could have adult children by now or very young children. It's not information that will help us locate him. You have no way of knowing what his relationship with his children is, either. If they even exist."

John sighed.

"Is there anything you see there that I don't?" he asked. Sherlock arched his eyebrows at him again, but John held his ground. The detective pinned his gaze for a long moment, then read through the notes again before shaking his head. John felt a stab of disappointment.

"As I said, John, a man with no memory. Oh yes, there are bits and pieces here, but nothing concrete. I could formulate all sorts of hypotheses based on this – or, rather, I could write you several stories. I'd be more accurate than anyone else, but it would still be largely a work of fiction."

"Could you just–"

Sherlock met his eyes squarely.

"No." It wasn't angry or unkind but it was firm. John pursed his lips, catching himself on the verge of insisting.

"Are you never going to let me ask you to take a case again?" he asked.

"Of course not," Sherlock said, looking surprised. "I can hardly imagine each case you find interesting that I don't will turn out like our nursery rhyme killer. Most murderers aren't professional assassins with highly specialized military training, after all. But this? No. There isn't anything here, John."

John waited a moment, then sighed in resignation and took the notebook that Sherlock passed back to him.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly.

---

At least, Sherlock thought, not anything you're liable to like.
He was alone, standing in the middle of a windswept street in Bastion, the blazing summer sun beating down on him. The wind wept as it brushed past him, but John felt nothing.

There was no sound other than the wind. No murmur of voices, no shouted orders, no helicopters landing, no vehicles rumbling past. The camp was empty of sound, empty of movement.

He stood surrounded by bodies. He was the only one left.

He had on his fatigues, his pack strapped to his back, his helmet resting heavily on his head. He could almost feel the red cross patches stitched to his sleeves.

He was supposed to help. He was supposed to be able to do something. He was supposed to prevent death.

But everyone was dead and he was alone.

John's vision swam. He tried to spot some movement, the telltale shift of shoulders or the rise and fall of a chest that meant someone was breathing. He tried to hear a weak plea for help over the forlorn cry of the wind.

There was nothing.

He focused on a Rover across the street from him, realizing with cold shock that he recognized the driver. John ran, avoiding the bodies of people he did not know, and pulled the door open. The creak of the metal was startling in the unnatural stillness.

A sergeant was slumped against the dash, motionless. John pushed him up then took a step back. It was Jamie. His eyes skittered over the mechanic's lifeless form, looking for a bullet wound. He had no idea why he expected one or why he thought it should be in Jamie's neck. His eyes were closed. There were no marks on him.

In the seat behind him, Bill Murray was slumped over, lifeless eyes staring at the upholstery in front of him.

"Hey!" John shouted, turning around, scanning the buildings behind him. "Hey! Anyone! Is anyone there?"

He waited for an answer that did not come.

Forcing himself away from the truck, John stumbled up the street with no real destination in mind. He had to get out of the camp. There would be people outside the base. Somewhere. Another base. Kabul. The rest of the world. London. Home.

He nearly tripped over someone, managing to catch himself at the last moment, looking down. John backed up fast, as if distance could negate what he was seeing. Then he forced himself back; he had to check for a pulse.

"Oh my god," he whispered when fingers against Tricia's neck found nothing. "Oh my god. Tee, come on, wake up. Come on. This isn't really happening."

He glanced up and doubled over; he hadn't noticed the others lying beside her. Henry was laid out
next to her, looking incongruous in his suit amidst the sea of military uniforms.

Josephine was lying between them, small and still.

"Oh, Jesus," John whispered, his stomach clenching. "Oh my god. No, please."

He pressed his palms against the hard ground, setting his jaw, breathing hard. What were they doing here? They weren't supposed to be here. Bastion was no place for a child – why would Henry bring her? Why would he even come?

John lowered his head to rest on the back of his hands, his eyes burning, his breath coming in ragged sobs.

He needed to get out.

Vision blurred, he pushed himself to shaking legs and started to run. The street streaked past and he rounded a corner then stopped dead before collapsing to his knees.

It was utterly deserted except for Sherlock, lying on his back, staring blankly at the sky.

"No," John moaned, shaking his head. "No, no. NO! Sherlock!"

He crawled over, checking futilely for a pulse, noting the blue tinge on Sherlock's lips, the too-pale hue of his skin. Shaking his head frantically, John pulled off his pack and tilted Sherlock's head back with trembling hands. Trying to work calmly, he checked his husband's mouth for obstructions to his airway, then pressed the heels of his hands on Sherlock's sternum and started compressions.

_This'll work_, he told himself. _It will. It has to._

He counted uselessly and Sherlock jerked beneath him with each pulse of John's arms. His face was hot where tears were streaking his cheeks and his eyes were burning.

_No, no, no, no_, he pled.

"Come on!" he yelled unsteadily. "Come on, Sherlock! Come on!"

Sherlock's grey eyes gazed blankly at the empty blue sky above them.


"John."

John jerked so badly he stopped working, eyes frantically searching his husband's face. There was no hint of movement, but it had been his voice.

"Sherlock, Sherlock," John said, checking hurriedly for a pulse, finding none, hands moving to stroke that familiar face, as if contact could bring him back. "Sherlock!"

"John."

He snapped his eyes open with a gasp, startled by the sudden press of darkness surrounding him, by the lack of wind and the sensation of warmth that was focused on his left shoulder. He exhaled sharply, feeling a nauseating sense of dizziness as the world tipped and dove before righting itself so quickly it left him reeling.
"John."

Sherlock's voice.

John twisted his head; he could just make out his husband in the darkness and the warm feeling on his shoulder resolved itself into Sherlock's hand, holding tightly but just this side of being painful.

John blinked, remembering where and when he was, reality reasserting itself over the dream. He sucked in another deep breath, held it, then let it out slowly.

"Nightmare," he murmured. "Sorry."

What he could see of Sherlock's expression shifted from concern to irritation; John knew the detective disliked it when he apologized for his nightmares. Sherlock insisted it was not his fault because he didn't intend to have disturbing dreams. That was true – but he still felt bad when he woke Sherlock. The detective slept little enough as it was.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Sherlock asked and the ghost of a smile tugged at John's lips. Sherlock also disliked listening to John recount his dreams. It didn't bother John; the detective would listen when needed and the doctor didn't like talking about them much.

"No," John sighed. He rubbed his face, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes, then dropped his hands away. He rolled onto his side, dislodging Sherlock's hold on his shoulder, and felt an arm settle around his waist.

He didn't want to relive it anyway. He knew why he'd dreamt it. He'd been alone before, hospitalized, removed from his life, isolated. But not like the John Doe at St. Thomas'. Nothing near that bad. Because at least he'd always had himself.

With long practiced effort, he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

The rest was short lived; John blinked himself awake again and sighed when he saw he'd managed less than another hour. He was still caught in Sherlock's arms, curled against his husband's chest, feeling the faint thump-thump... thump-thump... of a steady heartbeat against his cheek. With his arm around Sherlock's waist, he could count the deep, slow breaths in and out, and feel the tickle of air on his skin when Sherlock exhaled.

John lay still for awhile in the peaceful silence, waiting for sleep, knowing it wouldn't come. He had work in the morning and he knew it was going to be a long day thanks to the nightmare and the restlessness it left in its wake. He sighed to himself, tracing absent patterns on Sherlock's back, then sighed again, this time with more resolve.

"I need to get up, Sherlock," he whispered, raising his head just enough so that his voice would be audible, not lost in the thin cotton that separated Sherlock's skin from his own.

There was a corresponding murmur – half protest, half acquiescence – before Sherlock released John. He rolled onto his back, his head flopping to the side, one arm outstretched so that his hand lolled over the edge of the mattress, his other hand resting on his stomach. John waited to see if he'd wake up, but he didn't – he never did, not when John asked him to move in the middle of the night.

John eased himself out of bed and shivered slightly in the cold night air, shuffling around for a discarded sweatshirt and some socks. As he headed from the room, Sherlock made another noise and John glanced back, seeing the fingers on the detective's dangling hand flex and release lightly. He reached out, running his own fingers over Sherlock's palm.
"It's all right," he murmured.

"Hmm," Sherlock replied, curling onto his left side and withdrawing his hand to tuck it under his pillow. John smiled slightly and padded out of the bedroom, leaving the door ajar behind him. He went into the living room, took the afghan from the couch and settled it around his shoulders before curling into his chair. Faint street light from outside was just enough to see by. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, listening to the silence.

He remembered how strange the lack of noise had been when he'd first returned to England. He could remember having longed for it until he had it – and then it had enveloped him in its isolation. He'd never realized how suffocating silence could be until there was no other alternative but to endure it, minute after minute, day after day.

And then, Sherlock. John opened his eyes again and raised his head, letting his gaze sweep over the darkened flat. It had been almost eight years since he'd moved to Baker Street, but he could still remember those first few days as though they'd just happened. Despite the late hour and the stillness, John could almost hear the bustle and voices as police officers tore the flat apart, looking for drugs that may not even have been there. To this day, he still wasn't sure there'd been anything stronger than Mrs. Hudson's 'herbal soothers'. He could remember that first mad case, the realization that Sherlock had left with the murderer, the frantic attempt to contact Lestrade and to track Sherlock down at the same time, the desperate shot through two windows to save him from his own boredom and stupidity.

Eight years.

John thought of the notes Sherlock had left scattered about the day before their anniversary, all the memories they contained. It opened a flood – things Sherlock hadn't written down, good and bad. His expression seeing John step out of the cubicle at The Pool. The look of concentration on his face when he'd put John's wedding ring on his hand for the first time – here in the flat, to see if it fit. Holding him the darkness the first time he'd cried over his mother's death. Being held after Harry had died. The look of bliss on his face the first time John had stumbled on the thumb-on-the-back-of-the-head trick. The way he'd taught John's body to trust him their first night together as partners. The way John had instinctively trusted him from the first moment they'd met. Years of smiles, unexpected laughter, hugs, stolen kisses, simple touches.

He had it all, stored in memories – and he knew Sherlock did, too. John couldn't imagine not having it. Not never having met Sherlock, but losing the memories. He couldn't imagine waking up one day without any concept of who he was, where he was, what his past was.

Just the idea was terrible. But he knew, he knew, that if it had ever happened to him, Sherlock would have been there every step of the way, coaxing him back, making John fall in love with him all over again even if the memories had never returned.

Where were the people looking for John Doe? Was there someone somewhere who was frantically trying to find him, coming up against walls because no one with his name had been reported in any hospitals? Or was he as alone as he seemed?

A faint creak of floorboards told John he was no longer alone and he looked up to see Sherlock's pale form stepping into the darkness and shadows in the living room. He crossed the floor almost silently and knelt down in front of John. The barest smile tugged at the doctor's lips – no matter what, that action caused some reaction, even if the flicker of desire dulled before it really formed.

John spread his legs and Sherlock settled between his knees, resting his hands lightly on the doctor's thighs. John smiled again, reaching out to run his fingers through the dark, messy curls, then slid his
hand down to cover Sherlock's. Sherlock twisted his wrist so he could grasp John's hand and raised it to his mouth, pressing a kiss into his palm. There was nothing suggestive about the lingering lips against his skin, only reassuring.

"I dreamt I was at Bastion and you were dead," John heard himself say. Sherlock nodded but stayed silent and John was grateful – he didn't want any vapid platitudes or obvious reassurances. He knew Sherlock was not dead, just as much as he knew that either of them could die unexpectedly. He was a former army surgeon. He knew how quickly things could change.

Two months ago, they'd had a painful conversation about updating their wills and end-of-life care that John never wanted to repeat. He knew it was necessary but thinking of it now made him feel worse. If he couldn't imagine life without meeting Sherlock, he could certainly not imagine life if he lost Sherlock.

What had the detective said to him all those years ago? *Not much cop, this caring lark.* A bitter smile touched John's lips; Sherlock had obviously changed his tune when it came to his personal life but not with the cases. He still saw them as puzzles to be solved that just happened to involve the complication of human beings – all of whom could be reduced to their actions and motivations.

"I want to help him," John said.

"Then help him," Sherlock replied.

"I'm not you," John said. He knew he was half-asking Sherlock to take the case and wanted to retract his words – for the second time in less than a day. He shut his eyes, feeling stupid all over again.

*Brilliant, John. Remind him that his mum is dead and then remind him of the case you made him take that nearly destroyed him. If there was an award for spouses saying idiot things, you'd win hands down,* he told himself angrily.

"I am not made of glass," Sherlock said and John opened his eyes again. "And no, you are not me."

John sighed, looking away, pursing his lips.

"You've known me for eight years, John. You know my methods, how I work."

John nodded and felt Sherlock's gaze drawing his own back. He sighed and met the detective's pale eyes in the darkness.

"Still..."

"Still, you are not me," Sherlock agreed. He pressed another kiss into John's palm and interlaced their fingers, a faint smile touching his lips. "I will deny saying this if you repeat it, but he does not need me, John. He needs you."
"Sherlock's run off to chase down some clue then, has he?"

John looked up to see Sally Donovan walking toward him, her dark eyes flickering from the view of Doe's hospital room to meet his gaze.

"No," John sighed. "He's not working this case. You know that."

"Then why are you here? My constables tell me you've been here every night this week."

"Yeah," John said. "I just thought he'd like some company."

"You're making friends with a man with no memory?"

John pursed his lips, giving her a tight little smile.

"Found out who he is yet?"

"We're looking!" Donovan snapped back. She pursed her lips, suddenly looking tired. "He's like a ghost."

John glanced at the sleeping figure; he'd been much more tired today, complaining of a headache, leaving John to carry most of the conversation.

"We can't find anyone looking for him and he doesn't know anything about himself."

"He knows more than you think he does," John replied. Donovan shot him a sharp, mistrustful look and he shook his head hastily. "I don't mean that – he's not lying to you or anything. Just – if you took the time to really talk to him, you'd see."

"John, I don't have time to really talk to him," Donovan sighed. "He's not my only case."

"I know." He hesitated, debating with himself for a second but withdrew his notebook from his pocket and passed it to her. "Have a look at that."

Donovan skimmed the pages quickly, her frown deepening. When she was finished, she read it again.

"This is good," she admitted. "Nothing we can use to ID him but still… very good. I thought– well, I don't know much about how amnesia works."

"The brain is complex," John said. "But these are all good signs, Sergeant–" She shot him a look.

"Sorry, Inspector," he corrected when she shot him a look. Donovan's lips twitched into a small smile and John relaxed.

"Can I keep this?" she asked.

"You can make photocopies," John said. Donovan looked as though she were about to argue but relented, nodding instead. She gave the notebook to the constable guarding the door and sent him off, assuring him she'd stand watch until he returned.

"Have you put him on the news yet?" John asked. "He hasn't said anything about it, but I don't know if you would have told him."
"Yes, of course we would," she said. "But no, we haven't."

"Why not?"

Donovan sighed, crossing her arms.

"First off, have you seen him?"

"Yeah, okay, but you should be able to get a sketch artist to do a decent job now that he's not all bruises and bandages."

"It's not that," Donovan said. "You had it with the bruises and bandages. Someone did that to him, John. That kind of thing doesn't just happen by accident – someone wanted him hurt."

"A mugging gone bad? He didn't have a wallet or phone."

"Could be. Could be personal, too. I don't really want to start advertising the fact that he's here."

"You have a constable on guard already."

"I do," Donovan agreed. "And if I put him at risk, I need to be sure it's my only option. Secondly, you have no idea how many false leads a tip line gets. Given that it might only endanger him for no good reason, I'm not ready to waste dozens of man hours chasing down dead ends. We're still going through missing person's reports in the UK and looking through CCTV footage for the day he came in. I'm not –" She hesitated, then shook her head. "I don't want to muck it up, not if it means someone coming back for him."

"What about if someone's looking for him?"

"You say that like I don't think it a hundred times a day," Donovan said, a slight edge in her voice. "I know it's the holidays and I know someone's probably out there wondering where he is. I'm not trying to be cruel, John."

John nodded.

"No, I know. Sorry."

"I need to keep him safe just as much as I need to find out who he is."

The constable returned with the photocopies for Donovan, who accepted them with a murmured thanks.

"You've got much more out of him than we have," she said.

"I have time for it."

Donovan gave a distracted nod, focused on the notes. When she looked up, her expression had softened from the strained patience he was used to into something approaching warmth.

"You're a good man, John," she said. Coming from her, the compliment was so unexpected it struck him into momentary silence and he cleared his throat to cover his shock.

"I try to be."

"A lot of people don't try at all," Donovan sighed. "How many other people would take the time to visit a complete stranger in the hospital – especially one with amnesia? Can't be easy to talk to him."
"It's not that hard," John countered. "I just talk. He asks me questions, I asks him some. He's not a stupid man, Sally. He wants to know things."

"So do I," Donovan murmured, half to herself.

"I'd be lonely, if it were me," John said.

Donovan's lips twitched into a full-fledged, if brief, smile.

"John, if it were you, Sherlock would have found you within about five minutes."

Despite himself, John grinned.

"That's true."

"I have absolutely no worries about you ever disappearing," she said offhandedly.

"What? You've thought about that?"

"You're married to Sherlock Holmes, of course I've thought about that. It's something I'd prefer to avoid – I don't need the city going up in flames."

It was probably the closest thing to an admission of respect for Sherlock's abilities that John was ever likely to hear from Sally Donovan. He entertained the idea of telling Sherlock but the detective wouldn't care – from almost anyone else, he would have been secretly pleased. Not with her.

"Don't get all doe-eyed," she warned. "Not having him around makes my job a hell of a lot easier."

"I'd have said solving cases for you makes your job easier."

"I didn't say he doesn't get results," Donovan replied. "Thanks for this. Do you mind sending me anything else you might get?"

John hesitated, then nodded.

"I don't mind," he answered.

"Thanks," Donovan said.

They said their goodbyes and John headed for the lift, thoughts of home nudging for his attention, debating a cab versus the tube. Each visit with Doe only seemed to reinforce what home meant – the chaos, the mess, the warmth, the companionship, the security of knowing where he belonged and who he belonged with.

"John?"

John paused and turned back, meeting Donovan's waiting gaze again.

"Like I said, you're a good man. You tend to see that same good in people. But – not everyone is good."

"What?"

"I've seen a lot of victims in my time, John. Something like that – yeah, you're right, could have just been a vicious mugging, could have been just a random attack. But it could be someone thinks he deserves it."
"You can't pin a twelve year old murder on him just because his fingerprint might partially match one found at the scene, even if you're desperate for leads. It's not even circumstantial."

"Doesn't mean he didn't do it," Donovan replied.

"When did you become so suspicious, Inspector?"

"When did you become to trusting?" she asked in return.


"Yeah well, you picked a strange person to pin your trust on. I'm a cop, John. I know enough to be realistic."

"Seems like a sad way to live."

"Not if it helps me catch the bad guys."

John sighed, shrugging slightly.

"Good night, Sally."

"Oh, good, you're home. So nice of you to join us."

John heard the taut edge in Sherlock's voice and found the source immediately – Mycroft was sitting in the doctor's chair, his relaxed and amiable expression in stark contrast to the tight tension on Sherlock's face. John wondered how long his brother-in-law had been there – it could have been anywhere from an hour to a few minutes. Sherlock's reaction to his brother was pretty much the same no matter the length of time.

He closed the door and saw Sherlock's nostrils flare – clearly his husband had been hoping the open door would be a signal for Mycroft to leave. He removed his coat and scarf, eyes flickering to the Christmas tree that had been set up in the corner next to one of the bookshelves.

"A bribe," Sherlock said and John's eyes moved back to him.

Mycroft sighed.

"A gift," he countered. "I thought you might appreciate one less chore to do, John."

"Thanks," John said, settling on the arm of Sherlock's chair. The detective snaked an arm around his waist, resting his left hand on John's hip in a gesture that was both possessive and defensive, claiming John as his and asserting that John would take his side no matter what. This was generally true, especially with Mycroft, but the doctor at least wanted to get some idea of what was going on.

"Are you planning on retiring then? Buying a small cottage in the country and keeping bees?" Mycroft asked and John felt Sherlock stiffen. "Turning down a case for Inspector Lestrade and then this one? You have no cases from your website, Sherlock. Things must be getting a bit... dull."

"I'm quite capable of entertaining myself," Sherlock snapped and John rolled his eyes, aware that Mycroft had noted it.

"Ah, so it's work at the morgue."

"Your case is boring and trivial, Mycroft. You're well aware that I'm not busy but I'm not going to
leap at the first thing you dangle in front of me simply because you think I'm bored. I'm not some child excited by shiny things."

Mycroft raised his eyebrows and John repressed a sigh. Following the explosion, they'd actually got on reasonably well for a few months – but John had suspected it wouldn't last. The immediate impact of Sibyl's death and the attempt on Mycroft's life had lessened and Sherlock, at least, wouldn't feel the same sort of urgency for his brother's company.

"It's a delicate matter, Sherlock. I have a… colleague who would appreciate both your efforts and discretion."

"A significant pause colleague?" Sherlock asked. "What would Angela make of that, I wonder?"

"I imagine she is capable of determining when someone is reading far too much into a statement," Mycroft snapped back. John was surprised at the sudden defensiveness in his brother-in-law's voice. Judging by the way Sherlock's hand stiffened slightly on John's hip, he was, too. John drew a deep breath and wondered how often Sherlock was going to make pointed remarks about Angela in Mycroft's presence now. He reached down and interlaced their fingers, squeezing lightly, silently asking for calm. He knew Sherlock liked Angela – if 'liked' was the right word – but he also knew Sherlock wouldn't pass up any opportunity to get under Mycroft's skin.

"Right," John said before Sherlock could reply – he could see the snarky remarks lining up on the detective's tongue. "Both of you can stop acting like three year olds right now."

He felt the full weight of the Holmes' brothers gazes on him.

"Mycroft, if Sherlock doesn't want to take your case, too bad for you. Sherlock– just– enough."

Sherlock dropped his hand from John's hip but didn't withdraw his arm and John took it as a good indicator that he wasn't going to be in for one of Sherlock's massive sulks later.

Silence settled over them again for too long a moment and John resisted the urge to shift, knowing it would be interpreted as discomfort. He held his tongue through long years of training – both military and personal – and Mycroft finally nodded.

"Very well," he agreed. "But do call if you change your mind."

Sherlock only grunted noncommittally. John sighed inwardly, pushing himself to his feet as his brother-in-law rose. There was a moment where John waited to see if Mycroft would find his balance properly and he knew it had been noted, although the elder Holmes showed not outward reaction. He was probably tired of John checking but never deigned to comment. His limp was less noticeable now but it had been long enough that if Mycroft were going to recover completely by now, he'd have already done so. It was the only visible sign of the injuries he'd sustained in the bomb blast in August, but John also knew the ringing in his ears had never abated.

"So good of you to stop by," Sherlock drawled and ignored the glare John shot him. "Please don't hesitate not to do so again."

"Sherlock," John sighed. "Good night, Mycroft. Thank you for the tree."

"You're quite welcome, John," his brother-in-law replied as he slipped into his coat. "It's always nice to have a bit of a festive feeling in the air, isn't it?"

"It is," John agreed, holding the door open for Mycroft, who gave him a thin smile of thanks. He was pushing it closed when Mycroft glanced back from the top of the stairs, a familiar knowing look on
his face.

"Do let me know when you need help with your non-person," he said. John could only manage an abrupt, startled sigh.

"The police have it all in hand," he said.

"Oh yes," Mycroft replied. "I'm quite confident they do."

"Good night, Mycroft," John said and shut the door firmly.
"Coffee at this hour?"

Donovan looked up with a wan smile, raising her take away cup slightly in greeting. Lestrade bundled his hands into his pockets and sat down on the bench next to her.

"I'll be up all night anyway," she pointed out.

"You do have an office, you know. Inside the Yard. It's nice and warm in there."

She chuckled wryly, sipping her drink.

"I've got the coffee. And I needed a bit of air. I thought maybe it would help the thoughts chasing themselves around in my head."

"Has it?"

"Nope."

Donovan sighed, taking another sip of her coffee, then rested her arms on her knees, staring at the small, nearly empty courtyard. She wondered if it was hard for Lestrade to be here; even though there was only one other person out there with them, huddled in the lee of the building, she could still smell the faint scent of cigarette smoke. She generally avoided the place because of it, but it was private – as private as anywhere in the Yard could be, anyway.

"You know when you have to do something and you really don't want to? When there are a thousand good reasons not to do it but one reason to that blows them all out of the water?"

"I know," Lestrade replied.

"We can't find him, Greg. He might as well be invisible. Some days, I wonder if we're just all imagining him – maybe something in the water. If we went outside of London, maybe we'd forget about him."

"Oh, he's real enough," Lestrade said.

"Especially if that's his fingerprint from twelve years ago."

"Especially then."

She sighed, chewing on her lower lip, then turned to look at him.

"What if we're just chasing ghosts? What if it is a coincidence?"

Lestrade shrugged.

"That's our job."

"True," she murmured.

"But you're not thinking of charging him with a twelve year old murder. If you had any evidence, you'd have told me first. And you wouldn't be sitting here mulling over it if you had something concrete."
"I wouldn't," Donovan agreed. She sighed again, breath hanging in front of her face, a tiny white cloud that vanished slowly. "God, Greg, whoever did this to him – I don't want them coming back for him. All it would take is a phone call pretending to be a panicked family member."

"And you won't let anyone in there without at least one constable."

"I won't. Still..."

"Still," Lestrade echoed.

"It's almost Christmas."

"Are you hoping for a miracle?"

"I'm a cop; I'm always hoping for a miracle." She gave him a sardonic smile. "And knowing I won't get one."

Lestrade gave a dry laugh.

"You never know your luck."

"Oh, believe me, I know mine."

"You're a good cop, Sally. A good DI. I know you're worried. I think you've waited long enough. It's up to you."

"That's the rub," she sighed. "Why didn't you warn me that being the boss was like this?"

"I did. Repeatedly."

She smiled and took another sip of her coffee, enjoying the contrast of the warm liquid against the cold air.

"We spend so much time with names and no victim to go along with them. Now we have the victim but not the name. Forty-eight hours... I thought by then someone would have reported him missing."

"Does the most crucial time apply when you've got the person?"

"Looks like it doesn't."

She sighed again, shaking her head.

"It's going to be a mess."

"It always is."

Donovan bit her lower lip, nodding, looking away again. At least it would be her mess. Her decision, her terms. Her people would do what was needed and Scotland Yard could foot the bill for all of the overtime.

It might be worth it, if they got anything off the tips.

"I'll call the BBC in the morning," she said. "And send a sketch artist over to St. Tom's. Get the phone lines all sorted tonight."

"And then you'll go home and get some sleep," Lestrade said. Donovan looked back at him and
raised her eyebrows.

"I might go home," she conceded. "But I won't sleep."

"Should I be jealous?" Sherlock enquired without looking up from his book as John walked through the door.

"Jealous?" John asked.

"Home late every night this week," his husband murmured in reply, flipping a page. "Visiting a stranger in the hospital? Or are you having an affair with your secretary?"

John grinned.

"Don't have a secretary," he pointed out.

"You have a receptionist."

"The surgery has a receptionist. Not the same as a personal secretary."

"Hmm, that could be a problem, then," Sherlock sighed, tapping his book absently, still not looking up. "One of the nurses at St. Thomas' perhaps? It's not Sandra, is it?"

"First, that was years ago," John countered, taking off his jacket. He saw Sherlock's lips twitch upward. "Second, she works at St. Mary's and you know that. Third, she's not the only nurse in the NHS."

"Yes, but she's the only one who isn't rubbish."

John rolled his eyes as he hung his coat and scarf and turned back to Sherlock, who still hadn't moved.

"Since you would know before I did if I was having an affair, I don't think you should be too worried about it."

"Too worried? Perhaps just a bit worried?"

"Somehow I think it only crosses your mind when you want to tease me about it."

"I don't 'tease', John," Sherlock sniffed.

"Like how you don't guess?"

"Precisely."

"Since you would know before I did if I was having an affair, I don't think you should be too worried about it."

"You've been there every night this week. I did just point that out."

"Yep, and I remember being there every night this week. And then I remember coming home to you every night this week, too."

"Ah, you so you admit it," Sherlock said, finally looking up, grey eyes dancing.

"I admit to being there, yes."
"Has he told you anything?"

"If you mean 'has he suddenly remembered who he is and where he's from and what his favourite colour is?' then no."

Sherlock wrinkled his nose and John smiled at the expression, heading into the kitchen to fetch himself a beer then returning to the living room to settle into his chair.

"I'm very concerned," Sherlock drawled in a tone that completely belied his words. "What if he finds himself attracted to you?"

"Oh, well, then I'll leave you at the first sign," John said. "For a man who doesn't remember anything about himself and who is – odds are – straight."

"Well he can't remember anything," Sherlock reiterated. "Perhaps he's forgotten that, too."

"Yeah, I don't think that's something you can really forget."

"You did."

"No, you just convinced me otherwise."

Sherlock grinned. John rolled his eyes and took a swig of his beer before sighing and relaxing into his chair.

"I see you did absolutely nothing with the tree," he commented.

"Very observant of you, John. We'll make a consulting detective out of you yet."

"Then you wouldn't be the only one in the world."

"Mm, good point," Sherlock said, frowning. "Best not, then. Can't do with the competition."

John grinned and shook his head, glancing at the tree again. He'd left the box of ornaments next to it, but it was really no surprise that Sherlock hadn't decorated it. At least he hadn't decided to throw the tree out or burn it down – John wasn't sure how well a gift from Mycroft would last in their flat.

"I did consider it, believe me," Sherlock said and John rolled his eyes, wondering what had given him away. "I thought you might not like having to buy a new one."

"Of course it wouldn't occur to you to buy one yourself if you got rid of this one."

"Couldn't. Busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"Busy being busy."

"Right," John said, pushing himself back to his feet. "I'm going to reheat something for my tea. There's not going to be a head in the fridge, is there?"

"Probably not."

"What do you want?" John called from the kitchen, pulling open the thankfully head-free fridge and skimming the shelves with his eyes.
"Not hungry!"

"Suit yourself," he muttered, pulling out a container of casserole and dumping it onto a plate. He thought the smell might entice Sherlock – or make him try to steal John's food – but the detective ignored it. Instead, he turned on the television, flipping through the channels and muttering under his breath about the lack of crap telly at this hour. He finally settled on a German program so he could complain to John about the inaccuracies in the subtitle translations. John rolled his eyes but listened, resisting the urge to flick a bit of pasta at his husband.

"I'm going to decorate the tree. I need your help."

"It's really a one person job," Sherlock pointed out. John tapped his fork against his empty plate, arching an eyebrow.

"It is not, and I need your help with the lights anyway. You're the freakishly tall one."

"Oh, yes, thank you," Sherlock said, rolling his eyes. "That will certainly help persuade me, won't it? It's hardly my fault you're a tiny person."

"I'm not tiny, I'm short," John said. "And that's not my fault, either. Genetics."

"Well then," Sherlock sniffed. "You can't mock my height."

"I wasn't mocking you, I just said you were freakishly tall."

Sherlock shot him a dark look and John chuckled.

"Remind me again why I put up with you?"

"Because no one else will put up with you?" John suggested. "Also, you love me madly and to pieces and your life would be dull and meaningless without me."

Sherlock sighed, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"All right, fine. But you're not allowed to tell anyone."

"Everyone knows it anyway," John said with a grin and Sherlock rolled his eyes again. The doctor went back into the kitchen to put his plate in the sink and he heard Sherlock changing the channel to the BBC, which was something John could understand, at least.

"Really?" John sighed, coming back into the living room. "Isn't there a Doctor Who Christmas special or something else we could watch instead?"

"No," Sherlock sniffed as Crimewatch logo was splashed across the screen. "Feel free to ignore it if you want."

"It's not very festive," John pointed out.

"It's informative. Lestrade doesn't always see fit to notify me of cases that require my attention."

"I wonder why not?" John muttered, not quite under his breath. Sherlock affected his "listening to you is beneath me" attitude but set to work on the lights, at least until he determined the winding strands were low enough for John to finish, at which point he abandoned his work and wandered into the kitchen. John let him go – he did this every year and would eventually come back to lend his haphazard help. For Sherlock, 'helping' meant putting in an appearance more than it did actual assistance.
"Don't change the channel!" Sherlock called as soon as John started to reach for the remote. The doctor sighed and went back to work, finishing the lights and starting on the ornaments. As he had predicted, Sherlock came back and made a cursory contribution by hanging a handful of decorations near the top of the tree.

"Hmm," he commented, looking past John's shoulder. "It's your friend."

"What?" John asked and the detective pointed a long finger at the television. John turned, a glass ornament still in hand, and stared at the screen. The host was asking for assistance on behalf of the police identifying the man in the sketch, instructing anyone with information to call the number being provided. John stared at it, surprised.

"Donovan said they weren't going to do that," he commented, feeling half a protest in his words.

"Clearly she's changed her mind."

John nodded slowly, frowning. What had she said to him the day before? That they'd spend time chasing down false leads and dead ends, that it would be a lot of work for uncertain results. He caught his lip between his teeth, aware that Sherlock was watching him.

Mycroft had offered his help last night.

John wondered if Donovan would want it – or if she'd even have time to be bothered with it. He wondered if the offer even extended to the police.

Right, he said to himself. He stared at the screen, thinking hard, then nodded once, decided.

Mycroft's secretary was not there yet but Anthea was, sitting on a couch in the anteroom outside of Mycroft's office, on her mobile as always. She didn't so much as blink when John came in and shut the door behind him with a deliberate click.

"That will give you eyestrain, you know," he said. It wasn't true, but he especially enjoyed the way it took her a full five seconds to look startled and glance up. At least now she recognized him – that had only taken three years. Part of John kept waiting for her to just forget who he was.

"Sorry?" she asked.

"Nothing," John replied with a grin and knocked on Mycroft's office door. He heard a muffled invitation and stepped inside. Mycroft smiled at him and gestured with an open palm to the chairs in front of his desk. He didn't get up, but this no longer struck John as unusual.

"Hello, Mycroft," John said, pitching his voice a bit louder. Mycroft nodded in return.

"Good morning, John. And what can I do for my brother today?"

"Uh, nothing, actually," John replied and saw the slight flash of realization flicker through Mycroft's eyes, followed by an expression of smug satisfaction that made John repress an inward sigh.

"So you've come for yourself? Or should I say, for our mystery man in the hospital? A strange case, isn't it? A man with no memory who has not been reported missing and whose fingerprint may have been present at a murder scene twelve years ago, a crime which has gone unsolved all this time… I would have expected Sherlock to enjoy this case. Still, one can never tell with him."

"No," John agreed. "What do you know about it?"
Mycroft gave him one of those infuriating superior smiles and leaned back in his chair, regarding John levelly for a moment.

"Nothing," he said simply. "Oh, quite right, I'm certain you don't believe me, but I can hardly involve myself in all of the little mysteries that make up London."

"What about the ones that make up Sherlock's cases?"

"It's not his case," Mycroft replied. John sighed again, this time not bothering to hide it. "I see you've taken quite a personal interest in it, though. Does it strike a chord with you, I wonder?"

"I don't think you wonder about much of anything, Mycroft," John said wearily.

Mycroft's lips curled upward in a smile that came nowhere close to his eyes.

"Not for very long at any rate," he agreed. "And what would you have me do about it, John? That is why you're here, I presume?"

"Yeah," John admitted. "Did you see the photo the police ran on Crimewatch last night?"

"I'm not as dedicated to that programme as my brother is, but I am aware that Inspector Donovan made an appeal the public for information, yes."

"I want it," John said bluntly.

"What, the information?"

"Yes. The results from the tips line, Mycroft. All of it – all the good stuff I mean. I want whatever they got that led anywhere. And," he took a deep breath, deciding to out on a limb, "I want access to the police files from the murder twelve years ago."

Mycroft twitched an eyebrow up.

"You have great faith in my abilities to produce information on demand," he commented lightly.

"Yeah, I do. And it's probably nowhere near strong enough."

Mycroft was silent for a moment that was just shy of being too long, then gave John a bright smile that did reach his grey eyes this time, making them gleam.

"Quite right," he agreed. He gave John another long, evaluating look that John held out against as best he could. "Very well, John. I won't say I will see what I can do, because we both know what I can do. Anthea will have the information delivered to your flat. Do try to convince Sherlock not to just dismiss her without accepting the files."

"I will," John assured him and Mycroft raised both eyebrows this time.

"Impressive," he murmured. "Sometimes, John, I envy your ability to get through to my brother so easily."

_Easily?_ John thought, but kept that to himself.

"Still, if I consider everything else I can do with relatively ease... perhaps I wouldn't be so hasty to make the trade for that particular skill."

"I know I wouldn't trade you," John replied. He wondered what Mycroft thought of that, if he
judged it smart or stupid.

"No," his brother-in-law agreed as John rose to leave. "I don't believe you ever would."
Mycroft had made good on his word. John was armed with information on all the tips that had panned out so far, as well as a very accurate copy of the sketch the police had aired. He wondered what Donovan would say if she knew; she'd probably be livid but, to his surprise, he wasn't really bothered. He remembered full well what she'd said about overstretched resources and the number of leads they would have to follow up on. He doubted they'd yet been able to investigate this handful as thoroughly as they'd like.

And they were police, when it came down to it. People were always more reluctant to talk to the police than they were just another bloke. He'd learned that in his eight years working with Sherlock – just as he'd learned how to read people well enough to know how to approach the questions. He'd never been Sherlock Holmes but he was getting to be a decent hand at it himself.

He was currently in a pub on a small street just off of Camberwell Road in Southwark, nursing a beer, a small pile of shopping bags resting on the seat beside him. The pub was dim and cosy and someone had taken some pains to decorate it with red and gold garlands. He was still debating how to do so when the server came with his fish and chips. The smell of greasy, deep fried food was a welcome one after the chilly air outside and he smiled.

"Thanks."

"Anything else I can get you?" she asked, giving him a smile in return.

"Actually, maybe there's something you can help me with," John said as if he'd just thought about it. The woman – no older than her mid-twenties if he was any judge – frowned slightly when he pulled out his phone. John called up the picture and handed it to her, watching her expression shift from reluctant to quizzical – she'd thought he was going to ask for her number, he suspected, despite the ring on his finger.

"I was wondering if you know him."

"You with the police?" she asked, eyes still on the screen.

"Sort of," John replied. She glanced up then back down, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

"Only they were in here yesterday asking about him – at least I think it was him. I wasn't working, but one of the other girls told me."

"Do you know him?"

The server cast a quick look over her shoulder. The pub was sparsely populated at this time of day – there were two women in a corner booth having an animated but hushed discussion over hot drinks and a man in his thirties at a small table on a laptop.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked. John waved a hand invitation and the woman slid into the booth across from him, pushing his phone back toward him. John pulled out his ever-present notebook and she eyed it warily.

"I just need to jot down notes so I don't forget," he said, then gave her a disarming smile and tapped his temple with the end of his pen. "Not as sharp as I used to be."

At this, she relaxed, her features settling into a smile again.
"He comes in here sometimes – at least he used to. Haven't seen him in two or three weeks."

John nodded, making a note of that.

"Do you know his name?"

The young woman shrugged, then shook her head.

"He always paid with cash, so I never saw his card, if that's what you're asking. He told me once his name was Liam, but that was it, no last name or anything."

"Liam?" John asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah – I mean, I don't know if it's true, but why would you lie about that?"

John shook his head, swallowing on his flash of shock. The information he'd received from Mycroft didn't have any names in it – John had been surprised by that at first, but when he'd begun to read through it more carefully, it became apparent that everyone who had seen Doe knew him only in passing, only by sight. He made a note of the new name, circling it, wondering. Was it Doe's real name? If it wasn't, why would he lie?

"He came in sometimes for quiz night," the waitress said.

"Did he play?"

"No, he always seemed happy just to watch. He always kept to himself, y'know, not in a sad way or anything, just like this was his time alone. Never had too much to drink – I think the most he ever had in one night was three – I remember that because he gave me a really good tip. We'd always chat, but nothing important. The weather, football."

"Do you know if he watched football?"

"He said he supported Manchester United. That's all I know."

John wrote that down, too.

"Ever say anything about his family, where he worked? Wife, kids, anything like that?"

"Nope. Sometimes he'd come in wearing work clothes – hard hat, work boots, gloves, that kind of thing. Looked like road work, construction, something like that. He never said anything about it, though."

"What did he do when he was here?"

"Not much," she replied, shrugging. "Watched the quizzes, like I said. Sometime he'd read, other times he'd just sit and have his drink."

"Read what? Books? Newspaper?"

"I dunno, he used his phone," the woman replied and John made a quick note of that. "I never asked. He was quiet, never gave us any problems. Just another regular."

"Did he always sit in the same place?"

"Yeah, unless it was taken. Just over there." She pointed to a small booth behind them that was built for two people.
"I know it's a strange question, but which seat?"

She gave him a puzzled look but gestured with her left hand.

"The one on the left. My left."

John nodded and wrote that down.

"Another odd one: do you remember which hand he held his glass in?"

The waitress stared at him a moment before realization flashed across her features. She bit her lip, eyes darting away as she thought, and John watched her twitch her hands slightly, as if trying to use the movement to pin down the memory.

"Left," she said decisively. John wrote that down as well, relieved to know his initial impression had been correct.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" he asked. "Anything at all?"

"Um..." she chewed on her lower lip, brown eyes dropping to the table surface for a moment, then she glanced up again, looking past John at the wall. Her eyes lit up with recollection and John waited, not wanting to push too hard.

"There was one thing... It can't have been too long after he started coming here, so I don't know, late September? We used to have this painting on the wall, it was for sale. Right over there. Someone bought it a couple of weeks ago." She pointed behind him and John twisted, unable to make out any discolouration on the walls that would indicate where a painting had been.

"What was it of?" he asked.

The server pressed fingers against her forehead, then raked them through her short brown hair, frowning in concentration.

"Some landscape – Wales, maybe? The Highlands? I can't remember – something with mountains, I know that. In the summer, all greens and greys. Really pretty."

"What did he say about it?"

"I asked him what he thought of it and he was quiet for a moment, almost like he didn't hear me, y'know? Then he asked me how I thought they did it."

"What?"

"That's what I asked. He said something like 'how do they make such beautiful things in a world like this?'. I thought it was really sad. I asked him if he knew anything about art and he laughed and said he'd seen some but that was all."

"Anything else?"

"No, that was it." She glanced over her shoulder again to make sure the other patrons were still satisfied, then turned back to John. "Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," John said. "Thank you, that helps." She looked doubtful and he smiled. "Every little bit does, trust me. I didn't know his name when I came in here."

"Well I hope he's all right."
John nodded and tore a page of his notebook, scrawling his name and mobile number on it.

"Listen, if you think of anything else – or if anyone you works with knows something you might not – give me a call. We could always use the information."

"I will," she promised. John gave her his warmest smile and saw her lips twitch upwards in return.

"Thanks," he said. "I appreciate it."

Sherlock was nowhere to be found when John got home, so he dug out one of the maps of London he always kept on hand for the detective. He spread it out on the desk and found the files Mycroft had sent over that morning with the valid sightings. John circled all of them, putting a little star next to the pub where he'd learned Doe's name.

Most of them were in Southwark. John frowned at the map, circling St. Thomas' Hospital as well – it was close, but he knew from experience that it wasn't directly serviced with a tube station. And if he'd managed to get to the hospital on the tube, someone would have noticed. John was familiar with the indifference of Underground riders, but there was no way that would have passed completely unremarked.

He sighed, tapping the pen against the map.

There was one other place where Doe had been reported with some certainty, a shop in Mayfair. John frowned, sitting forward. What had Lestrade said about where they'd found the body? An art gallery in Mayfair. He tried to recall if the DI had mentioned the name but couldn't.

John fetched his laptop and checked for art galleries in Mayfair – then sighed. There were dozens and a number of them were within a few blocks of the sandwich shop Doe had frequented. He'd have to wait until Mycroft came through on the case files.

*In a city this size, how is it that no one knows him?* John asked himself, chewing absently on the end of his pen. If the waitress at the pub had been right, then Doe had had a job at least some of the time. Surely someone he worked with would have recognized him? Or at least noticed he hadn't shown up for work in weeks?

He opened his notebook and jotted down 'casual labourer?' – it might explain the lack of concern on an employer's part if Doe stopped coming to work. John sighed again, raking his hands through his hair, then shifted through Mycroft's notes, looking for the information on the tea shop.

According to the sales clerk who had been interviewed, Doe came in about every other week and always bought the same thing: regular tea. He paid in cash – John raised an eyebrow at that but wasn't surprised – and occasionally looked around the shop but never bought anything else that the man could remember. John checked the store's hours online – they were closed now, of course, but he could go round tomorrow and see if the salesman remembered anything else.

*Was he trying to be invisible?* John wondered. *Why?* He stared at the circled spot on the map in Mayfair and thought about a twelve year old murder.

*No, that's not fair. You can't see a pattern from where a sandwich shop is located. Maybe he just likes their food. Maybe he has another reason to go there and stops to buy tea because it's on the way home.*

He had no idea – but if someone else in Mayfair knew him and saw him on a regular basis, they weren't coming forward.
John sighed, dropping his head into his hands. He wasn't too proud to admit this would be much easier with Sherlock's help – or if Sherlock were doing it. Frowning, he raised his head and checked the time on his phone. He hadn't heard from Sherlock all day, which was especially surprising considering he'd been out shopping, a time usually accompanied by frequent texts from his husband with instructions and odd requests.

*Where are you?* he sent via text, then went back to studying the map as he waited for a reply. Since the majority of the reports came from Southwark, John knew it was most likely Doe lived in the area.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

He unlocked his phone again and called up the photos of the pub he'd taken from Doe's usual seat. The man had been in a good position to watch the door but he would have been difficult – if not impossible – for someone passing by on the street to see him through the windows.

Was that deliberate? Was he watching for someone? Or did he just like the small corner booth with its view of the pub?

He'd made a crude sketch map of the pub from that vantage point and had taken some photos outside as well, of the surrounding buildings and street. Nothing special from what he could tell – a handful of other shops, some flats above those shops, a typical mix of residential and business.

*Case. Mycroft. Will be late. Don't wait up. SH.*

John raised his eyebrows, wondering if Sherlock had given in and taken the case Mycroft had offered a couple of days ago or if this was something else. He went back to the photos, trying to see anything else of value.

*Well,* he realized suddenly, *I'm not the one who knows this area.* He blinked in surprise, then shook his head – Donovan would kill him.

*Why?* he asked himself. *This isn't confidential information. It's pictures of a pub and the area he spent time in.*

John chewed on his lower lip, debating. On the one hand, he didn't want to push or stress Doe – but on the other, the man was alone without information about himself. He didn't even know his own name, which John now – possibly – did.

He was a doctor. He knew how to approach these kind of things properly.

Decided, John pushed himself out of his chair and pulled on his coat, then clattered down the stairs to catch a cab.
"I'm sorry it's so late," John said, clicking the door shut softly behind him. Doe looked up, puzzled. "But I have some information for you."

"Oh," the other man said, nodding slightly, still looking confused. John gave him a reassuring smile as he pulled out his phone and notebook and shuffled one of the chairs next to the bed. He called up the photos from inside the pub and of the surrounding area, then passed his phone to Doe. The injured man looked through them slowly, a faint frown of concentration on his features.

"Look familiar at all?" John asked. Doe looked back down at the photos, scanning back to the beginning.

"It feels familiar," he said. "I can't — I don't know where this is, but I think I've been there before."

John grinned.

"That's because you have."

Doe looked back up quickly, surprise flashing across his still bruised and cut features.

"Where is this?"

"The Yellow Rose in Southwark. Not too far from here, really. Maybe ten minutes by car. Inspector Donovan told you they were putting you on Crimewatch, right?"

"Yeah, she had a sketch artist in here to draw me. Makes sense, I guess." He gestured vaguely to his face with his right hand. "Don't look like much right now. But — she said they had some tips but nothing concrete yet. Said it takes time."

John nodded, still grinning.

"They might not have found anything, but I did," he said. Doe stared at him, good eye widening somewhat.

"This pub, you used to go there on a fairly regular basis. I was just there this afternoon talking to one of the waitresses who remembers you."

"Someone remembers me?" Doe asked quickly, voice thin with shock.

"Yeah. She doesn't know you well, but she gave me a name. Liam."

Doe stared at him. John saw his lips move, repeating the name silently as if to taste it, then he winced, licked his lips, and coughed lightly.

"Liam," he said out loud and John nodded. "That's my name?"

"That's what you told her, yeah," John said, his wide grin relaxing into a more comfortable smile. "No last name, sorry, and she said you always paid in cash, so they don't have any credit card slips for. But it's a name. Your name."

"Liam," Doe said again as if trying it out. His gaze drifted away a moment, turning to nothing, then he looked back at John. "They said I said the name John when I came in. If I'm Liam, who's John?"
"I don't know," John admitted. "Someone you know? A family member, a friend?" He hesitated, shaking his head, but plunged on. "The person who did this to you?"

"I don't know, I--" He cut himself off, giving his head a gentle shake, and John stayed silent, letting him process the information. "I guess I got used to the idea that I was John. It's what everyone calls me now. It never felt quite right but – neither does Liam."

John nodded.

"That isn't really surprising," he said. "It's hard to feel a connection with a name when you have no memories associated with it. It will come back with time."

"Liam," Doe murmured again, voice low and pensive. "What– does it mean something?"

"I don't know the meaning, but it's usually short for 'William'. Not always though." He saw a sudden spark in the other man's good eye and Doe met his gaze again.

"Yes," he said nodding. "Yes. That's – that's right, there's something right about that. It's– dammit, it's right there, but I can't get it."

"It's all right," John said and Doe sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly before giving a faint nod. John poured him some water and the injured man accepted it with a look of thanks. John gave him a few minutes to refocus, to get used to the idea that he had a known name, that there were people out there who recognized him.

"I was right about your hands," he said, and Doe looked at him curiously. "The waitress I talked to, she said sometimes you'd come in after work with equipment like a hard hat and work boots. You did something physical. Could be construction, could be road work – any kind of civic maintenance work, I suppose. I'm not sure why your employer hasn't reported you missing, though. Unless you were on holiday or aren't working at the moment."

"Well I came from somewhere else, right?"

"Oh, yeah. At some point you did, yeah. But she said you started coming into the pub in September, so you've been here a few months – and you were working here, because you had your gear with you sometimes."

"Oh."

"I know, it's confusing. Let me start at the beginning. I've got some notes and sketches of the pub, too."

John walked Doe through it all slowly, step-by-step. The injured man listened, nodding along, looking at the map of the city John had called up for him. He knew it probably didn't do much, but having some frame of reference might be helpful.

"Wait, if I live here wouldn't someone have noticed I wasn't home?"

"Depends," John said. "You were admitted on the first of December, so if you rent, you'd already have paid. If you own your own place, the bank would automatically deduct any payments you owed."

"Oh. Right." Doe sighed again, shaking his head slightly. John felt a moment of stronger sympathy for him – whoever he was, he seemed to have led a quiet, almost lonely life. But something about that didn't sit well with John. There had to be someone out there – other than a waitress in a pub –
who knew him.

"Can I see this?" Doe asked and John let him have the phone, watching as he instinctively zoomed out on the map and moved the focal point north and west a bit.

"Inspector Donovan asked me about this tea shop, too," he murmured. "Seems a long way to go just for tea, doesn't it?"

"Unless you were working up in that area," John replied with a shrug.

"I guess so," Doe agreed. He frowned slightly and handed the phone back to John.

"What?" the doctor asked.

"She was – I don't know, jumpy about it. Like she really wanted me to remember that bit – more than my name or anything."

John sighed and leaned back in his chair a bit.

"What? What is it?" Doe asked.

"Did she ask you about art or art galleries?"

"Uh – yeah. She asked if I could remember going anywhere else, other shops, galleries, that sort of thing. Why?"

John worried his lower lip between his teeth, trying to decide what to do. He knew he shouldn't talk about an open investigation – but he also wasn't a police officer. Lestrade had come to Sherlock about it, Sherlock had dragged him along, and now here John was, in possession of potential information about a man with no memory. Somehow, it didn't seem fair to him that the police were treating him as a possible suspect but not making him aware of that fact.

He set his jaw and decided.

"Twelve years ago, a man named Patrick Connolly was found murdered at the Gossard Gallery in Mayfair."

Doe looked startled and John held up a hand but the other man spoke before he could.

"Did I know him? Did – what, they think I did it? They think I killed someone?"

John shook his head.

"No, they don't know who killed him," he said. "They don't know if you know him – at least as far as I'm aware."

"But there's something, right? Otherwise why would Inspector Donovan be on about it?"

"Your fingerprints were a partial match for one they found at the scene. No, wait. That means you might have been in the building – but odds are it wasn't even you. A partial match means some of the points they use to determine fingerprints are the same but not all of them. Fingerprints are unique to each person but they're also very complex."

As if to confirm this, Doe held up his left hand and studied his fingertips, a deep frown creasing his features.
"That means when they find a fingerprint they have to run it to see if there's a match to any known ones they have in their system. There's always going to be some overlap – that's a partial match."

"So either twelve years ago I killed a man I don't remember in an art gallery for – some reason or someone else did and their fingerprints are just close enough to mine that it looks like me?"

"They took your fingerprints when you were admitted, because you're a John Doe. They ran them through the system to see if anything had come up, and that did. It doesn't actually mean anything."

"The inspector must think it does."

"She has to try and find out. It's her job. Even if it was your fingerprint, it only means you were there. It doesn't mean you killed anyone – or even that you knew the person who was killed. You could have been there hours before he was, or even days. They're just trying to find out what happened. To both of you."

Doe let out a long sigh and John frowned.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have–"

"No, it's okay. I'd rather know. It was making me nervous, trying to figure out why she kept asking about Mayfair. I thought maybe – I don't know what I thought." He gave a wry, humourless chuckle. "Not that, though."

John leaned forward again, resting his elbows on his knees.

"The name doesn't mean anything to you, does it? Patrick Connolly, I mean?"

Doe thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Is there a way to see this gallery – the one he died in?"

John opened his browser and searched for the gallery, then handed the phone back to Doe, who studied the gallery's website.

"No," he said finally and sighed.

"John, look–" the doctor began, then cut himself off, and gave Doe a wry smile.

"'S'okay," the other man said. "Either name works for me. Like you said, no emotional attachment."

John gave a slight smile.

"Well, let's get you used to your actual name again, shall we? Liam, look, you're the victim here. Connolly is, too, poor bastard, but not because of you. Forget about him and focus on what you remember."

Doe gave another wry laugh, this one with a slightly more genuine smile behind it.

"Can't forget about him twice," he commented. "But yeah, okay. Sorry, none of this rings any bells."

"Don't be sorry about that," John replied. "Better you not remember that because you never knew it."

"Good point," Doe agreed.

"Here," John said. "I got the nurses to make more photocopies – this is what the waitress told me and
"Sure," Doe agreed. John smiled slightly; the other man looked more hopeful than John had ever seen him do so far, even with the news about Connolly's murder and his possible link to the scene via a single fingerprint. He disliked the tenuousness of the connection – he knew Donovan was only doing her job, but it still sat poorly with him.

The buzzing of his phone distracted him and he took a moment to read the text.

Done early. On my way home. Want sex. SH.

John rolled his eyes and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

"I need to go," he said. "Get some rest."

"You're the doctor," Doe said.

John flashed him a smile as he pulled on his jacket.

"I'll come by tomorrow, not sure when."

"I'll be here," Doe replied dryly. "Good night, John. And thanks."

"Good night, Liam. Sleep well."

On his way down in the lift, John pulled out his phone and sent a message in reply to Sherlock.

You're rubbish at this texting business. You do know that, right?

He grinned, slid the phone back into his pocket, and ignored the answering text when it came in.

Donovan rung off from her constable at the hospital and raked her hands through her curly hair, repressing a snarl.

Goddamn bloody hell! she thought, sucking in a deep breath and forcing herself to hold it. Sherlock bloody Holmes and John bloody Watson – I swear to God, I'll see them hanged myself.

Rationally she knew Holmes had nothing to do with this, but he was an annoying, arrogant, self-satisfied bastard and if it wasn't for him, John Watson wouldn't be getting in the way now. Holmes had never learned any boundaries and now the doctor thought the rules didn't apply to him, either.

She checked the time, hesitated, then decided it didn't matter. Let John Watson know what it was like for the job to wake him up in the middle of the night. She couldn't have bloody citizens running around, acting as though police procedure meant nothing to them and giving out information about cases whenever they felt like it.

And where had he even got the bloody tips from? She'd have to look into that, too. If someone on her team had a soft spot for Holmes, she'd have to root them out and give them a stern talking to. And maybe a transfer. She couldn't maintain any control if her people weren't doing their jobs.

Donovan pushed herself to her feet, pulling open a desk drawer to grab her purse at the same moment a knock came on her office door. She sighed, snapping the drawer shut.

"Come in!"
"Ma'am? Superintendent Broward wants to see you."

Donovan repressed another sigh and nodded.

"Thank you, constable," she replied. He left and she took a minute to refocus herself before heading up to see her boss, already planning how she would explain this whole bloody mess to him.

Donovan stepped back into her office and locked the door behind her, resisting the urge to lean against the Venetian blinds and bang her head against the glass.

_Goddamn bloody hell!_ she thought again, wondering if maybe she could make that her personal voicemail greeting.

No need for explanations – Broward had barely given her a chance to talk. Orders from higher up, he'd told her. _Much_ higher up. She didn't even know where and he'd refused to say.

And John Watson was being given access to the Connolly investigation. Whatever information he wanted.

_If Sherlock bloody Holmes is behind this, I will find out and_– Donovan cut herself off and admitted she didn't know what she'd do. Nothing she could do would affect the man anyway – he flaunted his disregard for her and the entire Met blatantly. Insulting him was useless and she had to watch her tongue now that she was a DI, be diplomatic and all that.

She sighed and sat down behind her desk again, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes. It was going to be another long night.

They were all long nights.

_All right, she told herself. Okay, Sally, you can still do this. Focus on the job, just get that done. John Watson can worry about John Watson._

Her phone rang, startling her, and Donovan took a steadying breath before reaching for the receiver.

"Donovan," she said in a level voice.

"Detective Inspector Sally Donovan?" said an Irish accented voice from the other end of the line.

"Yes," Donovan replied, frowning slightly. "Who's this?"

"Inspector Charlotte Morgan, Garda Síochána in Dublin. You have one of our people."

Donovan's frowned deepened.

"Sorry?" she asked.

"Your John Doe, the one you had on _Crimewatch_ two days ago. He's mine."
Chapter 13

Donovan recognized Morgan easily enough and it seemed the other inspector had been doing her homework, because her eyes found Donovan through the crowds at Gatwick. She was shorter than Donovan had expected, but her auburn hair and dark eyes were familiar from the file photos the DI had accessed.

"Inspector Morgan," Donovan said, stepping forward and extending her hand, which the other woman shook firmly.

"Inspector Donovan," she replied. "Thank you for meeting me."

"Sally, please. And I'm glad you're here – we've been at our wit's end trying to get any information on him."

Morgan sighed, nodding.

"I didn't even know he was missing," she said. "We haven't had him in Dublin in years. And it's been a month since I've spoken to him myself."

At this, Donovan raised an eyebrow but Morgan shook her head.

"I'll fill you in on the rest of the details on the way."

"Hospital or hotel first?" the DI asked.

"Hospital, please," Morgan replied. "I need to see him with my own eyes."

John checked the address and the name of the sandwich shop against the information he'd stored in his phone. It was a bit out of place in a neighbourhood dominated by more upscale shops and art galleries, but when he stepped inside, the incongruity vanished in the smell of fried food and freshly baked bread.

The other patrons of the tiny restaurant – a handful of men, mostly sitting alone – glanced up at John in mild disinterest before returning to their meals. He ignored them, weaving his way through the tightly spaced tables toward the untended counter. A middle aged woman bustled out from the backroom a moment later, carrying a small stack of porcelain mugs.

"Good morning, dear," she said. "What can I get for you?"

"I'm actually looking for a bit of information," he said, passing her his phone with the sketch of Doe displayed on the tiny screen. "Follow up questions about this man."

"Oh, the one the police were here about, I remember. I don't know what I can tell you I haven't already told your constables, though. I really don't know much about him."

John nodded, not bothering to correct the assumption as he pulled out his notebook. He told himself he wasn't actually impersonating a police officer because at no point had he identified himself as such.

He hoped if Donovan ever caught wind of this, she'd share his point of view.

"Sometimes telling it to a fresh pair of ears helps," John said. "You don't mind, do you?"
"No," she said, smiling. "It's easy enough, love. He'd come in here once in a while – I guess every other week – for breakfast. He paid with cash so there's no credit card receipts. The police yesterday asked about that."

John nodded, jotting it down although he didn't really need to. It was in the information Mycroft had provided.

"When did he come in?" he asked. "I mean, was there a specific day? Different days?"

"Saturdays. Always sat by the window, just watching the world go by. Always had his work gear with him – you know, hard hat, reflective vest."

"Did he ever say where he was working?"

"No, but it's pretty normal for the kind we get in here. It's a good place to stop for breakfast or pop in for lunch. Doing that kind of work, you need more than just tea and scones."

"What did he order?"

"Always the same thing. Whatever I had on special that day. He wasn't picky, said he just liked not to have decide or cook for himself. Always left with a cup of coffee, too."

"What kind of coffee?"

"I only serve two kinds, love. Regular and decaf. Most of the boys don't drink the decaf – he wasn't any different."

"And he never got anything else?"

"Not from here."

John nodded and glanced around the store again.

"How long do you keep the security footage?" he asked, pointing at the camera behind the register. The woman smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling.

"The constables asked about that, too, but no more than a week. Sorry. And I haven't seen him in about a month. Figured whatever he was working on had finished up."

John shut his notebook, then glanced toward the front of the store and frowned. He was silent for a moment, thinking, then asked:

"This is a strange question, but when he came in, did you ever notice what direction he was coming from?"

"Hmm," the woman murmured, eyes growing distant for a moment, then she gave a quick nod. "From the right. So that's south."

"And when he left? Did he go back in the same direction?"

"No, north. That's why I thought we were on his way to work."

John pulled out his notebook again.

"Which tube stations are closest to here if you're coming from the south? Do you know?"
"Green Park and Piccadilly Circus are about the same distance. Green Park may be a little closer, I think. Usually a bit less crowded than Piccadilly, too."

"And how would I get there on foot?"

"Oh, I think I have one of those tourists maps, just give me a moment…"

She shuffled around for a moment then came up with a creased and well-worn map of London which she spread on the counter between them. She drew the path for John, talking through the instructions, then folded it up and handed it over. John took it with thanks, eyeing the highlighted route.

"I hope this helps," she said. "Can't see how it would, but I'd hate to find out something happened to him. He seemed nice. Good customer, you know. Knew what he wanted, never complained about the price or if he had to wait, anything like that. Polite. But then, all my regular boys are polite," she added and John thought he could feel the faint smiles around him in response.

Quiet, keeping to himself, he thought, then sighed. It was hardly a suspicious activity not to cause a fuss in a shop – or at least, it shouldn't be. He chuckled wryly to himself.

"I'll take one of those coffees to go please. Same kind he got."

"Of course, dear."

John left the shop, heading south and wondered if the constables had done this – but he thought not, given the way the woman had needed to search for the map. He kept a slow pace, checking the map every so often. The walk was simple and he estimated it would only take him a little over ten minutes at his current rate. He looked at the other shops and galleries, at the little flats above them, at the pedestrians, but nothing jumped out at him.

John stopped when he rounded a corner and stared at the other side of the street. For a moment, he wondered if maybe he were imagining it, then he chastised himself for reading too much into it.

It doesn't mean anything, he told himself with an inward sigh. It didn't look open yet, and there was certainly no indication that someone had died there twelve years ago, but the path the shopkeeper had given him to Green Park station took him past the Gossard Gallery all the same.

The phone rang quietly on the other end of the line; once, twice, three times. He was about to hang up on the fourth ring when a click made him reconsider quickly and he pulled the phone back to his ear.

"Yeah?" The quiet, lilting voice was familiar, even after all this time. It almost made him smile, but not quite.

Not today.

"I have news," he said and heard a quiet answering murmur, an invitation to continue. "He's alive."

There was a stunned pause, then a sharp question.

"What? Are you sure?"

"He's in London," he replied firmly.
John Watson was explaining to him about the sandwich shop in Mayfair and Liam was listening carefully, trying to pick up some hint of familiarity in the photos on the doctor's phone, in his description of the store and the woman who worked there. He'd even brought coffee, which Liam apparently bought there on a regular basis. He examined the label on the take away cup but it didn't strike him as something he knew.

"Try smelling it," John suggested. He worked the cap off and passed the cup back. Liam raised it hesitantly to his nose, avoiding touching his skin because of the bruises, and sniffed. He frowned, closed his eye, and inhaled deeply.

The world spun and he heard the clatter of the cup on the small wheeling table and felt John's hand close over it to keep it from spilling.

"Liam," the doctor said sharply, but the injured man ignored him, keeping his good eye closed, and focused hard.

He could taste it, hot and bitter, tempered by sugar and just a bit of milk, the perfect balance in the morning. He flexed his left fingers against the cup; it wasn't that he felt but metal, smoother, warmer. A travel mug, chipped black paint with something on it. An image, an insignia, he couldn't tell. He could feel himself drinking it, standing up, looking down at a newspaper. The location faded into the background, not because it was unfamiliar because he knew it too well.

Home.

"I drank coffee every morning reading the newspaper in my flat," he said, opening his eye again, meeting John's gaze. The doctor was grinning and nodding, encouraging him to continue. "I had this old travel mug, it was black with something on it, I can't remember what. I must have had it for years. I was going to replace it – for Christmas. Little gift for myself. I didn't– I don't need much, but it was just one of those things. Never got around to doing it before."

"Good," John said.

"How did you know?"

"Smell is the strongest sense associated with memory. Even just a hint can trigger long buried memories. I've seen it happen before. Tell me about the flat."

Liam closed his eye again, trying to see it, then shook his head.

"I can't."

"Start with the newspaper. What was it?"

"I don't know. But it was on the table."

"Tell me about the table."

"Um– dark wood, some scuff marks. There was nothing– wait, there was a bowl on it. In the middle. I can't– sorry– I'm not sure what it looked like."

"Do you remember what was it in?"

He tried to, but shook his head with a sigh.

"No."
"Anything else on the table? How about chairs?"

"There were – four chairs. But I always read the paper standing up. There was something else on the table. Um, a small black round thing. Plastic." He snapped his eye open. "The lid for the mug. I never used it unless I was running late."

"Do you remember anything about the newspaper? The title? Any stories?"

It danced in his mind, just out of reach.

"No. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," John said with a grin. "This is amazing. You just told me something definite about yourself – you remembered a daily habit. And it isn't an old one – you knew you were going to replace your mug within the next few weeks."

Liam felt his own lips twitch but repressed it because it hurt too much to let himself smile fully. He felt a wave of relief and leaned back against his pillows, a chuckle escaping his lips. It turned into a coughing fit and he tried to double over, one of John's hands on his shoulder lightly to keep him upright, the other passing him a glass of water. He sipped it, coughed some more, then leaned back again with a groan.

"You all right?" John asked.

"Yeah," Liam replied. "Dammit." He tried to shift against the discomfort in his ribs and felt a familiar dull flash of panic at the realization that they were broken. Instinctively, his gaze sought the figure of the constable outside of his room and he relaxed a bit. It helped to know that someone was watching him day and night because he couldn't shake the knowledge that whoever had done this to him was still out there.

Inspector Donovan had told him they hadn't released his location on the news, or even that they had him. Only that they were looking for anyone with information on him.

It helped to have John Watson there as well – the doctor was better than any of the doctors he had, who didn't seem keen on explaining much. The nurses were pretty good; a few of them talked to him more than the others. But John took the time to explain things and didn't seem bothered when he realized he was assuming Liam could remember something that he actually couldn't.

And it was nice to have a conversation that wasn't rushed or edgy.

"Here, have more," John said, refilling the glass. "Take it easy, deep breaths, as deep as you can manage with those ribs. Good."

Liam set the glass aside and nodded his thanks. John seemed about to say something when there was a brief knock at the door and Inspector Donovan came in with a woman he hadn't seen before. She was short, auburn haired, with dark eyes and a serious, almost critical expression.

"Hello, John," she said, meeting his gaze. "How you feeling?"

John Watson started at the sound of his name and frowned at the unfamiliar woman accompanying Donovan – but she wasn't looking at him.

"Sorry," he said and her dark eyes shifted to him, slightly puzzled as though she were trying to place him. "How did you know my name?"
She held his gaze for a moment longer before replying:

"I don't."

John's eyes flickered to Donovan, who sighed, looking as if she wished John weren't there. He repressed a sigh of his own; she still wasn't happy with him visiting – probably less so after he'd told her constable about finding Liam's name from the waitress at the Yellow Rose. She hadn't chewed him out yet, but he suspected it was only because she hadn't caught him alone yet.

"This is Doctor John Watson. He's a–"

"A friend," John said firmly.

"And this," Donovan continued, shooting him a sharp glare. "Is Inspector Charlotte Morgan with the Garda Síochána in Dublin. That would be the Irish National Police Service, for those of you who may not know."

"What?" John asked, glancing at Liam, who was watching the two women with a confused expression. "Anyway, his name isn't John, it's Liam."

"His assumed name is Liam Walker, yes," Morgan confirmed, giving John a smooth nod. "His real name is John Aidan Riley, although he hasn't gone by that in about eight years."

"His assumed name?" John repeated, looking back at the Irish inspector. "He's an undercover cop?"

"No," Morgan replied. "He's a terrorist."
Chapter 14

The flat was chilly, lit only in the diluted red and green of Christmas lights. Sherlock must have turned the heating down before heading off to… wherever he was. It was likely Sherlock had texted to tell him, but John had turned off his phone.

He didn't bother to shut the door, didn't bother to hang up his coat, crossed the room to sink heavily into his chair. He sat still for a few minutes, got up, got something from the bedroom, sat down again. Waited.

He was still sitting there, staring at the tree, when Sherlock whirled in through the door, coming in halfway through a sentence that trailed and billowed behind him with his coat, flitting into the kitchen and out again, into the bedroom and out again, lights turning on around him, his voice a steady stream of chatter. He kept talking, spinning off in new directions as his mind switched from high speed track to high speed track, asking questions that he answered himself half a breath later, nattering about details that sailed right past, over and around John.

The detective hung his coat on the back of the door, headed for the kitchen again. In a single breath, he managed to ask if John had eaten, conclude a commentary on the state of the transportation industry, and decry his brother's latest cases as "transparent and futile attempts to distract me from real mysteries".

John sat through it all, staring at the tree.

"And of course these sorts of widespread delays could be orchestrated, but I fail to see to what purposes unless sociological research has just received significant increases in funding— and the results would be interesting, perhaps if we really could manage to understand mass hysteria— oh, the possibilities, John, think of the possibilities! Do you suppose some sort of situation could be established in which—"

Sherlock stopped abruptly and John felt himself react slightly – a slight twitch in the muscles around his eyes, a little stronger than a blink – at the sudden silence.

"John," Sherlock said and the tone of his voice had changed entirely. The manic energy had gone; he was no longer monologuing and using John as a sounding board. John felt the whole weight of the detective's genius suddenly focused solely on him.

He stared at the tree.

"John." Sherlock didn't ask if something had happened and John could almost hear him running through a list of possibilities and eliminating the most obviously incorrect ones before narrowing in on the probable choices. John saw Sherlock step toward him out the corner of his eye, but kept his attention on the tree, on the muted red and green lights. Long, cool fingers wrapped over his, pulling his fist open gently, dislodging the dog tags that John was clutching.

He let his gaze flicker up for a moment and saw the litany of names behind Sherlock's eyes, saw each one of them being dismissed.

"Do you know why we went to Afghanistan?" he asked, his eyes dropping back to the tree.

He felt the hesitation against his skin before Sherlock drew the dog tags away. John let them go without comment.
"Which of the many reasons would you like to me give as an answer?" Sherlock asked in reply. John's lips twitched but there was no humour in it.

"Do you feel safe, Sherlock?" John asked softly.

"If I feel safe then I know I'm doing something wrong," the detective replied and John felt his lips curl again, the expression vanishing as soon as it had appeared. He sighed and heard the faint clink as Sherlock tucked the dog tags into a pocket. The detective moved away to close the door, then came back and settled in his chair.

"Do you understand what it's like to live every day knowing you could be blown up or shot?"

"Yes," Sherlock said simply.

"No you don't," John contradicted softly. He heard Sherlock shift, then quiet inhalation that came before speaking, but he cut his husband off. "You don't, not really. You expect it – but with you, when it happens, it's because someone is playing a game with you. With you. You're not a game piece, you're the opponent. Moriarty, even Mycroft..."

He shook head, his gaze never leaving the tree. "When I was in Afghanistan... it's different when you're a soldier. You have training, you have resources if you want them. I didn't have to try and imagine what it was like for the people who lived there. I saw it all the time. Constant stress. Living in a warzone. Every time they left their homes, having to wonder if they'd get blown up. Hell, having to wonder that just being at home."

"The human mind is remarkably adaptable, John."

"Yes," John said. He knew that. "And no."

There was a silence that stretched between them that John didn't try to fill. He watched the lights on the tree. A few of them here and there were burnt out, needed to be replaced. Sherlock would probably have been able to tell him precisely how many.

There were a handful of wrapped gifts under the tree already, too. And not just his. Sherlock's wrapping jobs were always precise and careful. John had initially expected haphazardness from his husband, but he'd been wrong.

"John, what happened?" Sherlock finally asked. It struck John as the oddest question – surely Sherlock knew? That was what he did.

The doctor raised his eyes to meet the detective's and saw that there were still some uncertainties there. He could have figured it out, deduced it all down to the answer, but he was waiting for John to explain. Irrationally, he found this both endearing and stupid.

"Do you know what RIRA is?"

"The Real Irish Republican Army," Sherlock replied promptly. John was surprised, then he wasn't. "A splinter branch of the IRA."

"Yep," John replied. He let his eyes drop away. There was another long moment of silence and John felt a sudden cold weight settle in his stomach. "You knew," he said, raising his eyes, narrowing them as he met Sherlock's gaze. "You knew, didn't you, Sherlock?"

"I suspected," Sherlock corrected.
"You 'suspected'," John repeated in a murmur, then stared at him in disbelief, anger snapping. "Why the bloody hell didn't you tell me! He's a fucking terrorist and you– you just let me–"

"Because it was one of several options," Sherlock interjected, a sharp hint to his voice that made John shut his mouth abruptly, pursing his lips.

"What?"

"I told you I could have formulated several hypotheses about him."

"And you did," John said flatly.

"Of course I did."

"How many?" he snarled.

"Five."

"Five? Five! You let me run around stupidly while you had five actual theories about him that might have helped – and I wasted my time on a bloody fucking terrorist while–"

"No," Sherlock said and John stopped short again.

"No?"

"Five hypotheses, not theories, John. Based on incomplete information garnered from a man with no memory whose physical appearance could tell us very little given how badly injured he is."

John stared, a numb sensation settling over him.

"Let's have them, then."

Sherlock sighed and gave him a pointed look, but John held his gaze until he saw the faint flicker of expression that meant the detective was relenting for him.

"Given your initial assessment of the bullet wound to his leg, my immediate deductions were: police officer, criminal, military, or paramilitary."

"That's four things," John said.

"I can further refine police officer into two categories: undercover or not. I was able to dismiss police – either condition – or criminal given the fact that his fingerprints did not turn up a match in the system beyond the possible match to the Connolly case twelve years ago. A police officer would have been printed and any search for an undercover officer would have immediately alerted the proper people and Donovan would have found out who he was within fairly short order. It's possible that he was a criminal who simply wasn't apprehended, but if he were, and if he were shot while working, then his arrest is far more probable. Impossible to get treatment for a gunshot injury at a hospital without the police knowing – of course this assumes that he didn't have access to private no-questions-asked healthcare. Given the state of his hands, that would be unlikely. As you said, works with his hands, probably a manual labourer, so not the type of person to be able to afford such discreet care.

"His hands also eliminated the possibility of him being a police officer – why would he show signs of such physical labour? But perhaps he was shot while on duty and retired early and changed professions. That doesn't solve the problem of why he didn't turn up in the police system. Of course,
if he were from another country – Ireland, for example – his identity isn’t likely to be on file with the Met and other British police forces.

"So, unlikely to be a cop. Donovan doesn't have access to the military fingerprint database, so he could have been in the army. Bullet wound, works with his hands – you've told me there are any number of professions within the armed services in which one could work with his hands on a regular basis. It would explain why he had the injury and the physical evidence of his work that he does.

"Although it wouldn't explain why Mycroft couldn't find him in the military databases."

"You think Mycroft ran his fingerprints?" John interjected.

"Of course he did. He got you the information, didn't he? He's not the type to simply let something like that pass through his hands without at least some cursory investigation, John. Information is power. If he could find out who Doe was, it might be useful. It would be easier for him to access the British army rather than any other country, although he might have been working on that. It simply would have taken more time. If Doe was in the British army, we would have known about it by now.

"But what else is military and requires any number of skills to accomplish its objectives? Paramilitary – terrorist – organizations. The IRA has a number of splinter groups. These do not have databases with files on each member, so no fingerprints there. And if he were a member of one of these branches, he'd have to have a regular job as well – he'd need an income and a cover. Construction is a good choice – he may not be an engineer, but he'd have a solid working knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of building structures, which would be useful for planting explosives."

John opened his mouth to say something else but Sherlock shook his head and kept talking.

"Of course, there is a sixth possibility that he's nothing more than a man with a physical job who happened to have been shot at some point – wrong place, wrong time – and was recently attacked for reasons unknown. Personal? Random? Hard to say. Perhaps he's just unlucky. And it could be that any of those deductions were wrong because all we had was a beaten man with no memory and calluses on his hands and an old bullet wound to his leg. Hunting accident? Perhaps he does wood working as a hobby?"

"But you didn't believe that."

"I thought British military, Irish police, or IRA the three most likely choices, yes," Sherlock agreed.

"And you couldn't think to tell me that?" John snapped.

"Which one would you have chosen?" Sherlock sighed.

"What?"

"Which option would you have chosen, John? Would you have assumed the best of him or the worst?"

John stared, then rubbed his hands together and looked away.

"Because you are who you are, you would have assumed the best – that he was a former soldier or a former police officer."

"And I'd have been wrong!" John retorted, glancing back.
"And you'd have been wrong," Sherlock agreed with a nod. "But you would have picked either of those options and you would have carried investigating regardless."

"If I'd thought for half a second--"

"You would have stopped? No." Sherlock leaned forward, fixing his bright grey eyes on the doctor. "You would have told yourself there was a possibility you were wrong and you'd have continued trying to help him because he may not have been guilty."

John sat back in his chair, turning his eyes away again.

"Well, he is."

"I assume he's been arrested?" Sherlock asked.

"No, actually," John said and saw Sherlock turn his head slightly with that half-puzzled, half-suspicious look he got when he was wrong and surprised by the revelation. "An inspector from the Gardaí in Dublin came over – she saw him on the telly, too, bit later than we did, apparently – but nope, not arrested."

"A suspected terrorist then? But no, they'd have arrested him for that. Does his medical condition preclude arrest?"

"Nope." John waited, watching Sherlock watching him. "He's paid his time, apparently. Informant. Got found out though, so they had to move him here, give him a different name. Oh yeah, that's right. His name is John, Sherlock. He was right about that – Liam – Liam Walker, by the way – was– is– whatever – his assumed name. John Riley. From Dublin. Specializes in bombing, apparently. Good fit – you were right: he'd have to work with his hands."

"An informant," Sherlock said, arching an eyebrow, and John sighed sharply.

"Yeah."

"So he changed his mind."

"What?" John demanded, feeling a flash of irritation when Sherlock sighed.

"You're angry at him because he was a terrorist – precisely the same kind of problem you were fighting against in Afghanistan. But he changed his mind. Oh, granted, he was a terrorist. And then he decided this was objectionable and began assisting the police, a decision which led to him being removed from his home, his own identity, and moved to England. But you're angry with him."

"Of course I'm angry with him!" John snapped. "He was a bloody terrorist! He blew people up in the name of disliking his government! Or our government, whichever. Doesn't bloody matter."

"So not at all like our military does in other countries."

"That's different!" John retorted, pushing himself to his feet.

"Is it?"

"Yes! Because–"

"Because it's sanctioned? Because the weight of the government behind the force lends it legitimacy? Perhaps it's only a matter of perspective."
"Oh, yes, thanks for that, Sherlock! I'm really glad I can count on your support! So nice to know that the person I'm married to thinks that--"

"I don't think that," Sherlock interjected calmly. "I'm suggesting he might have."

"Blowing people up is not a solution!"

"I never said it was."

John stopped and sucked in a deep breath, raking his hands through his hair.

"And, evidently, he came to agree with you," his husband pointed out.

"What?" John snapped.

"You cannot be angry at him for being a terrorist and then refuse to acknowledge that his opinions on the matter changed. At great personal risk to himself, I might add. That can't be a decision made lightly."

John circled behind his chair and gripped the cushions, leaning forward.

"And now you're also angry that he betrayed the trust of his fellow RIRA members-- Wait, no. You're angry he betrayed your trust."

John felt his fingers tighten involuntarily on the upholstery and set his jaw, meeting Sherlock's eyes squarely.

"I was wasting my time on a bloody terrorist--"

"No."

"What?"

"No, you weren't. You were trying to help an assault victim, John. Stop for a moment and listen. No, don't just stare at me waiting for the next opportunity to say something, really listen to me, John. The man you're helping is not a terrorist."

"He's--"

"There was a man with his name and body who was a terrorist, yes, but not with his mind. He is not the same person. You're a doctor, I know you understand this. How much does he remember even now? Still very little, I'd wager, and likely none of it very significant or personal. Over forty years of life and memories that would -- if you could distil them into liquid form -- probably fit into a coffee mug. He is not John Riley, nor is he Liam Walker. He can keep either name and he retains the genetics, but even if someone could provide him with descriptions of every event in his life, they still wouldn't be his memories. All of those experiences which built him, they're not there right now. They may come back -- but even if they all do, there's no guarantee that he will view them the same way he used to. He is, quite simply, not the same person."

John stared across the small space and Sherlock met his gaze with a level expression.

"He did not deceive you, he did not lie to you. In fact, I'm certain he told you nothing but the truth. He had no reason not to. You've befriended him, John – in fact, you're the only person who is friends with the man he is right now."

John bit his lower lip to withhold a sigh and shook his head. He drew away from his chair, raking his
hands through his hair again.

"People don't change," John muttered.

"Don't they?" Sherlock replied. The doctor glared over his shoulder but Sherlock was still watching him with equanimity. He sighed, running a hand over his face, annoyed that Sherlock had taken that position. The detective loved to point out how people were creatures of habit, but John knew that wasn't always the case.

"Regardless of who he was, it does not make him responsible for Patrick Connolly's murder. Will you judge him guilty of that because you know something you dislike about him? And he is still the victim in a severe assault. Unless I'm very much mistaken, that level of injury would be impossible to inflict on one's self."

"So what should I do, Sherlock?" John snapped.

"I'm not telling you to do anything," his husband replied. "I'm giving you perspective."

"Perspective," John muttered.

"Continue investigating or don't, John," Sherlock replied with a light shrug. "I'm only suggesting you make the decision for legitimate reasons and not because you feel betrayed by a man who owes you nothing who happens to have a past you don't like."
John took himself upstairs to his old bedroom, the floorboards creaking forlornly under his weight.

He was angry and he knew he was deliberately distancing himself from Sherlock but he knew staying downstairs would make things worse. He would pick a fight. He wanted to pick a fight, which was so unusual for him that he had forced himself up the stairs and sat on the bed, arms folded, legs crossed, feeling even angrier.

He wasn't especially angry with Sherlock and that annoyed him. He wanted to be – he felt like he could have been justified in it, but part of him recognized that as untrue. It irritated him that he was being so ridiculous, like a little child who hadn't got his way.

Like Sherlock.

John sighed, raising a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes against the shadows that defined the dusty darkness. He tried to muster up some righteous indignation but he knew Sherlock was right – it wouldn't have mattered what assessments the detective could have given him. John would have picked the one he liked and gone right on investigating anyway.

Which left him angry with himself. And angry with John Riley for not knowing who he was. It irritated him even more that Sherlock was also right that Riley hadn't been lying to him. He couldn't have been – he barely knew anything about himself.

He felt stupid and foolish and he didn't think it was all fair that Sherlock was being the reasonable one here. That was John's job. Sherlock was meant to be the petulant moody one, the one who took offence at an offhanded remark, the one who lost his temper at the slightest provocation, the one who would sink into a sulk for hours on end.

It didn't help John's mood that he knew full well he was sulking. Lying on the spare bed alone the darkness, he felt like a child who'd had a toy taken away.

But it wasn't a toy, it was a terrorist. The word made John feel unsettled again. Not angry. Confused. It didn't add up – but Morgan knew Riley. He'd been arrested in Dublin eight years ago. She had files and confessions and evidence.

And Riley had turned to John for an explanation.

John could still see him, confused, uncertain as to what any of it meant, looking for an answer.

From the man who always did his best to provide them.

John sighed and rubbed his hands over his face, cursing quietly to himself. He slouched all the way down on the bed until he was lying on his back, staring through the darkness at the ceiling. A faint light came through the open door from the living room where he could hear Sherlock moving around. He'd let John go upstairs without comment and not the kind of lack of protest that meant he was going to be huffy. Just a simple nod, and John had felt those intense grey eyes following him up the steps.

He interlaced his fingers on his stomach and sighed again.

A few minutes later, he heard the faint strains of violin music drifting up toward him – just scales at first as Sherlock warmed up, transforming into soft Christmas carols that made John close his eyes.
He could picture their tree downstairs, decorated, glowing gently with its green and red lights. He still had to dig out the stockings that Mrs. Hudson had made for them the first Christmas they were married. Sherlock had acted appalled at the idea of a personalized stocking but had secretly been delighted.

John felt his lips twitch at the memory.

The music stayed soft, winding from one melody to the next, and he began to feel sad. He opened his eyes again, thinking of everyone he knew. Mrs. Hudson having her niece and her family for the holidays. His mum with her sister at their cousin’s in Lincoln. Tricia and Henry at home with their daughter. Bill and his family in Portsmouth with his in-laws. Lestrade at home with his wife and kids. Mycroft – John's lips twitched. Even Mycroft up in Buckinghamshire with William, Angela, and David.

And the man in the hospital with no memory.

He sighed, and rubbed his eyes.

The music filled the room and John felt alone.

He got up and padded back down the stairs to curl into his chair in the living room. Sherlock glanced over his shoulder at him but kept playing without comment. John sat and listened in silence, closing his eyes and feeling at home.

The next day, he went to meet Charlotte Morgan at Scotland Yard.

Donovan wasn't happy with him and she didn't bother trying to hide it. By the drawn expressions on the faces of both women, they hadn't had much sleep the night before. John felt a moment's guilt – he'd actually slept fairly well once he'd fallen asleep, wrapped in the cocoon of long limbs that was Sherlock.

This wasn't his job, he reminded himself.

And yet, here he was.

But Morgan shook his hand despite the glare Donovan aimed his way and gave him a tired smile that wasn't entirely faked. Despite the London DI's exasperation, the Irish inspector seemed glad he was there. She led him to an office that seemed to have been temporarily assigned to her then rounded up a constable and sent him for coffee with all the self assured authority of someone used to giving commands, even if this wasn't her own jurisdiction. Then she closed and locked the door behind the departing officer before settling behind the desk, across from John.

"Donovan's explained to me about you and your – sorry, what's the term you prefer?"

"Husband," John replied and Morgan smiled slightly, nodding. John didn't think she was much older than him, if at all – eight years with Sherlock had taught him to be very good at judging ages and he liked to tell himself he'd taught Sherlock a thing or two about tact in that regard.

"You and your husband," Morgan continued. "She showed me your blog."

John felt himself colouring and her smile grew and warmed somewhat.

"It's an– interesting life you lead, Doctor Watson."
"It has its moments," John agreed.

"What about John Riley?" she asked.

John frowned slightly, resisting the urge to shift in his chair. Even though it wasn't an interrogation room, he still felt like he was being questioned by the police. Which, point of fact, he was.

"What about him?"

"Donovan showed me the notes you took, too, the ones she photocopied. I assume you have more, and I'd like to know what you know about him that you didn't write down."

"Well apparently, I don't know anything about him at all," John replied. "He's your informant, he works for you."

"He was," she said, her expression turning serious, "and he was exposed four years ago, at which point he stopped working for us and we started working for him."

John frowned, shaking his head.

"New identity, new life, Doctor Watson. Keeping him safe. We have regular contact with him – but his attack came shortly after he last reported in. I would have had no reason to suspect anything had happened to him until shortly before New Year's. And now I have to worry that I've failed in my job because someone may have found him. If this wasn't random..."

"You're worried someone tracked him down here."

"Yes," she said plainly. "He helped us put a number of people in prison, but some of them have served their sentences. And some of them left behind families who would might object to the price of Riley's freedom."

"You do, don't you?" John asked. Morgan sighed.

"We don't negotiate the deals," she replied. "If this had been my choice... I may have made a different one. I see it's value, though. We need people like John – he got us information that stopped a number of other RIRA members."

"Why did he do it?" John asked. It had been the question that had plagued him the most all night – what had made him change his mind?

"Does it matter?" Morgan asked.

"It matters to me."

"Why?" Her question was simple, her tone straightforward. John searched for face, looking for some hint of judgment but found none. He wondered if she was hiding it, if she could school her features that well. Probably well enough to fool him, he thought.

He hesitated a moment, debating his answer.

"He's my friend."

Morgan regarded him thoughtfully for a moment then smiled slightly, giving a dry chuckle that was little more than a sharp exhalation.

"He could do a lot worse than you, Doctor Watson. He has. As to his reasons..." She paused,
pressing a hand over her lips, looking away. John waited, letting the silence stretch until he thought he wouldn't get an answer, then Morgan refocused with a small shake of her head.

"Someone died. His son. He was only three."

John felt a cold shock and swallowed on it, nodding numbly.

"You can say it's tragic – it was. And selfish. A lot of other people's children died because of the work he did."

_How many?_ John wondered. Then: _And how many didn't die because he did change his mind?_

"What about Patrick Connolly?" he heard himself asking. Morgan's eyes flared, narrowing hard.

"What do you know about Patrick Connolly?" she demanded.

"Um," John started, caught off guard by her sudden vehemence. "Not much – only what Lestrade told us when he came to see if Sherlock would take this case. He was killed in an art gallery in Mayfair – the Gossard Gallery – but they never solved the case. There were a number of fingerprints they couldn't identify, but one of them was a partial match to John's. The police thought if it was his, if he was there..."

"Oh, I don't doubt John Riley was there," Morgan said and John felt a flash of shock tighten the muscles along his spine, sending a warning flare through his shoulder. "Whether or not he was actually present when Sergeant Healy was killed is another matter altogether. We've never been able to prove that he was – and he'd have no reason to tell us if he had been."

"What?" John asked. "Who's Sergeant Healy?"

"Patrick Connolly, Doctor Watson. At the hospital, you asked if John Riley was an undercover cop and I said no. But Patrick Connolly was. Sergeant Finn Healey. He'd made it into RIRA and stayed there for almost a year and a half – then he was murdered. It's been twelve years and we still don't know who killed him."

John wasn't sure how he'd ended up in the ensuing meeting but he didn't ask, opting to stay silent and more or less forgotten in his seat while he looked through Connolly's case file. Donovan and Lestrade were both there now, standing next to each other in a face off against Morgan. He felt almost invisible, small and unseen, like a witness to a war.

_But if I blog this, will they arrest me?_ he thought. _Probably._

"The former gallery owner was loosely associated with RIRA – providing funding routed through charitable organizations," Morgan was saying. "She provided the space as a meeting place after-hours but never had any more direct involvement, as far as we could ever determine."

"As far as you could determine?" Donovan snapped. "We looked into her records twelve years ago and there was nothing suspicious at all!"

"You didn't know who Healy was," Morgan pointed out.

"No," Lestrade said and John was startled by the ice in his voice. "It seems that you force has been withholding information from us that could have helped us solve this case. Twelve years. A man's death has gone unsolved and unpunished for _twelve years_. Is that all right with you?"
"Of course not," she snapped, dark eyes flaring. "He was one of us, Inspector."

"That's why we needed to know! A police officer--"

"An undercover police officer who was murdered. We don't know why – you're going to say it's because he was discovered but we have no evidence of that. We don't know who did it, we don't know why they did it. And because we don't know, we couldn't risk exposing his identity to anyone. If no one knew who he was, if Patrick Connolly was murdered for some reason other than really being Finn Healy and if we had gone public with that information, everything he'd worked for would have been lost. Do you imagine he was the only undercover officer we had in an IRA group? Not a chance. Anything, any hint of this would have driven RIRA – and the rest – so far under the ground we'd never had found them again."

"And if you'd have let us do our jobs we might not be here right now having this conversation!" Lestrade snapped back.

Morgan shook her head firmly, blowing an irate sigh between her lips. John spared a glance at her, before frowning at a photograph of the body, tilting it to get a different angle.

"Do you think this was my decision, Inspector?" Morgan snapped. "Twelve years ago this was not my case. I didn't know Healy. The case is mine now but the decision still isn't – I still have to follow orders."

"And would you have told us if it was your decision?" Donovan demanded.

"Does it matter?" Morgan sighed. "It wasn't ever going to happen. You found nothing and we were in possession of more information and all of your facts and we didn't find anything either. Someone knows who murdered Healy, but it isn't me."

"Is it John Riley?" Donovan asked.

"Do you mean, does he know who did it or did he do it?"

"Both. Either."

Morgan sighed again, drumming her fingers on her desk.

"He was there," Donovan pointed out. John nodded to himself as though she'd been speaking to him – he had been there, even if he didn't remember. No doubt of that now. But had he held the knife? The doctor flipped through the notes again, frowning, eyes skimming the description of the fatal wound.

"Yes, he was there. That day, that time? I doubt it. He probably knows, but he's never said anything. He was interviewed about it when he became an informant but nothing in the interview suggested he had any idea."

"What about the gallery owner?" Lestrade snapped. "Why didn't we find information on her? Did you bury that too?"

"She buried it," Morgan retorted. "We knew she was involved in RIRA, that's how we were able to trace it. Those weren't faked charities, Inspector, they were real. Their finances were managed by different accountants but the same firm – giving one person access to all of them. Money was skimmed, here and there, but carefully and it was well covered."

John glanced up again to see Donovan and Lestrade glaring at Morgan before the DI sighed,
"Whatever money she may have kept giving them, they never used the gallery again," Morgan continued. "We didn't just lose a good sergeant when Healy died, we lost a lot of information."

"Until Riley turned informant," Donovan said.

"Until then," Morgan agreed.

"He's got to know something," Donovan murmured and John raised his eyes again, a warning on his tongue. She was looking at Lestrade, who gave a curt nod.

"What will you do?" Morgan said. "Arrest him?"


"You could even make a case that he murdered Sergeant Healy," Morgan snapped. "That doesn't mean he did."

"He didn't," John replied and there was a pause before their gazes swung around to him, making him aware that he was suddenly the subject of intense scrutiny by three high ranking police officers.

"John, I know you've become friends with him—" Donovan started. John shook his head, cutting her off, wondering for a moment if this was how Sherlock felt on a case, when he hit on that one detail no one else had spotted yet.

"It's not that. Look," he said, holding out the file, open to the picture of Healy's body and the coroner's notes regarding the wound. "The description of the stab wound. Healy was stabbed by someone holding the knife in his right hand. Through the muscles in the back and the ribs and into the lungs? That would take a lot of force."

"Yes," Donovan agreed. "And?"

"John Riley is left handed. He might know who did this, Sally, but it wasn't him."
None of this made sense.

The Irish inspector, Morgan, had come in and given him a name so that now the hospital ID bracelet on his wrist read 'John A. Riley' instead of 'John Doe'.

He seemed to have a second name, as well. **Terrorist.**

The word was meaningless to him but it ignited something in everyone who heard it and John wished he could understand. All of the reactions – gazes dropping away from him, too friendly smiles, blank looks, dark glares – seemed to be trying to tell him something but he had no idea what. Morgan hadn't seemed surprised, but of course she'd known. Donovan, the London DI, had looked angry and John Watson –

John Watson had looked so many things that John Riley had no idea what to call them.

The word 'betrayal' had come to mind but he wasn't sure he was right.

The details were lost on him, too. Morgan talked to him about *him* – about his attack and his safety and other specifics he couldn't follow. She talked to Donovan and John Watson about RIRA and the IRA and informants and identities being compromised. He'd tried to understand but he didn't even have the basics – RIRA seemed to be something none of them liked, but John had no idea what it meant.

Until a nurse had been kind enough to loan him her phone for a few hours and John had read and read and read.

It was all so… confusing.

He had a name, he had a birthday – eight meaningless digits printed on his hospital ID bracelet – he had a past, he had a home. London was not his home, nor was Manchester, where the police thought he might have been from. He'd been living there until several months ago, Morgan had said. He'd lived there for nearly four years. But his real home was Dublin.

It meant nothing to him.

He'd read about it, trying to find something, some hint, but the facts were nothing more than facts. Some more interesting than others, but he might as well have been reading about a place he'd never heard of before. It was almost true.

He read about Ireland and looked at photos and still felt nothing, which made him uneasy. Maybe they were wrong? Maybe he wasn't John Riley? How could he possibly feel so little about the place he'd come from, the place they said he fought for?

That made no sense, either. John read about the IRA and RIRA, trying to understand, but the history was complicated and he had to read more to get background and then more background to the background until his head began to ache and the screen blurred in front of him. The names of the countries involved – England, Ireland, Northern Ireland – he could keep those straight, but the details got messy and started slipping away and it was names and dates and places he couldn't remember or had maybe never known.

But he'd been there. Morgan had said so. She knew him, she had come for him. He'd blown people
up, apparently. John set down the phone and looked his left hand. John Watson said he'd worked in construction. Building things. Blowing them up meant destroying them.

And killing people.

He didn't feel like he'd killed anyone.

He couldn't imagine wanting to.

He couldn't imagine feeling anything but tired.

He didn't remember these things; he didn't know these things. Someone with his name and his body had walked around and done all the stuff they accused him of and had left him with the blame but not the memories.

He wanted to throw the stupid phone across the room but it wasn't his so he buzzed for the nurse and returned it to her with a murmured thanks. She smiled at him, but there was pity in her expression. Before – he'd been used to that before, because no one had known who he was, including him. Now if there was pity he didn't understand it. Why did they feel that way? Did they feel angry and then remember what had happened to him? Did they feel angry and then remember what had happened to him? Did they pity his choices? Did they sympathize with him?

Didn't they understand that he didn't remember any of it?

He wanted John Watson to come back. The doctor was so good at explaining things in a way that made sense.

But John had looked up the British army and Afghanistan – where John Watson had been stationed – and he'd seen the look on his friend's face.

He didn't think the doctor was coming back.

The room felt cold and lonely.

He touched his wedding ring – John Watson had asked Morgan about his wife. Apparently he didn't have one anymore. They were divorced. He hadn't seen her in over four years.

John wondered if he'd ever missed her.

He hadn't thought to ask for her name.

He drew the covers up carefully to his shoulders, burrowing himself under the blankets, hoping for some warmth. He didn't want to think about this anymore – his head hurt, his chest hurt, his whole body hurt. John closed his eyes and slept.

Riley was fast asleep when John slipped into the room and neither the quiet click of the door being shut nor the sound of John's footsteps disturbed the injured man. John checked the IV line and the machines with a practiced eye before claiming the chair next to the bed. Other than the slow sound of Riley's breathing and the faint hum from the fluorescent light overhead, there were no sounds in the small room. It was as empty and sterile as it had been the first time John had come to visit. The only small personal touches were the books John had bought. There were no other get well tokens.

Should have brought some flowers, John thought, then shook his head at himself. It wasn't likely Riley even noticed a difference. He had no reason to think anything was missing from his room.

It seemed lonely and sad to John, though. When Sherlock had been in the hospital following the
crash, there had been flowers and cards. Upon regaining his sight, the detective had complained about the cacophony of colour but John knew he'd been secretly pleased. There had been visitors, too – Sherlock's family, Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson, even Harry, although she'd come more for John's sake than anything.

Riley had family, too. In a way. Morgan had told them about his ex-wife. John wondered if she knew what had happened to her former husband, if the Irish inspector had thought to call her and let her know. Would she have come if she knew? Would she care? He hadn't left Sherlock's side in the hospital save for when he'd been forced home by Lestrade or Mycroft to get a few hours uninterrupted rest.

He wondered if someone with no memory could feel lonely.

The sound of the door opening distracted him from his musings and he looked up quickly to see Morgan coming into the room, surprise flickering across her features.

"Didn't think you'd be back, Doctor Watson," she commented quietly as she shut the door behind her.

"Yeah," John said, shrugging. "Well." She raised her eyebrows in return but said nothing. He was ignored for a moment while she made a quick check of the room and examined Riley, a frown creasing her features momentarily.

"You're a doctor – and from what I gather, you've spent more time here than his actual doctors. Can you tell me how he is? Really?"

"I'm not a neurologist," John sighed. "And I don't have anything to do with his treatment."

"But you were a combat surgeon. Surely you've seen people in similar situations." John arched his eyebrows and Morgan shook her head. "As I said, I've read your blog. And Inspector Donovan has filled me in on you."

"I just bet she has," John muttered. Still, it was better than Mycroft having decided to do a little impromptu kidnapping of visiting foreign police officers.

"I'd appreciate anything you could tell me."

John sighed, leaning back in his chair, looking at Riley before meeting Morgan's gaze again.

"He's sick. Someone beat the crap of out of him. In my expert medical opinion – I'm really just guessing – it was more than one person. He's lucky he didn't die, according to the A&E surgeon."

"Yes, I know all of that," Morgan replied but there was no impatience in her voice. "I've spoken with all of his doctors and most of the nurses. But you've spent the most time with him. I want to know what you think, Doctor Watson."

"You can call me John," John said and she smiled briefly. "He remembers a lot more than it seems. No, I'm not saying he's hiding anything," he added, holding up a hand to forestall the protest he saw forming on her lips. "Everyone wants him to remember what happened. Look– it's not likely he ever will, or not completely at least. But yesterday he remembered something about his flat here in London. Nothing big – what the table looked like."

John paused, shrugging lightly.

"It's just not the stuff anyone wants to know."
"No, it's not," Morgan sighed. "I know him. I could tell you almost all about him. But I'm not his biographer. I'm supposed to protect him and I can't do that if I can't find the people who put him here."

She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Donovan said he asked for your husband by name. Any idea why?"

"A lot of people know who he is," John said with a shrug. "A lot of people come to him with cases they don't want to – or can't – take to the police. Or if they don't think the police are doing enough."

"And does he help them?"


"Yes," Morgan sighed. "That's the problem. RIRA, the Gardaí, the British Army, friends or family of people he hurt, friends or family of men he sent to prison… It's like having to do a puzzle with only a single piece."

John huffed and Morgan raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Well imagine if all you had was the cardboard side of that piece. Now you know what it's like for him. Sure, it's your job to keep him safe. But you're not the one who stands to be targeted again."

"I know," she said, rubbing her hands together slowly. "And we're spoilt for choice, which leaves us nowhere."

"Hay in a haystack," John heard himself saying. Morgan gave him a puzzled look, eyes darkening momentarily with confusion, but she nodded.

"That's one way of putting it," she agreed and John shook away the memory. "Grasping at straws."

"Why did he move?" he asked abruptly.

"He requested it. Didn't like Manchester much," she replied with a shrug. "London's a big city. We did an assessment. Thought it would be safe enough. We were wrong."

"It's not your fault–"

"No, it's not my fault he did all of those things. It's not my fault he blew up buildings and killed people and wreaked havoc in the name of some misplaced ideal. It's not my fault he might be hiding whoever murdered a police officer. But it is my job to keep him safe and I did fail in that. Now I've got to fix it."

She cut herself off, lips pressing into a thin line as if to physically restrain any more words. Morgan took a deep breath and let it out slowly, eyes moving away to gaze out the window. John wondered what she thought about her assignment. What had it been like to be given that job?

He didn't know if he could have done it.

He looked at Riley, who was fast asleep, worn and slightly pale beneath his bandages. It was hard to imagine him setting a bomb and taking a life – several lives. Had he ever looked at himself in a
mirror and asked himself what he was doing? Had the doubts been there before his son had died? If that hadn't happened, would he still have come to the same conclusion, made the same choice to turn away from his beliefs?

John sighed, recalling what Sherlock had said; this wasn't the same man. But it had been his hands that had set those explosives. Even if he had no idea who had killed Finn Healy, how many people had he killed himself, walking away and letting a bomb do the damage?

He'd seen the aftermath of that too many times in Afghanistan. Pulled too many ruined bodies from rubble – some of whom had been his friends before the shockwaves or the debris had shred their skin and stolen their lives. He'd fought off death, smeared with blood, knowing the people who'd caused these massacres might be walking free, miles from the destruction.

Somewhere in London, the people who had put John Riley in the hospital were doing the same, going about their lives, unrestrained, unworried. The man in the bed in front of him seemed too reduced to have been able to do anything that horrific. And when he was awake, too trusting, too inquisitive.

"I've got to go," John said abruptly, making a show of checking his watch. Sherlock would probably be at home – John hadn't received any texts summoning him to a crime scene or complaining about Mycroft. It was easy enough to tell himself that he wanted to go home solely for his husband's company but he really wanted nothing more than to get out of that room.

"Good night," Morgan said. John nodded a good bye to her as well and slipped back into the quiet corridor, feeling some of the pressure around his lungs ease. The tension drained away as he left the hospital and merged into the crowds crossing Westminster Bridge, leaving him uncomfortably aware that he was abandoning someone who genuinely needed him. John glowered, bundling his hands into his pockets, wondering what the hell he was doing. Staying at the hospital seemed like no better an idea than going home.

He rode the tube back to Baker Street in silence, oblivious to the conversations around him, and climbed back up to street level wearily, tired of arguing with himself. John Riley could wait until the next day – there was nothing he could for the injured man when he was fast asleep anyway. John was going home, back to his life, back to someone who loved him – even if there was the very real possibility that said person might have accidentally set fire to something in his absence.

He felt a smile tugging on his lips at the thought of Sherlock a moment before a hand closed over his mouth and an unfamiliar voice murmured in his ear.

"It'll go better for you if you don't fight, Doctor Watson. We don't want to hurt you but we will if we have to."
John was ducking even as his elbow connected with the stomach of the man behind him, slipping from a loosening grasp. Fingers tightened convulsively on his jacket but he pulled hard, dodging, only to grunt when someone else slammed into him. He connected with a wall, head ringing, shoulders hunching instinctively to protect his face, to get into whatever space he could as he swung his left fist, hitting just below the ribs. A hot gust of air hit his skin with a startled gasp and he took the opening to get free but it hadn't been enough and a shoulder drove into his chest, forcing him against the wall again, one side of his face pressed against the uneven mortar, the sound of scrambling footsteps as the first man joined them. A word he didn't recognize, his mind informing him uselessly that it wasn't English.

"I haven't got any money," John managed, the scrape of jagged brick against his lips to his right, a gloved hand holding his jaw to his left.

"We don't want your bloody money," someone spat – the first man because the voice wasn't close enough, he couldn't feel it against his skin.

"We only want to talk," the second man added.

"Just come around for a chat?" John asked, knowing it was stupid.

The grip on his face tightened, knocking his head against the cold masonry once, sharply, almost perfunctorily. He hummed, or his head did, and his knees gave way.

The blurred feeling resolved itself into cold and the pinprick of a few distant stars overhead. He tried to move his legs but felt sluggish, heavy, cajoling his brain into working – he didn't think he'd lost consciousness. If he had, it hadn't been for very long. The knock had been hard but not hard enough; he wanted to reach up and feel his skull, to check if the sticky sensation was blood or just the haze of a mild concussion.

"We coulda done a lot worse," a voice told him. John tried to focus – the second voice. The one who'd done the hitting.

"Yeah," he agreed. He'd felt that in the hands that had held him. Guessed it from the way the man hadn't gone straight down from a punch to the diaphragm.

"You gonna sit still and not be stupid?"

*What would Sherlock do?* John asked himself and started to snicker, swallowing it hard with a wave of panicked euphoria. Sitting still and not being stupid was not Sherlock's forte.

But focus. He could focus. There'd been two of them – no, two that he'd fought. John listened in the darkness, trying to get his eyes to adjust. Very little light coming through so they had to be away from the street but they were outside because it was cold and the ground and wall against him was hard and frozen. It smelled of rubbish – an alley.

Christ. He'd been almost in sight of the flat. Almost home.

He was probably still almost home.

He felt a wave of regret that Sherlock had cornered Mycroft into eliminating the security years ago.
They weren't watched anymore. Most of the time, John appreciated it. Right now, legs numb, head ringing, he didn't. He wanted torchlight at the end of the alley, shouts, the sound of footsteps scattering, someone helping him up, taking him home. He couldn't bandage himself but Sherlock could and there would be tea and Mrs. Hudson would fuss and bring him something hot and heavy to eat and–

Concentrate, John, he told himself, listening to the pattern of breathing in the darkness. Just the two of them, and himself. He could take them, if only he could see better, if he could plan, if he was sure his legs would respond in time.

Absurdly, he realized he still had his wallet and his phone. He could just call Sherlock. He wasn't aware he'd been moving but there was a smooth pressure on his chin suddenly, gloved hand forcing his head back, searing the raw patch on his skull to the wall.

"Bloody tan," the voice hissed.

Something clicked, something in the voice, in the word. A faint Irish accent. Black and Tans.

He almost laughed, swallowing on it hard, focusing on the pain to quell the absurd humour. Less than an hour ago, Morgan had been regretting too many choices for who had put Riley in the hospital.

Oh god, John thought dully.

"What d'you want from Riley?"

You, John thought, a frown drawing his brows together, making his head ache. I wanted to find you. Oh well done, John.

"Nothing," he managed. His tongue felt thick, clumsy, so he swallowed. It helped a bit but did nothing for the way the world wouldn't stop spinning gently. If he could just focus a little bit more – stupid, he told himself. Don't fixate. "I'm a doctor."

There was a faint echo of laughter, two overlapping tones, edged with raw humour.

"Time was, he'd have blown you to bits. Better times, those."

John said nothing, concentrating on breathing over the pain in his head where the wound was grinding against dirty brick, droplets of blood prickling as they trailed down his neck, behind his ear.

"What do you know?"

John pursed his lips, keeping his silence, listening to the patterned breathing in the darkness. The grip on his jaw tightened, pulled him forward and slammed him against the wall again, just enough give on impact to let a whimper escape his lips. He felt the world spin and dip and there was a flash of heat beneath the cold, spreading outward from his skull.

"What do you know?"

He shook his head – or tried to – ignoring the bright stars that flared behind his eyelids. He was released abruptly, gasping at the sudden loss of pressure, the air driven back out of him immediately with a hard foot to the stomach. John doubled over but there was a blow to his side and another, the pain a crack that ran along his ribs, stabbing his lungs.

"Let up!" That was the first voice, closer now, the sound of shoes on the hard ground. "He can't
bloody talk like that."

"You gonna talk?" the second voice asked, vice-like grip back on John's jaw, hauling him back when he wanted to curl forward, forcing the screaming muscles in his abdomen to extend despite the pain.

"Don't know anything," he managed. There was a hand in his hair now, yanking his head back.

"What's he said?" the first voice hissed. "John bloody Riley. What's he told you?"

John swallowed, trying to breathe properly.

"First the bloody cops, now this," the second voice muttered. "Think you can use him to get to us? Think your army mates'll find us? What's he told you?"

_They don't know_, John realized, a flash of shock overpowering the cold and pain for a moment. They'd put Riley in the hospital and they thought the injured man knew that.

"You want walk out of here? You ever want to walk again?" It was the first voice this time, low, serious. John repressed a shudder; what they'd done to Riley, they could do to him. And wouldn't leave it to chance this time.

_Tell them and they'll vanish_, he thought, coughing weakly to buy himself some time, listening to the sneer in response. _They don't know he doesn't know. Keep them around._

"Nothing," he managed and the hand in his hair was tighter. John choked down a gasp, eyes shut against the sudden flash, against the way the world threatened to tip him over. He could feel the wall so close and didn't think his head could take another impact, not if he wanted to stay conscious.

"Nothing," he repeated, breathing hard around the focused pain in his skull, fingers on his left hand twitching, closing into a fist, itching to reach for his phone. So close. Sherlock could be there in two minutes.

They could snap his neck in far less time.

"He can't," John gasped. "He's not awake."

It was a gamble and he felt himself standing on the edge of a cliff, knowing he'd be pushed over the precipice if they had any idea at all. The air caught in his lungs, muscles in his throat too taut to let him breathe.

_Stupid!_ he told himself.

"Then what?" the second voice hissed. "Who're you, tan?"

"The police," John gasped. "I'm a doctor. I work with the police."

There was another teetering moment then a hiss, dissatisfaction, surprise, he couldn't tell.

"And what're you gonna tell them?" the first voice asked. It was almost a purr, almost understanding, but John heard the venom beneath it.

"Nothing," he said again.

"Too bloody right." The fingers in his hair yanked and he felt his skull collide with the wall.
It couldn't have been long, a couple of minutes, John thought, but he was alone when he could think again, when he could feel the cold creeping back in, pushing at the pain. He listened but there were no footsteps, no sounds of breathing except his own, breaking into whimpers on the edge of each exhalation. Distantly, he could hear the sounds of the city, the purr of traffic, the call of sirens, the far-off vibration of aeroplanes.

Concentrate, he told himself, remembering that he'd thought it before. Cold fingers fumbled for his phone but it slipped through his grasp in his pocket, too slim and slick for clumsy, unresponsive digits. John drew a deep breath, winter air burning in his lungs, held it, released it slowly. He forced himself to do so again, calming the hammering of his heart. The adrenaline singing in his veins might get him up but collapsing halfway down the alley wouldn't help.

The wall scraped against his coat as he pushed himself slowly to his feet, fighting the haze of stars that flickered around the edges of his vision, working to keep the ragged edge from his breathing. Standing wasn't so bad – once he got used to it – but moving would be. He couldn't slump along the wall the whole way; there were bins and other hazards in his path. He curled the fingers of his right hand into the brickwork whenever he could, steadying himself on the bins and railings as he went past, one slow, deliberate step at a time. He watched for movement, forcing the alertness on himself.

He should have been alert before. Ten years ago, his guard wouldn't have been down.

Do you feel safe, Sherlock? John laughed, a hoarse sound that seemed too loud in the empty alley. He'd felt safe. A block from home, the flat almost in sight. The familiarity was lulling, so easy to trust.

The blood had dried on his skin in places, was still dripping in others. He'd have it matted in his hair, he realized. Someone would stop him if he went out like this. There would be ambulances and police and Donovan would find out and they'd tip the one advantage they had. She'd be furious and would cut him off and then–


"Bloody tan."

It's not the same!

Working against the numbness in his fingers, John pulled up his hood. With his head down, it would hide the worst of it. His slow pace could be mistaken for anything – ambling, laziness, drunkenness. It didn't matter, as long as it got him home. One foot in front of the other, eyes on pavement that was unfamiliar if only because he didn't normally look down when he walked.

The front door gave him some trouble but he managed, half stumbling inside, blinking in the sudden light and warmth. The door knocked shut behind him again and John felt that sense of safety returning. He couldn't call it false no matter how hard he tried – this was home.

He managed to get his keys back into his pocket, slumped against the wall, breathing hard. He wanted to sink down but sitting down now meant not getting up, it meant falling asleep with his head still bleeding.

The stairs swam in front of him, the flat invisible beyond the turn. John sucked in a deep breath, trying to steel himself. He'd faced much worse before, in much worse condition. Fourteen steps with a handrail for support.

He could do this.
His legs trembled in protest, muscles begging to sit down. Another deep breath just made his ribs ache, made him want to curl forward against the bruising pain that seemed to be spreading as the warmth seeped back into his body.

*C'mon, Watson,* he told himself. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back then wished he hadn't.

*Come on!* he repeated. This wasn't so hard. One foot in front of the other, like he'd done all the way here, and so gravity would be working more against him, but it wasn't that far. He'd done this on a cane, leg screaming in protest. He'd done this backwards, kissing Sherlock as he went. He'd done this drunk, just as dizzy as he felt now, but lighter, laughing. He'd done this with Sherlock's weight slumped against him, dragging the detective back upstairs to patch him up.

And now he was being hauled up, he realized, an arm slung over Sherlock's shoulders. For a moment, they were face to face, so close that John inhaled Sherlock's breath, startled by the pinched expression, the banked anger beneath pale grey eyes. Not at him, though, because Sherlock said nothing. No ranting, no acerbic comments about John's stupidity, no questions.

The gentleness of the firm grip surprised him; somewhere between the tube and here – in the alley – he'd forgotten how carefully Sherlock could manage him when needed. And now it was one step at a time, going up very slowly, but it was easier with someone to lean on and Sherlock was murmuring meaningless encouragements the whole way.

"How'd you know?" John managed when the door was shut behind him and he was being lowered onto the couch, trying to ignore the way the flat was spinning gently.

"Standing at the bottom of the stairs ignoring my calls?" Sherlock replied and there was almost a hint of humour, of 'obvious' in his voice.

"Oh." His coat was removed and then Sherlock vanished, returning with John's medical kit. John talked him through the cleaning and the stitching, hissing and wincing, earning sharp apologies that made him want to shake his head but he couldn't move without risking getting jabbed in the skull. Sherlock's fingers were steady and sure, working evenly but carefully.

"You can't sleep," Sherlock said, fingers curling under John's chin when his head dipped forward. The doctor had a flash of panic at the touch then it was gone, vanishing under the familiar feeling.

"Not yet."

"I know," John managed. His voice was thick and tired.

"What do you need?" Sherlock asked, crouching in front of him, a sharp edge in his deep baritone.

*Sleep,* John thought, keeping his eyes open. The idea was too appealing, to curl up in bed next to Sherlock, all of that warmth against him, around him.


Sherlock nodded but there was a flicker in his features – that anger again. John wondered what would happen after he did go to sleep. Sherlock had eyes all over the city, and no one noticed the homeless, he said. They blended in with the background.

They would have noticed, though. There'd been no one there but them.

John wondered if men like them ever felt safe.

The thunder in Sherlock's eyes made him wonder if they'd ever feel safe again.
"… he's sleeping."

John drifted awake just enough to catch Sherlock's low tones reaching him from the living room. Through the small opening in the door he could hear two murmured voices – one Sherlock's, the other Mycroft's.

_of course Mycroft bloody knows_, he thought, but without much rancour. It was hard to care over the aches that gripped his skull and chest and the fatigue that clung to his muscles. Sherlock had left a bottle of ibuprofen and a glass of water on the nightstand. John stared at it for a brief moment, debating, then shut his eyes. He could sleep through the headache and any movement would bring Sherlock, which would bring Mycroft.

He wasn't in the mood for his brother-in-law right now, so he burrowed deeper into the duvet and pillows and sank back into sleep.

He moved through half-formed dreams of Bastion and the field hospital, old friends now gone, the room at St. Thomas' and John Riley, the images mingling and confusing themselves until he roused himself enough to shake them away. He slipped into a deeper sleep, half aware of the pain in his head and ribs and the flat door shutting behind Mycroft when he eventually left. Footsteps in the hallway and the faint creak of floorboards announced Sherlock's quiet presence in the room, but John didn't let himself wake up fully, not until thirst and the pain in his head dragged him reluctantly back to consciousness.

He was alone again so he shuffled from under the covers, moving slowly to keep the worst of the pain at bay. Standing didn't make him dizzy – at least not more than he expected to be in his dehydrated and underfed state – so he padded barefoot into the living room.

Sherlock had been bent over his microscope but was up in a shot, crossing the room before John had the chance to take another step, and long, cool fingers enclosed his face, holding lightly but with a definite warning against moving. He bent to John's eye level, piercing grey eyes scouring, evaluating. The intensity was heady given his concussion.

Sherlock pursed his lips in something approaching a satisfied expression and steered him to the sofa, settling him down before examining his injuries, slim fingers moving through John's hair before pulling up his shirt and probing the tender bruises skilfully but clinically.

_Pity_, John thought vaguely, chuckling quietly to himself. The amusement made him feel better, chased away some of the fatigue.

"Tea and toast, I think," Sherlock declared and was back in the kitchen, the sounds of porcelain being knocked about making John wince. A few minutes later, he was being presented with tea – as always, too sweet but still welcome – and toast scraped with the barest amount of jam. John smiled at the fussing and sipped his tea gingerly.

"What did Mycroft want?" he asked as Sherlock resettled himself at his microscope.

"To be insufferable," Sherlock replied, focused on whatever unfortunate specimen was smeared across the glass plate beneath the lenses.

"His weekly appointment with you, then?" John asked, earning himself a twitch of the lips which was, for Sherlock, very nearly a smirk.
"He has the whole of the British government," Sherlock complained. "I can't understand why he doesn't harass them."

"Because the whole of the British government isn't his baby brother," John replied. "You are."

"More's the pity."

"He doesn't come without a reason," John pointed out, resisting the urge to roll his eyes, suspecting it would do nothing for his headache. Even if that reason is a thinly veiled excuse just to check up on you, he added silently. He sighed to himself; after last night, it was probably an excuse to check up on him, too. Something like this wouldn't escape Mycroft's notice.

"Mm," Sherlock said noncommittally and John waited, nibbling at the toast, letting the silence stretched out. A frown twitched across Sherlock's features – evidence he'd just realized he had more to say and hadn't said it.

"Yes, he had something for you."

"For me?" John repeated. Sherlock looked up with his best withering obvious expression.

"It's on the desk," his husband sniffed and John glanced to where a small, localized hurricane had apparently struck. Whatever it was that Mycroft had left for him, it wasn't immediately visible. He waited a moment to see if Sherlock would clarify any further. When that didn't happen, he started to push himself to his feet with only partly feigned reluctance.

Sherlock's head snapped up, eyes narrowing, and he was on his feet instantly, shooting John a reprimanding look. The doctor suppressed a smile, sinking back onto the sofa. He'd thought that would work.

"Here, if you're so eager to know," Sherlock snapped, extending a flash drive to him. John took it, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"Well?" he asked when no explanation was forthcoming. "What is it?"

"No idea," Sherlock retorted, hovering in front of John as if to keep him from trying to stand again. The doctor fought down another wave of amusement.

"You didn't look?"

"Of course not," Sherlock sniffed, as though the idea of snooping into anyone else's business had never once crossed his mind. John let himself grin this time – gingerly. He'd probably ignored it just to piss Mycroft off. And possibly because of some misplaced idea that doing so was being kind to John while he was injured. The thought made him chuckle and Sherlock's eyes narrowed again.

"Whatever it is, it can wait," he said icily. John sighed.

"Mycroft isn't so good at waiting," he replied, neglecting to mention that Sherlock wasn't either.

"Your health is far more important."

"And looking at a computer screen is going to tax me into a relapse?" John asked, lips twitching into a wider smile.

"It could easily give you a headache."

"I already have a headache."
"Clearly."

"Mycroft wouldn't have dropped it off if he didn't think it was important."

"Mycroft thinks everything he does is important," Sherlock muttered, refocusing on the microscope. John let the silence settle again, studying the flash drive. Sherlock hadn't mentioned the fact that John had been attacked and beaten yesterday for information about Riley – he was almost emphatically not mentioning it. And he wasn't asking John to drop the case despite the obvious danger; a deep breath followed by a wince and hiss that made Sherlock raise his head was a good reminder of what he really faced with this investigation.

He sighed and Sherlock's expression pinched into a frown. With conscientious movements, his husband put away his equipment, stowing the mystery specimen carefully and covering the microscope before joining John on the sofa. John smiled faintly at the uncomfortable look on Sherlock's face; he'd never liked giving care in the aftermath of an injury or an illness, but he did at least try. Usually.

"It can probably wait a bit," John agreed. Sherlock pushed himself to his feet and disappeared into the bedroom, returning with the water and the ibuprofen and a pointed look. John took the pills before finishing his tea and toast. He was grateful Sherlock hadn't mentioned going to a hospital – Mycroft had probably tried to insist upon it, which meant the discussion was off the table unless John brought it up. But nothing was broken, even if he would be moving slowly for the next several days.

When Sherlock scooted to the other end of the sofa, John gave him a quizzical look, his unspoken question answered by the pillow Sherlock settled onto his lap.

"No," John said with a smile. "You'll get bored in ten minutes and probably just dump me on the floor."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and held up his phone.

"Stolen cameos. Antiques. I'm trying to trace their route; I suspect they'll turn up at auction in France or Italy. A circuitous route, of course, but it's a simple matter of finding the right starting point."

"Case from the website?"

"Mm," Sherlock agreed. John held out for a moment before relenting and settling down gingerly onto his back. He fell asleep to the sound of Sherlock tapping at his phone's screen and the feel of long fingers stroking carefully through his hair.

"Isn't this bloody city supposed to be infested with bloody cameras?"

"They're not much good when there's no light, sir."

And that's the truth of it, Lestrade thought. There were actually a number of strategically placed CCTV cameras guarding the entrances to the construction site – and somewhere, unseen, someone was probably very vigilantly manning them now that the police were there.

Hands in his pockets, he stared at one of them before exhaling a sigh in the frozen air. It was too damn cold to be standing around outside. Too damn close to Christmas to be watching the forensics experts and the coroner carefully disinter the body of a man some luckless construction work had stumbled upon just over an hour previous. Lestrade had questioned the man himself and had dismissed him almost immediately as a suspect. No one feigned distress at seeing a corpse that well. Still, his officers would have to follow up on it.
The cameras wouldn't provide any evidence, it seemed.

A little under a month ago – twenty-five days, to be exact – someone had managed to cut the power to the site in the middle of the night, disabling the security lights and effectively blinding the cameras.

And then, apparently, had carried a murdered man inside, buried him, and walked back, unconcerned, into London's winter streets.

"A month?" Lestrade asked and the coroner raised her head, meeting his eyes grimly.

"The cold weather's slowed decomposition and I can't say for sure until he's back in the lab, but given the temperature and the rate of decomp, he's been here three to four weeks."

Lestrade pinched the bridge of his nose, withheld a sigh. Someone was going to have to tell this man's family. He thought of Helen and the kids and the tree surrounded by presents in their sitting room. He didn't let himself imagine what it would be like to have that taken away.

*Merry bloody Christmas*, he thought as the coroner and her team lifted the poor sod onto a stretcher.

The first file was black-and-white CCTV footage, three different angles, from an area of London that John didn't immediately recognize.

"Canton Street between Saracen and Upper N Streets," Sherlock said and John resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

He was surprised there were cameras at all – the area looked quiet and not particularly well-to-do, with a church evident in one view, what looked like a school in another, and a line of row houses in all three views. There were several cars parked on the street and but few pedestrians. The time stamp put it on the eighteenth of November in the early afternoon.

Nestled between Sherlock's knees, his back resting on his husband's chest and a blanket draped over him for warmth, John watched the apparently sleepy street. For a minute, nothing happened, then a water department van drove up and a metre reader climbed out, heading for one of the houses. John frowned gingerly. What was Mycroft getting at? Is this what passed for fun for him these days?

He was admitted to the house and emerged a few minutes later, pulling the zip of his uniform jacket up, head ducked and shoulders hunched, probably against the cold weather. The sky was low and the gloomy day was obvious despite the monochromatic footage.

The apparent star of the show made his way to the next house and disappeared again for a few minutes. Baffled, John watched him make his rounds. He could feel Sherlock's warm breath ghosting against the top of his head, brushing the tender and swollen bruises, but the sensation wasn't uncomfortable. John resisted the urge to shift or to ask what Sherlock had noticed that he hadn't. Mycroft had brought this for him, so presumably it had something to do with John Riley, but he had no idea what.

The metre reader was admitted to a final house – by a man this time, John noted, whereas the others at home had been women – and came back out a few minutes later, pulling the zip of his uniform jacket up, head ducked and shoulders hunched, probably against the cold weather. The sky was low and the gloomy day was obvious despite the monochromatic footage.

Oh yes, city employees making phone calls. Subversive behaviour. Definitely, John thought wryly. The man turned slightly and John stiffened in surprise, certain he'd taken a picture of the house. He frowned, leaning forward slightly, ignoring the warning pressure of Sherlock's fingertips on his
shoulder. Was that Riley's house? But he'd said he had a flat – and that hadn't been Riley who had answered the door, nor was it anywhere near the area he'd been mostly seen and, presumably, lived.

The metre reader turned, slipping his phone back into his pocket, making for his van, and John just managed to swallow a gasp.

"That's him," he said as Riley moved into clearer view, properly facing the nearest camera now. It was shocking to see him uninjured – and shocking to see him dressed as a water department employee. No one John had interviewed had said anything about that – everyone had seen him with construction worker's gear.

He felt Sherlock nod against him and wondered briefly how long it had taken the detective to spot that. As John watched, Riley climbed into his van and drove away, the video ending almost as he was out of the frame. John didn't hesitate, but opened the next video file Mycroft had included.

This was better footage, clearer picture, better angles, early morning, three days after the previous video. The entrance to a construction site. Some kind of multi-story complex, John thought – flats or offices maybe. The surrounding street wasn't visible beyond glimpses of parked cars and pavement, but the workers coming in, having their IDs checked, were in plain view. Most of them were men, coming in ones and twos, congregating into slightly larger groups as they passed through the gate. John scanned the faces, tensing slightly when he saw a now familiar face. Riley, dressed in work clothing, a hard hat tucked under his arm, presented his identification. He spent a minute conversing with the guard and then was waved through.

"What?" he murmured to himself as the video ended. John twisted enough to see Sherlock's face; his husband didn't say anything but John read the expression easily enough. A man with known links to RIRA, who specialized in bombing, accessing private homes and construction sites.

It wasn't precisely enough to make him guilty of anything, John thought, but it certainly didn't make him look innocent.

"Sally."

Donovan looked up at Greg Lestrade standing in her doorway, tired and resigned. She waved him into a chair, concerned by the flatness of his tone, the way he was fixing his dark eyes on her.

"You heard about the body from the construction site?" he asked and she snorted faintly.

"Who hasn't?" Even if it hadn't been all over the news, coppers gossiped like school girls and the story had reached her quickly from someone she'd worked with in Homicide. "Found out who he is yet?"

"They're still working on the official ID," Lestrade replied and Donovan cocked a curious eyebrow. "But the cold weather worked with us this time. We ran his fingerprints. Guess where he was twelve years ago?"
Chapter 19

John endured Mrs. Hudson's fussing with good humour, letting her fluff his pillows unnecessarily and tuck the afghan more securely around him. Sherlock watched with mostly hidden disapproval – because he'd just done the same thing ten minutes ago.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Hudson, I really am. They just knocked me around a little," John insisted, downplaying the injuries for her. As a doctor, he wasn't really worried since they were all bruises, not breaks. He ached everywhere – although the painkillers had taken the edge off – but he wasn't in any real danger.

"Oh, you boys," she sighed, planting a motherly kiss on his forehead. "No one should think that being knocked around isn't a bad thing. Mrs. Turner's married ones never get into this kind of trouble."

John repressed a smile at Sherlock's snort.

"That's because they are boring and we are not," he said coolly.

"They're perfectly lovely," Mrs. Hudson replied primly and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"Lovely," he muttered. "Forgive me, Mrs. Hudson, but I'd rather be remarkable than lovely."

"You can be both," John commented to which Sherlock only raised his eyebrows in reply.

"I'll make you some soup, John. Goodness knows what Sherlock would mix in if he were cooking."

"I'm a perfectly capable cook," Sherlock protested but, John noted, didn't make any move to get up from his work and stop her. He smiled slightly, suppressing a wince as he shifted on the couch to get more comfortable. Sherlock's sharp gaze shot back to him, fixing on him firmly until John relaxed, giving him a slight nod. There was a reproving look on his husband's features for a brief moment as Mrs. Hudson vanished into their kitchen.

He was presented with a steaming bowl of chicken soup and a slice of buttered bread a few minutes later. John ate slowly, letting Mrs. Hudson hover over him while he did so, and chatted with her about her niece's upcoming arrival and their Boxing Day travel plans to Buckinghamshire.

"I'm glad you're going," she said, shooting Sherlock a look over her shoulder. "Your poor father. No one should be alone at Christmas."

"Mycroft will be there Christmas day," Sherlock murmured, focused on whatever experiment he was working on.

"In the end, family's all we have," Mrs. Hudson insisted.

John finished his soup hurriedly, handing the bowl and plate back to her.

"I need a nap," he said to forestall any more discussion about family. She might have missed the tension that slid along the line of Sherlock's muscles where his neck met his shoulders, but John didn't. He'd lived too many months seeing it, having learned to watch for it.

"Of course, dear," she said, leaning down to kiss his forehead again. "Sherlock, make sure he's able to sleep. No explosions."
"No more than necessary," Sherlock replied with a twitch of his lips and Mrs. Hudson sighed, shaking her head. When she was gone, John began a silent countdown in his head, reaching twenty-two before Sherlock got up, shut the door, then fluffed up John's pillow and adjusted the blanket.

"You should sleep," Sherlock said. "I know a doctor who regards it as an extremely effective treatment. For everything."

John chuckled.

"You should listen to him. He's right more often than you think."

Sherlock huffed and bent down, brushing his lips over John's in a light kiss. John returned it, eyes dropping shut.

"Go to sleep, John," Sherlock whispered, breath warm against John's skin. John smiled again, managing a murmured assent before he let himself drift away.

He awoke feeling warm and almost comfortable, the pain in his ribs and head dulled to a background ache. John let himself float peacefully in a half awake haze, lulled by the faint sound of the traffic outside and the smell of pine from the Christmas tree. He had some vague memory of Mrs. Hudson having returned and arguing with Sherlock about calling the police – although he hoped that was a dream.

When he finally opened his eyes, he felt himself being watched and turned his head just enough to see Sherlock sat in his chair, gazing at him steadily from behind steepled fingers. This wasn't the detective lost in thought or his husband evaluating his rest but something deeper.

"Everything okay?" John asked, voice still laced with sleep.

"There's been a murder."

"Oh," John said, feeling a mild flash of surprise. "You didn't have to wait for me to wake up if Lestrade called–"

"No, I haven't been consulted," Sherlock replied. John sat up carefully, wincing and hissing as he did so. A small table had been moved next to the sofa and Sherlock had left him a glass of water and some painkillers, which John downed gratefully.

He froze in the act of putting the glass aside, meeting Sherlock's gaze again. The detective shook his head but John didn't trust the immediate flash of relief.

"As far as I know, John Riley is fine. Apparently you managed to convince his former associates that he's still unconscious. There's been no news of an attempt on someone's life in a hospital at any rate."

"Okay," John said carefully, allowing himself to feel some reassurance. He wasn't sure what he thought about this – obviously it was a good thing that Riley's attackers hadn't found him again, but he wasn't sure he wanted to be spending the emotion on a terrorist, former or not. "Then what is it?"

"It would be best to show you," Sherlock replied. He unfolded from John's chair in a smooth movement and settled into the space on the sofa the doctor cleared for him, laptop propped on his knees. After a brief moment of typing, the computer was passed to John, who was greeted with a headline announcing the discovery of a murdered man's body at a construction site.

He read the story carefully – most of it was still speculation with a couple of hard facts from
Lestrade's team. There were no pictures yet of the victim and he remained unidentified, but the photographs of the construction site turned crime scene were uncomfortably familiar. The angle was different – these were mostly taken from the street, the press obviously not having access to the scene itself – but some of the buildings in the background were the same.

A glance at Sherlock confirmed it.

"Could be a coincidence," John said, not believing it.

"Mycroft doesn't deal in coincidences," his husband replied. John nodded, a numb cold settling into his stomach.

"We don't know that the victim is the same man in the CCTV footage," he pointed out reasonably. Sherlock nodded but his expression didn't change.

"We don't know yet," he agreed. "Are you feeling well enough for a little light burglary?"

"This is insane," John hissed, to which Sherlock responded with a faint smile and a glimpse of a police badge – probably stolen from Lestrade – that was immediately returned to his coat pocket. The doctor sighed, trying to hunch his shoulders against the rain without actually doing anything so stupid as bending or tensing. He was moving slowly so as not to aggravate his ribs or let the concussion get the better of him. Sherlock had even slowed his own normally rapid pace to accommodate, which the doctor would have appreciated a lot more if he weren't standing in the rain behind a possibly dead man's house.

"Yes and what will we say if the real police show up?" he asked, wincing against a drop of rain that trickled down his spine with unerring accuracy.

"I think I can talk my way out of any problems that might arise from patrol officers being sent round," Sherlock replied dryly, checking a window expertly, giving a triumphant hiss when it eased open reluctantly under his grasp. "If not, Lestrade will take care of it."

"He'll be a bit busy today, I bet," John shot back. Sherlock ignored him, slithering through the window with all the grace of a cat in a six-foot-two frame.

"Stay there," the detective ordered. "I'll open the door for you."

"You'd better," John warned. His only answer was a retreating view of Sherlock but a minute later the door into the garden was eased open. John hurried to it as fast as his protesting body would allow, stepping gratefully into the dryness. He closed his eyes instinctively when he felt something on his face, breath catching and making his ribs ache.

"It's a towel," Sherlock said with a hint of impatience. John opened his eyes as it was pulled away, then suffered his husband checking the stitching on his skull, patting it dry. This probably counted as medical care from Sherlock. John smiled slightly. He'd take what he could get.

"It's colder than it should be," John commented, speaking in a whisper. "Heat's not been on for a while."

"Several weeks, I should imagine," Sherlock commented, leading John towards the front of the house. "Or it's been turned on for brief periods of time. Someone's been taking care of this place."

"Post on the table," John said. There were two small piles of it, organized into regular and junk. "Wouldn't someone know if whoever lived here was missing then? Unless he was meant to be on
holiday."

"Or they were told he was on holiday," Sherlock replied. "Or, perhaps, the person who murdered him was the one watching over his house to make it appear someone was home."

"But no one reported seeing John Riley here!"

Sherlock looked down at him, grey eyes cool with a sharp glint.

"You assume I meant Riley," he commented and John opened his mouth to retort, finding his voice lost – he had immediately assumed that. "It could easily be someone else – there's no reason for your friend to have been involved, although his presence here on the footage Mycroft sent is telling. But it's easy enough to fake an email or a text message to a neighbour."

John sighed, then wished he hadn't when his ribs protested.

"Sit down," Sherlock ordered.

"And do what?" John asked. "Just sit here while you snoop around a maybe murdered man's house?"

"Yes," the detective said vaguely.

"What do you expect to find?" John asked as he made his way into the living room, shoes leaving damp impressions on the scuffed hardwood. "A big sign that says I'm a member of RIRA?"

"It doesn't have to be big," Sherlock said with a twitch of his lips and John rolled his eyes. "If you want to make yourself useful, look around this room. But if you feel dizzy at all, sit down."

"Yes, doctor," John replied, earning a sharp glare.

"And call if you need me," Sherlock replied.

"I will," John promised – he meant it, but in part just to satisfy the detective. Sherlock was beginning to have that look about him that indicated he'd be serious about enforcing rest. Usually when John was directed to spend time in bed it was for very different reasons, but Sherlock wasn't above getting him back for all the rest John had imposed on him when he'd had his own concussions two years ago.

And really, he knew this was ill advised. He should be lying down, if not sleeping.

He'd never been very good at following medical advice. Even his own.

He searched the living room as methodically as he could but there wasn't much to do. In sharp contrast to Baker Street, where books were crammed onto every available surface, there was only one bookshelf, filled with a random assortment. John tried to see patterns in the dust that had settled over everything, to see if specific books were less coated, indicating that they'd been used more. The few that were contained nothing of interest but were dog-eared, so probably just reread. He opened a few more at random and found nothing, then poked through the DVD collection and checked under all the cushions, mindful not to overexert himself. The sounds of Sherlock moving around the rest of the house were reassuring.

John eventually settled onto the couch, wishing he'd thought to bring some painkillers. To distract himself, he tried to observe the room more closely, looking for any inconsistencies, but either there was nothing out of place here or he wasn't seeing it. He was sidetracked from his attempts when
Sherlock came back in, flourishing a handful of photographs.

"Someone's been through here already," the detective announced. "Laptop gone, no sign of any wallets or keys or phones. There was a desktop in the office but the tower was removed – it had been under the desk, nearly out of sight, so whoever was sorting the post wouldn't have noticed, and there are no plants in the office, so no reason for her to go in there." John raised his eyebrows but didn't ask how Sherlock knew the minder was a woman. Probably some subtle lingering hint of perfume or the fading impression of a shoe on a rug somewhere.

"Our mystery inhabitant did know John Riley, however."

"What?"

Sherlock passed him the photographs. There were three, each taken from a distance, probably on a phone, he thought, because they weren't zoomed in.

"But Riley came here!" John protested. "If the man who lived here was following him, had recognized him– why would he put himself in danger like that?"

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow.

"Who said he was?" John opened his mouth, but a raised hand forestalled him. "The disguise might not have been to fool the occupant of this house, but to fool whomever else might be watching. They may have been intending to meet."

"But then why take these pictures?" John asked.

"And why hide them so effectively that whoever took the computers didn't find them?" Sherlock added.

"Could you send the fingerprints to Dublin?" Donovan asked.

"I don't need to," Morgan replied, arms crossed, gaze still intent on the face of the dead man stretched out on the morgue slab between them. "I know who he is."

She was silent for a long moment before sighing and meeting the DI's gaze.

"Neil Hayes. He's a RIRA member– well former member, now."

"Riley knew him?" Donovan demanded.

"Oh yes."

"His fingerprints were left at the Gossard Gallery twelve years ago."

"I'm not surprised," Morgan admitted. "He was in the same cell as Riley. When Riley came over to our side, we wanted to bring Hayes in for questioning about Sergeant Healy's murder. Never could though."

"Why not?"

Morgan fixed Donovan with a dark glare.

"Because he vanished shortly after Sergeant Healy was killed and we had no information on his whereabouts. Not even John Riley knew where he'd gone."
Chapter 20

John opened his eyes and immediately regretted it.

He felt worse than he had the day before, like someone had bound him up during the night so that he couldn't move. Every joint was stiff and sore. Pain lanced up his bruised ribs when he rolled carefully onto his side, and even the slide of the cotton sheets against his skin felt rasping and raw. He closed his eyes again, failing to stifle a low groan, and groped blindly for the painkillers that were still on the nightstand.

"Sherlock," John called, after managing to locate the bottle and down two tablets. His voice was weak, little more than a croak. He cleared his throat, wincing against the ache in his side as he did so. "Sherlock?" he called again.

No answer. John groaned as he rolled onto his back again, listening intently. The flat was silent and still – and not the kind of stillness that indicated Sherlock was at home and absorbed in something.

*Good bloody timing,* John thought, scowling to himself before forcing his features to relax. With a few muttered curses, he sat up slowly and waited to see if the change would make him lightheaded.

When he felt steady enough, he climbed out of bed and padded wearily into the living room, glancing around for his phone. It was on the small table beside the couch, along with a full glass of water and an unopened package of HobNobs. John managed a tired smile as he settled gingerly on the sofa. Sherlock's breakfasts were usually a bit more elaborate than this, but he wasn't particularly hungry. John nibbled on a biscuit as he checked his phone.

Sherlock had left him a hasty text message, the incomprehensible kind John associated with early case communication. Something about a stolen gem and a turkey. He couldn't quite put the two together and gave up trying in defence against the headache it threatened to cause.

He nibbled a bit more at the biscuit, eyeing the water critically. Somehow, water and chocolate didn't seem at all appetizing. With an inward sigh, John rose and shuffled into the kitchen to make himself a pot of tea. His phone buzzed lightly on the counter as new text message arrived.

*Be home around one. If you need anything, call Mrs. Hudson. For God's sake, don't do anything stupid. SH.*

*Fine advice for you to be giving anyone,* John thought, smiling despite the dull ache it caused in his head. He stared at his phone for a moment, debating with himself, then unlocked the screen and rang Charlotte Morgan instead.

He managed to shave and change before the Irish inspector arrived but judging by her expression, he looked about as rough as he felt. John waved Morgan into Sherlock's chair as Mrs. Hudson – who had seen Morgan upstairs – pattered about, making tea and ensuring that John was comfortable.

When the landlady was gone, Morgan put her tea aside and turned to John, banked fire behind her dark eyes.

"You'd better not be about to tell me that you walked into a door," she snapped.

"No," John said, sipping his tea. "I walked into two of John Riley's friends."
"What?"

John relayed the story to her, watching her expression darken, her lips pursing into a thin white line. He waited for interruption that didn't come and, when he'd finished, Morgan gave a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose, features weary. His heart went out to her – this was probably not how she'd intended to spend her Christmas.

"Did you see anything?" the inspector asked. "Colouring, scars?"

"They were both taller than me," John said, ignoring the faint answering huff. "Both had Northern Irish accents. It was dark and they got me from behind and into the alley quickly."

Morgan studied him for a long moment and John fought the discomfort at being so plainly assessed. He was used to it with Sherlock – someone else sitting in Sherlock's chair subjecting him to the same scrutiny was unnerving.

"Nothing else?" she pressed.

"No. Sorry."

She set her jaw, eyes bright, then shook her head.

"First Riley, then Hayes, now you," she commented, then gave a sharp laugh. "Or rather, first Hayes, then Riley, then you."

"What?" John asked. "Who's Hayes?"

"Watch the news, Doctor Watson?"

"Yeah, all the time," he replied. "And read it. Sherlock's always got an eye on it in case something interesting happens."

"Doesn't he count murder as interesting?"

"Of course--" John began. "Oh. The murdered man from yesterday." He'd suspected that and thought guiltily of the flash drive he'd stowed in one of the desk drawers, out of sight of any potentially curious eyes.

"The murdered man from yesterday," Morgan confirmed. "Neil Hayes, formerly of Killycard, Ireland, former RIRA member, and my newest bloody reason to be in this city during the holidays. And now, of course, you too."

"I'll be fine," John replied.

"Oh yes, I can see that," Morgan snapped. "Do you think this is a game, Doctor Watson? These men are dangerous. Do you understand that? They're killers. They've already put one man in the hospital and by the looks of you, you should have been there, too. They attacked you within sight of your home! It doesn't matter how good of a man you are – that means nothing to them. You mean nothing to them."

John drew a careful breath, swallowing his automatic retort that he'd been to Afghanistan, that he knew how to handle himself around these type of people. He had information about them that Morgan didn't – he'd gone so far as to break into one of their houses.

Telling her wasn't worth the trouble she'd give him, though.
"Did you ask John about this Neil Hayes? Did he know him?" John asked, deciding to play dumb. Sherlock had locked up after they'd finished and slithered back out through the window – with a little luck, no one would even know anyone else had been there.

"What do you expect he'd tell me?" Morgan replied.

"It might spark some memory if they knew each other."

"If they knew each other," Morgan echoed, gaze sliding away momentarily. The edges of her lips curled upward but the light in her dark eyes was sharp, humourless. "Oh, they knew each other, Doctor. Neil Hayes is just one more body linked to John Riley."

"What?" John demanded.

"Riley was a construction worker. Good trade – especially for someone in his line of work. Allowed him access to all sorts of places that he otherwise couldn't get into. Like the site where Hayes was found."

"That's not even enough to keep him in police custody," John protested, trying not to think of the face on the CCTV footage, of the photos of Riley taken from Hayes' home that Sherlock had hidden away somewhere.

"Never is," Morgan replied with a careless shrug. "Maybe it's just another one of the string of coincidences that follow him around. Like the fact that Hayes has been dead for four weeks, which is also when the power mysteriously failed at the construction site after hours."

And a few days after that CCTV video, John thought, feeling a warning prickling along his spine.

"And shortly before someone beat the living daylights out of Riley and presumably left him for dead." She pursed her lips as if to keep herself from saying more. The cold anger in her voice made John suddenly wonder if she regretted that Riley's attackers hadn't done a better job.

"You don't like him, do you?" he asked, as if forcing someone else to admit it would help drown out the doubt that was gnawing in his stomach.

"No, Doctor Watson, I don't," Morgan replied, returning her gaze to him, expression cool. She studied him quietly for a moment that was too long to be comfortable, but spoke over him when John drew a breath to say something.

"Do you know why we brought Riley in for questioning in the first place, Doctor?" she asked. "No, of course you don't. Even if he could have told you, he wouldn't have."

"What?" John snapped, wincing internally at the echoing pain that caused in his skull.

"Do the Massareene Barracks shootings ring any bells?"

John frowned – there was some distant memory but he couldn't put his finger on it so he shook his head gingerly. Surprise flickered over Morgan's features and she cocked an eyebrow at him coolly.

"In 2009, six men were shot in Northern Ireland near the Massareene Barracks. Four of them British army soldiers. Two of them died."

"And you think John Riley did that, too?" John demanded.

"No," Morgan replied. "But we know RIRA did. And we have evidence he was in Antrim – the
town – when it happened. The police managed to bring him in for questioning but of course he knew nothing. Shooting isn't his style. It's much harder to walk away from than it is from a set bomb.”

John sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose carefully. He was beginning to wish he'd never called her – none of this meant anything to him.

No, he told himself. That was a lie. It meant something. It meant more reason to never have become involved in this in the first place.

"He fit the profile of someone they thought they could turn: he'd recently lost a young son. And I have no idea what the police there said to him, but it must have worked because a month later he got himself arrested in Dublin so he could become an informant for us. Even gave us some information that helped lead to an arrest in Atrim."

There, John thought, Sherlock's earlier words about Riley having changed his mind echoing in his head.

"So he gave you what you wanted?" John sighed.

"In that instance," Morgan agreed with a curt nod. "Three years later, Sergeant Healy was killed and Riley was in the same building but he's never given us anything to go on. And now the body of one of his fellow members has turned up in a construction site. Riley was attacked. You were attacked."

"I don't see a pattern," John said.

"The pattern is violence, Doctor Watson. And he's at the centre of it."

"You could probably trace everyone back to the men who attacked me, too!" John snapped. "It doesn't have to be John. It could be any of them!"

"It could be all of them," Morgan countered. "If I had my choice, they'd all be in prison."

"John's been helping you," he protested.

"Because it's been convenient for him. Because he gets something out of it. I don't know what. Absolution? Retribution? I don't know. But he's doing this for himself, Doctor Watson, not for us. Don't credit him with motives that he doesn't have."

Why should he need them? John asked himself, surprised by the question. He wanted to deny it – of course Riley should have some acceptable and clear cut motive for choosing what he had. He'd walked away from bombing people – that couldn't be selfish.

Could it?

John thought of the times he'd been upset by Sherlock's motives, by his lack of empathy and his tendency to see everything as a game. He'd accused the detective more than once about not caring, about seeing victims as pieces of the puzzle.

But he'd seen Sherlock pour everything he had into a case just to see it solved – in the end, did it matter if he was doing it for the thrill and the triumph? He helped regardless. He could have done anything. And he chose to do this.

"He's still helping you," he insisted. "It doesn't matter why."

"The law is the law, Doctor Watson. If we all conveniently ignore it unless it suits our purposes, then
what? If a criminal helps us, does it make him a good man?"

*If I shot a murderer to save someone else, what does that make me?* John wanted to ask but swallowed on the question. It wasn't a hypothetical and he knew what it made him – it made him himself. Given the choice, he'd have made the same decision over and over again and had never once lost sleep knowing that.

"It's a start," he said.

"And it ends in death," Morgan replied. "At least for Sergeant Healy and Neil Hayes. It should have for Riley and it could easily have for you. They left you alive because they wanted to, Doctor. Not because they couldn't carry it through."

John nodded gingerly; he understood that much better than she knew.

"You can get them, though," he insisted. "They think John's still unconscious. They don't know he doesn't remember anything. You must have some contacts. Let it slip that he's woken up, they'll come back. They don't want him to talk. You've got them right where you want them!"

Morgan opened her mouth to reply when her phone chimed, a cheery little tune that seemed entirely at odds with the atmosphere in the flat. She stared at the screen for a moment before looking up at him, eyes narrowed, glinting darkly. John held firm under her scrutinizing gaze, wondering what she thought he'd done.

"I don't think I have to bother, Doctor," she commented, tossing her phone to him. "It seems someone has already got to them for me."

"Ma'am!"

Donovan looked up, startled, when the door to her office was flung open and one of her sergeants stuck her head in, expression alarmed, tinted with anger.

"What--" she began, pushing herself to her feet, the words dying on her lips as she saw Sherlock Holmes striding toward her office, his face smeared with dirt and blood, a deepening bruise marring one of his cheeks, his hair and clothing dishevelled and filthy.

He was dragging two men with him, both of them in much rougher shape than he was – and by the looks of it, they were keeping their feet only because of his grip on their collars and the speed of his pace.

"Sally!" he greeted brightly, a thin, dangerous smile on his lips matching the cold glint in his pale eyes. He shoved the men toward her, letting them crumple unceremoniously in the doorway from which Sergeant Morris had just had the sense to move.

"Holmes, what the hell--"

"I believe these are yours," he interjected. "You may find questioning them to be very informative. Particularly about who put John Riley in the hospital. Although they may need a hospital of their own – preferably not the one you've been spending so much time in lately. And it might be some time before Mister Campbell here can speak properly. Still, I think they'll be of some use."

"What?" Donovan demanded. "Holmes, you can't just go out and--"

"Consider it an early Christmas present," he snapped, all the brittle humour gone from his face. "Do
something intelligent with them, won't you? Surprise me, for once."

*Oh dear lord,* Donovan thought, struggling against the impulse to curse very loudly and colourfully.

"And make sure I never see them again," he added, his voice suddenly like ice. "Because if I do, I promise you, no one else ever will."
Warm and full of life, the tree lit and wrapping paper still scattered around, voices filled up every space of the flat, underlain by the faint strains of Christmas carols that Sherlock had put on as an indulgence for Mrs. Hudson.

John was sat on the couch, half an ear tuned to Mrs. Hudson, her niece, and Tricia as they chatted about cake recipes and the other half turned to the rather worrying conversation Sherlock and Henry were having about poisonous plants native to Egypt. There was a familiar glint in Sherlock's eye that John could see even across the room. He had to hope that Henry's legal expertise didn't extend to knowing how to smuggle controlled substances across international borders.

Josephine, nearly lost in the lab coat Sherlock had bought for her, was perched at the kitchen table, listening intently to something bubbling away in a beaker with the child sized stethoscope she'd received from John himself. For a moment, John wondered if he ought to be concerned – Sherlock had done a good job training Josephine to be careful around his chemicals, but she was only four.

As if sensing his gaze on her, his niece lifted her head and gave him a sunny smile before clambering off the chair and crossing the flat to crawl onto his lap. John folded his arms around her warmly, smiling at the intent look on her face as she pressed the stethoscope against his chest.

"Your heart is slow, Uncle John," she whispered. "Does that mean it's sad?"

From beside him on the couch, Tricia chuckled, turning to run a hand through her daughter's hair.

"No, it means his heart is healthy," she replied. "Adults have slower heartbeats than children, sweetheart."

"Mine is very fast," Josephine said, nodding in sombre agreement, and John grinned.

"Let me listen," he said and she gave him the stethoscope. He made a show of trying to find her heartbeat, humming and hawing until Josephine was giggling. John gave a cry of mock triumph when he found it and frowned in concentration.

"Very healthy indeed," he pronounced.

Later, after everyone else had left and he'd managed Sherlock's help in tidying up, John settled down with a book while his husband busied himself with whatever his latest experiment was, keeping the kitchen window cracked open against the smell. He had that same intent look he'd been wearing while talking to Henry and John got the distinct impression Sherlock was hurrying to finish whatever this was so he could move onto a study of Egyptian poisons.

John sighed, turning his attention to the novel he'd been reading, but his concentration began to drift after a few pages and he found himself staring at the sentence he'd read three times in a row already. With deliberate effort, John managed to keep his concentration until the end of the page before losing track again.

The silence in the flat was familiar, punctuated by the faint clink of glassware as Sherlock worked, and the lights from the Christmas tree bathed the room in a comfortable warmth. Despite the lingering ache in his head and the tendency to get tired more easily – not to mention the vivid bruise that still stung his ribs – the feeling of safety had crept back in when John wasn't paying attention.

He'd only gone out once following their illegal excursion, after Donovan had come around to the flat...
to see if he could identify either of his assailants from a photo line-up. When that had failed, he'd
gone down the Yard, Sherlock hovering protectively behind him, glowering at anyone who so much
as looked at either of them. A voice line-up had been much more productive; he'd been able to
identify both of them without any problems, giving the police that much more ammunition.

Morgan had told him she'd shown their photographs to Riley, who remembered nothing of them.
Nor did he admit to remembering anything about Neil Hayes or having any knowledge as to why
Hayes' body had turned up in a construction site.

John felt another stirring of guilt but pushed it down, trying not to think of the flash drive stowed in
the desk drawer. He couldn't believe Riley was lying – if he had anything to with Hayes' death, it
was so close to his own assault he wasn't likely ever to remember it properly anyway.

*If*, John reminded himself, ignoring the memory of Morgan's voice in his mind, commenting on the
coincidences that followed Riley around. It *could* be a coincidence, for all they knew.

And there was nothing in John that felt sorry that Neil Hayes was dead.

With a little help from Sherlock's hacking abilities and passwords stolen from far too many people to
make John comfortable, he'd been able to access more information about Hayes than he could find
on the internet. His own searches had been relatively fruitless – there were mentions here and there in
news, articles about Hayes and links to RIRA. From what he'd been able to learn on his own, there'd
been no links between Hayes and the shooting of the British Army officers in Northern Ireland eight
years previous.

The official – and classified – information had no firm links to that either, but more than enough
suggestions. According to an informant well known to John, Hayes had at least been in Antrim at the
time, if not near the barracks.

More damning were the details Riley had provided about the attacks Hayes had planned or executed
– along with information gathered by police from their own investigations. John had read it all
slowly, half hoping it wasn't true. He wasn't so naive to think he'd left all of this behind when he'd
been sent home from Afghanistan – especially not having spent his life since then with Sherlock.

But it was infuriating to go through police report after police report, all of which had turned into cold
cases because not even John Riley had been able to pinpoint Hayes' location for the police. John had
checked all the records very carefully; from what he could tell, the last time Riley had seen Hayes
had been twelve years ago at the gallery.

Until, of course, Riley had gone to his house. Had Hayes known that Riley had turned informant?
Had he recognized Riley at his front door? He must have done, John thought, because he'd taken
pictures of him.

And now Hayes was dead and Riley was in the hospital. The two men Sherlock had apprehended
weren't talking according to Donovan. John wondered if their fingerprints were on file from Healy's
murder twelve years ago.

He wondered if either of them knew what was really going on. Did anyone?

"You've been staring at the same sentence for eight minutes." Sherlock's voice cut through John's
thoughts and the doctor felt his spine tense, drawing his shoulders together slightly. He sighed and
glanced back.

"Either it's particularly well written or you should put the book away for a while."
John returned his gaze to the book before looking around the flat. He was surrounded by the comfortable chaos of their home, secure in the knowledge that he had everything he needed – food, shelter, security. And companionship and love. The feeling was almost a physical sensation, closing in around him, enveloping him.

He could remember a time when he had none of that, when he'd felt utterly abandoned by his life, when each cold day crept past with agonizing slowness, no different than the day before, blending into the day after.

He thought of William in Buckinghamshire – his first Christmas without his wife. But Mycroft was there with Angela and David. Mrs. Hudson had her niece, John had Sherlock.

John twisted in his chair to find Sherlock watching him curiously. He made a decision.

Mindful of his ribs and his tendency to get dizzy, he rose and ordered a taxi before rummaging around for a bag, aware of Sherlock's gaze following him carefully. He selected some bits out of pile of presents he'd received from colleagues and patients, picked up the remains of the tin of biscuits that Mrs Hudson had made them and added some HobNobs to the mix. He'd received a couple boxes of fancy tea he wasn't fond of either, and put those in the pile. Sherlock was still watching him – John knew that penetrative grey eyed gaze even without seeing it – but he kept working, going through their cupboards, pulling out a package of unopened chocolate HobNobs.

"No one should be alone at Christmas," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "Unless it's by choice."

Sherlock lifted his eyebrows and John suddenly wondered how many Christmases his husband had spent alone – and how many of those had been spent so high he hadn't known what day it was.

Sherlock joined him, helping him pack the bag without comment. When John moved across the flat to fetch his jacket, Sherlock followed, shouldering his own long coat as well, winding his scarf around his neck in a quick, practiced movement. John paused, frowning, silent questions written on his expression.

"No one should be alone on Christmas," Sherlock echoed. John felt a sudden flare of guilt but saw a smile ghosting at the edges of Sherlock's lips – he was coming for John's sake, not his own.

"Thanks," John breathed.

Sherlock shouldered the bag with a pointed look and John relented when he remembered that navigating the stairs even unencumbered right now was tricky. Sherlock followed slowly behind him without a word – it occurred to John that Sherlock wasn't just company, but protection.

Outside, a light snow was falling and the cab was slow to navigate the busy London streets but the comfortable silence was made warmer when Sherlock curled his gloved fingers over John's bare ones.

They were greeted cheerily by a constable who recognized John and checked the gifts before he went in. Sherlock gave his husband a quick kiss before settling into one of the chairs in the corridor, phone already in hand, eyes intent on the small screen.

Riley was watching something on the telly but his gaze slid to John when the doctor came inside, shutting the door behind him with a soft click. Surprise flickered over his features where they were not obscured by bandages, bruises, and healing cuts. He didn't look much better – but it had only been a handful of days since John had last seen him.

There was a suggestion of a smile on the injured man's lips, a faint gleam in his good eye.
"Didn't expect you," Riley said, voice barely above a whisper.

"Merry Christmas," John replied. "I brought you some things."

Riley picked through arrangement of gifts out, looking at each one curiously. He murmured a sheepish thank you, a small smile playing on his lips briefly before his brow furrowed in thought.

"They– she– the Irish inspector–" he began, expression darkening as he fumbled for the name.

"Morgan," John supplied. He wasn't happy that Riley was struggling with that but wasn't surprised, either.

"She said she'd bring round some of my own clothes. I don't know if it'll matter."

"It could help," John said, thinking of Sherlock's insistence on wearing his own clothing when he'd been in the hospital, even if it was just to sleep in. The first time he'd managed to get his husband dressed in proper clothing – not pyjamas – after The Crash, something had lifted in Sherlock's spirits.

"Sometimes it's just nice to wear something familiar, something that isn't–" He caught the wry look Riley gave him and stopped with a sigh, realizing what he'd meant. "Well, the smell or the feel might trigger a memory."

Riley nodded vaguely, looking only tired and resigned. He fiddled with the package of HobNobs until John offered to open it, then nibbled at a biscuit.

"These are pretty good," he commented and John relaxed a bit, smiling.

"Sherlock likes them, too – although he can never remember their bloody name."

Riley read the package, smiling slightly, before pushing it aside.

"D'you think I'll ever remember anything?" he asked.

"You've remembered some things," John said. "I think that's a good sign."

"Do you think I'll remember if I killed that man? The one they just found?"

John's eyebrows shot up and he cursed inwardly – had that been Morgan or Donovan's brilliant idea? He withheld a sigh; part of him knew they were just trying to close their investigations. Investigations that were currently complicated and probably showed no signs of being resolved.

"Morgan said I knew him."

John nodded silently, thinking of CCTV footage and the photographs.

"You did."

"We were terrorists."

"Yes," John replied, not mincing words. Riley didn't look surprised, only nodded. John wondered how he'd learned about all of this – and if it meant anything to him at all.

"Maybe I should go to prison," Riley said. "Maybe I did kill him – and that cop twelve years ago. I don't know. I killed a lot of other people."

John stayed silent, chewing on the insides of his cheeks, remembering the times he'd had to shoot to
save his own life or the life of a fellow soldier – and how much he'd hated it. He thought of the patients he'd lost on the operating table, how he'd fought so hard to save each one and failed. It wasn't the same, but it had felt like his responsibility then. Sometimes it still did.

"If they can't prove it, they can't put you in prison," he said reasonably.

"Does that mean I shouldn't go?" Riley asked simply, meeting his gaze with his good eye. John fought the urge to fidget and shrugged, shaking his head.

"You know, she – Morgan – told me I had a son who died. Thomas. That was his name. Apparently. I never remember to ask her what my wife was called. It doesn't mean anything to me. It must have done, right?"

The question ended with only the slightest tremor but there was raw need in Riley's face – pleading for some reassurance that once all of this had been important to him. That it was more than just facts delivered by a stranger who didn't like him.

"Yes," said John, because he couldn't imagine anyone losing a child and not thinking anything of it. He couldn't comprehend what it would be like to be told that this had happened but to have no association with it. To fight to find meaning when the memories were gone.

"Maybe I did kill him," Riley said again, looking away.

"He was a terrible man," John replied, only half surprised to hear himself nearly echoing words he'd said to Sherlock on their first case together, when he'd made a decision and shot a stranger – and a serial killer.

Morgan had said that a string of coincidences followed Riley wherever he went, but it was a string of bodies that had followed Hayes.

He couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for the murdered man, no matter how hard he tried.

"Does that mean he deserved it?" Riley asked, meeting his gaze again.

"I don't know," John replied.

When they got home, he pulled the photographs and the flash drive from their hiding place in one of the desk drawers. While Sherlock disassembled the drive and dissolved its components in acid, John stood over the fireplace, watching bright flames flicker as glossy paper curled and melted. He let the last little bits drop into the fire where the embers glowed orange and dulled to ash.

The ache in his ribs and the lingering unsteady feeling finally won out again and John took the paracetamol that Sherlock presented to him with a pointed look before stretching out on the sofa. Carefully, so as not to jostle him, Sherlock settled behind him, fitting his long body around John's shorter one with practiced ease. John smiled slightly and turned his head for a soft kiss before drifting off, bathed in the lights from the tree and snug in Sherlock's embrace.
Morgan returned to Ireland sooner than John expected, leaving shortly before New Year's with the two captured RIRA members who'd assaulted both him and Riley in tow. After a frank discussion with Lestrade – during which Sherlock had glowered at the DI the entire time – John had agreed not to press charges. Neither man was talking and the chances of conviction based solely on John's voice ID were slim. He'd also waited to report the attack, which would cast even more doubt on his story.

He didn't like that they weren't being charged with Riley's assault, but the injured man couldn't identify them.

"They showed me a bunch of pictures," Riley said when John mentioned it during one of his visits. "I didn't recognize anyone."

Sherlock was obviously unhappy about the decision; he'd started an argument about it then sulked on the couch for the rest of the afternoon, answering John in monosyllables – and then only if absolutely necessary. John let it go. He understood why Sherlock was upset and part of him thought he should feel the same way, but he didn't really want a court case he'd probably lose to complicate his life any more than it already was.

The complications came in a different form.

A week after they'd been to Buckinghamshire they were back again, for a much different reason. It was cold and drizzling when they buried William Holmes next to his wife. John stood huddled with Sherlock under an umbrella, close enough so that they could clasp gloved hands without being observed.

Sherlock's face was utterly impassive, breath misting in front of his lips, but John could see the pain nearly hidden behind his grey eyes.

When they got back to Baker Street, John left Sherlock sitting on the couch, holding the box William had left for him, while he unpacked their bags. It had been the second time in less than a year that they'd packed hurriedly to travel to Sherlock's childhood home. This time, though, there had been no hospital visit. William had died in his sleep and hadn't been discovered until the following morning.

When John came back into the living room, Sherlock was still sat on the couch, staring blankly at the opposite wall. The doctor took the box gently and set it aside. Sherlock folded forward, wrapping his arms around John's waist and turned his head to press his cheek against John's stomach. John laced his fingers into his husband's hair and kept silent. Sherlock didn't move or say a word.

They stayed that way for a long time.

More official information came to light about Neil Hayes – and none of it John liked. It was less than he'd learned thanks to Sherlock's blatant disregard for access to restricted information, but all of it reinforced what he already knew. The trail of bodies Hayes had left behind him ended only with his own. The police continued to investigate, but when Lestrade spoke to John about it, the doctor could see the frustration, the looming knowledge that the case looked like it would go cold.

Their primary suspect couldn't give them any information – nor could he be linked to either the crime scene or the victim's home.
Occasionally John wondered what had become of the CCTV footage Mycroft had sent him. If he'd been able to access it, surely the police could have? He thought they would have checked the cameras from both places leading up to the day Hayes was murdered – but if they did, they evidently hadn't seen him because there was no arrest, no reports they had any leads.

John thought he detected Mycroft's involvement but he couldn't figure out why his brother-in-law would bother. He asked Sherlock about it one night, late, when they were curled in bed together, Sherlock still mindful of John's healing ribs.

"Mycroft's motives are never clear," Sherlock replied. "Maybe he was leaving the decision up to you."

John nodded, trailing his fingertips up and down Sherlock's bare spine absently as he thought, feeling the familiar shiver of muscles under his ghosting touch.

"I've already made my decision," he replied.

Riley improved by degrees. As cold and flu season kicked in to full force, John found less time to visit, being swamped by patients. He imposed more rest on himself – a rare course of action, but he didn't want any respiratory bugs making things worse for his ribs. Even clearing his throat still sent pangs through his muscles – he couldn't imagine what coughing would do. The bruises had faded but the area was still tender. If Sherlock brushed it accidentally when they were in bed, John would hiss and tense involuntarily and they would have to stop until his breathing evened out and the warning flares subsided. Sex was a much more careful affair than it normally was, although he left his fair share of bruises on Sherlock, who wore them like vivid little badges of honour.

Still, John managed to get to the hospital a couple of times a week, watching as Riley's wounds healed. He was there when they removed the bandage covering the other man's injured eye. There was still a faint red mark edging the outline of his cheek and some healing cuts that would scar, but his vision was fine. He spent a few minutes blinking, distracted by the sudden return of depth perception.

Slower to heal were the more severe injuries but he was becoming better with his right hand, able to flex his fingers and hold light things.

His memory was still fragmented, mostly not there, and what he did remember tended to be small bits of information, inconsequential things.

"I had a blue duvet," he told John once. "And the kitchen window leaked when it rained."

John had no idea what had become of Riley's flat, whether it was still technically his or not, but before Morgan had left, she'd delivered some of his clothing. John had unfolded a few of the shirts and held them up for Riley to sniff, but it hadn't triggered anything. He wouldn't wear one of the shirts, insisting he didn't like it – John had no idea if that was a memory or a newly formed opinion.

He supposed it didn't matter. Riley wasn't the same person, as Sherlock had pointed out. It would be better if he developed new preferences, John thought, rather than try to remember his old ones. The times when he attempted to force memories only ended in disappointment and exhaustion.

There was one particular trend John noted though – Riley never forgot the doctor's name, nor the names of the nurses and the two constables who were friendly to him. He sometimes still stumbled over other names, even Morgan's. John was glad to see that there were people treating Riley warmly. He was still a patient, after all. In this, he was still the victim. The constables particularly impressed
John; they could easily have been disgruntled, having to look after a former terrorist. Some of them were. A quiet conversation with Donovan had one or two of them removed and replaced with constables who seemed indifferent to the assignment. Indifference John would take – they’d still do their jobs if required. It was clear Donovan was no great fan of Riley's, but John knew her professional pride would be stung – and her reputation damaged – if something happened to a victim in her charge.

John enjoyed talking to Riley and, as time went on, their conversations got easier. Riley started to learn – or relearn – things and develop opinions on what he liked and disliked. It was easy enough to talk to him. There was no judgment in his questions or observations and John found that refreshing. He was always interested in whatever topic they got onto, if only because he often didn't know anything about it. John was frank with him when Riley asked about his time in the army and about the Taliban, accepting John's answers despite the shadows of self doubt that darkened his expression.

John only ever addressed serious questions if he thought Riley was awake and strong enough to take the answers – more often than not, he'd nudge the conversation in a different direction and the injured man didn't seem to notice. There were still times when he fell asleep while John was talking, but they grew fewer. John would end his visits at the first real signs of fatigue, leaving Riley to sleep, and coming back later in the week to continue their conversations.

One day in early February, he arrived to find a bustle of nurses and doctors inside Riley’s room, along with Charlotte Morgan. She met his eyes through the door's window and stepped outside, gesturing him away from the constable who had cleared John easily enough – they all knew him now.

"What's going on?" John asked, glancing over her shoulder back toward the room.

"They're evaluating if he's well enough to be moved," she replied, folding her arms loosely, dark eyed gaze giving nothing away.

"What?" John demanded. "Why?"

"I'm taking him back to Ireland."

He felt a flash of panic followed by indignant anger, flexing his left hand into a fist to displace it, trying to stay calm.

"What evidence do you have—"

"I don't need evidence to know he's guilty, Doctor Watson," she snapped back.

"The courts do!" he hissed. "You can't call him guilty just because you want him to be!"

"And you can't call him innocent just because you want him to be," she replied curtly. "Maybe he's a wonderful person now, I don't know—"

"No, you don't," John interrupted.

"But he wasn't always," she continued, eyes narrowing slightly. "He was a terrorist and a killer, Doctor. That's not going to change just because he doesn't remember."

John shifted, falling back into an army stance out of habit, shaking his head. Morgan held his gaze hard for a moment before her shoulders relaxed slightly and she relented.
"Besides, no. I said I was taking him back to Ireland, not that I was taking him to prison. We can't leave him here – London's obviously not safe for him."

"And Ireland will be?"

"We'll do what we can," she said. "Give him a new identity – that won't be hard, since he doesn't remember his old one. It's much easier for us to keep an eye on him if he's in a hospital in Dublin, and hopefully we can get one step ahead of the people who know he's here."

"Sherlock caught them," John pointed out.

"I know you're not that naïve, Doctor," she snapped. "They hadn't spoken to us but you can bet they're speaking to their lawyers. Who are themselves probably RIRA members. The message will be passed on. I'd rather get him out of here before one of them decides things are calm enough to act."

"And then what?" John asked.

"I don't know," Morgan said. "He needs more time in the hospital. After that... I really don't know. Unless his memory comes rushing back, he won't be much good at supplying any more information. We'll try and get him a job, I suppose. Doing something useful. For once."

"Making amends?"

Morgan snorted softly, gaze darting away momentarily.

"You don't think he can," John said.

"No," she replied evenly. "I don't."

He swallowed a reply, wondering how often Morgan suspected that Riley had murdered Hayes. If he had, had it been pre-mediated? Had he tracked his former RIRA-mate to London? Or had it really been a dislike of living in Manchester that had brought Riley here to find Neil Hayes accidentally?

"Mind if I go say good bye to him?" he asked. Morgan pursed her lips but shook her head, stepping out of his way. He'd gone only a few steps when she called his name.

"Yeah?" John asked, turning back.

"You're happy about this, aren't you?"

John paused, regarding her thoughtfully. He was walking away with the knowledge that Riley had met Hayes before the murdered man's death – and he couldn't even find a twinge of guilt over that. If Riley had killed Hayes, he'd rid the world of one more dangerous person. If it hadn't been him, then he shouldn't pay for what someone else had done.

And he was getting a fresh start. Maybe being back in Ireland would help some of the memories return. Even if not, maybe he'd find a life he liked, and some peace. There were no guarantees. But there was a possibility – and it was a better life than living under guard in a hospital in London.

"Yeah," John said, giving her a smile. "I am."
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!